

## Research Article

# Thematic Parallels in Mariama Ba's *Une Si Longue Lettre* and Azaratou Baboni's *Vie De Femme, Vie De Sang*

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**Abstract:** All over the world, the female sex has suffered several (mis) interpretations. The woman is generally considered as the “weaker sex” and for this reason she must follow or be led by the man. In Africa as well as elsewhere, women want to be accorded their due recognition; they seek to talk about their problems in a world that is fashioned in the image of the man. Women's voices are in their loudest decibel today: “what a man can do a woman can do and even better”! The big question to ask, is whether African men are listening to this battle cry and whether they are willing to accommodate or embrace gender parity in all its ramifications with open hearts? How does the African traditional society perceive of women and their roles? What are the problems faced by young African women as they confront life daily either in their matrimonial homes or in the community? How do African women attempt to solve their problems and what have been the results so far? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to answer. Our method of investigation is the socio-historical approach anchored on the feminist orientation. We have also suggested the way forward for a more equitable African society.

**Keywords:** Gender parity, African feminism, socio-cultural profiling, female stigmatisation, male chauvinism, African reality, African cosmology.

## Introduction

If a woman has her Ph.D. in Physics, has mastered quantum theory, plays flawless Chopin, was once a cheerleader, and is now married to a man who plays baseball, she will forever be “former cheerleader married to star athlete.”  
(Maryanne Ellison Simmons)

The conspiracy of silence by the human race over the lot of the woman may be due to the complexity and interdependency of the problem. For so long, women have borne the brunt of sociocultural profiling and stigmatisation on account of no other reason than their natural sex. And while this injustice persists, the male folks have carried on as if there was nothing at stake. It is not debatable that marginalisation of the woman is inherent in our cultures, our traditions, our associations, indeed our very existence. All the semitic religions-Judaism, Christianity and Islam-lay the blame for the fall of man and the loss of paradise squarely at the feet of the woman:

“The judgment of God upon your sex endures even today;  
and with it inevitably endures your position as criminal  
at the bar of justice. You are the gateway to the devil”.... (Tertullian)

A significant percentage of women in Africa is limited to the four corners of the home, in which only men lead with great pride and unfortunately, oftentimes without any sense of responsibility. In that home where a woman is caged, she witnesses, often, the “glorious arrival” of a second, third or fourth co-wife, who is better catered for, while the children of the first wife are abandoned at the mercy of a society where morals and ideals of proper citizenship are virtually absent. This paper interrogates the thematic similarities in approach toward highlighting this existential conflict suffered by African women, as depicted in the novels of two francophone female writers—Mariama Bâ and Azaratou Baboni—using their epic novels *Une si longue lettre* (*So long a letter*) and *Vie de femme, vie de sang* (*Bloody life of a woman*) as a template. Through the traditional approach to literary discourse, we will attempt to provide a basis to understanding and reflecting on this existential question and offer some suggestions for a more equitable human society.

### Thematic Parallels of African Reality

It may be appropriate to begin our discussion with a remark from Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), that “any intelligent woman, who reads the marriage contract and then goes into it, deserves all the consequences” (27). The implication of this statement is that a woman who enters into matrimony should be ready to face whatever fate awaited her in her conjugal home since she went into it willingly. But why is the emphasis placed on the woman when marriage is supposed to be a social contract in which both parties have responsibilities to execute? Why is the woman mostly singled out for vilification when things don’t seem to add up in the home? Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese and Azaratou Baboni, a Béninoise, share their personal experiences and draw our attention to the omnipresent question of the place of the woman in our society through their works mentioned above, which form the basis for this analysis.

Through the socio-historical approach to literary criticism, we can infer that the works of Mariama Bâ and Azaratou Baboni are direct portraits of their immediate environments. In her epic novel *Une si longue lettre* (1981), (translated into English by Modupe Thomas as *So long a letter*), Mariama Bâ draws attention straightaway to her religious background : “nous nous avons usé pagnes et sandales sur le même chemin caillouteux de l’école coranique” (5) (we wore our native fabrics and sandals on the same stony path to the coranic school). In Azaratou Baboni’s novel, we also see a deep christian upbringing where rich moral values are held sacrosanct : “oui, je n’aime pas la bière et surtout c’est interdit par ma religion” (19); (no, I don’t like beer, especially as it is forbidden by my religion) and «Voilà, comment je fis mon baptême à l’alcool” (21) (That was how I had my baptism into the world of alcohol). We can say that both religious environments (Christian and Islamic) contribute directly or indirectly to the rise of polygamous homes, to the pride of men and their suppression of women over time.

Ramatoulaye was silent when rumours of the arrival of a second wife became a reality according to Muslim tradition. The Imam’s statement was clear: “quand Allah tout puissant met côte à côte deux êtres, personne n’y peut rien ...Dans ce monde rien n’est nouveau” (32). (When Allah, the Most High joins together two beings, no one can do anything about it...nothing is new in this world). This cajoling statement from the muslim cleric could be the biblical equivalent of « what God has joined together, no man can separate ». We can see how even religious men, held in awe by the society, manipulate portions of their holy books to massage the selfish egos of their paymasters. Religion, indeed is the opium of the people. In the case of Ramatoulaye, the support to the polygamous desires of Modou Fall marrying Binetou was vehemently pushed by his own mother and backed up by Islamic traditions. Similarly, in the case of Fatou in Baboni’s *Vie de femme, vie de sang*, the adulterous escapades of Ambroise, who flirted around openly with women older than himself, including younger ones like Rosemonde, were promoted by his mother and supported indirectly by

his traditional religious beliefs. The parents of Ambroise couldn't call their son to order when they knew he was regularly leaving his family in town to satisfy his uncontrolled lust of the flesh in the suburb with another woman.

It is evident that in both cases, the women are not happy having to share their husbands with strange women. Ramatoulaye is not happy to have Binetou as wife of her husband; moreover the special attention and care given to Binetou is food for thought for Ramatoulaye: "Ce Soir, Binetou ma coépouse, rejoindra sa villa SICAP. Enfin! Ouf!"(19). (This evening, Binetou my co-wife will be moving into her new apartment in the villa). Obviously, this « new apartment » in the villa was one of the attractions used by Modou Fall to cajole Binetou, his teenager new wife. Modou was also taking good care of his mother-in-law (the mother of Binetou), to the detriment of Ramatoulaye and her children. "Quatre millions empruntés avec facilité,... et qui avaient permis d'envoyer Dame Belle-mère et son époux acquérir les titres de Hadja et de El Hadji à la Mecque; ...changement continue des Alfa Romeo de Binetou, à la moindre bosse » (98) (Four million borrowed with ease..., which enabled Modou to send his mother-in-law and her husband to Mecca, in order for them to acquire the titles of Alhaja and Alhaji..., the changes continue with Binetou's new Alfa Romeo, just like that) !

While in *Une si longue lettre*, we see Modou Fall busy spending money to please his in-laws, in *Vie de femme, vie de sang*, on the contrary, we sympathise with Fatou as Ambroise, her supposed husband and father of two, shamelessly steals from her in order to sustain his adulterous pastime and satisfy his litany of casual sex providers. This situation impoverishes both homes and causes the children to suffer shame, abandonment and rejection, as well as repeated lies and quarrels in the home.

Ramatoulaye is very optimistic about life. And why not? Now in her fifties and a school teacher of many years' experience, one should naturally appreciate her perception of things as they affect her and her immediate family, the patriarchal underpinnings of her society notwithstanding. She demonstrates courage in her rejection of the proposition of Tamsir (brother of the deceased Modou) to remarry her. She also said "no" to the wish of Dieng the Lawyer to help her take care of the children after Modou's death. This attitude revolts her mother-in-law: "Bissimilai! Bissimilai ! Toi si fanée, tu veux choisir un mari comme une fille de dix-huit ans" (135). (God forbid ! You, already so fagged out, you want to choose a husband as if you were a girl of eighteen) ? But Ramatoulaye stands her ground firmly without compromising her personal beliefs in spite of the huge challenges confronting her. "Mes refus successifs me faisaient en ville une réputation de lionne ou de femme demeurée" (137). Ramatoulaye cuts the picture of an optimistic and progressive woman, a woman who has seen it all and who is therefore not so bothered by the challenging circumstances of life, like this.

On the other hand, Fatou, her younger counterpart in *Vie de femme, vie de sangs* is depressed and wants to give up on life : « ...après mon échec au baccalauréat et ma tentative de suicide, je n'avais pas vraiment eu de relation sérieuse"(17). (...after my failure at baccalaureate and my suicide attempt, I never really had a serious relationship). Here is a young girl who wants to commit suicide just because she failed her Bac ! She closed in on life and became depressed after her failure in the high school terminal exams. A pessimistic person depends on others to take decisions, even minor ones. Bali, her elder sister was a helping hand to Fatou in her moment of decision, while Ramatoulaye is an object of admiration, a role model to other women due to her courage and perhaps, age.

From a psycho-analytical point of view, we could feel and sense a deep projection of personal feelings of resentment from Mariama Bâ portrayed as Ramatoulaye and also from Azaratou Baboni presented as Fatima (or Fatou, as she is fondly called in the novel). In the novel *Une si longue lettre*, Ramatoulaye begins her letter to Aissatou on this note: "...j'ouvre ce cahier, point d'appui dans mon

desarroi" (5) (I am beginning this note as a morale booster to my present disarray). Also, in the novel *Vie de femme, vie de sang* by Baboni, we read: "la chaleur matinale de ce mois de décembre ne m'avait pas empêchée de sortir de chez moi, il faisait chaud, je marchai; je marchais, je n'avais pas averti mes parents...sans savoir trop où mes pieds allaient me conduire (13). (The morning heat of this month of December did not hinder me from leaving my house. It was hot, I walked ; walked, I didn't tell my parents where I was going to..., nor did I even know where my feet were taking me to). As we look deeper into the two narratives, it appears that the deceptions and humiliation from Modou Fall toward Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre*, as well as the series of domestic abuses and adulterous degeneration of Ambroise in *Vie de femme, vie de sang*, project a call for women to stand out of the cages of death carefully set by men for their enslavement. Through the feminist movement, women are clearly emphasizing the fact that it is time men began to value them beyond the confines of the kitchen and "the other room". Ramatoulaye takes upon herself the great passion and pain to train and educate her children, a task that would have been easier with a responsible man by her side. This simply tells us that a woman is a great help to a man, if only he could look at her with the eyes of admiration rather than suspicion and condemnation. Fatima, on her part, takes the long awaited inevitable decision to call it quits with Ambroise and move on with her life! This action on her part signals the climax of the novel.

### Conclusion

Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Azarou Baboni's *Vie de femme, vie de sang* depict African realism in that they are both actual and factual. The narratives represent African reality and cosmology, where there is absolutely no limit to the number of wives, maids or concubines a man could keep at a particular time. It is a man's wealth, not his morality that determines how many women he should have around him at a time and a changing world order cannot take away this much coveted privilege from him with fiat!

The male protagonists in the two narratives, Modou Fall (in *Une si longue lettre*) and Ambroise (in *Vie de femme, vie de sang*) extended their matrimonial beds outside the home to strange women or whoever cared to lay on them. Ambroise in particular, becomes a loose cannon who freely advertises his sexual escapades among his friends and acquaintances. In him, we see a horrible image of everything any responsible man should not aspire to be. Both women- Ramatoulaye (*Une si longue lettre*) and Fatima (*Vie de femme, vie de sang*) make up their minds to pick up the broken pieces of their lives and move on. They face the truth squarely about who they are and what they can do to reclaim their joy and bring some sense back into their lives, the physical separation with their spouses notwithstanding. Perhaps, owing to her age (well in her fifties), Ramatoulaye, who has since passed menopause, refuses to remarry but Fatima finds a new love for herself. Life indeed presents us with choices and every choice has its consequences. Modou Fall and Ambroise made their personal choices and the results are evident for all to see. Modou Fall's untimely death in *Une si longue lettre* and Ambroise's broken home in *Vie de femme, vie de sang* are consequences that all responsible men must do everything to avoid if they hope to enjoy peaceful matrimonial homes and raise worthy offspring who will hold the fort after them.

The novels of Mariama Bâ and Azarou Baboni are typical reflections of the traditional African world view. It is a patriarchal society fashioned in the image of the man, where the woman is seen as the lesser being, the weaker sex and therefore the inferior equation in the scheme of things. She is only a footnote to the man. In the African world, tradition and religion, especially Islamic religion are not only in league, they actively conspire and collaborate to strip the woman of her dignity, integrity and self-worth. She is only to be seen, not to be heard and it is her lot not to complain because this is the path nature has ordained for her.

This study should help in rethinking the urgent necessity to reconstruct and rehabilitate the status of women in Africa with a view towards according them their rightful place in the society. The saying: "it takes two to tango", is an ominous piece of advice to the menfolk. The reality of today's world is

that men can no longer afford to live in splendid isolation from the women, those who continue in this mind set are living in a pimper's paradise.

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