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The problem of a female writer coming to voice has been a central theme in Mariama Bâ's fiction. This piece explicates Bâ's worldview as a writer. This worldview is located within the Wolof world view. I will show that Bâ makes use of this world view--regarding issues of caste, friendship, fate, women's relations is important to any developed reading of her texts. I will therefore locate Mariama Bâ's fiction in the oral tradition of the Senegalese griot women in particular and Senegalese literature in general. Ba's biography is important in any sustained reading of her works. Mariama Bâ, was born in Senegal in 1929. She was orphaned at an early age and was raised by her maternal grandparents. The only way she knew her mother was through a photograph. Her father was one of the first ministers of state in the newly independent Senegal. The fact that she went to school did not dispense her from performing traditional tasks at home, especially since one did not know what the future might bring. As a young high school student, at the Ecole Normale Superieure, she wrote her first published work. This piece was published in France and focused on colonial education in Senegal. She did not publish another piece until So Long A Letter a book that won the Noma Award for Literature. This was followed by the Scarlet Song which was published posthumously. The long hiatus in her literary production her friends attribute to marriage and motherhood. As a writer, she has emerged from the oral tradition of the Senegalese griot women and writes a "speakerly text." This oral tradition in Senegal, has been the major outlet for women's voices. The griot women-- not controlled by society in ways other women are regarding speech--are given a license by society to say whatever they want without censor. As Alice Walker suggests, maybe contemporary black women writers have their names signed to their texts, but the texts are from those female ancestors who were never given a chance to write. The tradition of the griot women is important to Senegalese women, because it has always been one way of making themselves heard and listened to. So, for the Senegalese women, writing a speakerly text takes on added dimensions.

Mariama Bâ, I will argue writes in Wolof with the inflections of the spoken language. Bâ's expressions and structures do not change in the transition from speech to writing, as she gets Ramatoulaye to write herself not only into existence, but into a growth of self-consciousness. This is identical to what Alice Walker does to Celie in The Color Purple. In fact, there are many similarities between these two texts, but one major connection is the fact that they are both epistolary narratives, written in the speakerly text; in the oral tradition.

The autobiographical voice in the letter means coming out of muteness and speaking. This is important to the African who has been spoken for all her life. In gaining a voice, Ramatoulaye is a more mature and articulate speaker than Celie as she addresses herself to her best friend Aissatou. She embarks on a journey of discovery and soul searching at the beginning of her narrative and seem come to her own by the end of these narrative as she tells Aissatou ("I felt that I had

emerged..." So Long a Letter, p. 88). Ramatoulaye reflects on her past to understand the present.

Ramatoulaye, is the narrator and writer of her letters, which makes her both narrator and protagonist. Therefore, in the tradition of the speakerly text, what we hear is Ramatoulaye's interpretation of what the other characters are saying in free and indirect discourse, although, at times, she uses quotation marks showing that she is quoting a character's exact words. This is important to the African woman, because as she starts to tell her own story, she does not want to tell her sister's story for her and misrepresent it. So she creates some same allowing her sisters to tell their own stories.

Ramatoulaye is educated and, therefore, assumed liberation automatically, but this is possible only up to a certain point, because Ramatoulaye lives in a society that relegates women to a certain position, prescribed by society, a position that makes women only important as long as they are identified with men. Of course it has to be stressed here that this is a postcolonial position she has been assigned to by Islam. There is also the Wolof view of fatalism that says that everyone's destiny is a fixed reality, impossible to avoid. As a result, Modou Fall sees his marrying a second wife as something destined by God. Ramatoulaye sees it as something she should accept, caught between the established order and a present given by Western education. Ramatoulaye is in a dilemma, a dilemma that her friend Aissatou did not seem to have when she chose divorce as an alternative. Mariama Bâ seems to be answering a call to speak out, but with more contradictions and opposition than the Western female writer has. Femi Ojo-Ade, whose position on feminism and women writers need to be challenged, depicts the struggle of the female African writer as a one that is located within tradition, colonialism and modernization.

Mariama Bâ as a writer is caught between tradition and the move towards modernity. This is inescapable. The contradiction in polygamy today is that the men have accepted the Western economic system and a lot of its social mores, but they refuse to give up the tradition of polygamy, a tradition that seems to have hardly any place in modern Africa.

The Wolof

The Wolof people, geographically, are located in the Sénégambia region on the Atlantic coast of Africa. As the majority ethnic group in the region, Fatoumatta-Agnes Diarra asserts, "they have a tendency to believe themselves more fundamentally Senegalese than others."

The Wolof have had sustained contacts with foreign cultures for centuries. These contacts have left an indelible mark in the lives of the people. As a result of these contacts and the fact that they mostly inhabit the urban area, the Wolof think highly of themselves in terms of being able to adapt and change foreign cultures. However, one foreign culture that has nearly overpowered Wolof society is the culture that came with Islam. Islam therefore, becomes an important force that informs the Wolof world view.

What is this world view? The Wolof, as with other cultures in the world, have a way of looking at themselves and their relationship to the larger world. The Wolof have a sense of superiority over other ethnic groups and are ownership oriented as their language illustrates. The French and other ethnic groups around them have described them as, "arrogant," "haughty" and "think too highly of themselves." These comments are based on the posture the Wolof take regarding their unique culture.

As a society based on caste and family names, its biggest problem in modern times has been its inability to mediate between tradition and modernity. The caste system as archaic as it is seems, thrives today, as much as it did in yesteryears. The reluctance of the upper caste to give up caste privilege is at the center of this perpetuation.

Caste, coupled with the discourse of fatalism, coming through from both Islam and traditional practices helps the perpetuation of the status quo. From Islam, only that which suits the society is highlighted and incorporated into their ways of life. Islam, it is evident has no caste system, but from the Wolof world view there can be no society without caste. Speaking of this stratification in the Wolof Society, Abdoulaye Bara Diop explains that:

In the domain of secondary social stratification, the castes constitute, in the Wolof society, an important system from ancient times, but which is maintained with remarkable persistence. It continues to order groups, to determine their status, their functions and their comportment in reference to a social order-of old repute, but alive--though its origin is very remote within the passage of time (Translation mine).

This kind of ordering/othering is based upon the societies view of inferiority and superiority. Though this caste system is not gender based, there is a problem regarding the way the different genders are viewed.

Women, on the whole, are generally viewed as an important part of society and respected. Despite this respect, there are beliefs in the society that revolve around the evil and conniving nature of women, with sayings like, "Djiguene sopal wai bul wolu." I will explain this kind of definition of woman as a male understanding of the disruption of patriarchy. Within these schema of things is a concept and definition of the quintessential woman. This woman is the epitome of Wolof womanhood and she exemplifies the concept of "gatt lamagne, gatt tank," this type of woman is the best jabar (wife) to have. The construction of women as cheats, liars or saints, feeds into a stereotyping of women in these categories. As oppressed people, women take these definitions and turn them around on other women. This interesting contradictory relationships between women, becomes a recurrent theme in Senegalese fiction, of course presented differently from different experiences.

Ousmane Sembène, probably more than any male writer in Senegalese fiction, contributes a balanced perspective in the discourse on women. He credits these positive portrayals to his

experience, for what he saw growing up were powerful, resourceful women. The female writers in this tradition bring a whole new way of viewing women and their concerns. Therefore, constructions of the new knowledge of women arriving out of the particularity of female experiences finally joined the landscape of Senegalese literature that was male-dominated (at least the written aspect of the literature). Perhaps, no one is as poignant as Mariama Bâ in presenting the view of the women and the tensions inherent in such a presentation.

Claims of universality can be made about Mariama Bâ's work. Mariama Bâ herself, in her intellectual endeavors, has a sense of this universality. But, at the same time she understands the particularity of the Senegalese (mainly Wolof) experience that she is writing about. She explains, "...there is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world, a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry may be different, but there is still a certain unity" (Emphasis mine). Without her particularly being situated in an Islamic Wolof society and having an Islamic/Wolof world view, she could not have written these specific texts of hers in the context that she does.

Situating Bâ in this Wolof world view requires defining her positionality and the different locations she inhabits. Even though Bâ locates her self as "an average Sengalese woman," the spot she inhabits is anything but average. She is a daughter born into high caste in a society where caste impacts on one's life. Caste determines ones status in life--in the sense of expectations. Caste, like color is not something to be worn or discarded depending on one's whim. Bâ's status as a guer distinguishes her and places her in a position that is different from that of other women who belong to the lower castes. By virtue of the circumstances of her birth, some kind of 'superiority' is assumed. The fact that she is western-educated complicates matters further and puts her into a whole new category. Even though western education does not keep one away from the daily duties of a woman--there is always the option of choices that are otherwise unavailable. Throughout Une si longue lettre/So Long a Letter, as Irene D'Almeida points out, the discourse of choice becomes central in the text.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou always have the privilege of choice, as opposed to the non-western educated women in Un chant ecarlate/Scarlet Song like Coumba, Ouleymatou and Yaye Khady who seem to have little or no choice in the kind of lives they live, or even Binetou whose economic circumstances limited her choices. In reading Bâ, one then has to interrogate the interlocking systems of oppression of women in Dakar, Senegal. Caste, education and class become important in this kind of discourse.

Bâ automatically assumes the knowledge of how these three systems interact, as she discusses these systems of oppression, while not always naming them. Her positioning as female, muslim, guer, western-educated, orphaned, mother and a divorcee inform her experiences and the different tensions inherent in these multiple positionings.

How does Bâ's politics of location inform her intellectual project? Bâ's theoretical and practical concerns lie in the subjectivity of the Senegalese woman under multiple layers of oppression,

under the guise of tradition-- tradition here denoting something static. Senegalese society in general and the city of Dakar in particular is by no means inert. The city of Dakar, economically, structurally and culturally is continually changing. So, to claim a static culture and tradition is problematic. Mariama Bâ herself, believed that the mission of the writer in Senegalese society was to write against, "the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious heritage."(Preface to So Long a Letter).

These are issues Bâ raises in trying to understand the logic behind the often contradictory world view of her society. Bâ's canvas covers the different women in her society and their locations. As a female writer, Bâ is interested in a world where women will have choices and where monogamy is the order of the day. This world can only become a reality when women re-examine their relationships with each other and with that of their men. The goros, the xarits, the wugg etc. are all taken into account in this struggle.

Entering Bâ's fictional world then, the most important and successful aspect of her literary presentation is, perhaps, her use of language (especially Wolof concepts). Bâ's texts, though written in French, show evidence that her use of language is situated in the tradition of the tagg of the griot women. This poetic act of extolling virtues, takes the Wolof language to its highest forms. So when one reads Mariama Bâ's texts, in essence, what one hears is this highly specialized poetics. The style in which both her letters and prose are written is informed by this style of tagg. At the same time, within the tagg, she uses the xas style, a style that shows contempt for the person receiving the xas. The Wolof language and Wolof concepts, therefore, become central in locating Mariama Bâ's work.

" TAGG"

In the beginning of both her texts, A Scarlet Song and So long a Letter, Bâ starts by extolling the virtues of her characters. In So long a Letter, Ramatoulaye starts her intimate letter/diary by extolling and invoking her lifelong friendship (xaritya) with Aissatou:

Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds separated by a fence would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us we wore our 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...

This calling on Aissatou by Ramatoulaye, reaching into the past to show how important their friendship has been and continues to be, is significant for this tagg. This tagg is not much different from the one Bâ dedicates to her Uncle in Scarlet Song. The dedication of the book to her uncle takes the form of a tagg poem. These two taggs set the tone for the two novels. Without this kind of grounding in the tradition of the griot, Mariama Bâ's texts would have felt and read differently.

The tagg, in the first instance, is used to call on and strengthen a xaritya that has gone through different changes and experiences. Even though the a letter is utilized in the tagg, it is because Aissatou is located across the Atlantic Ocean. The letter becomes the only link between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as they inhabit two geographical spaces mediated by a body of water. This letter, it should be noted, is not written to anyone else but Aissatou. This is important, especially when looking at the way Ramatoulaye begins the letter with the 'tagg', because Aissatou is the 'xariti ben bakan.'

Aissatou shares in Ramatoulaye's tears and joys. In the serious matter of announcing her husband's death, Ramatoulaye calls on Aissatou three times to call her attention to the seriousness of the matter she is about to discuss. She has to remind Aissatou of the fact that memories are "the salt of remembrance" (p. 1) and the memories they share go back a long way.

Unlike the tagg poem for Aissatou with its intricacies, the 'tagg' poem to her uncle, Ousmane Macoumba Diop, has a clear purpose. This man is evidently someone who has touched Mariama Bâ's life in ways she cannot even begin to describe. He is obviously an extremely religious man, as the poem points to with words like, "prayers", "virtue", "piety", "solemn", and so on and so forth. It is no coincidence then that she presents us with a character like Djibril Gueye, who is the epitome of piety-- the monogamist, the religious, the respecter of women and the "level-headed" one. Djibril Gueye is the epitome of what men should aim to be like according to Bâ. The praises that are sung about him in Scarlet Song show the respect and admiration his "creator"(Bâ) has for him. Through Ousmane, his son, the admiration for Djibril Gueye grows. But Oussou's admiration is reciprocated by his father's admiration. Djibril Gueye's admiration of his son is without equal. In his tagg of Oussou, he explains why Oussou deserves his praises.

This form of tagg, a praise of gratefulness, is a common one. It can take place amongst relatives, close friends and neighbors in public and in private but always ending in the form of a prayer. Bâ's presentation of this tagg is true to its original in Wolof. In this is the kind of tagg many a child lives for to hear from their parents and loved ones. This tagg, as in others, there is a listing of deeds that are highlighted. Ousmane's success would have been irrelevant if he had not sent his father to Mecca, to perform the Hajj. Children's worth are based on how much they honor their parents. This of course has its problems, which include parents total control of their children's lives.

The tagg from the "griots, goldsmiths and laobes with their honeyed language"(p. 7), the members of the lower castes, comes with a price tag. Lady Mother-in Law, has to buy her tagg coming from a poor background. Having known poverty, she rejoiced in her new-found happiness. Modou fulfilled her expectations. He would thoughtfully send her wads of notes to spend and would offer her, after his trips abroad, jewelry and rich boubous. From then on she joined the category of the women 'with heavy bracelets' lauded by the griots. Thrilled, she would listen to the radio transmitting songs dedicated to her.

Sharing her tagg in the public sphere makes Lady Mother-in-law feel good about her achievements. When her name is broadcast over the radio it makes her feel important and accepted into "high society." The fact that she has been awarded a space/position within the sorority of women "with heavy bracelets" makes her revel in a false sense of security. Bâ presents her situation to show that she was not aware of the temporality of her newfound wealth. In this context, the 'tagg' becomes a 'djei' because Lady Mother-in-law would have never received this kind of attention if Binetou did not marry Modo Fall.

In a different context in Scarlet Song, Yaye Khady also gets her share of public tagg -- something she has always dreamt about and never thought possible--when Oussou marries a white woman, Mireille. With Ouleymatou in the family way with Oussou's child, Yaye Khady rejoices: finally, she is going to have her day in public. When the day comes, Yaye Khady won't be outdone.

Yaye Khady's narcissism always undercover comes out in full force as she participates in and does what is "required" of her in this naming ceremony. She feels redeemed in front of her age mates after the disastrous naming ceremony of Gorgui during which she was shamed. "At last she had her day of glory among her peers" (p. 134). The flattering to coax money out of the hands of the guers goes on with more and more taggs. Of course at such a gathering the tagg is done mostly for financial gain, as the praises of "the open-handed ones" are sung. Bâ gives faithful representations of these taggs in translation. It is evident she admires them for their literary finesse but, she also critiques the practice; especially in instances, were it is not genuine, but just done for financial gain.

For Ousmane Gueye, the public tagg brings complications in his life. Ouleymatou uses Mabo the Dialli (griot) as part of the seduction process to "get" Ousmane. The Dialli made Ousmane feel good about his roots and determine that he was doing the right thing by being with Ouleymatou. The words the Dialli uses are carefully chosen and meant to touch on Ousmane's heartstrings. Who will not be moved by high praises of one's ancestry? This is the human weakness, the tagg exploits. Regardless of class, and economic positioning, when one is reminded of one's glorious past, pride abounds.

In all its forms the tagg, therefore, operates as a way to show thanks and appreciation; to goad one on to release money; to praise one's ancestry and to ensure that things move smoothly at public functions, despite the fact that sometimes it has the opposite effect. Ramatoulaye complains about receiving the same calibre of praise as Binetou; when in her calculations she should have received the most praises, because she had been married to Modou for a longer period of time and has twelve children and Binetou has only three. She sees this as hypocrisy on the part of her in-laws. "Our sisters-in law give equal consideration to thirty years and five years of married life. With the same ease and the same words, they celebrate twelve maternities and three. I note with outrage this desire to level out, in which Modou new mother-in-law rejoices" (p. 4).

The tagg, as the above examples have shown, is deeply rooted in the griot tradition of praise poetry. A form that can be both spontaneous, well-thought out and defined. Mariama Bâ's literary roots, I will argue then, are deeply rooted in the tradition of the griot.

'Mirasse', 'Xas' and 'Aha'

In So long a Letter, Ramatoulaye's reflection on her life takes place during her tenge. This is when a woman is sequestered to mourn the death of her husband. It is a period of solitude, prayer and reflection. The interesting thing is, however, men do not have to go through this same process when they lose their wives. During the time of reflection that is afforded her, she uses to contemplate on how the choices she has made in the past have impacted her life. Ramatoulaye decides to evaluate the man she had married with "the ear" of her friend Aissatou. She justifies sharing the most intimate details of her life with Aissatou by stating: "the mirasse commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed" (p. 9). In keeping with the requirements of the mirasse, Ramatoulaye goes on to reveal the details of Modo life she never thought of revealing. Mbye Cham notes that:

In extending the conceptual boundaries of 'Mirasse', the novelist is able to provide Rama with the structural and, indeed cultural framework within which to undertake a comprehensive exposition (depouillement) of intimate secrets of married life with Modou Fall, particularly the latter's weakness as a human being and the effect of this on their relationship.

The fact that Modo Fall dies of a heart attack is a shock to Ramatoulaye. "Modo is dead. How am I to tell you? One does not fix appointments with fate. Fate grasps whom it wants, when it wants"(p. 2). This strong belief in fate, tied to her Islamic religion and the Wolof worldview, "lu yalla dogol, Diam mun si dara" (what god decides, man can do nothing about), is what pulls her through the difficult time.

Modou's death is a rapid death for someone who had accumulated so much aha (sin)in his life. It is widely believed in Wolof society that a major sin, such as the abandonment of one's wife and children, deserves a fate no less than an "ugly" death-- Modou Fall deserved this kind of death. Thus, because God "never sleeps," Modou is "embarrassed" in death. Aminata Sow Fall, a Senegalese writer notes that shame is something to avoid in Wolof society:

A sense of shame used to be something to avoid. WE are afraid of shame. There is a Wolof proverb that affirms "It is better to die than to know shame." People have been known to commit suicide because of a scandal that caused them shame. Today because of material goods, because of money, people have lost their sense of shame or scandal.

Modou Fall had lost his sense of shame and thought that money could right all his mistakes. It is discovered, according to Ramatoulaye, that he died "without a penny saved. Acknowledgement

of debts? A pile of them: cloth and gold traders, home-delivery grocers and butchers, car-purchase installments" (p. 9).

At the time of his death, Modou had abandoned Ramatoulaye, his first wife and their children for the younger Binetou, a friend of his oldest daughter. This type of abandonment (a form of betrayal known as 'ur') is frowned upon by the society, but Modou sees nothing wrong with his actions. He is going through a mid-life crisis and needs a young woman to make him feel young again. Modou Fall's belief in having "fresh blood" with a young wife is what leads him to Binetou. In the prime of his life when he is supposed to dedicate his whole life to Allah, it is more important for him to have a young woman than to have any orderly life he and Ramatoulaye may have had.

This position that Modou is located within is contradictory. Mariama Bâ makes it clear that the men in her fiction do not always follow the precepts of society (religious and traditional). On one hand, Modou knows and understands that tradition frowns upon abandonment; yet, as a man, tradition sanctions more than one wife and, usually, it is understood that the wife one takes in middle age is a young virgin. How does he reconcile these tensions in his life without committing sacrilege against tradition? Bâ offers some clarification regarding what Islam has to say about the taking of more than one wife: "A man must be like an evenly balanced scale. He must weigh out in equal measures his compliments and his reproaches. He must give equally of himself. He must study his gestures and behavior and apportion everything fairly" Scarlet Song, p. 7). With a prescription such as this one, no man is qualified to have more than one wife. Because what kind of man will be able to be so fair-minded so as not to go against the teachings of Islam.

Modou Fall, evidently does not have the presence of mind or the tenacity needed to have more than one wife; as "in loving someone else, he burned his path both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal" (So Long A Letter, p. 12). Modou Fall, Mbye Cham at this point will argue, has a "selective adherence to tradition." This selectivity is based upon the idea of privilege, but never taking the responsibilities that come with one's privilege. This puts Modou Fall in a space where he cannot transform his possibilities from the positions he inhabits. Transforming tensions that result from his multiple positionings is something he is incapable of.

As a result of this inability to transform his situation, Ramatoulaye now has the right to call him out on his indecencies and blatant disregard for tradition where his first family is concerned; thus, the use of the xas. It should be pointed out at this moment that the concepts xas, mirasse and aha are used concurrently in the text. The occasion Ramatoulaye uses to lash out indirectly at Modou is when Tamsir, Modou elder brother, proposes marriage to her. She decides that her voice, which was silenced during thirty years of marriage, would be heard. She names what she sees as Tamsir's lack of regard for her in a violent sarcastic xas.

Ramatoulaye's torrential tirade is a result of what she considers an affront to her sense of agency. She says she commits this act of verbal violence to get back at Tamsir for announcing Modou

marriage to her years earlier. But, it is more than revenge. It is an act of courage for Ramatoulaye to speak up about her feelings. Tamsir bears the brunt of her anger that she has bottled up over the years. Tamsir becomes the whipping boy for Modou Fall, whom she did not have the chance to xas before his death. All the anger Ramatoulaye had kept under wraps due to Modou treatment of her and her children surfaced in her somewhat misdirected anger at Tamsir.

What Mariama Bâ does in this xas episode is to call to the attention of her readers that silence does not always mean a lack of agency. When the occasion presents itself, women are as capable as men in defining their needs and wants. She is also leveling a critique of the use of women as property under the guise of custom. In this process of wife inheritance women are exchanged and discarded as goods rather than as human beings with rights. A custom thought of to keep children within a family, wife inheritance is widely abused nowadays. Customs, Bâ seems to be saying, have their place in regulating society, but it is when people want to practice customs without all the responsibilities that come with them that they become problematic.

Tamsir wants to practice the custom of wife inheritance but cannot even afford to feed his own wives and numerous children. For a custom designed to financially and emotionally help a widowed woman, his request is unreasonable. His lack of resources and any kind of emotion for Ramatoulaye makes him unsuitable for the task at hand. He only sees Ramatoulaye as a "milch cow" to exploit.

The exposure of Tamsir's motives in public (he is accompanied by the Imam and Mawdo) coupled with the disclosure of Modou indiscretions to Aissatou, locates the xas within the concept of the mirasse, as these two terms work hand in hand to situate the aha.

Women and Caste

It is necessary to further explicate Bâ's fictional world by examining the caste system and women's relationship to it. What is caste and how does it operate in Bâ's fictional world? The caste system in the Sénégambia area is as old as the histories of the people who inhabit the area. It needs to be suggested at this point that not all ethnic groups in the area have caste systems. The four major groups with the most sophisticated caste system are: the Peulh, the Toucouleur, the Wolof and the Mandinka. What concerns us as we read Bâ are the Wolof and the Peulh systems which are similar in a great many ways. The caste system in Sénégambia is occupationally based and not always economic. I will try to briefly explain a complicated system:

The Guers: This is the highest caste in the caste system. It comprises the descendants of nobles and farmers. In the past, supposedly, this group ruled the various kingdoms in the region before the advent of colonialism.

The Guewals: This is the second highest caste in this man-constructed hierarchy. The praise

singers, the poets and the guardians of history and culture form this group.

The Tegg: This caste is made of highly skilled members who work with metals. They work with the elements of water and fire, a skill that requires mathematical abilities, scientific know-how and creativity.

The Woodeh: This caste, also highly skilled, works with leather and wood. They are mostly the artists of the society. Of course this situation is being challenged as gifted artists from all castes practice their craft.

In Bâ's fiction the issue of caste is well woven into her texts. Her stance is one of resistance. She creates the possibility of a relationship between two women from two different castes. In Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, a tegg and a guer come together in a friendship based on equality and mutual respect.

Evidently, these two women have transcended the boundaries drawn by caste. Tante Nabou, Mawdo's mother and Aissatou's mother-in-law, cannot transcend the parameters set-up by her society. To her it is each to his/her own. Mawdo's marriage to Aissatou is perceived by her as an affront to her noble birth. Mbye Cham suggests that:

Tante Nabou's demarche is cool and subtle, quite in consonance with the canons of comportment of her noble origin. Her relationship with Aissatou is cold and antagonistic. She looks down a long 'geer' nose on this upstart 'tegg' (blacksmith) from which it is her honorable mission to wrest her son whose caste sin she cannot bear to live with.

For people like Tante Nabou the past cannot be separated from the present, from the future. Her world view (the kind Bâ critiques), rests on the belief in "ancient properties." Tante Nabou believes that as one who is descended from a long line of notable nobles, she is superior to the members of the lower castes. Her belief in perpetuating the traditional way of life, is informed by her annals of history that teach her that there should be no intermarriage between the castes. Caught between tradition and modernity, she opts for the glorious days of the past in which people respected the old ways and lived faithfully by them. For someone of her standing, female solidarity has no meaning, because she cannot transcend caste to transform her possibilities.

Mariama Bâ, in her presentation of a woman like Tante Nabou, shows the problem involved in locating a female solidarity: as caste, age and "bloodlines" become more important than being female. Aissatou's crime, as Bâ presents it, is marrying the man she loves despite the fact that he belonged to a "superior" caste. Tante Nabou, Mawdo Bâ's mother, and Aissatou's mother-in-law, totally disapproved of this kind of "rah" (mixing). She does not want grandchildren who will be located in a position where they will suffer from the violence of xas because of the "inferior" blood inherited from their mother. Therefore, from the day Mawdo Bâ married Aissatou, Tante Nabou lived exclusively to get Aissatou out of the household.

Thus, Tante Nabou embarks on a journey of renewal of her roots that will purge her family of Aissatou. She travels to Diakhao, the place of Bour Sine her revered ancestor. In Diakhao, she reexamines her location vis-a-vis her son and daughter-in-law, Aissatou. She becomes more determined than ever after her ritualistic search for selves, to get 'rid' of Aissatou. She swears that Aissatou's existence, "would never tarnish her noble descent"(p. 28). Her offerings to her "tours" are a sign of her determination to live the "old way." Bâ comments on Tante Nabou's role as an upholder of the "canons of tradition" (Cham). Aunt Nabou "lived in the past, unaware of a changing world. She clung to old beliefs. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she firmly believed that blood carries its virtues, and, nodding her head, she would repeat that humble birth would always show in a person's bearing" (p. 26). Tante Nabou's attitudes, it is important to note, do not exist in a vacuum, rather they are the sum total of a way of positioning and naming people in her society. Her language reflects caste as conceptualized within the language of division and difference (in a negative way). To Tante Nabou "those people" are not worthy of her company or family, because they have a specific place and function in society. You call on them when you need their services, otherwise, each to his/her own when it comes to marriage.

The question raised by this kind of presentation is, does Bâ successfully critique women's relations based upon caste thoroughly, or does she contribute to the perpetuation in placing the lower caste women in particular positions?

Bâ, it can be argued, carefully negotiates the spaces inhabited by the different women in her fictional world. She does present women with tensions in their lives contingent on their locations, locations replete with tensions. These tensions are exacerbated further by generational gaps and caste pretensions, to the point where the women always seem to be in contention and opposition. These opposition and tensions are not always negative, as Bâ seems to leave space for transformation as in the relationship with Ramatoulaye and Farmata. Bâ sees transformations of culture and traditions as a solution to the alleviation of the situation of the woman in Senegalese society in particular and Africa in general.

At the same time, this does not absolve her from reinscribing caste in ways which can be read as acquiescence. For instance, even though, Ramatoulaye tries not to be caught in the game of castes, she does turn to Farmata for help in sending a letter to Daouda Dieng. Farmata, she tells the reader, "was happy, having dreamed of this role right from our youth"(p. 67). Farmata is supposedly happy to finally have the chance to act out the role of her subordination in society. The use of caste, though seems to rest on Bâ's characters who are rooted in their belief, in tradition. Yaye Khady, Tante Nabou and Lady Mother-in-law represent the last bastion of this tradition.

Bâ's intellectual project leaves the baton to the young women to change the status quo. Her hopes are that through the younger generation, the archaic and negative attachment to tradition will make way for a different way of constructing knowledge within tradition but in a positive

manner. This transformation, she firmly believes can and will take place within Senegalese society.

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