Overcoming Boundaries: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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This study utilizes Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1991) and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) to examine the ways in which women interact with cultural boundaries in West African and African American contexts. While Morrison explores the sociocultural role of Black woman in North America, Bâ focuses, in her novel, on the sociopolitical implications of polygamy and cultural conflicts in postcolonial Senegal on women in the country. Both novelists engage in a struggle to reposition Black women, who have often been marginalized in men's narratives. Therefore, by giving agency to their heroines, they make a clear political move with regard to a long established form of writing.

Despite the fact that women make up the majority of the world's population, they are often given a lower position in society and treated as a minority group. Their ambitions for careers and power have regularly been hindered by social, racial, ethnic, religious, and political constructions. Female authors the world over have frequently sought to counter this perception by exploring issues affecting women in their novels, standing against sexual stereotypes or other restrictions. In other words, through their writing, they seek the same political, social, sexual, intellectual, and economic rights as men.

It could be said that the postcolonial period is marked by social inequities in the US for women. Moreover, women's social position in the US cannot be fully explored without referencing racial segregation, which has impacted all minority social groups, including Black women. The marginalization of women in both American and West African societies is similar, as can be seen in Buchi Emecheta's use of the word "*slave*" in *The Slave Girl* (1989).

In what follows, this essay will explore issues affecting women, namely their cultural marginalization in two novels by female authors from the US and Senegal: Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1991) and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981). As will be shown, these two Black female authors constantly negotiate their agency through their novels, stressing modern sociocultural values and friendship as a mode of empowerment. The following questions will be explored: how do women cope with their cultural and gender roles and how do women's life experiences culturally, socially, and economically inform their voices in literature? In addition, an attempt to explore gender from both inside and outside the home, focusing on traditional sociocultural norms, will also be made.

Viewed from a Marxist perspective, the aim of modernization was, in the 19th and 20th centuries, to eradicate exploitation, inequality, and conflict to create a just world. Inglehart and Welzel (2009) believe that "since the end of the Cold War, however, the concept of modernization has taken on new life. Stripped of the oversimplification of its early versions, the new concept of modernization sheds light on ongoing cultural changes, such as the rise of gender equality; the recent wave of democratization; and the democratic peace theory" (p. 35). The term includes transformation but incorporates a wider range of processes. As can be seen, this concept can also be reflected in increased stratification of social structures. Thus, in traditional West African and African American societies, many different areas of life were

merged. As victims of power control, men, and more frequently women, westernized themselves, accepting these new social standards and seeking freedom from racial and gender-based subjugation. Accordingly, in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ creates heroines who live in an environment that is physically but also culturally not favourable to them.

Throughout colonization, the capital of French West Africa included a large percentage of individuals living in diaspora, who consequently shared their cultures with one another. Bâ (1981) recalls such memories to explain the introduction of education and its role in West Africa and the ways in which it influenced the indigenous population.

> Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an "uncommon" destiny. Together, let us recall our school…. The admission policy which was based on an entrance examination for the whole of former French West Africa, now broken up into autonomous republics, made possible a fruitful blend of different intellects, characters, manners and customs.… We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation. (p. 15)

Not only does the presence of foreign women signal a novelty, but it also justifies "the profound choices made by New Africa for the promotion of the black women" (Bâ, 1981, p. 16). Given their pride, bravery, and self-confidence, social and cultural changes only slowly affected people, with frustrations and misunderstandings arising due to the differences between cultures.

Women's improved social standing, as shown in *So Long a Letter*, demonstrates the forthcoming vision and determination of the female gender to "enter the sphere of transcendence" (Massey, 1998, p. 161). In *Sula*, these same aspirations are depicted in Helene, who is portrayed as having a strong desire to look like a White woman. As an upstanding member of the Bottom community, Helene Wright moved to Medallion from New Orleans, where her grandmother raised her. As the story unfolds, we learn that Helene is married to a respectable man and has established herself in the community as the picture of propriety, all in an effort to escape her family's bad reputation. She carefully and successfully raises her

daughter, Nel, to be like her, living a life free from shame and immorality. Helene's imitation of the majority goes so far as to change her mannerisms and clothing. Morrison (1973/1991) presents Helene's state of mind, as she depicts her "… cutting the pattern from newspapers and moving her eyes rapidly from a magazine model to her own hands" (p. 19). In this excerpt, it could be said that Helene is undertaking a long and painful search for a modern style of life.

Taking an ironic stance in relation to both male and White female readers, Morrison resolutely articulates the objectives of her writing: "I write for black women. We are not addressing the men as some white females writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving loving way. They are writing to repossess, rename, reown" (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 6). Morrison's voice is echoed by Bâ (1981), who constantly maintains that "Books are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon" (p. 13). Consequently, both writers believe literature is a viable means to stand up to oppression and/or sociopolitical and economic inequity, which can provoke "… a confrontation between old values of the tribes and new urban values" (Morrison, 1973/1991, p. 221). Overall, Morrison's and Bâ's appeal seems to be heard by Black women in the diaspora. Not only do Black women unanimously rise up and speak with the same voice, but they also provide an important example of the relationship and solidarity between women in West African and African American communities. This paradigm represents a strong unification against all forms of discrimination keeping women at the periphery.

Both Morrison and Bâ stress the importance of places in their narratives. They emphasize the existing social, cultural, and economic differences by offering an idea on how both worlds connect. The austerity of social customs and the quest for self-definition mark the companionship among some of the characters. In *Sula* for example, Morrison (1973/1991) gives

a detailed presentation of the Bottom, a rural town where the majority of the population is Black. Focusing on Sula Peace and Nel Wright, she depicts the interdependence that ties the two characters together. Through these characters, it is possible to compare and contrast their position on the conventional image of Black womanhood. "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things" (p. 55). During the early twentieth century, Black women had to endure perpetual injustice. As bell hooks (1982) contends, "many of the service jobs black women were employed to perform forced them into daily contact with racist whites who abused and humiliated them" (p. 77), which intensified their already unpleasant interactions. It can be presumed that this is the reason why the people of the Bottom avoid communication with Whites as much as possible and stick together within their community.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have a similar relationship in *So Long a Letter*, as they confide secrets to each other. However, the advantage that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have over Nel and Sula is their intellectual background, which is a contributing factor to their commitment toward decision-making. For example, they attended a French-run school at a time when few Senegalese women were given this opportunity. They create a space within which they can redefine their identity. Despite the geographical distance that separated them, they stay connected via letters. Ramatoulaye was the first person that Aissatou informed about her divorce when Mawdo took a second wife to fulfill a motherly desire. Not only did her mother-in-law consider her an outcast, but she also accused her of over-controlling Mawdo and his property.

> These commonplace truths, which before had lowered the heads of many wives as they raised them in revolt, did not produce the desired miracle; they did not divert you from your decision. You chose to make a break, a one-way journey with your four sons, leaving this letter for Mawdo, in clear view, on the bed that used to be yours. I remember the exact words. (Bâ, 1981, p. 31)

Additionally, as Bâ notes, “Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love.” (p. 54). In essence, West African women set out to forge new traditions to match their country’s new independence. Similar to Nel’s support of Sula—both financially and in his criminal dealings—Aissatou creates a successful life for herself and begins to help Ramatoulaye by buying her a Fiat.

The question of personal experience in the Black community is pervasive in *Sula*. I argue that discrimination represents a basic symbol of persecution, making Black men and women victims of the American system and that segregation limits their personal development. Accordingly, the society that Toni Morrison (1973/1991) depicts is strongly characterized by unfairness, if not overt racism. Yet, women are most affected by such circumstances, as they face both discrimination and subjugation. This gives details about the misadventures of Helene Wright, who though depicted as “an impressive woman, … a woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority” (p. 18), she confronts the hard truth of segregation and realizes that, despite her manner and the way with which she carries herself, she is just a second-class citizen.

Significantly, the brutal scene on the train in *Sula* shows that particular mannerisms or behaviors are not enough to be protected from racial injustice. Both authors engage in deconstructing the politics of the home to envision a far better future for the women in their novels.

> Settling homes has been understood for centuries as the most proper occupation for women, shielded as home was thought to be from the aggression, materialism, and competitiveness of the public arena. Home is imagined as a place of domestic order, separate from the outer public world of commerce, government law, and other social institutions in which men exercise worldly power. (Strehle, 2008, p. 1)

As Strehle (2008) shows, home is politically and socially constructed and marked by defined gender roles. In my own experience, Strehle's analysis of home is quite accurate. In West Africa, for example, women are assigned this symbolic place, which consists taking care of the house—mothering, nurturing, cooking, and continuing traditions—whereas men are concerned with overseeing these tasks. In *So Long a Letter*, these female tasks are fulfilled by some of the characters. Aunty Nabou for instance, in the process of preparing young Nabou for married life, provides her with the required education for this next phase of her life, including submission, which is a part of their culture. Bâ (1981) asserts that "it was especially while telling folk tales, late at night under the starlit sky, that Aunty Nabou wielded her power over young Nabou's soul: her expressive voice glorified the retributive violence of the warrior; her expressive voice lamented the anxiety of the Love One, all submissive" (p. 47). Morrison (1973/1991) expressed this submissive conduct in Eva, who represents the image of a good mother. In an attempt to earn money to feed her children, Eva makes the unthinkable decision to sacrifice one of her own legs: "Somebody said Eva struck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for $10.000" (p. 31). Yet, to be a woman and a good mother is a difficult task, as shown in *So Long a Letter* and *Sula*.

In West Africa, as well as in the United States, the issue of gender has always been complex. Some writers, historians, politicians, sociologists, and anthropologists have frequently been concerned not only with how it is regarded, but also with how it functions in general. While Peach (1998) states that prior to the mid/late 1980s, "African-American criticism had eschewed gender in favor of race, or at best, … had conceived of them as separate" (p. 8), Stichter (1988) describes it as "a pervasive problem of central concern," before asserting that "the deconstruction of the domestic unit may actually be easier to accomplish in sub-Saharan Africa than in some

other parts of the world, given this area's historic emphasis on the division by sex of labor, property rights, and spheres of influence" (p.177–178). Feminist scholars, in particular, have contested the distribution of roles within social constructions. For example, Nfa-Abbenyi (1997) argues that "Feminist theory and practice around gender seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference, whereby, 'men' and 'women' are socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism" (p. 16). Nfa-Abbenyi continues, by saying that, occasionally in postcolonial women's writing, "some feminists have argued that gender is a social and/or cultural process involving a complex set of relations that inevitably interlock with other relations of age, race, class, ethnicity, ideology, et cetera." (p. 17). This raises two important questions: what is the impact of such debates on women and how does modernity come into play in awakening women in the US and Africa?

The introduction of Western culture in West Africa and the modernization of the US created greater awareness in women. For example, the Civil Rights movements in the US and the migratory movement of people in the Black diaspora have contributed significantly to women's desire to redefine their image. Authors like Bâ and Morrison unquestionably challenge cultures, customs, and ways of life. According to Munt (1998), "the configuration of bounded categories such as race, nation, sexuality, and even identity, is an inheritance of nineteenth-century imperial obsessions with naming, containing and blaming" (p. 11). Given this, the focus today is often on deconstructing sociocultural boundaries, on the one hand, and finding ways to accommodate local and foreign cultures, on the other.

Morrison and Bâ both utilize double consciousness and are aware of their social and professional positions as women and authors. They challenge norms and traditional canons of writing with female characters endowed with freedom to confront traditions to envision a

modern world. In *Sula*, for example, while Eva reinforces women's traditional roles, Sula rebels by not placing importance on the institution of marriage: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrizon, 1973/1991, p. 92). Being unable to enjoy her life, Sula decides to leave the Bottom, whereas "now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall" (p. 120). The allegory of the snake refers to customs that are now considered dangerous with regard to how they constrain people. Sula's defiance of her own community causes her to leave for a period of ten years, moving from Nashville to Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego. The men she lived with during this period and "those places had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainment of love, the same cooling of love" (pp. 120–121). Because of her formerly "wild" ways, Sula faces difficulty reintegrating into her hometown and is associated with the devil. "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways.… They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst (p. 117). Bâ (1981) presents a similar situation in Aissatou's relation to her own social environment: "School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path" (p. 17).

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou go through the same process. The mixture of cultures—traditional and Western—has completely shaped their vision. Like Nel, Ramatoulaye backs down under the yoke of traditional culture, while Aissatou fights female oppression caused by polygamy permitted by Islam. Aissatou serves as a model for other women who are seen as uncontrollable under the norms of their own cultures and religions. Yet,

Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's immediate responses to their abandonment by their husbands are not necessarily a definitive way to regard one as feminist and the other as not. Nor is there a union between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou at the end of the narrative when Aissatou, who has long traveled in the US, returns in her tailored suit and is nudged by Ramatoulaye to drop her fork and knife and dip her fingers into the communal food bowl as the two enjoy a meal together, a projection of a simple hybridity (Olaogun, 2009, p. 182). Both authors depict hybridity caused by the influence of the external world and create two female protagonists who respond to the norms of their respective cultures in vastly different ways, which helps to elucidate how their lives are impacted cross-culturally. Aissatou and Sula claim a belonging to a world of equity, justice ,and freedom. The migratory movements in the texts, both home and abroad (in the case of Aissatou), are caused by a search for self-empowerment that inevitably points to a loss of home.

In both narratives, home is presented as a place that traditionally belonged to men, who usually used it as a location of authority. Historically, men had the tendency, on account of their role as the breadwinner, to treat women as second-class citizens, good for nothing but obedience. Bâ (1981) and Morrison (1973/1991) both explore gender relations inside and outside of the home by focusing on the tension between men and women and how women have transcended cultural limitations. In other words, both authors portray the impact of men's misogynistic behavior toward women. As such, male characters are frequently depicted as irresponsible or violent, which provides a glimpse into their own limitations and loss of authority within African and African American cultures.

In West Africa, marriage and religion have sometimes been a hindrance to modernity, as shown in *So Long a Letter*. Although women struggle to define new roles for themselves, they

still face challenges in doing so. In emphasizing that "the management of the home is an art. We have learned the hard way, it is still not over," the narrator stresses a division of labor (Bâ, 1981, p. 63). From the above quotation, it can be assumed that if home is a space designated for women, the outside world is then only for men, where the former symbolizes confinement and the latter authority and control. There is an enduring struggle for women to find equality in spaces traditionally reserved for men. Such is the case with Mawdo, whose wife divorces him, takes the children, and assumes full responsibility for the family, taking, then, a male role. According to Kane (2011), tensions mark discussions of the division of household labor for Senegalese immigrants in the US:

> There are very few women who are willing to contribute to the expenses of the household. When it comes to pay the rent or bills, they tell their husbands that they are wives, and, therefore, paying bills and rent is not their business. When the husbands ask them to stop working and take care of the domestic task and the education of children, they refuse. When the husbands ask them to return to Senegal, they divorce. … Here in America, the division of the domestic labor is another source of great tensions. (p. 193)

As shown in the above quotations, women have begun to stand against the traditional rules of marriage and Islam. Kane (2011), furthermore, posits that "women do not agree with the interpretation of African imams that women should contribute to the expenses of the household" (p. 193). Nevertheless, Ramatoulaye was forced to act as both a mother and father to her 12 children after her husband's death. "I was left with empty hands," she articulates, before desperately adding, "he forgot us" (Bâ, 1981, p. 46). Similar, in *Sula*, BoyBoy is depicted as a depraved man who does not even try to gain control over his family. He is shown to be "preoccupied with other women and not home much" and shares an inclination toward sexual bias, like Modou Fall, Mawdo Bâ, and Samba Diack (Morrison, 1973/1991, p. 32). Taken together, these men have all lost their dignity and morality, their bad behavior showing weakness

and an inability to stand firm. Morrison (1973/1991) sums up BoyBoy's conduct, saying that "he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (p. 32). The image of the two Black soldiers standing by silently as a White man brutalizes a Black woman reveals men's weakness in such a hostile environment: "The two black soldiers, who had been watching the scene with what appeared to be indifference now looked stricken" (Morrison, 1973/1991, p. 21).

In both novels, poverty and unemployment are two factors that affected female and male characters, having, of course, an impact on their relationships. "The power and authority ascribed to women in the Black ghettos of America, women whose families are locked into lifelong conditions of poverty and welfare, have their roots in the inexorable unemployment of black males and the ensuing control of economic resources by females" (Stack, 1999, p. 349). As Stack (1999) shows, women play an important role in the community as household leaders. This is shown particularly in *Sula,* where men are absent or have even deserted their families, which certainly makes women the only source of financial support. Just as Eva takes care of her children and makes a big sacrifice to feed them when her husband abandoned them, Helene Wright nurtures and educates her daughter with no help from her husband, who is often absent from home. When Nel's husband, Jude, leaves her, she also does her best to find a job to sustain her small family: "there were no more fifty dollars in brown envelopes to count on; … she got a better job working as a chambermaid in the same hotel Jude had worked in. The tips were only fair, but the hours were good, she was home when the children got out of school (p. 139). Although some women in these novels are successful in establishing their authority and leading their household, others fail to fully adopt the same approach, as is seen in Eva, who, despite efforts to manage her family, remains traditional.

As shown in *So Long a Letter* and *Sula*, West African and African American traditions have long constrained women in spaces that do not allow for self-fulfillment, but the influence of external culture has allowed women to move beyond these traditional roles. It can be said that Bâ (1981) and Morrison (1973/1991) have been very affected by this in the ways they attempt to redefine gender roles and the traditional concept of "home" in their novels, as well as in characterization and plot structure. While Bâ focuses more on the effects of polygamy and Islam on women, Morrison stresses the consequences of marriage and racism in the early twentieth century in North America. In addition, they both critique the social conventions of their cultures through a feminist lens. As has been shown, both authors give a full voice to their heroines and, in so doing, make an appeal for unity, progress, and liberation to young writers. Morrison (1973/1991) and Bâ (1981) focus on the need for friendship and collective struggle to deconstruct and reconstruct what has always been the space of the "Other." The construction of sexual categorizations, which make relations difficult, has led to a reconsideration of gender roles both inside and outside the home. While differences may exist between their approaches, both are involved in the analysis and representation of women's identity.

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