So Long a Letter

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARIAMA BÂ

Mariama Bâ was born in 1929 in Dakar, Senegal, then part of French West Africa. She grew up Muslim, attending Koranic school from a young age, and her family was relatively wealthy. Her father served as Minister of Health under the French colonial regime and went on to become one of the first Ministers of State after Senegalese independence. Her mother died when Bâ was young, and so she was raised mostly by her grandparents. Against their wishes she attended college, where she studied law. Upon graduating she became a schoolteacher. Bâ was an outspoken, politically active feminist. In the years leading up to and following Senegalese independence, she wrote essays against French assimilationist policies, joined a number of women's rights advocacy groups, and penned newspaper articles on education, genital mutilation, and the unequal treatment of women in Senegalese society. She had nine children, whom she raised more or less single-handedly after divorcing her husband. *So Long a Letter* (1979) was her first novel. Written in French, it was published to immediate literary acclaim. In 1981 the book won the first ever Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, and it went on to become one of the first novels by an African woman to gain international attention. Bâ, whose health had been declining for years, died later that year. Her second novel, *A Scarlet Song* (1981), was published posthumously.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The West African country of Senegal, in which *So Long a Letter* is set, has a long and rich history, much of which roils beneath the novel's surface. Before the colonial period, the region now called Senegal was long a part of the powerful Ghana and Wolof empires. Today most Senegalese identify as Wolof, an ethnic group marked by its strictly defined caste system and widespread practice of Sufi Islam (Islam was first introduced to the region in the 11th century). Bordered on three sides by the Sahara, the Atlantic, and the jungles of sub-Saharan Africa, Senegal—in particular its capital, Dakar—was once an important trade hub and, for that reason, a contentious region among the colonial powers. France eventually assumed control in the late 19th century. Under the French system, colonial subjects were theoretically offered a path to French citizenship, but such an approach forced them to first receive a French education and assimilate to French culture, and in any case the law was never really put into practice. Still, Senegal eventually gained four seats in the French National Assembly. Beginning in 1914, the deputies who filled these seats, all native Senegalese, began to push for Senegalese independence, which was peacefully signed into law in 1960. Léopold Senghor, a poet, was one of the most outspoken of these deputies, and he became the first president of Senegal. Mariama Bâ belonged to a slightly younger generation; she came into her literary powers just as Senegal achieved its independence. Bâ's Senegal was a young country faced with an uncertain future, entering an increasingly global economy and saddled with the responsibility of reaffirming a national sense of self.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The mid-20th century saw the ascent of a number of black francophone authors who came of age under French colonial regimes across the globe, a movement to which Mariama Bâ certainly belongs. Léopold Senghor, a Senegalese poet and the first president of independent Senegal, was the perhaps the most prominent of these authors. Together with Aimé Césaire, a poet and playwright from the Carribbean island Martinique, and Léon Damas, a French Guianese poet, he founded a literary movement known as "négritude," whose proponents emphasized distinctly African cultural values and traditions in opposition to French colonial oppression, following Senghor's dictum that "We must learn to absorb and influence others more than they absorb or influence us." Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land* (1947) and Léopold Senghor's *Collected Poetry* (1998) are both foundational texts of the movement. The contemporary Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a novelist and short-story writer operating within the African feminist tradition that Mariama Bâ more or less inaugurated—her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and story collection the *Thing Around your Neck* (2009) might be read alongside *So Long a Letter*. Marie NDiaye, a French author of Senegalese descent, could also be considered a spiritual successor of Bâ. Her novels *Self-portrait in Green* (2014) and *Ladivine* (2016) both follow women who, much like the main character of *So Long a Letter*, struggle to overcome colonialist oppression and a patriarchal society.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** So Long a Letter
- **When Written:** 1979
- **Where Written:** Senegal
- **When Published:** 1979
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Post-colonial
- **Genre:** Epistolary novel, Feminist novel, Post-colonial literature, Négritude
- **Setting:** Dakar, Senegal

- **Climax:** Ramatoulaye learns that her daughter, Aissatou, is pregnant.
- **Antagonist:** Modou
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Semiautobiographical. Many critics have remarked on the similarities between Ramatoulaye's life story and Bâ's own. For example, Bâ had nine children—not quite Ramatoulaye's twelve, but still a lot!

School in her honor. In 1977, Leopold Senghor helped found a boarding school on Goreé, an island in Senegal, and named the school after Mariama Bâ. The school is open to this day.

PLOT SUMMARY

So Long a Letter begins when Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese woman living in Dakar, the country's capital, decides to write a letter to her old friend Aissatou, who lives in America. The letter is occasioned by the sudden death of Modou, Ramatoulaye's estranged husband. In keeping with Muslim custom, Ramatoulaye must observe a *mirasse*, a forty-day period of isolation and mourning. Over the course of this period she keeps a diary, which she eventually intends to send to Aissatou.

Ramatoulaye begins by reflecting on the long funeral proceedings following Modou's death. Senegalese-Muslim customs dictate that Ramatoulaye serve as a host to all the mourners and well-wishers, opening her house to them and providing them with food and drink. This strikes Ramatoulaye as a grave injustice, as Modou, in his final years, wanted nothing to do with her. The mourners virtually sack her house, and though they bring gifts—mostly bank notes—the most of them end up in the hands of Modou's second wife, Binetou, and her greedy mother (Lady Mother-in-Law).

Ramatoulaye goes on to reflect on her marriage to Modou. She cannot understand what led him to lose interest in her. Their first years together, as sweethearts and then as a young married couple, seemed hopeful. They married despite the protestations of Ramtoulaye's family, who saw Modou as something of a loaf. In her diary she admits that they were right, and wonders why, despite her education, she chose him over the more sensible option—Daouda Dieng, an older and more established, financially stable man.

Aissatou's marriage, like Ramatoulaye's, also disintegrated. Around the time that Ramatoulaye married Modou, Aissatou married Mawdo, a medical student and overall model citizen. The two were greatly in love. However, Mawdo is of noble birth, while Aissatou is merely the daughter of a goldsmith. Mawdo's family—in particular his mother, Aunty Nabou—objected to the union. In an effort to undermine the marriage, Aunty Nabou **traveled to her ancestral hometown** and convinced her brother to relinquish one of his daughters—Aunty Nabou's namesake—to her care. Aunty Nabou proceeded to raise and preen young Nabou. Then, when the girl was of proper age, Aunty Nabou begged Mawdo to take young Nabou as his second wife. Mawdo, fearing that his mother would become distressed and fall ill if he declined, agreed. He assured Aissatou that he did not love young Nabou, but he also had children with her. Aissatou could not accept this and divorced him. She focused on her education, received a degree in diplomacy, and moved to America to work in the Senegalese embassy.

Meanwhile, Ramatoulaye was enduring her own marital misfortune. Her daughter Daba befriended a girl name Binetou. Binetou spoke often of a "sugar daddy," an older man who bought her clothes. After a while, Binetou's family began to pressure her into leaving her education behind and marrying the man for his money. Binetou reluctantly agreed. Ramatoulaye was disappointed by this news, but not otherwise suspicious. Some days later, Mawdo, Modou's brother Tamsir, and a local Imam appeared at Ramatoulaye's house. Together they informed her that Binetou's sugar daddy was in fact Ramatoulaye's husband Modou, and that Binetou would soon be her co-wife.

Ramatoulaye was left heartbroken and effectively abandoned as Modou began a new life with Binetou. Despite this, she decided to remain married to Modou, accepting her fate as if it were a duty to fulfill. Her children protested, but she remained steadfast.

Now Modou has died, and Ramatoulaye must navigate the strange situation of being forced to mourn for a man who abandoned her. As her *mirasse* draws to a close, she is approached by Tamsir, who announces that he will marry her. Ramatoulaye is deeply offended by his crass proposal, and tells him off in front of Mawdo and the Imam. Later, Daouda Dieng proposes to her. Though he does so with considerably more tact than Tamsir, Ramatoulaye rejects him as well. She resolves to focus her efforts on raising her children.

Thanks to the increasingly prevalent forces of modernity, Ramatoulaye's adolescent children become exposed to a host of new dangers, dangers from which she feels they must be protected. While playing baseball in the street, two of Ramatoulaye's sons are run over and injured by a wayward **motorcycle**. She catches three of her daughters smoking. Aissatou's namesake gets pregnant out of wedlock. Ramatoulaye responds to all of these crises with strength, equanimity, and poise.

Ramatoulaye concludes her long letter by anticipating Aissatou's impending return to Senegal. She looks forward to seeing her friend, and trusts that despite the physical changes they've endured, their friendship will be strong as ever.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ramatoulaye – Ramatoulaye is the narrator of *So Long a Letter*; the book is both her diary and a long letter to her friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye belongs to the generation that grew up under the French colonial regime and came of age just as Senegal was achieving its independence. Accordingly, she is very politically engaged, and reflects often on the future of her country, the role of tradition in modern life, and the prospect of women's liberation. She is fundamentally a feminist, though she holds certain beliefs that some feminists might find unfamiliar or perhaps even disagree with. For one, she is a devout Muslim, and follows the dictates of her faith even when they seem to advocate the unequal treatment of women. Though she is a teacher and has a professional life of her own, she is also a devoted mother. Her faith and her patience are tested when her husband, Modou, decides to take a young second wife (perfectly acceptable in Senegalese-Muslim culture) and proceeds to abandon Ramatoulaye and her twelve children. Despite Modou's infidelity, though, she chooses to remain married to him.

Aissatou – Aissatou is Ramatoulaye's old childhood friend, and the addressee of her letter. She comes from a rather poor family; her father is a goldsmith. Aissatou experiences similar trouble in her marital life—her husband takes on a young second wife, of noble birth, in order to please his mother—but she reacts to it quite differently. Unlike Ramatoulaye, Aissatou decides to leave her husband on principle. Of a much more independent spirit than Ramatoulaye, Aissatou decides to pursue her education. She ends up moving to America, to work in the Senegalese embassy there.

Modou – Modou is Ramatoulaye's husband. He is a union organizer and, like Ramatoulaye, engaged in his country's politics. At first, the two are very deeply in love, and they marry despite the protestations of Ramatoulaye's parents. However, their love fades as they grow older. Modou takes secret interest in his daughter's young friend Binetou. He lavishes her with gifts and money, and eventually decides to marry her without telling Ramatoulaye. After this second marriage, Modou essentially abandons Ramatoulaye and their twelve children. His death occasions Ramatoulaye's letter to Aissatou.

Mawdo – Aissatou's husband. Mawdo is a doctor, an upstanding citizen, and a member of Senegal's class of nobles. He and Aissatou fall in love despite the class difference between their two families. This upsets Mawdo's mother, who eventually tricks him into taking on his young cousin Nabou as a second wife. He does so somewhat reluctantly, but then proceeds to have children with Nabou, claiming all the while that he only loves Aissatou. Aissatou cannot accept this and leaves him. Even after Aissatou's departure, however, Mawdo remains a good friend to Ramatoulaye.

Binetou – Modou's second wife, and a friend of Daba. She is only 17 when she reluctantly marries Modou. She does so at the urgings of her family, who are after Modou's money. Binetou survives her marriage to Modou by making fun of him, ordering him around, and making him buy her things.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lady Mother-in-Law (Binetou's Mother) – Binetou's mother. She gladly reaps the benefits of Binetou's marriage to the wealthy Modou.

Aunty Nabou – Mawdo's mother. She is of noble birth and is extremely conservative. She is appalled when Mawdo decides to marry Aissatou. She schemes to have him marry his cousin Nabou instead.

Nabou – Mawdo's cousin and second wife. She has little say in the matter of her marriage, but Aunty Nabou thoroughly prepares her for the role. She is brought up with refined manners.

Daouda Dieng – Ramatoulaye's old suitor. He is a member of the national assembly, a conscientious man. He proposes to Ramatoulaye again after Modou's death, but she rejects him.

Daba – Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter. She is fiery and independent.

Farmata – Ramatoulaye's wacky, conservative neighbor. She is a *griot*, a kind of fortune teller.

Aissatou (Aissatou's Namesake, Aissatou II) – Ramatoulaye's daughter, named after her friend. She gets pregnant out of wedlock.

Ibrahima Sall – Aissatou II's sweetheart, and husband-to-be. He is a law student.

Tamsir – Modou's brother. He proposes to Ramatoulaye shortly after Modou's death, but she rejects him.

Farba Diouf – Aunty Nabou's brother, and Nabou's father.

Ousmane – One of Ramatoulaye's sons.

Malick – One of Ramatoulaye's sons.

Alioune – One of Ramatoulaye's sons.

Omar – One of Ramatoulaye's sons.

Mawdo Fall – One of Ramatoulaye's sons.

Jacqueline – Ramatoulaye's friend from Cote d'Ivoire.

Samba Diack – Jacqueline's husband.

Fatimi – Ramatoulaye's younger sister.

Arame – One of Ramatoulaye's daughters.

Yacine – One of Ramatoulaye's daughters.

Dieynaba – One of Ramatoulaye's daughters.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CUSTOM, MODERNITY, AND PROGRESS

The Senegal depicted in *So Long a Letter* is a country on the threshold, passing between two historical eras. Ramatoulaye is born and educated under the French colonial regime, and she lives through Senegalese independence. Hers is the generation responsible for the slow process of Senegalese self-determination. They have taken on the enormous task imagining a new sociopolitical order, and with it a postcolonial future for their country.

Ramatoulaye is extremely politically engaged, and while she herself is not active in the political scene, she is surrounded by those who are—her husband, Modou, works as an adviser to the Ministry of Public Works, and her friend Daouda is a member of the National Assembly. She spends much of the book reflecting on the future of her country.

The people of Senegal have cast off the bonds of colonial rule. No longer beholden to colonial demands of assimilation, they can reimagine and/or reassert a national identity. Yet colonial rule has left an indelible mark on Senegalese society. Modernity, progress, self-determination, the very concept of "nationhood"—all these terms are central to the new Senegalese political discourse, yet in some sense they are also imports of the West and, by that same token, artifacts of a long history of oppression. Independence and liberation mean entrance into an increasingly global economy, participation which is perhaps just another form of assimilation, or, worse, acquiescence to colonial exploitation by another name.

But neither is there hope of returning to a pre-colonial past, nor does that seem like the right path forward. Ramatoulaye is nostalgic for certain Senegalese customs (she mourns the decline of traditional crafts and professions) while she remains skeptical of others (she is scornful of Aunty Nabou's devotion to dusty social hierarchies and notions of nobility). Conversely, she is eager for progress and modernization while wary of the alienation it may bring. As she writes, "We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the 'hard sweat' that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive."

While this ambiguity between nostalgia for custom and eagerness for modernization is never fully resolved by Ramatoulaye, she seems ultimately to advocate for a synthesis of the two: a steady march of progress tempered by an attentiveness to the past, and a reinvigorated sense of cultural identity.

FEMINISM AND ISLAM

The opposing pulls of custom and progress that Ramatoulaye encounters in the Senegalese political climate become personal and particular in her struggle to reconcile her abiding faith in Islam with her feminism. The central drama of the novel is the disintegration of Ramatoulaye's marriage to Modou after the latter takes on a second wife—his daughter's young friend, no less. Ramatoulaye's faith permits polygyny (a man taking more than one wife), and dictates that she remain with her husband even after he marries another woman. And yet Ramatoulaye can't help but feel the injustice of her position—Modou takes on his second wife without any warning (he even refuses to be the one to break the news to Ramatoulaye) and then proceeds to effectively abandon Ramatoulaye and her twelve children.

When Modou suddenly dies, it appears at first as though his entire inheritance will fall to his in-laws and his second wife, Binetou. Ramatoulaye has to fight off her mother-in-law in order to claim the house that Ramatoulaye and Modou acquired on a joint bank loan, a house that is thus rightfully hers. Both the circumstances of her husband's second marriage and the events following his death indicate to Ramatoulaye that, in the Senegalese-Islamic model of marriage, the woman is seen as something of a disposable commodity, who can be cast aside as soon as the husband grows bored of her.

Aissatou, who endures a similar misfortune when her husband marries his young, nobly born cousin in order to appease his mother, provides Ramatoulaye with an example of escape. Rather than endure her husband's second marriage, Aissatou divorces him on principle (he claims to still love her) and seeks an education in France, before eventually moving to America. While she never disavows her faith, her decision entails an implicit rejection of certain Senegalese-Islamic norms. Despite Aissatou's example, however, Ramatoulaye brings together her outspoken feminism with her religiously-inflected notions of family. She resolves to remain married to Modou, even though he has effectively abandoned her, and endures the indignities of the mourning period as the fulfillment of a vow. While she is a professional woman, working long hours as a school teacher, she also remains committed to her role as the homemaker. She turns her feminism inward, seeking empowerment within the constraints of custom. She learns to drive and singlehandedly raises her twelve children to become sensitive adults. When, following Modou's death, Tamsir and Daoudu propose marriage to her, Ramatoulaye rejects them both (publically humiliating Tamsir) and resolves to live a life of self-reliance. Not long afterward, she manages to win back the house that she and Modou bought together.

Ramatoulaye lives at an intersection likely unfamiliar to most Western readers: she is African, she is Muslim, and she is a feminist. Rather than reject any one of those identities, she seems to value and embody each equally. This refusal to choose is itself an expression of empowerment.

MOTHERHOOD

Ramatoulaye is a devoted mother to her twelve children. When Modou abandons her for Binetou, and then when he eventually dies, Ramatoulaye must redouble her efforts as a mother and face with courage the prospect of being a single parent. Ramatoulaye's struggles as a mother are not just particular to her marital situation—they are also particular to the times in which she lives, as her children are growing up during the dawn of Senegalese independence. They are entering a society that is less repressed and inhibited than it once was, but by that same token is full of new dangers for teenagers, who are now exposed to a much wider array of temptations and urges.

Ramatoulaye faces this very difficulty in the final of third of the book. A progressive mother, she treats her adolescent children with a laissez-faire ("hands off") attitude, allowing her daughters to wear trousers (unusual for Senegalese-Muslim women) and go out at night. As she puts it, "I wanted my daughters to discover [love] in a healthy way, without feelings of guilt, secretiveness or degradation." However, when Ramatoulaye finds three of her daughters smoking, and soon afterward discovers that another daughter, Aissatou II, has gotten pregnant out of wedlock, she comes to reconsider her parenting methods. She grows angry at her children, and worries that her hands-off parenting has left them in peril.

In the end, however, Ramatoulaye brings herself to meet her children's mistakes with equanimity and love. Rather than spurn her pregnant daughter, she remembers how her daughters supported her in her time of need, and welcomes her with open arms, writing "one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable…one is a mother in order to love without beginning or end." And, in any case, she is impressed by her children's ability to confront and resolve their missteps completely of their own accord. In particular, she is surprised to find that Aissatou, upon learning she was pregnant, worked together with her boyfriend to determine how the child would be cared for, arranging that her boyfriend's grandparents would care for the child in the first years of its life.

For Ramatoulaye, motherhood is an ongoing, mysterious, hugely difficult, and ultimately reciprocal process. Her decision to meet her pregnant daughter with boundless love, while not exactly conventional by her community's standards, brings her closer to her child, and reinvigorates her with a new understanding of motherhood.

FRIENDSHIP VS. MARITAL LOVE

Throughout the novel, Ramatoulaye's close bond with her friend Aissatou is continually posed against the disintegration of both of their marriages. For both Ramatoulaye and presumably Aissatou, friendship—especially female friendship—offers a richer and more intimate connection than marriage ever can.

This contrast is evident in the very form of the novel. Ramatoulaye's intense feelings of kinship with Aissatou, even while Aissatou lives thousands of miles away, can be felt in the intimacy of her address. The novel is framed as both a letter to a friend and a private diary, and it seems that for Ramatoulaye there should be no distinction between the two: what one friend endures privately, the other one shares. As if to confirm their solidarity in each other's struggles, Aissatou—without being asked, and without asking for anything in return—buys Ramatoulaye a car.

Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye convinces her that friendship is more resilient and rewarding than marital love. As she writes, "Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love." Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter, Daba, echoes this sentiment when she says "Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life's programme. So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain?" Then again, Ramatoulaye does not share completely in her daughter's liberal and pragmatic view of marital love. While she feels that friendship has "greater heights" than love, she also believes strongly in the sanctity of marriage, and the importance of raising children along with a spouse. And, finally, Ramatoulaye's younger daughter Aissatou II provides a rejoinder to Daba's pragmatism, and with it a glimmer of hope: Aissatou and her husband-to-be are deeply in love, yet they also succeed in maintaining a practical, mutually respectful relationship.

While Ramatoulaye is skeptical of the institution of marriage, and wary of the particular injustices it has wrought in her own life, she meets marital love with a kind of stoicism, upholding it as a duty that one must take on, if only for the sake of one's children. However, it is in friendship—especially friendship with Aissatou—that Ramatoulaye finds real strength and emotional fulfillment.

DIALOGUE AND ADDRESS

So Long a Letter is formally unusual. It is at once an epistolary novel—a novel composed of letters—and a diary. Ramatoulaye, writing during the 40 days of mourning she must observe in the wake of her husband's death, addresses her reflections to her best friend Aissatou. And yet we never get to read Aissatou's response. The book has the

quality of a dialogue in the sense that the writing is interpersonal, addressed to another mind, but the dialogue is ultimately one sided.

Consequently, the reader comes to stand in for Aissatou, and becomes the addressee of Ramatoulaye's musings. Indeed, much of what Ramatoulaye writes seems written for the reader's sake, as so many of the details she recounts, Aissatou already knows. In this way, *So Long a Letter* is framed as an ongoing conversation—a conversation that may extend into the future—in which the reader is included and perhaps even encouraged to respond.

The theme of dialogue is manifested not just in the form of the novel, but also in its plot. For one, Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye and her children is framed as a complete breakdown of communication and dialogue. Rather than confront Ramatoulaye directly about his decision to marry a new woman, he sends his brother to break the news to her. Ramatoulaye, feeling the burden of etiquette and custom, cannot respond to her husband's messengers in the way she wants. The breakup of Aissatou's marriage unfolds in a similar manner—Aissatou is left completely out of the loop when it comes to Aunty Nabou's scheming to replace her. In contrast, Ramatoulaye's arguably greatest moment of triumph occurs when she finds the strength to speak freely and without inhibition with Tamsir after he crassly proposes to her following Modou's death. Finally, Ramatoulaye's extended conversation with Daoude over the role of women in government introduces a political dimension to the theme of dialogue. The exchange demonstrates that dialogue is an important catalyst for political progress, and in fact constitutes the very foundation of democracy.

At last, it seems that the ambiguities and contradictions Ramatoulaye grapples with in trying to reconcile her feminism with her faith, her political beliefs with her personal life, are really the beginnings of an ongoing conversation—a conversation in which the reader is included, and on which the future of Senegal depends.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

AUNTY NABOU'S JOURNEY

Aunty Nabou's journey to her ancestral village of Diakhao symbolizes and enacts a kind of passage through time—particularly a passage *backwards* in time. As Nabou moves further inland, further from cosmopolitan Dakar, she immerses herself more and more intensely in the old customs of Senegal, and in an older, more rural way of life. Her final destination is the tomb of her ancestors—another symbol of the past, of nostalgia and tradition and precedent—and it is here that she finds the resolve to scheme for her son Mawdo's second marriage.

THE MOTORCYCLE

The motorcycle that knocks down Ramatoulaye's sons Malick and Alioune is a physical manifestation of modernity. Just as the motorcycle comes crashing into the boys at play, the forces of modernity—globalization, imported vices, Western culture and customs—have come crashing into newly independent Senegal. Like the motorcycle, modern amenities and values are flashy and seductive, but they also bring with them clear dangers, as made tragically clear in the boys' fate.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Waveland Press edition of *So Long a Letter* published in 2012.

Chapter 2 Quotes

This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behaviour is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Lady Mother-in-Law (Binetou's Mother), Modou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye writes these words as she endures the elaborate, highly formalized mourning period for her estranged husband, Modou. Custom demands that she serve as a hospitable, generous host to the throngs of friends and in-laws that show up at her house to pay their respects. What this means in practice is that she must surrender her energy and livelihood in order to please and console the relatives of a man who abandoned her and her children. Not only is this economically taxing, it robs Ramatoulaye of her dignity. No one attending the funeral considers how Modou's death has affected Ramatoulaye

emotionally; they instead see her as a mere servant—maybe even a household object—dedicated to helping everyone else express their grief. Her internal life is seen as irrelevant. This is a powerful example of how Senegalese-Muslim tradition, while important to Ramatoulaye's identity and sense of self, simultaneously reduces her to an object in many situations.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Each group displays its own contribution to the costs. In former times this contribution was made in kind: millet, livestock, rice, flour, oil, sugar, milk. Today it is made conspicuously in banknotes, and no one wants to give less than the other. A disturbing display of inner feeling that cannot be evaluated, now measured in francs!

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In accordance with tradition, the mourners who visit Ramatoulaye's house to pay their respects to Modou offer gifts of consolation to Ramatoulaye and her family-in-law. While the gifts were once objects whose value could not be quantified, now the guests simply arrive bearing cash. This development illustrates in miniature a much larger predicament facing newly independent Senegal. The young country is undergoing modernization, and entering into an increasingly global economy. While on the one hand modernization bears with it the promise of greater prosperity and freedom, it seems also to threaten some of Senegal's dearly held traditions. Although cash expedites economic exchange, it also turns the giving of gifts—once a beautiful ritual—into a mindless game. The guests are more concerned with posturing, demonstrating their wealth and one-upping each other, than giving.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ To overcome my bitterness, I think of human destiny. Each life has its share of heroism, an obscure heroism, born of abdication, of renunciation and acceptance under the merciless whip of fate.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Modou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye writes this as she reflects on her lot in life and tries to understand what led Modou to abandon her. Her words provide insight into her particular brand of feminism. She is less interested in achieving complete liberation from the bonds of patriarchal tradition than she is in achieving a kind of quiet heroism within the constraints of her experience. Ramatoulaye accepts her fate in many ways—she does not leave Modou when he takes on a second wife, and she endures the indignities of his funeral without protest—but she never fully surrenders to it. Instead, she finds empowerment in her daily life, acting as a strong mother to her twelve children, rejecting the advances of other men, and cultivating a valuable relationship with her friend (and addressee of the novel itself) Aissatou.

❝ Combining your despair you could have been avengers and made them tremble, all those who are drunk on their wealth; tremble, those upon whom fate has bestowed favours. A horde powerful in its repugnance and revolt, you could have snatched the bread that your hunger craves.
Your stoicism has made you not violent or subversive but true heroes, unknown in the mainstream of history, never upsetting established order, despite your miserable condition.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Here Ramatoulaye is directly addressing the blind, disabled, and destitute of the world. She means to draw a comparison between these unfortunates and herself: she, like the blind or disabled, did not choose her fate. She was born as a woman, and so must fulfill the particular role that Senegalese-Muslim tradition assigns to women.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Ramatoulaye admires the stoicism of these other targeted groups. In her eyes, it takes true bravery to accept and confront one's fate, and to therefore be lost to history. Her admiration provides clear insight into her personal conception of female strength. For her, a woman is strong not necessarily by rebelling against

tradition and its attendant constraints, but rather by facing the miserable aspects of womanhood with humility and courage.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress. The word 'love' had a particular resonance in her. She loved us without patronizing us, with our plaits either standing on end or bent down, with our loose blouses, our wrappers. She knew how to discover and appreciate our qualities.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Aissatou

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Here Ramatoulaye remembers the methods of her and Aissatou's French (white) schoolteacher. Throughout the novel, Ramatoulaye constantly tries to reconcile the apparently opposing forces of custom and modernity. Senegal, a newly independent country emerging from the colonial era, is undergoing a process of modernization. And yet modernization, with its demands for assimilation to Western ideals, threatens to destroy Senegal's unique cultural identity. Ramatoulaye's old schoolteacher, whom Ramatoulaye deeply admires, demonstrates that progress need not come at the expense of custom. The teacher values diversity—of appearance, culture, thought—above all, and attempts to instill universal values among her students without erasing their differences. The teacher's methods seem to provide a model for Ramatoulaye's brand feminism, which combines a respect for tradition with a belief in liberal values such as gender equality.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Eternal questions of our eternal debates. We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the 'hard sweat' that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Here Ramatoulaye recounts the political discussions she would have with her friends around the time of Senegalese independence. The members of her generation are faced with the enormous task of directing an entirely new, independent country. In one sense they are free to reassert their cultural identity in the face of the Western powers, though in another they are eager to shed tradition in order to become a progressive, prosperous country within a global economy. The past and the future pull them in opposite directions. Ramatoulaye seems to believe that they will find success if they can somehow attend to both—if they can feel "nostalgia" but also remain "resolutely progressive." Ramatoulaye's reference to "eternal debates" then suggests a method of achieving this attentiveness to the past and the future: in disagreement and dialogue they may reach compromise and synthesis.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ The assimilationist dream of the colonist drew into its crucible our mode of thought and way of life. The sun helmet worn over the natural protection of our kinky hair, smoke-filled pipe in the mouth, white shorts just above the calves, very short dresses displaying shapely legs: a whole generation suddenly became aware of the ridiculous situation festering in our midst.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye makes this remark while reflecting on her generation's unique but difficult position in the history of Senegal. They live in a transitional period between the fall of the French colonial regime and the rise of the new self-determined, independent Senegal. Specifically, Ramatoulaye is commenting on the absurdity of forced assimilation—that is, the idea, promoted by the French colonial powers, that the Senegalese should abandon their cultural heritage and instead adopt European customs. For the French, assimilation and progress were interchangeable terms, but

this makes little sense to Ramatoulaye. Why wear a hat when her kinky hair provides her natural protection from the sun? Why wear short skirts, when the Islamic faith demands modesty of dress? The task facing Ramatoulaye's generation is to devise a way forward while retaining a sense of cultural identity distinct from the foreign and often ridiculous customs of the West.

❝ How many generations has this same unchanging countryside seen glide past! Aunty Nabou acknowledged man's vulnerability in the face of the eternity of nature. By its very duration, nature defies time and takes its revenge on man.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Aunty Nabou

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Here Ramatoulaye is describing Aunty Nabou's journey into the interior of Senegal to visit the tomb of her ancestors. It is as much a journey through space as it is through time. Aunty Nabou's belief (which is either created or strengthened on this journey) in man's vulnerability in the face of eternity is in part what brings her to attempt to undermine her son Mawdo's marriage to Aissatou. It is in deference and grave respect for her ancestors that she refuses to accept Aissatou—the poor daughter of a goldsmith—as a member of the family.

Ramatoulaye seems to respect and even agree with Aunty Nabou's deep deference to time and the eternity of nature, despite the disastrous effects it ultimately has on her friend Aissatou's marriage.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But to understand what? The supremacy of instinct? The right to betray? The justification of the desire for variety? I could not be an ally to polygamic instincts. What, then, was I to understand?

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Mawdo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye is irritated by Mawdo, who has just attempted to justify his ongoing sexual relationship with Nabou, his second wife, despite claiming not to love her. Her apparent disgust at his attempts to justify his behavior reveals the subtlety of her relationship to custom and the dictates of Senegalese Islam. She knows that polygamy is permitted by her faith—it is for this reason, among others, that she later decides to remain married to Modou when he takes a second wife. However, she cannot herself become an "ally" to the supposed "instincts" that drive men to polygamy. She accepts the consequences of her husband's infidelity without endorsing it.

Alternatively, it may simply be that it is harder for Ramatoulaye to achieve the same moral clarity when she is faced with her own husband's interest in another woman—but when it comes to defending her friend, Ramatoulaye is able to take a firmer moral stand.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Modou, Aissatou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye writes these words to Aissatou after Aissatou, upon hearing that Ramatoulaye has been using public transportation to get around, buys her a car. For Ramatoulaye, her friendship with Aissatou is a much stronger and far more fulfilling human relationship than her marriage to Modou. Whereas her marriage essentially dissolves as soon as it faces an obstacle—Modou's infidelity—Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendship seems only to grow stronger with time and distance. Aissatou lives thousands of miles away and yet she treats Ramatoulaye with the selflessness and generosity deserving of a family member or even a spouse. In Aissatou, Ramatoulaye has found a kind of kinship that escapes the pressures and indignities of custom.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Modou, Aissatou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Though faced with nearly identical marital problems—both must face the infidelity of their husbands—Aissatou and Ramatoulaye respond to their mistreatment in opposite ways. Aissatou takes a moral stand against her husband and the antiquated customs that permit polygamy: she divorces Mawdo, focuses her attention on pursuing higher education, and leaves the country. Ramatoulaye, who demonstrates an abiding faith in the institution of marriage, chooses to remain—if only in a legal sense—with her husband.

In comparison to Aissatou's moral conviction, Ramatoulaye's decision to stay may seem like an expression of weakness. However, looked at another way, Ramatoulaye's ability to confront her misfortune and understand her own personal reasons for doing so demonstrates a kind of quiet power—an unconventional sort of feminism.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ 'You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you.'

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Modou, Tamsir

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye speaks these words to Tamsir, after he cavalierly makes clear his intentions of marrying her once the mourning period for Modou has ended. It is one of the few moments in the text when Ramatoulaye takes an explicit, vocal stand against the sexism she has had to endure her entire life. The way in which Tamsir casually announces that he will marry Ramatoulaye demonstrates his inability to see her as a person with hopes and preferences of her own. Here Ramatoulaye is careful to assert that she is not merely some piece of furniture to be passed around; she has an internal life and will stand up for it.

Ramatoulaye has a complex understanding of marriage, and that understanding is clarified somewhat here. While custom and cultural norms are important to Ramatoulaye's worldview, she does not seem to believe that one should get married for marriage's sake, or simply because it is expected. (And to be clear: Tamsir's proposal, while crass, is also customary—in Senegalese-Muslim culture it is traditional for a widow to marry one of her late husband's relatives or friends.) Rather, Ramatoulaye maintains a mystical, romantic view of love: for her, love transcends the institutions that are meant to contain it. Marriage, though socially constructed, should be the result and expression of transcendent feelings.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Daouda Dieng was savouring the warmth of the inner dream he was spinning around me. As for me, I was bolting like a horse that has long been tethered and is now free and revelling in space. Ah, the joy of having an interlocutor before you, especially an admirer!

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Daouda Dieng

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye writes these words while recounting a discussion she has with Daouda Dieng, an old suitor. Their conversation covers politics, the future of the country, and the role of women in it all. From Ramatoulaye's perspective, their lively and mutually respectful debate is liberating and empowering—a breath of fresh air from the degrading interactions she's had with Tamsir and Modou's other relatives, who can't seem to understand that she has thoughts of her own, much less sophisticated political views.

Unfortunately, Daouda Dieng is perhaps not as different from the others as he initially seems. Though Ramatoulaye sees him as a peer, an interlocutor (someone to converse with) without any ulterior motives, Daouda sees her first

and foremost as a potential wife. Though he respects her, his respect is part of a broader marital fantasy that he hopes she will fulfill for him. As if to prove this, he later breaks off all contact with Ramatoulaye when she rejects his romantic advances.

Chapter 22 Quotes

When we meet, the signs on our bodies will not be important. The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animates us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our children brothers and sisters. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests?

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Aissatou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Here Ramatoulaye is directly addressing Aissatou, who plans to return to Senegal after living for many years in America. She defines their friendship in opposition to romantic love, asserting here as she does elsewhere that in some ways true friendship is more fulfilling and more powerful than love. For one, friendship is resistant to all the accidents of the body, all the superficial attributes that can come between lovers. It can adapt to separation, and it solidifies over time.

Ramatoulaye still believes in love and marriage, but her words here constitute a radical refutation of marriage's central position within the vast tapestry of human relationships. In her female friend Ramatoulaye has found someone who treats her as an equal, and who cares only for the content of her character.

Life is an eternal compromise. What is important is the examination paper… This, too, will be at the mercy of the marker. No one will have any say over him. So why fight a teacher for one or two marks that can never change the destiny of a student?

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Daba, Mawdo Fall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

One of Ramatoulaye's young sons, Mawdo Fall, has made a habit of arguing with his teacher over grades. Mawdo does indeed have reason to be upset: his teacher appears to favor a white boy over Mawdo, despite Mawdo's obviously superior intelligence. Ramatoulaye, however, discourages Mawdo and his older sister Daba from putting up a stink, offering this reflection by way of explanation.

Her advice again reveals a conservative streak, and her somewhat complex relationship to protest. A more conventionally "liberated" woman—such as Aissatou or Daba—would likely have no problem telling the teacher off and accusing him of racism. In contrast, Ramatoulaye advocates for self-reliance, for turning one's energies inward—for subverting authority by being one's own authority. Ramatoulaye's personal philosophy of acceptance and quiet power may not be immediately palatable to the most liberal minded readers, but in at least this case she seems to have a point. While grades are of course important, it would be a mistake to see them as the sole determining factor of one's destiny.

Ramatoulaye's reaction to her son also illustrates her parenting style, which is tough and somewhat unconventional. More often she takes the side opposite her children—she rarely bends to their will—and tries to help them see their world from a new angle.

Now our society is shaken to its very foundations, torn between the attraction of imported vices and the fierce resistance of old virtues.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Daba, Mawdo Fall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye makes this off-the-cuff remark while describing to Aissatou the difficulties of parenting during Senegal's period of modernization. It is perhaps the most concise and concentrated statement she makes on the

particular, historically awkward position her generation finds itself in. Ramatoulaye and her peers are caught between two distinct eras, and two distinct cultures: on the one hand, the ancestral traditions of Senegal and West Africa, on the other, the "modern" habits and customs of the West. These two cultures are seemingly irreconcilable to each other. The "old virtues" are skeptical of imported Western ideals, and the imported Western ideals are irreverent in the face of tradition.

For Ramatoulaye, the difficulty comes in extracting the best from each and casting aside the worst of both. From the West come certain unsavory vices such as smoking, a more reckless understanding of sexuality, and of course a tradition of colonialism and white supremacy. From Senegalese tradition comes a certain conservatism and fanaticism that leads, among other things, to the subjugation of women. Throughout the novel, Ramatoulaye comes into direct contact with both poles of experience, and has to figure out how to synthesize the two.

❝ 'Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life's programme. So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain? It may be Abou [her husband]; it may be me. Why not? The wife can take the initiative to make the break.'

Related Characters: Daba (speaker), Ramatoulaye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Daba says this to Ramatoulaye while trying to describe her view of marriage. In contrast to Ramatoulaye, Daba has a far more liberal, practical understanding of the particular kind of agreement a marriage entails. In fact, that Daba sees marriage as a mere agreement—not a sacred oath—is itself telling. This comment is at least in part a veiled criticism of Ramatoulaye's stoicism: while Ramatoulaye insisted on remaining (legally) married to Modou even after his infidelity, Daba, had she found herself in a similar situation, insists that she would not have hesitated in calling the whole thing off.

Daba's view of an ideal marriage prioritizes the equality of the spouses. While this idea is certainly attractive to Ramatoulaye, she also maintains a certain sentimentality about romantic love and tradition that is at odds with Daba's strict pragmatism.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ Who knows, one vice leads to another. Does it mean that one can't have modernism without a lowering of moral standards?

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye writes this after she discovers three of her daughters smoking cigarettes. She is surprised and angry that they've picked up the habit, and that it seems to come so naturally to them. The incident brings Ramatoulaye to worry more broadly about the cultural climate of a rapidly modernizing Senegal. Her children—especially her daughters—are now allowed greater freedoms than she ever was, yet as a result they are exposed to a broader array of temptations and dangers. Ramatoulaye worries that compromised morals are the price one pays for progress.

As a mother, Ramatoulaye must adapt to the peculiar conditions of a modernizing and globalizing country. She must discover a way to uphold the moral values she most cares about and instill her children with virtue, while simultaneously allowing them to reap the benefits of a freer society.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ And also, one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end.

Related Characters: Ramatoulaye (speaker), Aissatou (Aissatou's Namesake, Aissatou II)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Ramatoulaye writes these words after she discovers her daughter, Aissatou, has gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Rather than punish or reject her daughter, Ramatoulaye decides to meet her with love, grace, and understanding.

Here, Ramatoulaye's description of motherhood emphasizes its complexity and ultimate sanctity. For

Ramatoulaye, a mother is a kind of benign god—a forgiver, a protector, and an interpreter of mysteries. Motherhood is a process that is always unfolding: it is never finished, and neither is it ever fully understood. Ramatoulaye's personal

edict is more liberal than those of her ancestors, but it does not leave her entirely without a certain amount of authority over her children.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Ramatoulaye, the narrator (living in Dakar, Senegal), addresses her friend, Aissatou, who lives far away, in America. Ramatoulaye writes that she has received Aissatou's letter and that, by way of reply, she has decided to write a diary. This diary, she decides, will serve as a "prop in [her] distress"—though she doesn't yet reveal what has caused this distress. First she recalls her childhood with Aissatou, listing off a series of discrete images: the two of them walking along the same road to koranic school, and the two of them burying their baby teeth in the same hole.

The immediate intimacy of Ramatoulaye's address establishes how close these two friends are, and how close they remain despite the physical distance between them. At first Ramatoulaye's promise to keep a diary that will also serve as a letter to Aissatou seems like a contradiction—one typically thinks of a diary as private, and a letter as inherently shared. Yet Ramatoulaye's memories from their childhood together makes it clear that the two friends share everything—and thus this diary/letter gives the novel its unique form.

Ramatoulaye then reveals the cause of her distress: "Yesterday you were divorced," she writes, "today I am a widow." Ramatoulaye's estranged husband, Modou, has died suddenly of a heart attack. Ramatoulaye describes to Aissatou the phone call she received informing her of the news, as well as her trip to the hospital, and her encounter with the body. She explains that Mawdo, Modou's doctor friend and Aissatou's ex-husband, was called to the scene but arrived too late—all his attempts to resuscitate Modou were for naught—and describes his sadness with a certain tenderness. Distraught and confused, Ramatoulaye seeks consolation in remembered verses from the Koran.

Although Ramatoulaye is estranged from Modou, she receives the news of his death with the solemnity, awe, and devotion that her faith demands, and with the grief of a loving spouse. Similarly, she expresses her tenderness toward Mawdo without restraint, despite his estrangement from the letter's addressee, her friend Aissatou. For Ramatoulaye, death is a sacred matter, the gravity of which overcomes (if only for a moment) feelings of animosity or remorse. Here we also see the strength of Ramatoulaye's Islamic faith, and the way that it informs her life, emotion, and decision-making on almost every level.

CHAPTER 2

The day after Modou's death, droves of mourners appear at Ramatoulaye's house to pay their respects. Modou's close relatives appear as well, and the women among them help make the funeral preparations, bringing incense, holy water, white muslin, and dark wrappers to the hospital in order to dress the body. In accordance with custom, Modou's young second wife, Binetou, is installed in Ramatoulaye's house, to receive guests alongside her. Ramatoulaye is bothered by her presence but ultimately feels pity toward the girl. The male mourners form a funeral procession and accompany the body to its final resting place, while the women stay behind. Modou's sisters ritually undo Ramatoulaye's and Binetou's hair.

Ramatoulaye's description of the funeral preparations demonstrates just how much custom and tradition saturate Senegalese culture and experience—further, it demonstrates that Senegalese-Muslim rituals typically delineate distinct, complementary roles for men and women. Ramatoulaye's complex feelings toward Binetou, her co-wife, include both indignation at having to associate with her husband's second wife and a kind of maternal feeling—after all, Binetou is young enough to be Ramatoulaye's daughter.

Custom dictates that Ramatoulaye serve as a hospitable host to Modou's family and to her co-wife's family, providing them with food and lodging and generally accommodating their every need. Ramatoulaye dreads this responsibility, most of all because it calls on her to surrender her personality and dignity in the interest of serving her estranged relatives. Modou's sisters shower praises and words of consolation over Ramatoulaye and Binetou, but it bothers Ramatoulaye that they give equal consideration to both—Binetou was married to Modou for only five years, while Ramatoulaye was married to him for thirty. The men return from the funeral procession and offer their condolences to the women in a highly ritualized fashion.

In order to satisfy the demands of custom, Ramatoulaye must essentially erase herself, render herself transparent, and reduce herself to an object in the service of men. The fact that she and Binetou receive the same amount of attention only underlines the fact that Ramatoulaye's "role" as the aggrieved wife has, in the eyes of the other mourners, overwhelmed any and all of her individual characteristics as a human being.

CHAPTER 3

The funeral ceremony continues into its third day. Now all sorts of people come out of the woodwork to pay their respects and mooch off the hospitality of the aggrieved. Ramatoulaye's house is essentially trashed by the crowd. The men and women occupy different sides of the parlor; the men occasionally shout over at the women to chastise them for gossiping loudly and not showing the solemnity that the occasion demands. Many of the guests present gifts of money to Ramatoulaye and to Modou's family. Ramatoulaye explains that these customary gifts once consisted of unquantifiable goods, such as livestock or millet, but now everyone simply presents the aggrieved with banknotes, and tries to one-up everyone else by giving the most cash. The proceeds are divvied up among Ramatoulaye, Binetou and her family, and Modou's family. Binetou's mother and Modou's sisters get the lion's share, leaving Ramatoulaye destitute in comparison.

Ramatoulaye experiences firsthand the marked disconnect between the premise of dignity on which the funeral ritual is founded and the indignity that the ritual actually can create. But while she is skeptical of the traditions she is expected to follow, she is also nostalgic for traditions that have been abandoned or otherwise corrupted: the exchange of cash in lieu of actual gifts strikes her as somewhat appalling. The unequal apportioning of the gift money between her and her family-in-law only underlines the illogic of custom for custom's sake, and the way even traditions of generosity and selflessness can be easily twisted.

Finally Binetou and the relatives clear out, leaving destruction in their wake: Ramatoulaye's floors are blackened and her walls are stained with oil, and trash litters the house. In their absence, Ramatoulaye now must confront her *mirasse*, a period of four months and ten days that she must spend in solitude and mourning, in accordance with custom. She is apprehensive but faces her "duty" with resolve, writing that her "heart concurs with the demands of religion."

Despite her clear and outspoken discomfort with many of the demands of her religion and culture, Ramatoulaye is determined to meet them head on and operate within *them, rather than* against *them. This is one of the first glimpses of Ramatoulaye's particular brand of stoicism and quiet courage.*

CHAPTER 4

The *mirasse* also demands that Ramatoulaye and her family-in-law meet to "strip" Modou and reveal the secrets he kept during his lifetime. Mostly this involves laying bare his financial debts. It is then revealed that the chic villa in which Modou had been living with Binetou and Binetou's mother was acquired on a bank loan originally granted to both Modou and Ramatoulaye. Even though the deed has Modou's name on it, Ramatoulaye essentially helped pay for the house. However, Modou's lavish treatment of Binetou and her mother—he paid for their pilgrimage to Mecca, bought them cars, and, to Ramatoulaye's horror, provided Binetou with a monthly allowance after pulling her out of school— has led the two to think that they are guaranteed the house. It seems also that they have begun fraudulently removing furniture from the house, even before the estate is settled.

It becomes clear that Modou has used his privileged position to exploit Ramatoulaye's financial independence. His family intends to prolong this exploitation into the future, and it doesn't seem like there is much Ramatoulaye can do about it. Ramatoulaye's horror at Binetou's removal from school establishes Ramatoulaye as someone who cares deeply about education, particularly for young women, and once more illustrates her conflicted maternal feeling toward her young co-wife.

CHAPTER 5

Alone again with her thoughts, Ramatoulaye becomes distressed. She wonders what could have possibly caused Modou to abandon her, not to mention their twelve children, in order to marry the 17-year-old Binetou. Ramatoulaye compares her fate to that of the blind, disabled, and destitute, asking how those in worse situations than hers find strength, moral fortitude, and even heroism in their disadvantage and distress.

Like the blind and the disabled, Ramatoulaye's position of social disadvantage has everything to do with the circumstances of her birth and nothing to do with her character. Her assertion that the blind can still act heroically in quiet ways, within the confines of their societal disadvantage, reflects her own brand of stoic feminism.

CHAPTER 6

Ramatoulaye recalls meeting Modou for the first time, while on a trip to a teachers' training college with Aissatou. Addressing Modou directly, in the second person, she remembers him asking her to dance and their ensuing romance, which endured even after Modou went off to study law in France—Modou, she explains, felt homesick and lonely the whole time he was there, and wrote to her often.

Modou's dissatisfaction in France illustrates a conundrum that then faced the educated in Senegal: most pathways to higher education also demanded assimilation to French culture—that is, the culture of the colonizer and oppressor. Separately, Ramatoulaye's use of direct address illustrates her continued feelings of intimacy towards Modou, even after estrangement and death have separated them.

Upon his return to Senegal, Modou and Ramatoulaye prepared to marry. Modou also introduced his friend Mawdo to Aissatou. Ramatoulaye's mother was skeptical of her daughter's choice, however, and Ramatoulaye now understands her skepticism. Ramatoulaye and her mother belonged to the first generations of women fighting for empowerment in Senegal, and her mother wanted her daughter to have a husband that would be equal to Ramatoulaye's intellect and ambition. It seems that by marrying Modou, an idler, Ramatoulaye surrendered her freedom to a man who was beneath her. Now she has nothing to show for it.

Ramatoulaye's disagreement with her mother raises a question that vexes the entire novel: are traditional family life, religious marriage, and motherhood fundamentally at odds with female empowerment? Does a woman surrender essential freedoms just by choosing to marry? Or just by marrying the "wrong" kind of person?

CHAPTER 7

Ramatoulaye remembers with fondness her and Aissatou's French—which is to say, white—schoolteacher. All of her students came from different cultures within French West Africa, and she treated them all equally, and instilled universal moral values in them, lifting them out of the "bog of tradition, superstition, and custom."

The acceptance offered to Ramatoulaye by her schoolteacher stands in contrast to the alienation Modou felt in France. Ramatoulaye's admiration for the teacher demonstrates a certain optimism—a faith that education and progress do not have to include the indignity and erasure of forced assimilation into the culture of the oppressor.

Ramatoulaye wonders why, despite her education, she chose Modou over Daouda Dieng, an intelligent, mature, wealthy doctor who tried unsuccessfully to court her. She rejected him against the wishes of her parents, who saw Daouda as the more stable, practical option.

At the time, Ramatoulaye's rejection of Daouda was in some sense an expression of empowerment and a rejection of tradition. But now she wonders whether accepting a more practical option might have ultimately offered her greater freedoms in the long run.

CHAPTER 8

Ramatoulaye shifts her attention to Aissatou's controversial engagement to Mawdo. Aissatou is of modest birth—her father is a goldsmith—while Mawdo is nobility, his mother a "Princess of the Sine." In the eyes of tradition it was a total mismatch, and at the time of the engagement everyone in town gossiped angrily about the scandal.

The widespread shock in response to the engagement demonstrates just how strong a grip custom has over social relations in Senegal, or at least the parts of the country that Bâ describes.

Ramatoulaye then uses Aissatou's father's profession to discuss some of the broader social changes happening in Senegal. Aissatou's younger brothers will not take up their father's profession, pursuing a Western education instead. While Ramatoulaye acknowledges the importance of education—she is a schoolteacher, after all—she is wary of overemphasizing it. For one, education is still largely inaccessible for the poor, and in any case schooling is not necessarily right for everyone. What will the dropouts do? Modernization has begun to render obsolete the traditional crafts—like goldsmithing—that would otherwise serve as alternatives to those not receiving a higher education. This conflict between modernization and tradition is an "eternal debate," Ramatoulaye writes.

Modernization is not, Ramatoulaye suggests, a universal good. While it is necessary for the progress of Senegal as a newly independent nation, it also seems to compromise important facets of Senegal's cultural identity. While Ramatoulaye cannot offer a solution to the conundrum, she seems to suggest that the "eternal debate" is important to preserve—perhaps the solution lies partly in the very process of debating.

CHAPTER 9

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou marry their fiancés around the same time, and together they endure the joys and frustrations of their new marital life. Ramatoulaye is pestered constantly by her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, who day after day drop in unannounced and abuse her hospitality. She is also exasperated to discover that despite her professional life as a teacher, and despite the help of a few maids, the brunt of household duties still fall to her. For Aissatou's part, her family-in-law does not respect her, and barely acknowledges her existence.

Modou's family's careless treatment of Ramatoulaye is a form of objectification—in their eyes she is little more than a provider of service. Even her professional success cannot save her from the role assigned to her by custom. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendship provide them with an escape, however. With their spouses and in-laws they endure their oppression silently, but with each other they can express their frustration openly.

In their precious free time together, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou take long walks together along the coast and relax in Aissatou's beautiful home. They find solace in nature and the open air. They find solace, too, in their professional lives. They are both schoolteachers, and the satisfaction they derive from helping young children is incomparable to anything they feel at home.

The openness and natural beauty of the coast stands in sharp contrast to the confines of the home. Against the claims of custom and tradition, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou find more fulfillment in their friendship and profession than their conventionally "sacred" household duties as wives.

CHAPTER 10

Modou rises to the top ranks of the trade union for which he works. Meanwhile, Senegal is in the midst of achieving its independence. Debate over the right path forward—how best to shed the history of colonial exploitation and bring a new republic into being—grips the country. Ramatoulaye sees her generation as occupying a privileged but difficult position between two distinct eras. Modou leads his trade union into collaboration with the government. He is skeptical, however, of the hasty establishment of too many embassies, which he sees as an unnecessary drain on Senegal's precious resources.

Ramatoulaye and those around her feel personally invested in the political debates taking place, and the path before them is somewhat fraught. Modou's skepticism of the embassies illustrates one of the biggest dilemmas facing independent Senegal: modernization seems to demand participation in an increasingly global economy, and yet doing so also seems to come at the expense of internal stability (and often at the expense of Senegal's unique culture, at least when "globalization" means assimilation into an oppressive Western culture).

CHAPTER 11

While admitting that she must be reopening old wounds for her friend, Ramatoulaye proceeds to describe the breakup of Aissatou's marriage. She explains that Mawdo's mother, Aissatou's "Aunty Nabou," simply could not accept that her son had married a woman of low birth. Nabou resolves to visit her brother, Farba Diouf, who is a customary chief in Diakhao, a rural town far inland. After **a long journey** she visits the tomb of her noble ancestors, which is located in the town, and pays her respects there. Nabou is received in her brother's house like a queen: she is served the choicest bits of meat, and relatives from all over the area come to visit her. Toward the end of her visit, she tells her brother that she needs a child by her side—her children have married and her house is now empty. Farba, hearing this, immediately offers to surrender his own daughter, Nabou's namesake, to Nabou's care. Aunty Nabou returns home with the young Nabou in tow.

Nabou's symbolic journey to the country's interior is like a journey back in time: the rural town of Diakhao is still very much under the spell of tradition, unlike cosmopolitan Dakar. And while the rituals Nabou rehearses there are antiquated, Ramatoulaye still describes them with a degree of awe and respect—they are somewhat beautiful and powerful, even if they ultimately quicken Aissatou's personal troubles. Still, the ease with which Farba offers up his young daughter is certainly appalling. She has no say in the matter, and is exchanged like a mere commodity. It's also worth noting that Aunty Nabou, a woman, has internalized the sexist aspects of her culture seemingly as much as any man, and feels no qualms about accepting her niece solely as an object.

CHAPTER 12

Under Aunty Nabou's guardianship, and with the help of Ramatoulaye, young Nabou is enrolled in a French school and after a few years becomes a midwife. One day, Aunty Nabou summons Mawdo and tells him that Farba has offered young Nabou to Mawdo as a wife. Aunty Nabou implores Mawdo to accept—if he doesn't, she says, she will surely die of shame. Mawdo takes this to heart, and agrees to marry young Nabou. The whole community learns about this before Aissatou does. Reluctantly Mawdo breaks the news to her, telling her that he is agreeing to the marriage only to appease his mother—he does not love young Nabou. Aissatou goes along with this for a while, but when Mawdo begins to have children with young Nabou, Aissatou leaves, leaving him a letter—which Ramatoulaye reproduces for the reader—explaining in direct terms that she cannot accept his decision.

While at first it seems that Mawdo maintains an entirely practical view of his marriage to the young Nabou, his actions—namely, having children with his new wife—undercut his claims to pragmatism. Mawdo tells Aissatou his decision is a matter of principle, not passion, and yet Aissatou's uncompromising and impassioned rejection of him is the most principled decision perhaps in the whole novel. Ramatoulaye's role in all of this—in the background, never intervening on the part of either Mawdo or Aissatou—illustrates her more conservative and reserved tendencies.

Now free of her marriage, Aissatou turns to books, and begins taking her education seriously. Ramatoulaye admires this greatly. Aissatou returns to school, receives a degree in interpretation, and gets a job at the Senegalese embassy in America. Meanwhile, Mawdo finds himself dissatisfied with Nabou. She does not keep up the house in the way Aissatou had, and she is constantly receiving visitors from her hometown. In letters Mawdo begs Aissatou to return, but she refuses. Despite his misery, Mawdo continues to have children with Nabou. When Ramatoulaye confronts him about this, Mawdo can only explain himself with a crude analogy: he is a starving man, and Nabou is the nearest plate of food. This disgusts Ramatoulaye.

Aissatou flourishes outside the confines of marriage and custom, embracing modernism and education and going so far as to leave the entire country behind. For his part, Mawdo misses Aissatou for reasons that have nothing to do with her and everything to do with her ability to serve him. Ramatoulaye's disgust at Mawdo's analogy demonstrates not just a solidarity with Aissatou but also with Nabou, who throughout the whole ordeal has never been treated as more than just an object.

CHAPTER 13

Ramatoulaye now decides to recount her own marital misfortune. Her teenaged daughter, Daba, begins to spend a lot of time with a friend Binetou; together they are preparing for a standardized test. Modou often offers to drive Binetou home after the study sessions. Binetou wears expensive dresses which, she explains, have been paid for by a "sugar daddy." Ramatoulaye doesn't think much of this until, one day, Daba explains that the "sugar daddy" wants to marry Binetou. Ramatoulaye tells Daba that Binetou's education is far more important, and that she shouldn't cut short her youth simply because a rich man wants to marry her. Though Binetou agrees, she cannot convince her family, who are attracted to the "sugar daddy's" money. She reluctantly accepts his marriage proposal.

Ramatoulaye's emphasis on education, and her wish for a successful future for Binetou, seems to be driven in part by Aissatou's success after leaving Mawdo. Ramatoulaye knows firsthand how difficult it is, in Senegalese society, for a wife to maintain both a home and a professional life. Binetou's submission to her family's demands ominously echoes Mawdo's submission to Aunty Nabou's demands—it seems that the older generation often forces their family members to continue within the confines of strict or outdated customs.

On the day that Binetou is to be married to her sugar daddy, Modou's brother Tamsir, Mawdo, and a local imam appear at Ramatoulaye's house. Modou is nowhere to be seen. After some dawdling and beating around the bush, the three men announce the reason for their visit: Modou, it turns out, is Binetou's sugar daddy, and today he is taking her as his second wife. The men express their support of the marriage, which they see as a matter of God's will, though Mawdo, evidently remembering Aissatou's reaction to his own second marriage, seems subdued. Ramatoulaye is of course shocked and upset—suddenly all of Modou's absences in recent months begin to make sense—yet she maintains her composure, smiling, thanking the men, and offering them something to drink.

The formality of the exchange, while supposedly customary, comes off as ridiculous and cowardly, a total breakdown of respectful communication—Modou can't even confront his wife himself. Depending on how you look at it, Ramatoulaye's stoicism in the face of this absurd development is either tragic or empowered. At the very least, it's clear that maintaining her composure and offering these men hospitality is no easy feat.

CHAPTER 14

Daba, who was also kept in the dark about the true identity of Binetou's sugar daddy, is infuriated, and implores Ramatoulaye to leave Modou just like Aissatou left Mawdo. Ramatoulaye's neighbor, Farmata, also encourages Ramatoulaye to leave. Farmata is a *griot*, a kind of fortune teller, and she informs Ramatoulaye that her future includes laughter and a new husband. Ramatoulaye rejects these predictions, however—she thinks she is too old to attract the attention of a new man, and worries that if she were to leave Modou she would live out the rest of her life in loneliness. Increasingly distraught, she finds herself descending into a nervous breakdown.

Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye has left her unable to imagine that any man will find her attractive in the future. Her steadfast refusal to act on Daba's and Farmata's advice is at once tragic and somewhat impressive—it might be argued that she is asserting a kind of independence, rejecting the idea that she requires a man in her life at all.

By way of illustrating her own distress, Ramatoulaye tells the story of her acquaintance, Jacqueline. Jacqueline, a protestant from Coite d'Ivoire, marries Samba Diack, a friend of Mawdo's. Jacqueline is not used to Senegalese customs. She is treated like an outsider, and is shocked when Samba begins chasing after other women—relatively standard behavior for Senegalese husbands. Distressed, she begins experiencing all manner of physical pain, which no doctor can diagnose. She undergoes a host of x-rays and invasive tests, but the nature of her illness remains a mystery—that is, until a doctor diagnoses her with depression. The diagnosis alone helps Jacqueline greatly. Now that she knows the source of her illness, she turns her energies inward, and begins to overcome her depression. Taking heart in this story, Ramatoulaye resolves to confront her suffering head-on. She decides to remain married to Modou—in her view, the dignified solution.

For Jacqueline and, the reader can assume, Ramatoulaye, mental pain manifests itself as physical pain—a potent reminder of the toll that the constant stress of oppression takes on the body. The conclusion Ramatoulaye draws from Jacqueline's story is certainly counterintuitive: she seems to suggest that her suffering is more a matter of attitude than circumstance. Whether this conclusion should be applauded is left somewhat ambiguous by Bâ. Separately, Jacqueline's story illustrates a political reality that is often overlooked in the West: just how diverse Africa's nations and cultures are.

CHAPTER 15

Ramatoulaye compares and contrasts Nabou and Binetou. Nabou is full of poise and tact, thanks in part to Aunty Nabou's intense involvement in her moral education. Her job at a maternity home is difficult and often frustrating, but Nabou is a fighter, and in this way Ramatoulaye sees her as a kindred spirit. In contrast, Ramatoulaye feels a kind of pity for Binetou. Trapped in a marriage she never wanted, Binetou can tolerate her life only by making Modou dye his hair, dress younger than his age, and lavish money on her. Some of Ramatoulaye's friends, horrified by Modou's behavior, suggest that she stage a supernatural intervention, using love potions or spiritual mediums to break up the marriage. However, Ramatoulaye rejects these suggestions as irrational.

Whereas Ramatoulaye feels a kind of parallel feeling toward Nabou—they are both working women struggling to reconcile their home life with their working life—she feels something closer to a maternal feeling toward Binetou. Ramatoulaye's rejection of her friends' suggestions constitutes a rejection of the old ways, a rejection of superstition in favor of a kind of brutal and resigned rationalism.

Instead, Ramatoulaye resolves to "look reality in the face." As she explains, reality consists of Lady Mother-in-Law (Binetou's mother) living a pampered, "gilded" life on Modou's dime. It also consists of the odd couple, Modou and Binetou, going to nightclubs and dancing awkwardly, to everyone else's delight and embarrassment.

Neither Binetou nor her mother are seemingly at all interested in Modou; they are only interested in his money.

CHAPTER 16

As time goes on, Ramatoulaye finds that what her children originally begged her to do—to leave Modou—is now functionally the case, as Modou seems to have lost all interest in maintaining even the semblance of a relationship with her. While Ramatoulaye did not make this choice for herself, she learns to cope with and even enjoy her newfound independence. Being a single parent to twelve children is no easy feat, however. Money is tight, and she must make certain compromises, such as making her children ride public transport, while Binetou and Lady Mother-in-Law drive around in a fancy new car.

Ramatoulaye's resolve in the face of a fate she never chose for herself demonstrates an extraordinary resilience, and a belief in making due with whatever life has in store. Ramatoulaye does not take direct action on her own behalf in the sense that she doesn't stand up to Modou, but she at least takes the challenges of single motherhood (multiplied twelve-fold) in stride.

In passing, Ramatoulaye one day mentions having to ride public transportation to Aissatou in a letter. In response, Aissatou immediately buys Ramatoulaye a car by calling in an order to the local Fiat agency. Ramatoulaye is surprised and overjoyed. She does not know how to drive and is somewhat afraid to learn, but remains determined and overcomes her fear.

Not only must Ramatoulaye adapt to her newfound personal independence, she must adapt to Senegal's increasing modernization and globalization, as represented by her learning to drive an Italian car purchased for her by her friend overseas.

CHAPTER 17

Ramatoulaye reflects further on the fate of her marriage. She struggles to understand why Modou decided to leave her in the first place, and tries to determine if there was anything she could have done to prevent his flight. She is sure, however, that she has been an exemplary wife and mother. Further, she admits that she is still devoted to Modou, despite his terrible treatment of her. She writes to Aissatou that, though she respects women who take a stand against their errant husbands and leave them behind, she has never conceived of happiness outside of marriage.

Ramatoulaye clearly did nothing to invite Modou's abandonment of her. Despite her sacrifices and invaluable contributions to her family life, she is still seen by Modou as entirely disposable. Ramatoulaye's "confession" to Aissatou shows again just how much she has internalized custom and tradition, including the idea that there can be no real happiness or fulfillment for a woman outside of marriage.

CHAPTER 18

It is now the fortieth day after Modou's death. Ramatoulaye writes that she has forgiven him. Then, out of the blue, Tamsir, Mawdo, and the Imam appear again in Ramatoulaye's home. Tamsir speaks, telling Ramatoulaye that as soon as she comes out of mourning her will marry her, explaining that he prefers her to the "other one" (Binetou, that is).

Tamsir expects to inherit Ramatoulaye from his dead brother much like he would a piece of furniture. His confidence—he doesn't ask so much as he informs—conveys a total disrespect for Ramatoulaye's independence and intelligence, and even her basic humanity. His reference to Binetou as "the other one" might be laughable if it weren't so horrible.

Ramatoulaye is infuriated by this proposal. In response, she rails against Tamsir's disrespect and presumptuousness. She tells him that he is disrespecting not only her, but his own wives and the memory of his brother. She insinuates that he is simply after his brother's properties, which Daba and her husband have recently bought. Taken aback, Mawdo begs Ramatoulaye to stop yelling, but she refuses. Finally she finishes, and Tamsir leaves, defeated and speechless.

This is perhaps the first time in the novel that Ramatoulaye takes a stand against her oppressors, and it is certainly satisfying. She proves herself to be more sensitive, smart, and rhetorically deft that Tamsir. Her outburst, which cuts straight to the heart of things, is a stark counterpoint to the three men's bumbling, awkward admission of Modou's infidelity earlier in the novel.

CHAPTER 19

The next day, Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye's old suitor, appears. Ramatoulaye senses that he has come to ask for her hand in marriage, although he lacks the obnoxious confidence that Tamsir displayed. Wanting to steer Daouda away from the topic of marriage, Ramatoulaye begins discussing politics with him (he is a member of the National Assembly). Ramatoulaye teases Daouda about the lack of women in the assembly—only four of the one hundred representatives are women. She stresses that women should have the right to equal education and equal pay, and that Senegal has gone too long without a female leader. Daouda vehemently agrees, and claims to have given speeches before the assembly on those very issues. He concludes by saying that Senegal has a long way to go. He leaves without bringing up marriage.

Though this is exchange is certainly intelligent and mutually respectful, there is something ironic about it too. That is, Daouda has come to Ramatoulaye essentially to claim ownership over her, and yet he insists that he wants greater freedoms for women in Senegal. Still, despite the irony, the civil exchange presents a hopeful picture of the future of political discourse in Senegal (in both public and private spheres). The two speakers are energized and enthusiastic about their country's future.

CHAPTER 20

Some days later, Daouda appears at Ramatoulaye's door again. Once again they fall on the subject of politics, but this time Daouda redirects the conversation to the subject of marriage. He admits to Ramatoulaye that he has never stopped loving her, ever since he first tried to court her. Ramatoulaye is taken aback if not entirely surprised. She even feels, as she tells Aissatou, a little "intoxicated" by the proposal. Tactfully, Daouda tells Ramatoulaye to think about it, and then he takes his leave. On his way out, he runs into Farmata, Romatoulaye's *griot* neighbor. After the brief encounter Farmata rushes back to Ramatoulaye and informs her that she's met Ramatoulaye's new husband, whose arrival she predicted earlier.

Daouda's humility and tact are a breath of fresh air in comparison to Tamsir's crass proposal. Rather than announce his intentions, Daouda presents Ramatoulaye with a choice. Still, Ramatoulaye is by no means overjoyed by the attention—at most she is slightly intrigued. Farmata's excited reaction is somewhat absurd and, in Ramatoulaye's eyes, overly superstitious. Ramatoulaye is the true master of her fate, at least in this aspect of her life.

CHAPTER 21

Ramatoulaye thinks over Daouda's proposal in solitude. She knows Daouda is an honorable man. She trusts that he would serve as wonderful father to her children, and she notes that, despite not really loving his current wife, he has always treated her with the utmost respect, going so far as to involve her in his political life. Farmata concurs with all these assessments, and encourages Ramatoulaye to accept the proposal. However, Ramatoulaye can't bring herself to love Daouda. As she puts it, she knows in her head that he would make a fine husband, but her heart disagrees. She decides she cannot marry him.

Ramatoulaye cannot bring herself to agree with a practical view of marriage, choosing instead to follow her heart. In this way she rejects the traditional, conservative worldview—represented here by Farmata's urgings—according to which she has essentially no choice but to choose Daouda. Her choice to remain a single mother is as brave as it is honest.

Ramatoulaye decides to write a letter to Daouda, explaining her decision not to marry him. In it, she says that while she holds Daouda in high esteem, it is ultimately only esteem that she feels for him, not romantic love. She also writes that, having only recently been abandoned by her husband, she cannot in good conscience come between Daouda and his current wife. Farmata delivers the letter, thinking that Ramatoulaye has accepted the proposal. She learns otherwise when she sees Daouda's reaction upon reading it. Angry and disappointed, she returns to Ramatoulaye with Daouda's response: "All or nothing. Adieu."

Ramatoulaye's letter is measured and reasonable, while Daouda's response is curt and somewhat extreme. Though its extremity perhaps originates in personal anguish, it also seems to reveal that Daouda is unable to conceive of Ramatoulaye as a friend and a peer—she is only a potential mate. Now that she has turned him down, he has no use for her company anymore.

After Daouda, more and more men show up at Ramatoulaye's doorstep to ask for her hand in marriage. She rejects them all, which earns her a reputation among her neighbors as a crazy woman. As Ramatoulaye explains, all the men seem to be after her inheritance, which she has recently won back from Binetou and Binetou's mother. Most notably, Ramatoulaye—with the help of her daughter Daba and Daba's husband—has won back the villa that Modou lived in with Binetou and her mother. Binetou and her mother are evicted from the house. While Binetou's mother is terribly upset by this, Binetou is indifferent.

Ramatoulaye's steadfast refusal of a second husband is completely sensible—and financially responsible—yet in nearly everyone's eyes she seems crazy. In other words, the prejudices of the community do not permit the idea that a powerful, financially independent woman can live on her own. Binetou's indifferent reaction to the loss of her house seems to suggest that her early marriage has sapped her of all emotion, or that the greed that seemed to motivate the marriage mostly belonged to her mother, not herself.

CHAPTER 22

Ramatoulaye writes to Aissatou that Ousmane, her youngest child, is always the one to bring her the letters that Aissatou sends her. Ramatoulaye is greatly comforted by Aissatou's words of comfort and encouragement. She looks forward to the day when they meet again, writing that the changes their bodies have undergone, and the time they have spent apart, will be meaningless to them. Their friendship is founded in the content of their hearts.

For Ramatoulaye, true friendship, unlike romantic love and marriage, is impervious to distance, time, and change. Even though Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have conducted their friendship only through letters over many years, it remains as strong as ever.

Daba returns from the secondary school that Mawdo (Mawdo Fall), one of Ramatoulaye's sons, attends. He has been getting into trouble with his white philosophy teacher, who "cannot tolerate a black coming first in philosophy," and favors a white French boy, consistently giving him the highest marks even though Mawdo is the better student. Both Mawdo and Daba understand this to be a great injustice, and Daba wants to tell the teacher off. But Ramatoulaye tries to dissuade her, arguing that doing so will be a waste of energy. It is more important, Ramatoulaye argues, to focus on one's own studies, one's own improvement.

Ramatoulaye and her daughter have two separate ways of responding to this obviously racist, colonialist injustice. Ramatoulaye represents a more conservative, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps view of self-reliance. Daba, who is younger and more fiery, seems to favor confrontation and protest in the face of injustice. These two perspectives represent in miniature a greater political question dogging newly independent Senegal: how best to respond to white supremacy and a recent history of colonialism and oppression.

Ramatoulaye lingers on Daba for a while, describing her marriage to her husband Abou. Daba maintains a far more practical view of marriage than Ramatoulaye ever has, fully accepting that there may come a day when she and her husband decide to divorce. Daba has also decided she does not want to enter into electoral politics, preferring instead the small women's organization to which she belongs. Ramatoulaye is somewhat bewildered by her daughter's decisions but ultimately impressed by her conviction and the clarity of her reasoning. Ramatoulaye closes this section of the letter by describing how her daughter Aissatou (Aissatou's namesake) helps her with raising the young children, and how Mawdo Fall helps her when she is sick.

Though Daba's view of marriage differs significantly from Ramatoulaye's, Ramatoulaye is able to understand and ultimately respect her daughter's reasoning. Daba represents a younger, more progressive generation coming to the fore, taking the reigns of newly independent Senegal. Ramatoulaye, then, represents an older generation that is potentially willing to let in new values and cultural norms, rather than bitterly clinging to custom and causing pain for her children.

CHAPTER 23

Ramatoulaye recounts to Aissatou a recent episode in which she walked in on three of daughters—whom she describes as "the trio"—smoking cigarettes secretly in their room. She is shocked by this, and doubly shocked by their bewilderment in the face of her anger. Ramatoulaye wonders whether she has been too liberal as a mother (she lets them go out at night on their own) and worries that smoking will lead them into other, more dangerous vices. She notes also that her daughters have started wearing trousers, which strikes her as indecent. Despite her worry, however, Ramatoulaye doesn't crack down on her children—instead she simply keeps watch over them, otherwise trusting them to make their own decisions.

The trio's behavior suggests that they are abandoning conventional Senegalese-Muslim wisdom in favor of a more progressive, European-inflected outlook. On the one hand, they now have access to greater freedoms; on the other hand, these new freedoms present dangers to their health (in a quite literal way, in the case of the cigarettes), and threaten to admit indulgence and vice. Though Ramatoulaye disagrees with her children's decisions, her ultimately measured response to them suggests an underlying liberal attitude.

CHAPTER 24

Not long after, Ramatoulaye is interrupted during her evening prayers when her two sons, Alioune and Malick, come home injured and crying, a group of friends in tow. Malick's arm looks broken. The children explain that while they were playing soccer in the street, a man on a **motorcycle** ran over a group of them. They bring the motorcyclist, whom they have beaten up, before Ramatoulaye. He apologizes to her, explaining that he did not expect the boys to be playing in the street, and failed to stop before hitting them. To her sons' surprise, Ramatoulaye takes the side of the motorcyclist, chastising her children and telling them they shouldn't have been playing in the street to begin with. Malick's broken arm is treated by Mawdo at the hospital.

The motorcycle symbolically comes crashing into the children just as modernization has come crashing into Senegal—with a sudden influx of both new freedoms and new dangers. Ramatoulaye's decision to take the motorcyclist's side in the dispute further characterizes her as a tough but conscientious mother, focused more on educating her children than soothing them in their distress, especially when doing so might compromise her morals or sense of justice.

Ramatoulaye segues into discussing her daughter Aissatou, her friend Aissatou's namesake. Aissatou has become pregnant out of wedlock. Ramatoulaye recounts how she learned of this development. Aissatou had begun to show some signs of pregnancy—she had lost weight, her breasts were swelling, and she was suffering from morning sickness—but Ramatoulaye brushed these signs off as coincidences. However, Farmata, Ramatoulaye's *griot* neighbor, insisted otherwise, until finally Farmata herself confronted Aissatou, learned the truth, and brought her before Ramatoulaye to explain herself.

In this case, Ramatoulaye's hands-off parenting leads her into blindness. She does not expect the news, or does not want to believe it, or both. Suddenly Farmata, who until this point has seemed like a fanatical quack, is the one who sees through to the truth of things. Perhaps conventional wisdom isn't totally useless after all.

Aissatou II tearfully explains that the father is Ibrahima Sall, a law student that she has been dating and, in fact, loves. Ramatoulaye is at first angry—how could her daughter do something so careless, and so soon after Modou's death? However, swallowing her anger and remembering how her daughters supported her in her distress, Ramatoulaye decides to embrace Aissatou with open arms and confront the situation with optimism. Farmata, who expected Ramatoulaye to put on a more angry, indignant display, is hugely disappointed.

By consciously rejecting the part of her that wants to punish Aissatou, Ramatoulaye bucks conventional wisdom, creating for herself a code of ethics that prioritizes love, understanding, and forgiveness over the dictates of religion and tradition. It is perhaps only a small victory against the forces of oppression that Ramatoulaye contends with throughout the novel, but for Ramatoulaye and Aissatou it makes all the difference.

CHAPTER 25

Ramatoulaye summons Ibrahima Sall, and he comes to visit her. She is pleasantly surprised by him: he is clean, dresses well, and conducts himself with tact. He assures her that he and Aissatou II have figured everything out: his parents will take care of the baby until Aissatou and Ibrahima finish their studies. Luckily, the baby is due during the holidays, so Aissatou will be able to hide her pregnancy and avoid expulsion. Ramatoulaye is impressed by all of this, and adds nothing to the plan. She writes that she feels that Aissatou has entered Ibrahima's care; Ramatoulaye is no longer her daughter's primary guardian.

Ibrahima and Aissatou's open dialogue, careful planning, and their love and mutual respect for each other offer a clear counterpoint to Ramatoulaye's and (other) Aissatou's failed marriages. By Senegalese standards, Ibrahima and Aissatou's union is entirely unconventional—even immoral—and yet in practice it seems like a far healthier relationship than the others the novel has offered thus far. Their example gives Ramatoulaye hope.

CHAPTER 26

Ibrahima visits Ramatoulaye's house often. He is a role model to Ramatoulaye's young sons, and he encourages Aissatou's namesake in her studies. "The trio" spurns him, and Farmata remains skeptical, but Ramatoulaye comes to admire him greatly.

Once again, Ibrahima's conscientious and solicitous behavior is a hopeful counterpoint to Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye.

Spurred on by Aissatou II's pregnancy, Ramatoulaye decides to have a conversation with "the trio," her younger daughters, about sexual education. She remarks that in the past, young girls have been taught chastity above all else. However, instead of forbidding sex outright, she channels a more "modern" outlook, and decides to emphasize safe sex above all. In addition, she tries to underline the "sublime significance" of sex, in the hope that her daughters will take it seriously. She delivers her lecture nervously and with some difficulty, but her daughters seem unfazed and even bored by it—Ramatoulaye gets the impression that, to them, she is merely stating the obvious.

Times have changed: though Ramatoulaye finds it difficult to adopt a more "modern" outlook than she is used to, her daughters, simply by virtue of being young, have naturally developed more liberal attitudes toward sex than the older generations. If Ramatoulaye's daughters are any indication, the future of Senegal has the potential to be more open, honest, and understanding than ever before.

CHAPTER 27

Aissatou is coming to visit soon, and Ramatoulaye looks forward to her arrival. Ramatoulaye reflects further on the fate of women in Senegalese society: she is heartened by the expansion of their rights and liberties, but remains wary that their hard-fought gains are unstable—certain social restrictions persist, and men still have a monopoly on power. Ramatoulaye insists, however, on her faith in the institution of marriage, and what she calls the "complementarity" of man and woman. Man and wife are the most basic political unit, she argues, as nations are made up of families.

With regard to the status of women in society, Ramatoulaye is hopeful but ever vigilant: she knows that societal advances for women are always fragile and difficult to maintain. At the same time, her belief in the institution of marriage shows her more conservative streak, and demonstrates her belief that family life and political life are not distinct, mutually exclusive pursuits—in fact, they are inseparable.

Ramatoulaye wonders if Aissatou will appear changed upon returning. She guesses that Aissatou will be wearing a suit, not traditional clothing, and will ask to eat at a table with utensils, in the Western style. Ramatoulaye closes by saying that she retains hope for her future, and that she will go out in search of happiness.

Ramatoulaye's conjecture about Aissatou, though lighthearted, expresses an anxiety that modernization might come to erase Senegalese culture. Tellingly, the novel does not describe the actual reunion of the two friends—it only exists as an address, a kind of monologue, and any response Aissatou might offer exists only beyond the page.

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