

2005-2006: MARIAMA BÂ'S *UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE*.

Mariama Bâ's 1979 novel, *Une si longue lettre*, is the third and last book chosen for the 2005-2006 AATF Book Club, whose focus is on cinema. This accessible book, praised for its depiction of women's changing role in a post-independence Senegal, will be familiar to many AATF members, since it is widely taught and previously figured on the AP reading list. The novel takes the form of one long letter written by a fifty-year old widowed teacher and mother of twelve, Ramatoulaye Fall, to her best friend Aissatou Bâ, during the 40-day mourning period of *mirasse* required by Islam. During the course of her letter, Ramatoulaye reminisces over her youth and early years of marriage, describes the challenges of motherhood, and tells how polygamy impacts her and her family when her husband of twenty-five years essentially abandons his family as he takes a second, younger wife. Aissatou has experienced a similar betrayal, but unlike her friend, who decides to stay in her marriage, Aissatou leaves her husband, taking her three sons with her to France, and then the U.S. where she works in the Senegalese Embassy.

Ramatoulaye sees her generation of educated women as a bridge between a traditional Africa and a modern Senegal. Some critics consider Ramatoulaye to be a "conservative feminist" because she is a modern educated woman who clings to certain traditional values that are challenged by the situations she encounters such as polygamy and the pregnancy of her high school aged daughter. As she struggles to adapt to her changing circumstances, Ramatoulaye maintains that harmonious relationships between men and women, and solid family values, form the foundation of a strong Africa. She closes her letter on an optimistic note that anticipates a brighter future for her daughters.

Although it was written over 25 years ago, Bâ's novel continues to be relevant as evidenced by a recent collection of essays entitled *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ*. The contributors argue that "the insights of African Francophonie, gathered from revisiting Bâ's works, illuminate postcolonialism, feminism, and postmodernism which, in turn, enable readers to reevaluate stereotypical cultural assumptions that inform the reading of African literary texts, views that are shifting, are mutually transforming and dialogic between the West and Africa" (p. x). Some of those cultural assumptions will be taken up in the book club discussion of the novel which will focus on what the novel reveals about Senegalese society in transition, especially gender relations, the role of education, and the conflicts between tradition and modern-

ization, African values and Western values, which are at the heart of Bâ's novel.

Unlike the other two works selected for the AATF book club, *Une si longue lettre* has not been made into a movie, although a made-for-TV version, filmed entirely in Wolof, was aired in Dakar in 1984. We have selected three Senegalese films that can be taught along with *Une si longue lettre* to help contextualize the main themes of the novel, and provide additional perspectives on many of the same issues. This is especially important since *Une si longue lettre* is told from the point of view of one woman from a privileged, rather elite social position, who is writing to her best friend. The three films, all by Senegalese film makers, are: *Xala* (Ousmane Sembène, 1975), *Tableau ferraille* (Moussa Sene Absa, 1997) and *Faat Kiné* (Ousmane Sembène, 2000). Like *Une si longue lettre*, two of the films are set in Dakar, and all of them examine problems associated with Senegal's transition from French colonial rule to independence. Sembène's *Xala*, for example, follows the decline of a corrupt businessman who is struck by the curse of impotence when he takes a third wife. Much like *Xala*, Moussa Sene Absa's *Tableau ferraille* focuses on the corrupt practices of a post-colonial elite who has exploited Senegal's resources for its own gain. Attention is again on husband-wife relations in this film as Daam takes an ambitious, western-educated second wife, a marriage that leads to his downfall. *Faat-Kiné* is Sembène's more recent look at the strong women who hold Senegal together. *Faat Kiné* is a forty-year old gas station manager who has raised her two children without the help of their worthless fathers. Her children, who reject the values of their weak and corrupt fathers, represent the future of Senegal. Significantly, the film takes place in 2000, the year that ended political control by Senghor's party when Abdoulaye Wade was elected president of Senegal.

The list of questions that will help facilitate discussion of the novel and the films as well as a bibliography can be found on the AATF Web site at [www.frenchteachers.org/convention/bookclub.htm].

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