

REJECTING THE EPISTOLARY WOMAN:  
MODERN FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN MARIAMA BÂ'S  
*UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE* AND YING CHEN'S *LES LETTRES CHINOISES*

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## Abstract

One of the most interesting thematic elements of the male-authored epistolary texts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is what Katharine Ann Jensen refers to as the “Epistolary Woman”: “Seduced, betrayed, and suffering, this woman writes letter after letter of anguished and masochistic lament to the man who has left her behind” (Jensen 1). Jensen notes a pattern of this portrayal in texts such as *Lettres portugaises* and also in the letter-writing manuals written by men of the period. Epistolary Woman stems from masculine efforts to limit and define women’s writing as highly emotional, and in turn, Epistolary Woman is “a male creation” designed to marginalize women (Jensen 2). This creation compensated for the shift in gender power roles that was occurring in salon culture, where women had cultivated power and influence.

The Epistolary Woman trope appears in its most vividly obsessive portrait as Gulleragues’s Portuguese Nun, Mariane. Mariane’s abandonment in the text’s series of unanswered letters are a portrait of amorous despair and suffering. These themes of betrayal found in the letters of Epistolary Woman also have marked the works of two modern Francophone authors: Mariama Bâ and Ying Chen. In Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* and Chen’s *Les lettres chinoises*, the authors develop female characters that are initially defined by the absence of the man they love from their lives. As francophone women, Bâ and Chen possess a clear knowledge of French literary history and in turn, the manner in which to create works that promote change within the parameters that the male Epistolary Woman text has come to represent. I will therefore examine *Une si longue lettre* and *Les lettres chinoises* as modern representations of the classic epistolary narratives of suffering, amorous women and also as re-evaluations that eventually serve to advocate a more realistic and (at times) more feminist portrayal of a new Epistolary Woman.

## Introduction

The epistolary text came to prominence during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as more authors began to venture into the realm of narrative fiction, partially forsaking verse and historical and philosophical writing to pursue lesser known and less respected territory. The texts that are most often regarded as being the major works of the genre are mostly those of male authors such as Guilleragues's *Lettres portugaises*, Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, and Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses*. While these works have typically been given more critical attention, female authors such as Madame de Graffigny and Madame de Riccoboni also were instrumental in the rise of the epistolary text due to the immense popularity of their works.

One of the most interesting thematic elements of the male-authored epistolary texts is what Katharine Ann Jensen refers to as the "Epistolary Woman":

In seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, one of the ideals of femininity, which women were encouraged/compelled to realize, was what I term Epistolary Woman. Seduced, betrayed, and suffering, this woman writes letter after letter of anguished and masochistic lament to the man who has left her behind. (Jensen 1)

Jensen notes a pattern of this portrayal in texts such as *Lettres portugaises* and also in the letter-writing manuals written by men of the period. Epistolary Woman stems from masculine efforts to limit and define women's writing as highly emotional. By defining it as such, these men also maintained that female authors innately possessed the ability to write eloquent letters. Jensen asserts: "Editors of these manuals selected, revised, and at times even wrote the 'women's' letters they offered for imitation...by theorizing about woman's natural talent for letter writing, male epistolary theorists and editors sought to limit women's writing to the letter genre and to marginalize it as non-literary" (10). In turn, Epistolary Woman is "a male creation" designed to marginalize women (Jensen 2). This creation compensated for the shift in gender power roles that was occurring in salon culture, where women had cultivated power and influence.

However, while the male editors and authors initially created this trope, there were also female authors of the time who furthered this patriarchal vision with their epistolary narratives. For example, the writings of Madame de Lespinasse and the love letters of Marie-Catherine Desjardins recreated the suffering in love of the women of their male predecessors; instead of re-interpreting the trope as other women did, Lespinasse and Desjardins served to re-inforce the image. Unfortunately, in 1668, Desjardins had her anguished love letters published against her will, and in her private writings, she participated in the same masochistic refrain as the female protagonists of her male contemporaries. However, Desjardins, writing under the nom de plume of Madame de Villedieu for her 1675 novel *Les Désordres de l'amour*, also turned Epistolary Woman on its head by creating a heroine in this novel who seduces a man through letters. In this situation, rather than being the poor abandoned women, it is Desjardin's heroine who is endowed with romantic power. In contrast with Desjardins, Lespinasse did fulfill the role of the suffering Epistolary Woman: she is said to have died of love. Despite the presence of certain women who themselves lived and wrote in Epistolary Woman's tradition, other authors such as Madame de Graffigny and Madame de Riccoboni wrote within the epistolary structure with the intention of changing its female characters, providing inspiration for the women who wrote in the centuries following.

The Epistolary Woman trope appears in its most vividly obsessive portrait as Gulleragues's Portuguese Nun, Mariane. Mariane's betrayal and abandonment in the text's series of unanswered letters are a portrait of amorous despair and suffering. This will be an important issue to address before endeavoring to discuss ways in which female authors have both embraced and rejected this characterization. The themes of betrayal and abandonment found in the letters of Epistolary Woman not only influenced the works of 18<sup>th</sup> century male and female novelists but also have marked the works of two modern Francophone authors: Mariama Bâ and

Ying Chen. In Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Chen's *Les lettres chinoises*, the authors develop female characters that are initially defined by the absence of the man they love from their lives. However, Bâ's female protagonist, Ramatoulaye, is eventually able to redefine her personal agency and her role in a distinctly patriarchal society. Because Bâ and Chen are not French, their writing also integrates aspects of their native cultures; in turn, their female characters exhibit both Western and traditional values. While others have analyzed the epistolary narrative in *Une si longue lettre*, this aspect of *Les lettres chinoises* has been discussed less often than issues of identity and nationality. However, I believe that the structure and its Epistolary Woman tradition have extensive implications upon the themes that Bâ and Chen explore.

In *Une si longue lettre*, Ramatoulaye uses her letters to her best friend Aïssatou to aid her in coping with the death of her husband, a man who left her for a teenage girl. However, while she writes to express her pain, she also manages to remove herself from the cycle of self-generating suffering typical of Epistolary Woman to find redemption in her role as mother and teacher by the end of the novel. Through writing to her female friend rather than to the lover who abandoned her like the Portuguese Nun, Ramatoulaye eventually heals after her abandonment.

In contrast, Ying Chen preserves the Epistolary Woman themes much more than Bâ. Chen creates the novel's narrative through the letters of three characters: one male (Yuan) and two females (Sassa and Da Li). Yuan, a student, decides to move to Montréal to pursue his destiny away from his homeland of China, leaving his fiancée Sassa in Shanghai feeling desperately abandoned. Soon after Yuan leaves, a mutual friend of the couple, Da Li, also moves to Montréal. This serves as the beginning of an implied love triangle that ultimately breaks the hearts of both the female letter writers, causing Da Li to flee to Paris and Sassa to descend into illness and, eventually, death. Sassa suffers in silent betrayal and expresses her pain

in letters to her female friend, Da Li, as Bâ's Ramatoulaye does. Da Li's letters to Sassa also dissect her love life, and like Sassa, Da Li chooses to write to her "amie" rather than to her "ami." Additionally, Chen's extensive discussion about immigration and the nature of identity creates a work with more to contribute than another portrait of a wronged woman.

As francophone women, Bâ and Chen possess a clear knowledge of French literary history and in turn, the manner in which to create works that promote change within the parameters that the male Epistolary Woman text has come to represent. I will therefore examine *Une si longue lettre* and *Les lettres chinoises* as modern representations of the classic epistolary narratives of suffering, amorous women and also as re-evaluations that eventually serve to advocate a more realistic and (at times) more feminist portrayal of a new Epistolary Woman.

## *Lettres Portugaises*

Before beginning the chapters about Bâ's and Chen's novels, a brief discussion of Guilleragues's *Lettres portugaises* will provide additional context for the Epistolary Woman trope. A true cultural sensation, *Lettres portugaises*, was published anonymously by Claude Babin in 1669. The text consists of five letters, originally attributed to a Portuguese Nun, Mariana (Mariane) Alcoforado, who was writing to a French officer whom she deeply loved. However, in more recent literary history, critics have attributed the text to Gabriel-Joseph de Laverne de Guilleragues; the French version of the text was reportedly from his translation of the Portuguese "original." The text was immensely successful, and, in turn, there were five editions published within a year. Since that time, *Lettres portugaises* has been translated into many languages and remains an extensively read example of French literature throughout much of the world (Landy-Houillon 60-61).

Identifying herself as Mariane, the Portuguese Nun writes her tortured letters from the isolation of a cloister. Having met her French military lover while in the convent, she remains behind as he returns to France, leaving her without a formal good-bye or any clear notion of where he had gone. His departure deeply wounds Mariane, and the text's first letter clearly reflects her heartbreak: "Hélas! les miens [les yeux] sont privés de la seule lumière qui les animait, il ne leur reste que les larmes, et je ne les ai employés à aucun usage qu'à pleurer sans cesse, depuis que j'appris que vous étiez enfin résolu à un éloignement qui m'est si insupportable qu'il me fera mourir en peu de temps" (Guilleragues 71). Mariane begins her letters in such a state of dejection that she has lost her will to live. She laments her abandonment for the ensuing four letters and proceeds to perpetuate her own misery by writing to an uncaring man.

On several occasions, the Portuguese Nun writes of her unwillingness to end her suffering. For instance, she states: "...mais, hélas! quel remède! non, j'aime mieux souffrir

encore davantage que vous oublier” (Guilleragues 75). This powerful need to continue feeling pain demonstrates a particular tendency towards self-torture in love which is a defining characteristic of Epistolary Woman. Katharine Ann Jensen discusses this phenomenon: “Because the abandoned woman’s desire is self-generated, so are her letters; however thematically or stylistically repetitious, these letters could go on forever, as long as the woman desires to desire and write about it in her lover’s absence” (31). Thus, Mariane insists upon the depth of her hurt for much of the rest of the text, extending her desperation so far as to have her heartbreak physically manifest: “Je suis au désespoir, votre pauvre Mariane n’en peut plus, elle s’évanouit en finissant cette lettre. Adieu, adieu, ayez pitié de moi” (Guilleragues 77). Begging for pity, Mariane receives none.

As he unmistakably rejects her, the Portuguese Nun writes of her disdain for him in her final letter and returns almost all of the letters that he had sent her. While stating that she will no longer correspond, she also expresses the desire to continue to write: “Je veux vous écrire une autre lettre pour vous faire voir que je serai peut-être plus tranquille dans quelque temps...” (Guilleragues 94). Although the text does not include any more letters, Mariane has not appeased her need to continue her cycle of masochistic, self-generated pain. Because of this, the Portuguese Nun experiences no resolution to her heartbreak at the text’s end.

Having given a brief description of Guilleragues’s Portuguese Nun, I would like to begin my discussion of the Francophone texts, with Mariane serving as a template rendering of Epistolary Woman. By establishing parallels between the 17<sup>th</sup> century text and my two chosen novels, I intend to demonstrate the strength of such a trope even in cultures outside of France. I will first examine the trope in Bâ’s *Ramatoulaye* and will follow with my discussion of Chen’s female protagonists, Sassa and Da Li.

## *Une si longue lettre*

Mariama Bâ's novel, *Une si longue lettre*, is one of the most widely read works of Francophone African literature. Published in 1979, some critics attribute the novel's immense popularity to the frank and clear voice of the narrator, Ramatoulaye, and to Bâ's depiction of a modern Senegalese woman, conflicted about Islamic culture and Westernization. With African women so seldom the subject of literature before the 1970s, Bâ found a willing audience for her first novel, both in Senegal and in France. However, despite her creation of a uniquely African protagonist, Bâ chose to use a narrative structure with a rich French literary history: the epistolary novel. While establishing a connection with famed epistolary texts like *Lettres portugaises*, Bâ portrays her letter-writing heroine as not only the distraught victim of a man's betrayal, but also as a survivor and an empowered woman.

Before discussing aspects of the structure, I must review the novel's plot. *Une si longue lettre* begins as Ramatoulaye addresses a long letter to her best friend, Aïssatou, and announces the death of her husband. Readers soon discover that Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou had been confronted with similar situations: Modou (Ramatoulaye's husband) and Mawdo (Aïssatou's husband) forayed their entitlement as Muslim men into second marriages to the detriment of their existing families. Despite similar circumstances, the women had very different reactions to their husbands' choices. Aïssatou found her salvation in higher education, left Mawdo, and eventually immigrated to the United States with her children to work at the Senegalese embassy. Meanwhile, Ramatoulaye remained faithful to Modou until his death, despite his complete neglect of her and their twelve children. However, after Modou's death, Ramatoulaye defies societal expectations of women when she refuses to remarry after receiving two proposals. By the end of the letter/novel, Ramatoulaye begins to assert her independence and finds comfort in the support of her best friend and her family. While Ramatoulaye's love for Modou appears

torturous to some (including to her own daughter, Daba), she emerges from her mourning period having started to heal from Modou's betrayal.

As according to Muslim custom, Ramatoulaye remains in complete isolation for much of the letter/novel during her 40-day mourning period to begin her new life as a widow. Due to Ramatoulaye's betrayal by her husband and her widowed isolation, critics have compared Bâ's novel to Guilleragues's 1669 *Lettres portugaises*: "The two novels, *Une si longue lettre* and *Lettres portugaises* are similar in the desperate and lyrical monologue of solitude, metaphorically represented by the seclusion, clausturation and isolation of the two protagonists, Mariane in the convent, and Ramatoulaye in a mourning house during the rite of widowhood" (Azodo 5). Although Ramatoulaye is writing to Aïssatou, she cannot resist addressing a section of the long letter to her husband, Modou, thus engaging him in fantasy since he is, in fact, dead. As she insists on perpetuating this fantasy, Ramatoulaye mimics the Portuguese Nun, but in contrast does not use her address to Modou as a lament.

In the book's sixth chapter, Ramatoulaye speaks to a "tu" (Modou), remembering the story of their courtship, from his studies in France to her mother's objections to the relationship because Modou was "trop parfait" (Bâ 35). Rather than berating him for leaving her for a teenager, Ramatoulaye relates fond, loving memories of the early days that she and Modou spent together. Perhaps because she knows that this letter will never reach Modou, Ramatoulaye allows herself to relive the tender moments that the couple had: "Modou Fall, à l'instant où tu t'inclinas devant moi pour m'inviter à danser, je sus que tu étais celui que j'attendais" (Bâ 33). In contrast with Mariane's constant laments of her lover's departure, Ramatoulaye now feels she should have expected his eventual betrayal because her mother had warned her about it. Ramatoulaye repeats her mother's doubts, based on a traditional Senegalese belief: "Elle parlait souvent de la séparation voyante de tes deux premières incisives supérieures, signe de primauté de

la sensualité en l'individu. Que n'a-t-elle fait, dès lors, pour nous séparer?" (Bâ 35). Later in the letter to Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye bemoans that she did not listen to her mother's advice and now appreciates her wisdom. By mentioning her mother's statements, Ramatoulaye shows how female companionship and family could sustain a woman after she is abandoned and then widowed. After all, these two systems of support are Ramatoulaye's only sustenance through the various tragedies that she endures.

However, before Ramatoulaye begins her road to recovery, she follows the Portuguese Nun's suffering example as she deals with the results of Modou's death. Ramatoulaye writes: "Je mesure, avec effroi, l'ampleur de la trahison de Modou. L'abandon de sa première famille (mes enfants et moi) était conformé à un nouveau choix de vie. Il nous rejetait. Il orientait son avenir sans tenir compte de notre existence" (Bâ 27). Ramatoulaye attempts to make sense of her abandonment by describing her situation to her best friend during her mourning period after his death; Ramatoulaye obsessively returns to her relationship with Modou in order to understand why someone would want to leave behind his family. However, because Ramatoulaye is discussing her past pain from a point in the present, she is able to contextualize her feelings and realize that she was able to survive despite her immense sadness. As Ramatoulaye begins to recover from the shock of the rejection and Modou's subsequent death, she also begins to repeat the following: "Je survivais" (Bâ 98). After her initial use of this phrase, she also repeats it three times in the next three pages. In contrast with the Portuguese Nun who is likely to waste away from heartbreak, Ramatoulaye writes that she has survived the pain of betrayal. The tone of this repeated sentence has both a sense of sadness and a sense of pride behind it. In her new independence, Ramatoulaye celebrates her own accomplishments rather than obsessing over her inadequacies. It is for this reason that Keith Walker writes: "Ramatoulaye, the correspondent, is not a passionate woman in love, alone and tormented, who

through the projective epistolary gesture seeks to turn her lover's absence into an imagined presence and her soliloquy into an imagined, fulfilling dialogue" (257). Instead of torturing herself into eventual silence by writing to an uncaring lover, Ramatoulaye decides to address her letters to an understanding friend despite engaging in a brief fantasy by writing several pages to Modou after his death. By writing such an extended letter to Aïssatou, she transforms the letter into a sort of journal. While sharing certain themes, Ramatoulaye is able to find renewed strength in her life through her friendship with Aïssatou, motherhood, and her education. Using these three aspects, Bâ depicts Ramatoulaye as a woman simultaneously progressing towards happiness while reconciling the sometimes conflicting French and Senegalese cultures.

In comparison with Ramatoulaye's marriage to Modou, her friendship with Aïssatou is the most significant relationship that she has in the novel. Through writing the letter to Aïssatou, she reconciles her intense sadness about Modou's death and his earlier abandonment. Bâ establishes the importance of the friendship beginning with the very first word in print, "Aïssatou" (Bâ 11). Although it serves as the salutation for the letter, Bâ further maintains the name's importance in the first two paragraphs:

J'ai reçu ton mot. En guise de réponse, j'ouvre ce cahier, point d'appui dans mon désarroi: notre longue pratique m'a enseigné que la confiance noie la douleur.  
Ton existence dans ma vie n'est point hasard. Nos grands-mères dont les concessions étaient séparées par une tapade échangeaient journallement des messages. Nos mères se disputaient la garde de nos oncles et tantes. Nous, nous avons usé pagnes et sandales sur le même chemin caillouteux de l'école coranique. Nous avons enfoui, dans les mêmes trous, nos dents de lait, en implorant Fée-Souris de nous les restituer plus belles (Bâ 11).

In a few sentences, Ramatoulaye describes a common past and a life-long bond that has sustained her throughout various personal difficulties. While Ramatoulaye alludes to a tragedy, she immediately seeks consolation in corresponding to her friend about the happy memories that

they had shared. Several paragraphs later, the source of her sorrow becomes clear: Modou is dead.

The obvious comfort that Ramatoulaye finds in writing to Aïssatou establishes the importance of the friendship in both women's lives. This powerful connection lends support to anthropologists' assertions that relationships between female friends are closer than those of married couples in certain African societies. Given how polygamy destroys the marriages in the novel, this is not difficult to believe. While Modou openly betrays and abandons Ramatoulaye, her friendship with Aïssatou remains strong despite their separation of thousands of miles. In the sections following the initial salutation, Ramatoulaye writes on two separate occasions about how much stronger friendship is than love: "L'amitié a des grandeurs inconnues de l'amour. Elle se fortifie dans les difficultés, alors que les contraintes massacrent l'amour" (Bâ 103). Later, Ramatoulaye again avows: "Tu m'as souvent prouvé la supériorité de l'amitié sur l'amour" (Bâ 134). Ramatoulaye recognizes that the support she has received from Aïssatou does not disappear as she ages and becomes less sexually desirable. When she understands that these physical changes were partly responsible for Modou's departure, Ramatoulaye becomes even more grateful for Aïssatou's unconditional love.

This unconditional love manifests itself in several situations, but in the most striking display, Aïssatou provides financial support to Ramatoulaye while Modou ignores his first wife's economic need. In this particular scene, Ramatoulaye explains that after Modou abandoned her, she needed of a car in order to take care of family business. Instead of providing help to his old family, however, Modou purchased a sports car for his new, young wife. In contrast to the self-involved husband, her loving friend purchases a car for Ramatoulaye. The bond shared between the two female friends allows Ramatoulaye to be vulnerable and admit her necessity without feeling the requisite shame that would tinge her interactions with Modou. Instead of having to

jettison some of her newfound independence from Modou, Aïssatou's support keeps Ramatoulaye from once again beginning her cycle of despair.

It is because of the strength of Ramatoulaye's friendship with Aïssatou that she can initiate the healing process by writing after Modou's death. As she states at the end of the book's first paragraph: "la confiance noie la douleur" (Bâ 11). Ramatoulaye knows that in writing to Aïssatou, she is writing to a receptive and loving audience, and this allows her to express herself fully. In contrast with the Portuguese Nun, this difference in audience is significant. Bâ has Ramatoulaye correspond with her dearest friend, allowing her to move beyond the pain caused by Modou, a movement that is wholly absent in Guilleragues's narrative. In making this change in letter recipient, Bâ enables her heroine to depart from the self-perpetuated pain of Mariane and Epistolary Woman. While Ramatoulaye, like her counterparts in French literature, still asks the inevitable questions about her abandonment, Bâ's Senegalese heroine is able to heal.

Ramatoulaye not only has a close relationship with Aïssatou, she also shares one with her children. After describing her abandonment in early her letter, Ramatoulaye recounts her eldest daughter's reaction to Modou's taking a second wife: "La rage de Daba augmentait au fur et à mesure qu'elle analysait la situation: 'Romps, Maman! Chasse cet homme. Il ne nous a pas respectées, ni toi, ni moi. Fais comme Tata Aïssatou, romps. Dis-moi que tu rompras. Je ne te vois pas te disputant un homme avec une fille de mon âge'" (Bâ 77-78). Daba, a product of a more Westernized generation than her mother, sees no reason for her mother to remain married to the man who betrayed her. Unlike Ramatoulaye, Daba sees the situation in very clear terms: her mother has been wronged and, in turn, must leave her wandering husband. In fact, the betrayal has had such an alienating effect upon Daba that she speaks about her father as if she barely knows him. When addressing her mother, Daba uses "Maman," a term of endearment; in

contrast, her father is “Il,” “cet homme,” and “un homme.” Because of his betrayal of both her mother and the family, Modou no longer merits his status as father in Daba’s eyes. However, the thought of divorce frightens Ramatoulaye. Writing to Aïssatou about Daba’s remonstrance, Ramatoulaye asks her friend: “Partir? Recommencer à zero, après avoir vécu vingt-cinq ans avec un homme, après avoir mis au monde douze enfants? Avais-je assez de force pour supporter seule le poids de cette responsabilité à la fois morale et matérielle?” (Bâ 78). As her last question shows, Ramatoulaye is afraid that she cannot manage the day to day details of supporting her family on her own after a divorce. She is not afraid to be without Modou’s love (which she had already lost), but rather to be unable to perform practical tasks.

From a Westernized perspective like that of Daba, Ramatoulaye’s decision not to divorce her husband could show weakness. But regardless of her more traditional choice to stay married, she gains strength from living without a man. Ramatoulaye becomes involved in the practical aspects of life, which take precedence over heartbreak: “Les dates extrêmes de paiement des factures d’électricité ou d’eau sollicitaient mon attention. J’étais souvent la seule femme dans une file d’attente” (Bâ 98). Based on necessity, she begins to fulfill the typically male role of handling money matters. Although she realizes that she is the only woman in line, she is not deterred from continuing to take care of the family business. Giving details of her new public life, Ramatoulaye discusses the social implications of this sort of public solitude for a woman: “On dévisageait la femme mûre sans compagnon. Je feignais l’indifférence, alors que la colère martelait mes nerfs et que mes larmes retenues embuaient mes yeux. Je mesurais, aux regards étonnés, la minceur de la liberté accordée à la femme” (Bâ 99). Given that Ramatoulaye, we learn, has worked for years as a teacher, her fear about paying bills in public and her remark about women’s lack of freedom seems surprising. Yet as a teacher, Ramatoulaye’s career has always been within an approved feminine realm: education and childcare. As she begins

standing in line to pay bills, she departs from the sphere allotted women and realizes how society views her new “masculine” forays into public. The tasks she must now assume as the sole parent of her children raise therefore her feminist consciousness.

While many immediately attribute Senegalese opinions of women to Islam, Georges Hardy and the other nineteenth-century French colonizers also managed to communicate certain prejudices about women inherent in their own European culture. For instance, Lucy Creevey discusses a particular agricultural program which serves as an example of how the French aided to further subjugate Senegalese women:

The arrival of the French reinforced the downgrading of the position of women...By the end of the eighteenth century the French were providing every possible incentive to get Senegalese farmers to grow peanuts. They assumed-based on their own culture and economy-that the production of peanuts would be a specifically male responsibility. The man might use his wives as labor, but, whether or not he did, he was the one to whom the incentives should go-the selected seeds or fertilizer or credit for example. (Creevey 276)

In this system, the wives were made dependent upon their husband, and as Creevey also discusses, they were unable to continue growing other crops to be sold at the market as they had been doing for years. By asserting their own patriarchal assumptions, the French aided in maintaining an economy in which women had limited independence. This limited independence is clearly reflected in Ramatoulaye’s concerns about her ability to support her family financially after Modou’s departure.

Indeed, while her initial public ventures were to perform practical tasks like paying the electricity bills, Ramatoulaye also discovers the particular enjoyment that she feels going to matinees at the movie theater. Defying expectations, Ramatoulaye begins to find solace in her public life, and instead of retreating into her house, she openly claims her independence. She writes:

Les séances de matinée, au cinéma, me comblaient. Elles me donnaient le courage d'affronter la curiosité des uns et des autres. Elles ne m'éloignaient pas longtemps de

mes enfants...Ils approfondissaient et élargissaient ma vision du monde, grâce à leur apport culturel. J'oubliais mes tourments en partageant ceux d'autrui. Le cinéma, distraction peu coûteuse, peut donc procurer une joie saine (Bâ 99).

Her experiences at the movie theater allow her to forget the recent misfortunes in her personal life and find a joy that she has long been missing. Ramatoulaye's emotional turmoil does not mirror that of the Portuguese Nun in its incessant self-absorption; Ramatoulaye is able to relate to the troubles of others rather than descending into an internal cycle of self-pity. Her decision to do activities alone shows character growth as she is increasingly able to be happy without Modou. Importantly however, Ramatoulaye does not entirely break from expectations in her movie trips; like a good Senegalese mother, even her indulgences do not cause her to be away from her beloved children for long. This passage serves as a microcosm of Bâ's characterization of Ramatoulaye. On one level, Ramatoulaye does as she pleases and defies tradition by going about town alone, and on the other, she continues to feel a strong maternal pull to return home quickly. As she proclaims two pages later: "L'amour maternel me soutenait" (Bâ 101). Her love for her children, combined with her friendship with Aïssatou, proves to sustain her through her heartbreak.

Ramatoulaye describes her trips to find joy at the movie theater, but she also is cognizant of the role that she plays in the moral development of her children. As Ramatoulaye discusses her relationship with her children, she moves her focus away from her broken marriage with Modou. Ramatoulaye, desirous of happiness for her children, allows her daughters to dress as they choose in Western clothing despite her fears that they are venturing into a life outside of cultural traditions. She worries about the sort of teenagers that her "trio" of daughters are becoming: "Le pantalon fait saillir les formes plantureuses de la Nègresse, que souligne davantage une cambrure profonde des reins...Puisque mes filles voulaient 'être dans le vent,'

j'avais accepté l'entrée du pantalon dans les garde-robes" (Bâ 142). Having permitted Westernized clothing, Ramatoulaye begins to question her concession when she spies the trio smoking: "L'autre nuit, j'avais surpris le trio (comme on les appelle familièrement) Arame, Yacine, et Dieynaba, en train de fumer dans leur chambre. Tout, dans l'attitude, dénonçait l'habitude: la façon de coincer la cigarette entre les doigts, de l'élever gracieusement à la hauteur de lèvres, de la humer en conaisseuses" (Bâ 141). This habit clearly upsets Ramatoulaye as she exclaims: "Mais de là s'octroyer la license de fumer! Ma colère les foudroya. J'étais offusquée par la surprise. Une bouche de femme exhalant l'odeur âcre du tabac, au lieu d'embaumer! Des dents de femmes noircies de nicotine, au lieu d'éclater de blancheur!" (Bâ 142). Ramatoulaye objects both to the secretive nature of her daughters' behavior and also to their departure from Senegalese tradition, which insists upon the importance of white teeth in African women's beauty. Yet, just as she herself had ignored her mother's advice about Modou when she was younger, Ramatoulaye's daughters now ignore their mother's traditional beliefs about beauty. In the end, their choices lead Ramatoulaye to ask Aïssatou: "Le modernisme ne peut donc être, sans s'accompagner de la dégradation de mœurs?" (Bâ 143). While she is tolerant of certain shifts in sexual dynamics (as with women beginning to wear pants like men), Ramatoulaye remains unmoved on others.

She confronts an even graver danger from Western, liberal influence than the trio smoking when she discovers that her second oldest daughter, Aïssatou, is pregnant: "Mes dents claquaient de colère..." (Bâ 152). Instead of disappointment, Ramatoulaye is so angry at her pregnant daughter that she physically reacts. To Ramatoulaye, any kind of sexual relationship should be the product of mature love, leading to marriage; yet Aïssatou is unmarried and only 16 or 17 years old. So the infuriated Ramatoulaye demands: "La première question qui vient à l'esprit à la découverte d'un pareil état est: qui? Qui est l'auteur de ce vol, car vol il y a; qui est

l'auteur de ce préjudice, car préjudice il y a! Qui a osé? Qui...?" (Bâ 151). Ramatoulaye refers to the loss of virginity as a "theft" and in the process indicates how precious she believes women's chastity to be. At the same time, however, in referring to theft, she might be expressing her sense of having her daughter stolen from her now that Aïssatou is no longer a virgin. After Ramatoulaye meets her pregnant daughter's boyfriend, she remarks to Aïssatou : "À ce moment, je sentis ma fille se détacher de mon être, comme si je la mettais au monde à nouveau...J'acceptais mon rôle subalterne" (Bâ 158). Whereas Ramatoulaye had been able to exercise a amount of control over her children's lives since Modou's departure, she now must accept that she is no longer the only person to whom her daughter is attached. Because her new, post-abandonment identity is so tenuously constructed upon her role as a mother, Ramatoulaye is increasingly afraid of losing herself again once her children are grown. Despite this fear, though, Ramatoulaye continues to desire Aïssatou's happiness.

Having examined Ramatoulaye's reaction to finding her daughters smoking, some of her objections must also stem from her daughter's more Westernized outlook on sexuality. Ramatoulaye advocates sexual self-restraint, and her daughter clearly strays from her mother's traditional beliefs. In this way, the younger Aïssatou reflects the Westernized behavior of her "homonyme," Ramatoulaye's best friend, Aïssatou. The older Aïssatou does not engage in promiscuous sexual relationships, but her decision to divorce her polygamous husband is significantly more radical than Ramatoulaye's decision to stay with hers.

Despite Ramatoulaye's anger at her daughter Aïssatou's morally suspect decisions, her desire to be an effective and loving mother is stronger than her distaste. Although she does not approve, Ramatoulaye decides to accept the situation: "Et puis, on est mère pour comprendre l'inexplicable. On est mère pour illuminer les ténèbres. On est mère pour couvrir, quand les éclairs zèbrent la nuit, quand la tonnerre viole la terre, quand la boue enlise. On est mère pour

aimer, sans commencement ni fin” (Bâ 153). Her love for her child, regardless of the child’s bad decisions, does not end, and Ramatoulaye continues to find purpose in this love.

Although Ramatoulaye accepts her daughter’s situation out of love, she immediately fears that Aïssatou may eventually have to confront a polygamous husband without the benefit of a complete education. A year away from taking the baccalauréat, the younger Aïssatou’s future could be limited by pregnancy and motherhood. However, upon meeting Aïssatou’s boyfriend, Ramatoulaye’s concerns are somewhat assuaged by the young man’s serious, ambitious demeanor. Instead of restricting her daughter’s prospects, he helps her to focus on her work and to improve her grades. To this scholastic improvement, Ramatoulaye responds: “...à quelque chose malheur est bon!” (Bâ 160). Ramatoulaye, herself an educated woman and teacher, attempts to see the positive in an otherwise negative situation by emphasizing Aïssatou’s new scholarly success.

Ramatoulaye’s positive attitude about Aïssatou’s scholastic achievement is a logical response considering her emphasis on education in her own life. After the dissolution of her marriage, Ramatoulaye also found sustenance in how well her children performed in school: “Leurs succès scolaires étaient ma fierté, autant de lauriers jetés aux pieds de mon seigneur” (Bâ 107). Both French and Senegalese cultures accord the mother a crucial role in education. For this reason, I would like to discuss the role of education in both societies and how, because of this, Ramatoulaye would be able to find meaning in a way that the Portuguese Nun could not.

Ramatoulaye is herself a product of the French colonial school system and would have most certainly have come into contact with the works of various 18<sup>th</sup> century French *philosophes*. The *philosophe* ideas of republicanism would have framed her notions of duty to her country. To speak to this influence, Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* discusses the importance of education in the establishment of a successful republic: “C’est dans le gouvernement républicain

que l'on a besoin de toute la puissance de l'éducation. Tout depend donc d'établir dans la république cet amour [l'amour des lois et de la patrie], et c'est à l'inspirer que l'éducation doit être attentive" (31). In accordance with Montesquieu's republicanism, Ramatoulaye believes that, as a mother, it is her duty to help to create good Senegalese citizens; therefore, she attempts to instill in her children an appreciation for the culture's traditions. Besides establishing a culturally-conscious environment in her home, she also enrolls all of her twelve children in school where they can receive an education that she cannot give them at home as a working mother. Similarly, during the establishment of the New French Republic during and after the Revolution, French women fulfilled an important role in children's education.

During this time period, women began to be seen as instrumental in the education of young people in the new republic. According to Lynn Hunt:

In February 1791 Prudhomme laid out the soon to be standard revolutionary view in his *Révolutions de Paris*. The Revolution depends on you, Prudhomme wrote to his women readers; "without leaving your homes, you can already do much for it. The liberty of a people is based on good morals and education, and you are their guardians and their first dispensers."...In this vision, widely shared by women as well as men, the most important role of women was as mothers, who would educate the new generation of patriots and, after 1792, republicans (Hunt 123).

Prudhomme's statements indicate that the mother's role in the fledgling republic begins in the construction of loyal citizens at home. In connection with this, Ramatoulaye proclaims: "La réussite d'une nation passe donc irrémédiablement par la famille" (Bâ 164). While Ramatoulaye harkens back to the nationalism of Mother Africa with her rhetoric here, she does not clarify what cultural values are engendered in the family. Because the nation must be successful, her task in the educating her children adds a noble purpose to her existence.

Significantly, the French entered into colonial education with a similar view of the importance of mothers in the colonizing process. János Riesz quotes a passage from the writings of the first Inspector General of French West Africa, Georges Hardy, in which he discusses the

importance of education in the creation of a cohesive empire: “Quand nous amenons un garçon à l’école française, c’est une unité que nous gagnons; quand nous y amenons une fille, c’est une unité multipliée par le nombre d’enfants qu’elle aura” (32). As his philosophical predecessors argued before him, the mother (or women in general) are seen as indispensable for the promulgation of the French language and values in West African society. However, although this ideology is apparent in Bâ’s novel, her statements do not necessarily mean that the nation’s success depends upon the spread of French cultural values. After all, Ramatoulaye has consciously objected to her daughter’s Westernized decisions. However, she has been able to remove herself from her suffering at Modou’s hands due to Western feminist beliefs.

As a teacher, Ramatoulaye sees her purpose as an educator not just of her own children but also of other people’s children. For instance, at one point writing to Aïssatou, she states: “Les enseignements--ceux du cours maternel autant que ceux des universités--forment une armée noble aux exploits quotidiens, jamais chantés, jamais décorés. Armée toujours en marche, toujours vigilante. Armée sans tambour, sans uniforme rutilant. Cette armée-là, déjouant pièges et embûches, plante partout le drapeau du savoir et de la vertu” (Bâ 51). The militant images of this passage recall Senegal’s often violent past and also the violence of the French Revolution. Speaking specifically to the “army” Bâ describes, it sounds strikingly similar to the oft immortalized patriots of the early French Revolution, average citizens with noble ideas and a desire to change their society. Indeed, the Senegalese independence movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s possessed the same idealism as the French Revolution two centuries earlier, so despite the clear parallels, Bâ does not necessarily reflect either a French or African viewpoint. All of the French ideas in the novel’s text may cause some to question to which country’s flag Ramatoulaye attributes knowledge and virtue: France or Senegal? In the context of French colonial rhetoric, France would certainly have been the answer because the colonizers believed

that their mission was to bring civilization to the people of “primitive” societies. However, Bâ does not mean to lend support to this belief. When Bâ writes “le drapeau du savoir et de la vertu,” she is not alluding to the flag of any country. She is rather speaking about the open mark that education leaves upon a person; in her view, education influences all interactions positively. Bâ envisions an educated populace (although not necessarily educated only in the French schools) that will be able to make significant changes in Senegal.

Bâ’s portrayal of Ramatoulaye as being both educated *and* a good mother also stems from her personal beliefs and own life. A divorced, working mother herself, Bâ knew the struggle that Senegalese women faced. In an enlightening 1979 interview with Barbara Harrell-Bond, Bâ discusses her views about the role of the family in providing a traditional Senegalese education to children. Historically, mothers educated their daughters to run a household and to be modest women and good (obedient) wives. This education also typically included a number of oral histories that had been told in the family from generation to generation. However, as formal education became more readily available throughout the country, many young women began to disregard the information that their uneducated mothers had had to share with them. The novel provides numerous examples of the increasing denial of traditional wisdom; For example, Ramatoulaye discusses her own unwillingness to listen to her mother’s warnings about Modou and later finds her own admonitions to her daughters falling on deaf ears. Despite being a product of colonial schools, Bâ protests the movement away from traditional knowledge:

But a woman’s relationship with her children has changed. It is not like it used to be. The woman does not perform the same educational role with her children as before. She does not have the same power to act with her children. All that has changed. There is first the problem of school. The mother has not been to school, so she cannot participate in the process of the child’s acquisition of knowledge...In effect, the school comes between the mother and the child...the education she might like to give her children does not fit the present generations any more (Harrell-Bond 386).

Essentially, while the French schools provide a sufficient European scholarly education, it is also important for the preservation of Senegalese society that the mother continues to educate her children, regardless of her own level of schooling. Bâ criticizes the education gap that made it difficult for many women of her generation to impart knowledge to their children, and in the process of this criticism, Bâ, an educated woman herself, hopes to aid in changing the views that traditional knowledge is useless in the modern world. In this, Bâ seems to project her own views upon Ramatoulaye; Ramatoulaye wants to raise her children to respect their culture while also integrating certain Western influences.

In reference to a more scholarly education, Bâ portrays Ramatoulaye as capable of maintaining a balance between the French and Senegalese traditions. Ramatoulaye discusses the schooling that she and her best friend Aïssatou received:

Nous sortir de l'enlissement des traditions, superstitions, et mœurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts; faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà la tâche qui s'était assignée l'admirable directrice (Bâ 38).

Ramatoulaye speaks appreciatively of the balance between French and Senegalese ideas that she received at the hands of a white woman, "l'admirable directrice." However, while the passage shows a woman grateful for the work of a French educator, Bâ makes sure to establish that the value of Ramatoulaye's education lies in her integration of Senegalese traditions and French ideas. The young girls were not called to forfeit their cultural identities in order to receive a Western education. Because of the ideas implanted in the young women's minds, Ramatoulaye manifests the effects in her actions as an adult. Ramatoulaye shows a certain appreciative remembrance of her schooling through her belief in the power of education and her career as a teacher. The "admirable directrice" educated her students about their own culture while integrating very French notions such as "la morale universelle." The idea that morality could be

universal stems from the republican belief that equality among citizens is possible. According to this assumption, theorists believe that republican ideals are so accessible that all people living in France, including the colonized and newly immigrated, should assimilate into the country's democracy since all citizens are equal. This universal morality, in Ramatoulaye's mind, is also reflected in children's education, but is not limited to the French ideals taught in colonial schools.

The empowering influence of the female director of her school translates into Ramatoulaye's career as a teacher, and she would have received substantially more education than most young women in Senegal. While Senegal is significantly more liberal in its treatment of women than most other Muslim countries, the majority of women during Bâ's time received only a primary school education. Ramatoulaye is an anomaly in that she completed both a secondary and a teacher's education. In a belief similar to Revolution-era France, Muslim societies typically view education for girls in a way that is linked to eventual motherhood. According to Callaway and Creevey: "Education is viewed as essential in order that women know how to fulfill their duties as wife and mother" (55). For this reason, society generally considers it unnecessary for women to receive a university education. The necessary knowledge of reading, arithmetic, and religion suffices in raising children and keeping house, and often, society (specifically men) perceives higher education for women as a threat. Ramatoulaye's French schooling in turn is problematic. Callaway and Creevey explore: "Western education, in particular, tends to stress individual rights, individual responsibilities, and individual worth, which may be seen as inconsistent with a view of a woman as subservient to her husband and obligated to meet his, and her children's, needs before anything else" (56). Ramatoulaye serves to display both Bâ's rebuttal and acceptance of this image of woman. She is highly educated but continues to care for her children despite her abandonment by Modou. Rather than becoming

self-involved because of her education, Ramatoulaye finds sustenance in her life as a mother during her time of strife. Ramatoulaye places a great deal of weight upon her children's needs, making her a combination of French and Senegalese cultures.

The Muslim outlook on motherhood is also reflected in the African literary equivalent of the Epistolary Woman trope: Mother Africa. Both of Epistolary Woman and Mother Africa are inherently patriarchal constructions that treat women as objects whose portrayal depends upon the male author. For my purposes, the Portuguese Nun serves as an example of Epistolary Woman suffering the loss of her lover in the cloister, and certain aspects of Bâ's text shows a similarly isolated, abandoned, and tortured Ramatoulaye. Bâ also echoes certain elements of Negritude's "Mother Africa" metaphor. Bâ integrates both of typically these male objectifications of women to dismantle them. Based in the poetry of Léopold Senghor (specifically the poem "Femme noire") and the other authors of the Negritude movement, "Mother Africa" is as inherently male-constructed as Epistolary Woman. Florence Stratton describes "Mother Africa" in the following passage:

...the trope defines a situation that is conventionally patriarchal. The speaker is invariably male, a western-educated intellectual. The addressee is always a woman. She is pure physicality, always beautiful and often naked. He is constituted as a writing subject, a producer of art and of socio-political visions; her status is that of an aesthetic/sexual object. She takes the form of either of a young girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund nurturing mother. The poetry celebrates his intellect at the same time as it pays tribute to her body which is frequently associated with the African landscape that is his to explore and discover. As embodying mother she gives the trope a name: the Mother Africa trope (41).

Many African women authors have set about the business of dismantling this metaphor in combat with its forms perpetuated by Senghor. Mariama Bâ herself expressed a desire to re-evaluate the treatment of her African sisters: " 'The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough for us,' stated the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ..." (Newell 138). Indeed, in *Une si longue lettre*, Bâ

creates a novel which attempts to reconcile the changing position of women within Senegalese society through her nuanced portrayal of both traditional and progressive women.

Although Ramatoulaye may appear to manifest Mother Africa”in the form of “the fecund, nurturing mother,” Bâ also imbues Ramatoulaye with agency that male authors have denied Mother Africa just as they have historically done with Epistolary Woman. Ramatoulaye fulfills the metaphor in that she has twelve children for whom she actively cares; also, as her life spirals out of control after Modou’s abandonment, Ramatoulaye finds significant meaning in her relationship with her children and is partially able to regain her sense of self because of her role as a mother. However, because Bâ has clearly stated objections to the “Mother Africa” metaphor, she does not make Ramatoulaye one-sided.

Indeed, Bâ does find certain aspects of Negritude’s philosophy useful, and there are instances in the text where her rhetoric does echo its nationalism. In connection, Ajayi-Soyinka states the following in the article “Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity: Re-Reading Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*”:

The archetypal *femme noire* becomes an enduring symbol in a recurring double motif in Negritude creative writings. On the one hand, she is equated with mother earth, nature at its purest without the interference of human cultures. Symbolically, ‘mother earth’ represents the geographical body of the African continent: Mother Africa, free of contaminating European cultures and colonialization (152).

Ramatoulaye echoes the celebration of the mother earth figure but does not make any mention of colonialization. She defends Senegalese tradition by speaking out against her children’s Westernized decisions, but she also favorably discusses her educational experiences in French schools. Instead of demonizing French culture, Bâ utilizes Western feminist beliefs to subvert the Mother Africa image and encourages the reader to not equate Mother Africa with the African mother. Ajayi-Soyinka argues: “...when confused with Mother Africa, the African mother ends up being a voiceless and defenseless object of whom everyone takes advantage” (156). In turn,

equating Ramatoulaye with the Mother Africa image would cause her to lose the voice and identity that she has struggled to construct throughout the letter to Aïssatou. Although Bâ does not directly attack Negritude writings, she develops Ramatoulaye as a devoted mother with a voice: “In other words, the generic African woman becomes a real person capable of action, thought, and emotion” (Ajayi-Soyinka 167).

Through her relationship with Aïssatou, her children, and her education, Ramatoulaye recovers from her betrayal in a way that seems unfathomable for Mariane in *Lettres portugaises*. Ramatoulaye is desperate for the company that she is lacking immediately after her husband leaves: “Je n’ai jamais conçu le bonheur hors du couple, tout en te comprenant, tout en respectant le choix des femmes libres” (Bâ 106). She makes this statement to Aïssatou, admitting that she had not understood her best friend’s decision to divorce her husband until she was forced into a similar situation herself. In fact, Ramatoulaye admits that she wanted to find another man after Modou was clearly not coming back: “J’appelais ardemment, de toutes mes forces disponibles, un ‘autre’ qui remplacerait Modou” (Bâ 101). She describes the force of her desperation implying that she was originally as destroyed as the Portuguese Nun. However, because of her personal relationships and her education, she gains the necessary self-confidence to reject two suitors at the end of her mourning.

In the letter, Modou’s death appears to have an emancipating effect on Ramatoulaye; after he dies, she is free to explore and discover herself even though she is cloistered in mourning. Ramatoulaye first fields a marriage proposal from her brother-in-law. According to Barbara Callaway and Lucy Creevey in *The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion, and Politics in West Africa*, this is a traditional situation: “Women whose husbands died or who are abandoned by their spouses became the responsibility of brothers (or fathers, or maternal uncles or cousins, depending on the particular culture). In some societies, a man was even supposed to marry his

brother's widow and care for her" (Callaway and Creevey 33). Following this custom, Ramatoulaye's brother-in-law, Tamsir seeks to make her one of his wives. However, because of the independence that she has managed to gain, Ramatoulaye is able to reject such an arrangement. She writes to Aïssatou, an affirming audience: "Ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades. Elle éclate, violent, tantôt sarcastique, tantôt méprisante" (Bâ 109). Realizing that she had made a mistake remaining silent for so long, Ramatoulaye decides to openly reject the marriage. Breaking her silence, she replies to Tamsir's proposal: "Et tes femmes, Tamsir? Ton revenue ne couvre ni leurs besoins ni ceux de tes dizaines d'enfants...Je ne serai jamais le complément de ta collection...Tamsir, vomis tes rêves de conquérant. Ils ont duré quarante jours. Je ne serai jamais ta femme" (Bâ 110). She begins her tirade by accusing Tamsir of being unfit to take another wife because of his inability to pay for his already existing families. Such a question would be apt for a Muslim woman, because a man, while permitted to have as many as four wives, must be able to provide for all of his wives and children equally. Refusal of a marriage for economic reasons would be much more permissible in Senegalese society than a refusal based on the desire to be independent. While the beginning of her argument falls within societal expectations, Ramatoulaye is not afraid of offending her brother-in-law with her demand that he leave his dreams of conquering her behind.

After receiving Tamsir's undesired proposal, Ramatoulaye receives another marriage proposal from Daouda Dieng, one of the suitors from her youth who is now a representative in the Senegalese National Assembly. Ramatoulaye enjoys the friendship and the political discussions that she has with Daouda Dieng, but she also feels a lack of true emotional connection: "Mon cœur n'aime pas Daouda Dieng. Ma raison apprécie l'homme. Mais le cœur et la raison sont souvent déscordants" (Bâ 124). She does not love him, and she objects even more heartily to the arrangement because he already has a wife and rejects his proposal in a

letter. While Daouda Dieng is wealthy and would be able to help Ramatoulaye with her concerns about money, but this fact does not sway her. This illustrates significant character change in the course of the text. Originally, Ramatoulaye admitted that she wished for a man to take Modou's place after his departure. However, when this man comes along, Ramatoulaye does not accept him because she finally feels capable of supporting herself and her family without male help. She reacts in accordance with her distaste for polygamy and further establishes her newfound self-worth.

Ramatoulaye's letter to Aïssatou ends on a hopeful note, anticipating her best friend's impending visit to Senegal from the United States. In contrast with the Portuguese Nun, Ramatoulaye has undergone substantial character changes from the novel's beginning to end; while Guilleragues's Mariane remains in a state of dejection, Bâ evokes both French and Senegalese traditions and creates a new African female character in Ramatoulaye. Confronted with the same isolation and rejection as the Portuguese Nun, Ramatoulaye utilizes positive aspects of her life to detach from the Epistolary Woman trope and eventually becomes her own powerful, independent woman.

## *Les lettres chinoises*

In a rapidly changing global landscape, certain authors reflect the tensions inherent to complicated subjects like immigration and cultural identity. Perhaps because of author Ying Chen's own situation as an immigrant, *Les lettres chinoises* provides an engaging commentary on the difficulties of being both in exile and lost in one's own native country. The novel, published in 1994, details its characters' efforts to reconcile their Chinese pasts with their new lives in a Westernized world. Chen chose to write in French, despite the fact that it is her second language, and also chose, like Mariama Bâ, to work with a narrative structure with a rich French literary history: the epistolary novel. Despite this alignment with French literary tradition, Chen harshly criticizes Western culture; however, Chen also does not spare her native China any criticism and shows that contentment is as difficult to find in China as it is in Canada without a strong sense of personal identity.

The novel's events develop around letters from three characters, Yuan, Sassa, and Da Li. Yuan is a Chinese student who has moved to Montréal to pursue his studies with the promise that Sassa, his fiancée, will soon join him in Canada. Da Li is a mutual friend of the couple who joins Yuan in Montréal because she is desperate to flee from Chinese culture and from her mother's traditional expectations of her. In contrast with the others' world travels, Sassa cannot bring herself to correct problems with her passport application and in the process reveals how much she truly fears leaving Shanghai. Moreover, she maintains an increasing emotional distance in her letters to Yuan.

Not long after her own arrival in Montréal, Da Li begins to write to Sassa about a young Chinese man with whom she is hopelessly in love. Although Da Li never expressly confesses, it becomes clear that the man Da Li loves is, in fact, Yuan. In the meantime, Yuan and Sassa continue to write to each other, but there is a notable silence about two extremely important

subjects in their letters: Yuan's increasingly intimate friendship with Da Li and Sassa's declining health. Da Li reveals that she and her "amoureux" (Yuan) have become physically involved, and Sassa eventually infers that her fiancée has become Da Li's lover. Despite having physically connected with her beloved, Da Li now understands that she will never be able to have him because she is not the woman that he truly loves. Desperate to remove herself from such a miserable situation, Da Li flees Montréal for Paris. At the novel's end, Sassa goes into the hospital and refuses Yuan's offer to return to China to her bedside. Judging from the finality of her last letter to him (and also the last letter of the novel), she dies soon afterward.

We can readily see how Chen aligns her novel with a certain French epistolary tradition with this brief account of the plot. Both of Chen's female letter writers bear a resemblance to Epistolary Woman, given their sense of emotional abandonment because of the man they lost. As Martin Hall notes of the female characters in French epistolary texts: "The novel consists for the most part of letters written to her absent lover by a forlorn woman, a figure heavy with connotations in French epistolary fiction: passive, constrained or captive, waiting, unfulfilled in the absence of the man" (107). This passage perfectly describes the situation in which Sassa finds herself enmeshed; abandoned by her soulmate, Sassa has to reconcile the pain of losing the man she loves to Canada's promise of a better education and to the embrace of another woman. Like the Portuguese Nun, Sassa is destroyed by Yuan's departure and eventual betrayal. Yet, rather than creating a simple narrative, Chen integrates aspects of Chinese culture to explain the position of her women, which includes a duty to maintain a judicious silence. While Sassa writes directly to Yuan and openly laments his departure, she remains mute about topics such as Yuan's infidelity because of certain dictates of her culture. Forced into heartbroken silence by traditional Chinese discretion, Sassa, it seems, dies of emotional pain.

In contrast with Sassa, Da Li appears to be a stronger female character at the novel's beginning. While Sassa remains in Shanghai because she is afraid of change, Da Li leaves her native country to pursue personal freedom in Quebec. However, Da Li quickly reveals that she is as lost as Sassa. Easily influenced by those around her, she never manages to cultivate a true sense of herself and in turn, pursues a man who will never be able to love her in return. Instead of writing her letters to the man with whom she is involved, Da Li, like Ramatoulaye, addresses her letters to a trusted friend. However, unlike Ramatoulaye, Da Li does not find comfort in her friend's confidence. At the novel's end, Da Li flees her new country for France, hoping to find herself there after her ill-fated love affair with Yuan. Insofar as both her female characters are equally destroyed by their relationships with a man, Chen invokes Epistolary Woman of the past and simultaneously re-evaluates this literary tradition by adding elements of Confucianism, traditional Chinese wisdom, and criticism of Western society.

As the novel begins, Sassa attempts to cope with the loss of Yuan. In her newfound solitude, she becomes depressed after the person upon whom she depended most for support and her very identity leaves her behind. Without Yuan's constant support, Sassa loses sight of her reason to live. She writes in one of her initial letters to Yuan: "Sans toi, ma vie ne peut plus être la même. Le soleil me semble moins lumineux, et la journée trop longue. Le matin, je trouve peu de force pour me lever" (Chen 18). Expressing her profound love for the absent Yuan, Sassa displays a predisposition towards invalidism and sickness that plagues her character throughout the novel. This crippling depression soon transforms into crippling physical illness. Sassa's physical weakness clearly stems from her immense dependence upon her absent lover; this dependence mirrors that of the Portuguese Nun. To use a quotation from my original discussion of *Lettres portugaises*, a desperate Mariane writes: "Je suis au désespoir, votre pauvre Mariane n'en peut plus, elle s'évanouit en finissant cette lettre. Adieu, adieu, ayez pitié de moi"

(Guilleragues 77). Until this point, Mariane has not mentioned any other symptoms of being weak, but the sheer force of her emotion has put her on the verge of collapse; Sassa's illness mimics this portrayal. Because Sassa no longer has Yuan with her, she is similarly overwhelmed, and instead of fainting like the Portuguese Nun, Sassa's pain manifests as fatal illness. While displaying symptoms evocative of future illness, Sassa also discusses past maladies, revealing how much she depends on Yuan's support in order to continue living:

De plus, il faut être malade une fois pour comprendre la mesure de cet amour. Quand j'étais malade, Yuan venait chaque jour, qu'il pleuve ou fasse beau temps, m'apporter un petit quelque chose: une feuille tombée qu'il avait ramassée dans la ruelle, une fleur sauvage qu'il avait trouvée au pied d'un mur, un poème qu'il avait lu la veille, un goûter que j'aimais, une anecdote amusante d'un ami...

Je serais peut-être bien plus heureuse si j'étais morte à cette époque. (Chen 79)

The attention Yuan paid her during this period clearly told Sassa how much he loved her. All of Yuan's actions in the passage show a desire for Sassa's recovery, enjoyment, and comfort. In contrast, his decision to leave China appears to have been made in total disregard of her well-being and pleasure. Without the support she craves, Sassa no longer feels like herself. Consequently, she imagines that she would be happier if she had died during this first sickness; this would have allowed her to avoid her current despair at losing herself, the result of Yuan's departure.

In contrast with Sassa's shattered self image, Yuan often discusses the manner in which he has begun to enjoy life in Montréal. In his third letter to Sassa he writes: "Je n'ai plus à me découvrir devant des gens connus et inconnus et à me sentir ainsi dépourvu jusqu'au plus profond de moi. Je sens bon maintenant. Je redeviens frais. Je suis content de moi-même. Je commence à aimer un peu cette vie" (Chen 16). His happiness in escaping the rigidity of Chinese society is reflected here; instead of destroying his self-image, the new culture allows Yuan to feel "content de moi-même." Such confidence diametrically opposes Sassa's depression

and self-loss. Yuan continues to speak of the freeing experience of his immigration when he writes in the same letter: “J’ai l’impression d’avoir rajeuni. Je vis comme un nouveau-né” (Chen 17). This image of rebirth implies that Yuan feels as if he has not been truly living during the many years he spent in China. Not surprisingly, this particular passage strikes a nerve with Sassa, and in her reply, she portrays their emotional disconnect: “Seulement, avant de ‘renaître’, j’espère ne pas paraître trop vieille pour toi” (Chen 19). The rejuvenating effects of Yuan’s immigration elicit the opposing reaction in Sassa; while he is reborn, she has begun her slow descent into death. These two passages indicate a shift in the lovers’ relationship. Whereas before, Sassa took solace in the fact that her separation from Yuan was merely physical, she now begins to see their immense emotional divide. Yuan, who had been so sensitive to Sassa’s needs in China, becomes much less attentive to his fiancée’s feelings now that he is in Quebec. While his excitement at his new life is understandable, it provokes even more depression in Sassa, who is not content with her life in China without Yuan.

In her depression, the feelings of her abandonment become too much to bear, and in one letter, Sassa writes: “Je t’ai perdu, toi. Oui, je t’ai perdu par un certain après-midi de dimanche à l’aéroport de Shanghai. J’aurais dû le comprendre dès le moment où tu es monté dans l’avion...Je t’ai perdu dans le bleu du ciel” (Chen 107-108). Sassa repeats “Je t’ai perdu” three times in a masochistic refrain; interestingly, she is the sentence’s subject and the person performing its action. Rather than accusing Yuan of *leaving* her, it is Sassa who *lost* him. As she avoids insulting the man who she calls her “maître,” she places the blame on herself for the situation. Other than blaming herself, Sassa aims to create feelings of guilt and pity in Yuan by punishing herself for his actions. She wants to emphasize the horror that Yuan has committed in leaving her behind. This is one of the rare times until the novel’s end that Sassa directly accuses Yuan of being anything other than devoted. Sassa’s breaks her silence about her hurt, and Yuan

becomes noticeably concerned about his fiancée's state of mind. He attempts to comfort her with talk of how she will soon join him in Montréal, but, because of her fear of the unknown, Sassa remains dejected, and even Yuan's comforting words cannot help her avoid suffering and illness. Without her reason to live (Yuan), she no longer believes that any good can come of living and looks toward bleak prospects.

Though generally silent about her failing health in her letters to Yuan, Sassa does eventually admit: "J'ai l'impression que ma santé se détache de moi comme ces feuilles qui volent au vent. J'ai en plus attrapé un rhume. Il me semble que tu n'es plus là à me rechauffer les mains sur ta poitrine..." (Chen 122-123). Sassa reveals the beginning of her physical decline and a troubling feeling of detachment from herself and from others. She believes she has caught a cold, but she also writes that she has gotten sick because Yuan is not there to warm her hands against his chest. This continues Sassa's indictment of Yuan's choice to leave her behind; she implies that it is because Yuan left her that she has become ill. Like the Portuguese Nun who is tortured by her lover's departure, Yuan's absence equally pains and eventually kills Sassa

Sassa's deteriorating condition also allows Chen to evoke traditional Chinese wisdom. While Sassa feels as if she has lost part of herself after Yuan leaves, her emotional unrest manifests itself physically. According to Chinese holistic medicine, each emotion is intimately related to an organ. Therefore, when Sassa questions why she has been catching colds, this shows a suspicious weakness of the lungs. In traditional medicine, frailty of the lungs demonstrates that she is experiencing the following emotions: grief, sadness, and feelings of detachment (Wong Par. 7). Sassa clearly feels all of this after being abandoned, and accordingly, these unresolved sentiments cause Sassa to fall ill. Sassa spends the entire novel in denial of the extent of her mental turmoil, and as she ignores her pain, she also ignores traditional holistic medicine by not admitting that her illness may be related to her emotional state.

As Sassa does not understand her health problem and heartbreak, silence becomes an impossible obstacle because of the distance between the lovers. Instead of pouring her heart into her letters, like Epistolary Woman, Sassa begins to pull away from Yuan because of her suffering at being abandoned. When writing at length about the details of her life, she asserts: “Je ferais mieux de m’arrêter ici. À quoi bon te raconter tout ça? Ce ne sont pas que les détails des détails” (Chen 51). Instead of maintaining her intimate relationship with Yuan, Sassa stops herself from telling him everything that she has experienced and decides that there is no reason to be as open with him as she has been in the past. By contrast, Sassa’s frank letters to Da Li discuss important details of her daily life that she consistently neglects to mention to Yuan. While glaringly silent about her health to Yuan, Sassa reveals in two different letters to Da Li that she has fallen ill and insists that her friend not tell Yuan. Sassa writes: “Ne dis rien à Yuan à propos de ma santé: jure-le!” (Chen 66) and “Quand tu rencontres Yuan, ne parle pas de ma santé. Je ne veux pas le bouleverser” (Chen 127). This implies a certain intimacy and willingness to speak to her female friend that she no longer has in her relationship with Yuan. Sassa never explains her choice to inform Da Li rather than Yuan despite the obvious effect that her illness would have on his life. At the root of this decision are Sassa’s subconscious feelings of betrayal stemming from Yuan’s departure; while Da Li also left her, Sassa did not feel as abandoned after her friend’s immigration because she is much less dependent upon Da Li for her self-concept.. Da Li and Sassa maintain an equally close friendship as before in spite of the distance. In this way, the pair resemble the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou: female friends that support each other regardless of a change in situation.

However, a disastrous love affair eventually shatters the lives of both women. Near the middle of the novel, Da Li’s letters imply to Sassa that Da Li has fallen in love with Yuan and that she and Yuan have begun a physical relationship in Montréal. The letters never directly

state that Yuan has betrayed his promise of fidelity to Sassa, but the parallels between the description of the man that Da Li loves and Yuan are clear. Da Li writes about the “amoureux”: a young, recently immigrated Chinese man with a fiancée to whom he frequently writes letters. After Yuan and Da Li have their brief physical encounter, the guilt eventually overcomes Yuan, and he writes the following to Sassa: “Et surtout, je te demande pardon si parfois je perds pieds malgré moi dans ce mélange de devoirs et de droits, et que je me trompe sur la place à leur accorder au fond de moi. Tu me pardonnes, n’est-ce pas? Dis-moi que tu me pardonnes, Sassa!” (Chen 125). Yuan, amidst all of his discussion about North American freedom and the differences in local morality, has become more like a Westerner; he has begun his own love affair in the sexually free fashion of his Canadian counterparts. Yuan practically demands that Sassa forgive him for some unnamed sin, and the sheer desperation of his requests for pardon implies that he has truly wronged Sassa. His silence about what exactly it is that he has done mirrors Sassa’s silence about her illness. However, instead of responding with the expected distress of a suspicious fiancée, Sassa writes back: “Je ne vois pas, cher Yuan, ce que j’ai à te pardonner. Et je ne veux pas le savoir” (Chen 131). Despite Yuan’s cryptic demands for forgiveness, Sassa also directly states that she does not want to know what he has done. As Sassa insists upon maintaining silence and ignorance about the situation, Chen creates a female character distinct from Epistolary Woman, who masochistically cries for news of her lover. While Mariane begs for information about the French officer, Sassa refuses to be told. The basis for this refusal may be found in Chinese notions of femininity. A traditional Chinese woman, as Sassa aspires on some level to be, would be subservient to her fiancé/husband, and her subservience would typically include an inability to question his decisions. Phyllis Andors discusses the concept of Chinese women’s subservience in *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women: 1949-1980*: “The ideal of female behavior was embodied in the concept of the ‘three

obediences.’ In youth a girl was obedient to the wishes of her father; when married, to her husband; and in widowhood, to her son” (13). Sassa may have received a Westernized education, but she also echoes this sort of respectful female obedience in the following quotation: “Que demanderais-je de plus sinon de pouvoir t’obéir, mon cher maître?” (Chen 45). Sassa’s attachment to Yuan is so intense that she even alludes to him as her master because he has complete control over her. In this situation, Sassa defers to the discretion of her “Maître” instead of demanding information. In his attempts to open some sort of discussion about his actions, Yuan is asking Sassa to depart from her prescribed gender role, and she refuses to do so.

While Sassa initially appears to not comprehend the gravity of Yuan’s indiscretion, she implies later that she has a deep understanding: “Je comprends alors pourquoi l’ami de Da Li (t’a t’elle parlé de son ami qu’elle aime vraiment?) n’a pas pu rester fidèle à sa fiancée au loin. Il fait l’amour à Montréal et envoie des lettres à Shanghai, car il vit dans deux mondes et il aime de deux façons. Je trouve ça très correct” (Chen 132). Sassa alludes to a situation glaringly similar to her own without implying that she has discovered what has happened. In the process of doing so, her statements about Da Li’s “ami” seem to pointedly assert that such a love affair is excusable because of his division between two worlds; knowing that Yuan is Da Li’s “amoureux,” Sassa is able to show her forgiveness without questioning Yuan. In the end, because of her decision to remain detached from Yuan’s affair, Sassa can also maintain her image as a subservient, “good” woman by indirectly supporting her fiancé.

In the letters following, Sassa increases her efforts to passively reject Yuan. Knowing that her health is in decline, she writes to him: “Quand un amour est trop malade, on ne le transporte pas, afin d’éviter les complications. On attend tranquillement sa fin, ou l’enterre dans son lieu de naissance et on inscrit des poèmes sur la tombe, dans sa propre langue” (Chen 133). As with her previous accusations, Sassa remains very passive. Rather than directly questioning

the status of their relationship and the wisdom of her immigration to Canada, Sassa speaks in the form of a metaphor; their relationship is sick, and therefore, Sassa implies that it should be ended. Sassa herself manifests this love sickness, and she is too ill to immigrate to Canada. She is also unwilling to do so because it would remove her from her place of birth and her native language. Yuan's response is not one of loving support, but instead one that implies that he now feels abandoned: "Imagines-tu, ma cruelle, l'effet que ta dure lettre a produit sur moi?...Il y a des limites à plaisanter ou...se venger!...Dès que tu sens chez moi une certaine odeur 'étrangère,' tu m'abandonnes. N'est-ce pas pour ça que tu m'abandonnes, pour être tout à fait sincère?" (Chen 134-135). In the role reversal, Chen makes an interesting narrative choice in which she transforms Yuan into Epistolary Woman, and he spends the rest of the novel begging an increasingly distant Sassa to communicate with him. He is now the desperate one, and his tortured tone speaks of an abandonment similar to that of the Portuguese Nun. Sassa finishes her letters from a hospital bed and expresses her intent desire that Yuan move on to live a happy life in his new home, having realized that she will never be able to join him. Although her issues of Yuan's abandonment affect her state of mind, Sassa's decline in health is also substantially aided by an extreme identity crisis provoked by a conflict between the modernization of China and Sassa's longing to remain a traditional Chinese woman.

Before drawing conclusions about Sassa's identity crisis, I will discuss additional notions of traditional Chinese womanhood and certain Confucianist beliefs. Without the context of these two ideological systems, it is impossible to fully comprehend the effects of Western influence and globalization on both Sassa's and Da Li's lives. Like much of Western culture, Chinese culture is patriarchal. As one philosophical scholar of Confucianism maintains: "Without entering into a marriage, a woman is in fact without a permanent social place of her own" (Rosenlee 126). Women historically have lacked power in China in contrast to Western societies

where women have gained some political and personal power within the past century. With this in mind, the reader may better understand Sassa's loss of self in the face of the loss of her fiancé. Without a man to define her, Sassa feels as if she does not truly exist. And while others such as her Westernized sister would encourage Sassa to not place so much importance upon Yuan, she is unable to see past her traditional values.

The notions of *yin* and *yang* serve as a philosophical manifestation of these gender-based, societal views. Through these concepts, it is possible to better understand Chinese ideas about male and female "correlative and complementary" relationships (Rosenlee 50). Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee contends: "...the receptive *yin* qualities in nature are emphasized...often characterized as being feminine..." (49). In turn, while the *yin* is associated with the feminine, the *yang* is equated with the masculine. These two elements are inextricably linked with and provide balance to each other. Yuan and Sassa's romance before his immigration similarly reflects the complementary relationship between male and female. Because of this, Sassa loses her equilibrium when Yuan leaves and cannot regain it in the absence of the other half of her "self."

In Yuan and Sassa's relationship, Chen creates an interesting interpretation of the binary opposition created by the *yin* and *yang*. Significantly, Rosenlee draws a parallel with nature when defining *yin* and *yang*: "Etymologically, *yin*, as defined in the Shouwen, means the shady side of the mountain, and *yang*, the sunny side of the mountain" (50). The metaphor of complementary aspects in nature reveals a representation of this binary in descriptions of Yuan and Sassa in the novel. In their initial letters, the lovers begin an exchange in which Sassa refers to Yuan as "mon soleil" and Yuan refers to Sassa as "ma lune" (Chen 13-15): "Fais attention, ma belle lune..." (Chen 15). The sun and the moon represent the two different cycles of the day and bear a striking resemblance to Rosenlee's description of the shady side (*yin*) and sunny side of the mountain (*yang*). However, while establishing her binary, Chen has also chosen to reverse

the associations. While *yin* is associated with the feminine, Sassa refers to Yuan as “mon soleil.” In following this metaphor, it is Sassa, not Yuan, who should be referred to as the sun. To demonstrate the extent of the relationship’s imbalance, Chen attributes the lovers to the opposite sides of *yin* and *yang*. The French language must have affected Chen’s decision in this area, the articles of the nouns match the gender of the person to which they refer. Therefore, as the lovers chose diminutives for each other, they simultaneously integrated French constructions and disregarded Chinese thought. However, these nicknames do not persist throughout the novel as the couple handles the strain that Western society has caused in their relationship.

Sassa’s shaky identity as a Chinese woman becomes the main impediment to her immigration to Canada. In one letter to Yuan, Sassa responds to her fiancé’s comments about his Chinese identity and the French language and Western morals. Eileen Sivert maintains that Yuan’s changing self also effects Sassa: “Just as she is torn between ties to cultural tradition and family on the one hand and a sense of rootlessness on the other, Sassa seems continually caught between a desire for, and a fear of, losing her identity, losing herself” (221). Because of Yuan, Sassa begins to examine her own self-concept and realizes that she is, in fact, more lost than her newly relocated love. She writes: “Mais quand on est étranger chez soi, on n’a aucun espace de retraite...Je suis partie moi aussi en exil” (Chen 27). As Bénédicte Mauguière states in an article about *Les lettres chinoises*: “...they [the letters] also reflect the difficulty women have in defining themselves as a subject, both with respect to themselves, and with respect to the Other” (58). Examining Sassa’s statements in reference to Mauguière’s insight, there is a clear connection between Sassa’s gender and her inability to assert an identity without Yuan’s approval and support; in other words, one of the reasons she is an “étrangère” is because of her dependence. The Portuguese Nun also displays this level of reliance. Both the Portuguese Nun and Sassa link their self-esteem and identity linked to the men in their lives.

In addition to Sassa's inability to find herself without Yuan, she also increasingly sees herself as an "old soul" in a world and a country that are rapidly changing. Sassa and Yuan, writing to each other in French instead of Chinese, seem to have removed themselves from the linguistic culture of their homeland. When Yuan makes the choice to immigrate to Canada to complete this change, Sassa remains in China but also works as a translator and places a large amount of importance upon learning languages. In the following passage, Sassa writes about her desire to lose herself in another language:

Rien ne vaut plus que le bonheur d'une disparation complète de soi. C'est pourquoi je n'ai pas peur d'abandonner une langue pour une autre. Je n'ai pas peur d'être étrangère. En un mot, je n'ai pas peur de m'effacer aux yeux des autres ou des miens. Non, ce n'est pas cela qui m'effraie dans l'exil. Au contraire, je crains de devenir trop visible dans un autre pays. C'est affreux de vivre sous les regards quand on a déjà perdu toute fierté pour sa propre image et pour son pays. Et s'il faut mourir, il vaut mieux que ce soit dans les ténèbres tranquilles que dans les lumières curieuses. (Chen 37)

While Sassa's identity is inextricably linked to Yuan, she also finds it impossible to relate to or be proud of herself or her country. Sassa has a significant amount of education, and in contrast with her clear tendency to be a "traditional woman," she cannot come to terms with certain aspects of Chinese culture because of this education. Like both Yuan and Da Li, she would like to be free of societal constraints, but unlike the other two characters, she is too afraid to leave. As a translator, she loses herself in language and finds the ensuing "disparation complète de soi" that languages provide to be pleasing. Sassa claims that she is not afraid of being an "étrangère," possibly because she already feels as if she is a foreigner in Shanghai. In another passage earlier in the same letter, Sassa writes: "On vagabonde sans cesse d'un endroit à l'autre. Et on va de plus en plus loin. On parle plusieurs langues, moins pour s'enrichir que pour s'effacer" (Chen 36). The theme of erasure connects these two quotations. Having lost her identity when Yuan left her for the Western world, Sassa shows a clear inclination to escape from her life.

Instead of utilizing the pronoun “je” in the preceding quotation, Sassa substitutes the impersonal pronoun “On.” By making the pronoun refer to an unspecified person, Sassa manages to do exactly what she wishes to do: erase herself. One may also find a sense of linguistic self-erasure in the works of the post-colonial theorist Franz Fanon: “Parler, c’est être à meme d’employer une certain syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c’est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d’une civilization” (13). Fanon wrote about the confusing intersection of Antillais and French culture, coming from a similar situation of feeling lost in his own home. Because of her lack of a stable identity, Sassa appears to embrace what Fanon vehemently criticized: linguistic assimilation. In writing her letters to Yuan in French, Sassa explicitly decides to deny a significant part of her Chinese identity; she perpetuates what Fanon would call a “rupture” in attempting to merge her two languages. Sassa eventually chooses the Chinese language and culture by remaining in Shanghai, but this decision is also problematic. However, because she is so immensely alienated, Sassa will not even be able to rediscover herself if she joins Yuan in Canada. Like the Portuguese Nun, her only choice is to stay behind with her pain.

Because of Sassa’s French language education, she chooses to write to her fiancé and friend in a language that is not her first and finds herself caught between two languages and two cultures. This cultural complexity provides a clear departure from Epistolary Woman, who only exists after her lover’s departure to suffer. Epistolary Woman obsessively examines her relationship and does not complicate her laments with cultural observations. In contrast, Sassa’s extensive discussion about her country and identity in combination with the obvious pain of her abandonment, establishes her character as both a suffering Epistolary Woman and as a modern female protagonist.

Amidst all of Yuan's commentary about "freedom" in his letters discussing Canada, Sassa comments on the changing face of liberty in China: "Depuis ton départ, on dirait que le mot 'liberté' n'est plus aussi péjoratif qu'auparavant. Il n'est plus synonyme d'irresponsabilité, d'immoralité ou même de criminalité" (Chen 61). Here Sassa speaks about her newfound feelings of discomfort with cultural change. She is no longer at home in Shanghai because Shanghai no longer feels like the city that it had been in the past. Despite the changes in culture, Sassa continues to judge others (and sometimes even herself) from a very traditional perspective. For example, Sassa and her sister have several arguments about how a "good" Chinese woman behaves. As she writes about her sister to Da Li: "Ma sœur, justement, a tendance à devenir trop libre...Ce que moi je ne supporte pas, c'est qu'elle sorte avec deux garçons. Elle me trouve pitoyable et elle menace de m'exposer un jour dans un musée consacré à l'époque ancienne." (Chen 62). Evidently, Sassa's sister takes a much more "liberated" position on sexuality than Sassa. In contrast with Sassa, who has been engaged to Yuan since high school, Sassa's sister reflects the changes taking place in China. Sassa is typically subservient and refers to Yuan as "mon cher maître" while her sister refuses to even be in a relationship with one boy at a time. In turn, the sister's threats to put Sassa on display in "un muse consacré à l'époque ancienne" imply that Sassa's traditional femininity is a relic.

Sassa continues to cope with new Chinese culture when she later tells Yuan of a trip that she made to one of their former favorite restaurants: "Un soir, je suis allée manger une soupe à la maison de Yuag-Yang. La patronne se souvenait encore de moi...Elle projette de transformer la maison en restaurant chic. Je n'y suis pas retournée depuis" (Chen 87). This restaurant on the couple's favorite street was never a fine establishment, and Sassa discusses the "soupes peu nourissantes" of which she had eaten countless bowls. However, while the lack of quality food did not prohibit Sassa's eating there, the implication that the owner wants change does. Sassa

resists modernization of beliefs and also the modernization of more concrete aspects of life like restaurants. The loss of the couple's preferred restaurant to "chic" Western ways is yet another blow to Sassa's already fragile constructed identity. She has not only lost Yuan to Montréal, but she is also beginning to also lose the memory of him in Shanghai.

In a letter where Sassa expresses her impending dread about her life in China, she once again creates an image of Shanghai that likens it to the West. For a significant portion of the novel, Sassa has examined the nature of freedom in her letters to both Yuan and Da Li. All of the characters generally assume during the initial discussions that North Americans are, by default, more "free" than their Chinese counterparts. However, as Sassa feels progressively more like an "exilée" in China, her assertions that this sort of freedom of morality exists only in the West shifts. Because of her resistance to the change of traditional ways, Sassa laments: "On se trahit de plus en plus même dans notre ville, car on a horreur de se sentir emprisonné." (Chen 117). Having been abandoned by both her fiancée and best friend for a cosmopolitan Canadian city, Sassa regards every Chinese person as becoming different besides herself. In the quoted passage, Sassa once again uses the impersonal pronoun, "On," this time to imply that her statements of feeling imprisoned are true of everyone living in Shanghai. She performs the task of self-erasure by becoming part of an immense group. Rather than overtly claiming her own problems, Sassa attributes them to others and eliminates the need to have an opinion. Sassa the exile retreats further, understanding that her identity crisis has no ending; she is not as capable as some to change her traditional ways.

Besides Sassa, Chen also creates another female character that attempts to re-cast Epistolary Woman by integrating Chinese morality. Da Li begins the novel in pursuit of a life in Montréal, removed from the restrictions of societal expectations in China. However, while attempting to construct her identity as a free-spirited Western woman, Da Li comes to realize

that she cannot leave traditional China behind when she begins her affair with Yuan. She laments her painful liaison with her “amoureux” in her letters to Sassa, and like Sassa and the Portuguese Nun, she is unable to recover from her self-destructive tryst with her lover. At the novel’s end, Da Li sees that she will never be happy in Montréal and flees Canada for Paris.

Da Li explains her decision to leave Shanghai: “J’ai quitté ma ville natale surtout pour quitter ma mère et abandonner les ‘armes’ qu’elle m’a léguées” (Chen 52). In immigrating, she attempts to escape the past in China (as represented by her mother), and Da Li consistently displays this desire to flee throughout the novel. The excitement that Da Li feels in making the life-changing move from Shanghai to Montréal is immediately apparent in her letters. Initially, Da Li rents a room from an extremely overweight Canadian woman who has an extreme obsession with shopping for sales at supermarkets. This living situation provides an ample opportunity for the elated Da Li to comment on Canadian life:

L’ennui, c’est qu’il ne reste pas suffisamment d’espace dans le réfrigérateur pour mes aliments. Je ne te dis pas, chère Sassa, combien de kilos...En effet, elle n’achète que ce qui est ‘en spécial’. Mais chaque semaine, dans chacun de nombreux supermarchés d’alimentation, au moins une dizaine de produits sont au rabais, et ma chère hôtesse fait ses courses dans plusieurs supermarchés chaque semaine!...Souvent, les yeux brillants, elle me montre ses achats: ceci est cheap, cela est cheap, tout est cheap, quel bonheur!...Je pense déménager bientôt pour avoir un réfrigérateur à moi seule, parce que moi aussi je commence à regarder plus souvent les publicités et à acheter beaucoup plus qu’auparavant.” (Chen 23-24)

Da Li initially comments on the ridiculous amounts of food that her landlord buys. However, in less than a page, there is a clear shift in her outlook; instead of complaining that she does not have enough space for the reasonable amount of food that she has purchased, Da Li admits that she has begun to subscribe to the North American consumer attitudes: she wants her own apartment so that she has more available space for all of the groceries that she has begun to purchase. This change in Da Li’s perception demonstrates the influence that others have upon her. Da Li does not have the same sense of morality and tradition as Sassa; Da Li is unable to

prevent an almost immediate conversion to Western life because of this. However, she does not notice the change that has occurred in her because of her immersion into the new culture. In her efforts to integrate herself, Da Li loses herself as much as Sassa does; she is unable to resist the influence of others.

Aside for epicurean matters, Da Li also details her new romance. Da Li scolds Sassa for asking whether or not Da Li's new love is an "étranger": "Depuis la guerre d'Opium, les Chinois ont l'habitude de ne considerer comme étrangers que ceux de race blanche" (Chen 64). Da Li criticizes Sassa's apparent fear of the unknown; Da Li implies a separation from the group by using the general term "les Chinois." She views herself as now being separate from a fearful Chinese society because of her new Canadian life. However, Da Li, while no longer part of the Chinese group, is certainly also not a Canadian. She describes: "Pourtant, comme je ne suis plus dans mon pays, la situation est devenue plus compliquée. C'est moi qui suis devenue étrangère" (Chen 64). Da Li's sensitivity to her "foreignness" stems from the way that Canadians view her. As much as she struggles to assimilate, it will never be fully possible to not be a foreigner. This fact creates as much of an identity crisis for Da Li as it does for Sassa. As Sassa describes herself as an "étrangère" after she has been abandoned by Yuan, Da Li also describes herself as an "étrangère" now that she is becoming increasingly involved with the unnamed man. The young women lose themselves in both love affairs due to their destructive relationships with men.

The unavailability of Da Li's "amoureux" causes her great pain and is eventually the reason that she is unable to remain in Montréal. Almost immediately after she realizes that she is in love, Da Li cannot sleep for excitement and for the need to write to Sassa about her feelings. She exhibits a need for connection which later transforms into a need to constantly be with her beloved. Da Li describes:

J'ai seulement besoin d'être avec lui. Regarder avec lui le coucher du soleil, manger avec lui dans un restaurant inconnu, marcher avec lui dans les rues désertes, derider son front par mes rires, briser son silence avec mes questions...complémenter sa bien-aimée quand il en parle...Et devenir malade pour obtenir ses soins, tu parles! Je pourrais tout faire pour lui, mais je ne serais pas malade. (Chen 83)

This passage draws an interesting parallel with Yuan's caring for Sassa during an illness; Sassa described the extreme consideration and care that Yuan gave to her, and she, in turn, expressed her desire to either return to those days or to have died before recovering. Da Li, like Sassa, feels as if she would be content if the unnamed man (Yuan) would devote himself to her. Her willingness to suffer physically in order to appease her yearning for Yuan therefore becomes troublesome.

The torture of unrequited love eventually culminates in a desperate and drunken night. As she falls more deeply in love, Da Li finds it increasingly difficult to maintain the Chinese standard of propriety in her relationship with her already engaged "amoureux," and one evening, Da Li and Yuan drunkenly sleep together. This act displays Da Li's desperation and all-consuming desire to be loved. Against her better judgement, Da Li asks during the act whether or not Yuan loves her, and his response is an exclamation about how traditional she is. This comment causes almost as much distress for Da Li as the realization that he does not love her. Da Li examines the reasons for his statements: "J'étais 'traditionnelle' parce que j'étais incapable de faire l'amour avec celui qui ne pouvait pas m'épouser ni m'aimer d'une façon absolue. Cet 'esprit asiatique' dont je me moquais tant a surgi du fond de moi au moment où, après une longue attente, la rencontre rêvée se produisait réellement" (Chen 114). In being called traditional by the man she loves, Da Li's sense of newfound identity in the Western world is shattered. Although she left Shanghai to escape her mother and traditional Chinese values, she discovers that she is not removed from her former life despite all of her efforts. Later in the same letter, Da Li clearly understands the implications of being traditional when she writes: "Je

me préférerais très occidentale, forte, insensible, pratique, voyant dans l'activité sexuelle non pas un rituel mais une tendresse facile qui implique le divertissement, le cadeau, le 'voyage', la consommation, l'exercice physique et le rapide oubli" (Chen 115). Having tried to imitate the behaviors of Western women, Da Li prefers a more carefree identity, but recognizes that she will never be able to separate her present from her past.

Feeling guilty, Da Li states: "Nous ne serons jamais vraiment libres. Nous n'arrivons pas à être ensemble sans nous sentir coupables. Je me rends compte de mon immoralité et lui de sa trahison...Nous avons eu beau quitter notre terre, l'esprit de Maître Con nous à suivi jusqu'à ici, écrasant notre simple bonheur et nous compliquant la vie" (Chen 129). The guilt of the two lovers cannot be assuaged, and in dealing with the immorality of the situation, Da Li retreats to an image of "Maître Con," about whom Sassa has spoken on several occasions, but whose guidance Da Li has not always followed. In mentioning Confucius at this point in the novel, Da Li indicates a break with her liberated North American persona. Moving away from her desire for cultural assimilation, Da Li once again becomes critical of North Americans: "On voulait la liberté. On l'a presque obtenue, au moins en ce qui concerne les relations sexuelles. Cette liberté me semble visible sur les fronts des habitants...Hommes, femmes et enfants, ils avancent et se croisent tout le temps, rapides comme le vent et solitaires comme les étrangers..." (Chen 119). Rather than including herself in those groups of "liberated" people, Da Li maintains a passive role as an observer; however, as she had formerly celebrated the freedom of Canadian life, Da Li now sees the loneliness that it can cause. She utilizes the phrase "solitaires comme les étrangers" and insinuates that the people in Montréal have very few connections. In addition, Da Li writes "étranger" in the sense that she criticized Sassa for doing earlier: to denote those of the "race blanche," or those of the racial "Other." Because of her recent discovery about her traditional nature, Da Li no longer has any desire to associate herself with these "étrangers."

Da Li's last letter to Sassa (letter 50) details her new plans to move to her dream city of Paris and to escape the pain and suffering in love that she has found in Montréal. Just as Sassa takes ill and as the Portuguese Nun writes of her suffering in unanswered letters, Da Li's recourse is to sublimate her memories of her rejection by running away. While telling Sassa that she intends to return to both Montréal and Shanghai one day, Da Li affirms: "Je reviendrai, mais d'abord il faut que je m'enfuie" (Chen 130). In order to preserve what little remains of her identity after her disastrous love affair and a miserable immigrant experience, Da Li decides to try to rediscover herself in another location. Whether or not she will be successful, Chen does not venture to suggest.

Da Li is as emotionally wrecked as Sassa, and her romantic misfortunes also mirror those of Epistolary Woman. While Da Li appears initially to adapt to her new culture, her tenuously constructed identity implodes because of her destructive relationship with Yuan. Like Sassa, Da Li chooses to address her letters to a sympathetic female friend instead of her emotionally distant lover; despite the painful effects that such letters have as they reveal Yuan's infidelity to Sassa, Da Li understands that Sassa is the most supportive person she could turn to for help in resolving her inner conflict. As discussed before, the friends therefore have a layer of trust in their relationship that they do not share with Yuan, the man that neither of them can ever truly have.

In conclusion, Ying Chen's characters of Sassa and Da Li are not only representative of the trope of the ever-suffering, amorous Epistolary Woman but also of the modern Chinese woman. Unlike Guilleragues, Chen not only structures the narrative to include questions of a woman's involvement in a relationship, but she also shifts the importance of the suffering woman from her suffering in love to her suffering to find her own identity amidst a rapidly changing world. In other words, Sassa's and Da Li's pain is not only owed to their losses in love but also to their loss of their sense of self and their sense of cultural belonging.

## Conclusion

In *Une si longue lettre* and *Les lettres chinoises*, Mariama Bâ and Ying Chen endeavor to examine both Western ideas and their native cultures in the lives of their female protagonists. In the process, the authors create epistolary narratives that mirror aspects of the ever-suffering, amorous Epistolary Woman writing unanswered letters to an uncaring lover. However, because the novels are products of cultures outside of France, this feminine representation undergoes extensive alterations. In a celebration of resilient African womanhood, Bâ's Ramatoulaye transforms herself from a hurt and abandoned first wife into a strong, independent woman. In contrast, Chen's Sassa and Da Li both suffer due to their ill-fated love affairs with Yuan, and while neither recovers from their heartbreak like Ramatoulaye, Chinese culture influences the morality and reactions of both women in a way that they represent Epistolary Woman.

While in the process of researching this thesis, I have read extensively about the epistolary form and its long history in French literature. However, because of length and time requirements, I have been unable to integrate as many epistolary texts as may have influenced both *Une si longue lettre* and *Les lettres chinoises*. Originally, when outlining the works to be included as a part of this project, I listed one additional text that does not appear in the final version: the 1747 *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* by Françoise de Graffigny. Similarly to both Bâ and Chen, Graffigny's distinctly feminist voice refutes Epistolary Woman. In creating her protagonist, Zilia, Graffigny depicts a female character that is unwilling to suffer for love unlike Epistolary Woman and Guilleragues's Portuguese Nun. Graffigny celebrated strong women with Zilia, a female protagonist more similar to herself than Mariane or the women of the letter writing manuals of the time period. This concept is closely related to a postulate set forth by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* that: "The woman-writer – and we shall see women

doing this over and over again – searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of her femininity but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavors” (50). In this way, Graffigny, Bâ, and Chen strive to represent themselves, their female friends, and their female relatives rather than Epistolary Woman, a patriarchal vision of their sex that men perpetuated.

Like Bâ and Chen, Graffigny undertook a commentary about the Western world in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. Graffigny's Zilia is originally from Peru and during the course of the novel's plot is taken to Europe by colonialists. After her forced immigration, Zilia integrates herself partially into Western society and subsequently criticizes it. In an interesting parallel, Chen's Yuan and Da Li do the very same upon their immigration to Canada. As I have maintained as part of my argument for this thesis, aspects of cultural assimilation and occidental ideas complicate the love narrative exponentially and therefore establish differences with the French Epistolary Woman texts. These similarities imply that Bâ's and Chen's novels not only reflect French masculine literary inspiration through their representations, but also that of earlier female authors like Graffigny. If given the opportunity to further examine this thesis's texts, I would specifically like to study *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* as a possible influence for both Bâ and Chen.

Aside from *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, I would like to examine other epistolary works by women that seek to deconstruct the Epistolary Woman trope as Graffigny does. For instance, I was immediately struck by possible comparisons with Isabelle de Charrière's text, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie*. Published in 1784, de Charrière's text provides a clear voice of feminist dissent in a society that had very few female authors speaking openly against women's prescribed roles. The heroine, Mistriss Henley, begins in search of an appropriate husband and believes that she has found such a man in Mister Henley. The couple marries, and

because of her husband's desire for control, Mistriss Henley eventually loses all of her personal agency to him. Even in realms that would typically be considered "women's work," such as child-rearing, Mister Henley criticizes his wife's abilities so often that she is depressed and feels worthless by the final letter.

As in *Une si longue lettre* and *Les lettres chinoises*, Mistriss Henley's identity throughout the text is inextricably linked to the man in her life. In fact, she does not even have a name without him, and after his constant barrage of criticism, she is as lost as Chen's female protagonists. Despite being similar to the Epistolary Woman texts in its sometimes desperate tone, *Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie* represented a change in the female literary voice; in contrast with heroines like the Portuguese Nun, Mistriss Henley's concerns extend past a torturous love affair as do those of Bâ's Ramatoulaye and Chen's Sassa and Da Li. De Charrière criticizes her male-dominated culture and portrays its effects upon the women who lived at the time. Whereas Mistriss Henley loses her identity as the result of her marriage like Ramatoulaye, she does not have the opportunity to re-discover herself because of 18<sup>th</sup> century society. De Charrière's text reflects a shift towards themes of modern feminism and its discussion of power, marriage, and women's roles.

Due to the additional works that I would like to examine, this thesis has the possibility of providing many more years of interesting research. With the advent of globalization, authors like Mariama Bâ and Ying Chen who attempt to reconcile two conflicting cultures are becoming more pertinent. While writing in a language that is spoken by millions around the world, Bâ and Chen also make significant strides in promoting cross-cultural understanding of women's issues. In turn, as the study of both women's literature and Francophone literature continues to blossom after having been silenced for such a significant time, scholarly work on such novels becomes increasingly more pressing and engaging for a new audience.

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## **Vita**

Rosemary Harrington was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1984 to Kevin and Toni Harrington. After graduating from Columbus High School in Columbus, Georgia, in 2002, she enrolled at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. Rosemary graduated *cum laude* from Wesleyan in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and French. She began her studies in the Department of French Studies at Louisiana State University in the fall of 2006 and will continue in the department's doctoral program upon the completion of this thesis.