

BEYOND THE VEIL: MUSLIM WOMEN WRITE BACK

by

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree**

**DOCTOR LITTERARUM
(English)**

in the

Faculty of Arts

**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
PRETORIA**

October 1999

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SUMMARY

This thesis sets out to provide what is perceived as the nature of Islam and background that inform the interpretation of the two novels of Mariama Bâ as well as that of selected works by fellow Muslim writer, Nawal El-Saadawi. Although the question of gender is carefully addressed, the principal viewpoint is Islamic theocratic rather than purely feminist.

This study surveys the struggle of these two women writers to claim public space in a dominant patriarchal society. It examines the socio-political conditions affecting women in the Arab peninsula before the rise of Islam, also called *Jahiliyyah*, from Islam's inception (622 AD). It notes that the principle of equality of all the believers was established by the injunction in the *Qur'an*, and endorsed by Muhammad, the Prophet, after whose death, manipulation of the sacred texts, especially of the *Hadiths*, took place. This led to opposition to gender equality; while *fitna* (civil war) in Medina, led the Prophet to re-institute the *hijab/veil*, in order to protect women from being sexually harassed.

The significance of the *hijab* is then explored, and Fatima Mernissi's text *Women and Islam* (1987; 1992) is used as seminal to the argument that the *hijab* was not instituted to put a barrier between men and women. The question of how the Islamic tradition succeeded in transforming the Muslim woman into a submissive, marginal creature, one who once buried herself behind a veil, is considered in the light of feminist theory and

practice in both the Third and Arab worlds as well as in terms of the postcolonial notion of 'writing back'.

The works of Bâ and El-Saadawi, chosen for discussion in this thesis, examine these common issues, and underscore the entitlement of women to equality. The proposition, that Muslim women talk/write back, is epitomized in Ramatoulaye's forceful words - uttered after thirty years of silence and harassment: 'This time I shall speak out' (*So Long a Letter*, 1980; 1989: 58).

This study also shows that both Bâ and El-Saadawi (by employing the *journalisme-vérité* approach) move beyond gender and cultural issues to explore the universal nature of man and woman, and that in accordance with Muslim theocracy, these writers ultimately advocate the notion of redemption through humanity, coincidentally expressed in the Wolof proverb: 'Man, man is his own remedy!' (*Scarlet Song*, 1981; 1994: 165).

Furthermore, within the context of these concerns, a few speculative remarks on the likely future of Muslim women in the Arab and African world are made, arguing that had Bâ's life not been cut short so tragically, it is reasonable to suppose that she would, like El-Saadawi, have continued to advocate a holistic, healthy Muslim society, in which the humane treatment of women would prevail.

Finally, in terms of the title *Beyond the veil: Muslim women write back*, an attempt has been made to show how both Bâ and El-Saadawi strive by 'writing back' to move 'beyond' the veil, speaking out on behalf of fellow Muslim women in Africa.

KEY TERMS

Cross-cultural marriage, Cultural conflict, Fundamentalism, Gender-based viewpoint, *Hadith*, *Hijab* [Veil], Humanity/ Sufism, *Iqra* [Recite/Read], Islamic theocracy, *Jahiliyyah* [Pre-Islamic society], *Journalisme-vérité*, *Mirasse* [Disclosure], *Qur'an*.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie verhandeling poog om die agtergrond en aard van Islam te belig, wat die interpretasie van die twee romans deur Mariama Bâ, sowel as die geselekteerde werke deur die mede Moslemskryfster, Nawal El-Saadawi - ten grondslag lê. Alhoewel die aangeleentheid van vroueregte aangespreek word, word die Islamitiese teokrasie, eerder as 'n suiwer feministiese uitgangspunt, onderskryf.

Dié studie ondersoek die stryd van hierdie twee vroulike skryfsters om erkenning in 'n oorwegend patriargale gemeenskap, te verkry. Die sosio-politiese omstandighede van die vrou in die Arabiese skiereiland - voor die stigting van Islam (622 NC), ook bekend as *Jahiliyyah* - word ondersoek. Die grondbeginsel van gelyke regte vir alle Moslemgelowiges is vasgelê in die gebod in die *Koran*, wat tegelykertyd deur Mohammed, die Profeet, onderskryf is. Ná sy dood volg die manipulasie van die heilige tekste, in besonder die *Hadiths*, wat aanleiding gegee het tot die teenstaan van gelyke regte vir vroue. Weens die vrees dat *fitna* (burgeroorlog) in Medina kon uitbreek, het die profeet die gebruik van die sluier heringestel om die vroue teen seksuele teistering te beskerm.

Die betekenis van die sluier word in Fatima Mernissi se teks *Women and Islam* (1987; 1992) ondersoek. Hierin maak Mernissi daarop aanspraak dat die *hijab* nié ingestel is om skeiding tussen mans en vroue te maak nie. Die vraag naamlik, hoe het die Islamitiese tradisie daartoe aanleiding gegee dat die Moslemvrou in 'n onderdanige wese omskep is wat vroeër agter 'n sluier verskuil was, word aangespreek. Dit geskied in die lig van 'n

feministiese teorie en praktyk in beide die derde en Arabiese wêreld, sowel as in terme van die postkoloniale konsep van 'terugskryf'.

Bâ, sowel as El-Saadawi se werke, wat vir bespreking in die tesis gekies is, ondersoek hierdie gemeenskaplike vraagstukke en propageer gelyke regte vir vroue. Die stelling dat Moslemvroue hulleself verweer deur die praat- en skryfstem, word (na dertig jaar van stilswye), versinnebeeld in die woorde van Ramatoulaye: 'This time I shall speak out' (*So Long a Letter*, 1980; 1989: 58).

Hierdie studie toon aan dat beide Bâ en El-Saadawi (aan die hand van die *journalisme-vérité* benadering), en buiten die kwessie van gelyke regte en kulturele konflik, die universele karakter van die mens ondersoek en belig. In ooreenstemming met die Moslemteokrasie propageer hierdie Moslemskryfsters dat bevryding deur middel van menslikheid, soos vervat in die Wolof-spreekwoord: 'Man, man is his own remedy!' (*Scarlet Song*, 1981; 1994: 165), moontlik is.

Enkele spekulatiewe opmerkings met betrekking tot die toekoms van die Moslemvrou word ook gemaak. As Bâ se lewensdraad nie so tragies kortgeknip is nie, sou sy, soos El-Saadawi, moontlik voortgegaan het om 'n holistiese, gesonde Moslemgemeenskap te bevorder waarin die vrou menswaardig behandel word.

Ten slotte, in terme van die titel, *Beyond the veil: Muslim women write back*, word daar ook gepoog om aan te toon hoe beide Bâ en El-Saadawi namens die Moslemvrou, verder as die sluier kyk en beweeg, deur middel van beide die spreek- en die skryfstem.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For first suggesting the idea behind this thesis and for her meticulous supervision, constant advice, enthusiasm and support, my particular thanks to Professor Rosemary Gray (director of this study).

A word of special thanks to Professor Henk Potgieter, Head of Department: Semitic Languages, for his helpful comments on the two theoretical chapters, and for discussion which helped focus some of the theological questions addressed here. I would also like to thank him for checking the accuracy of the punctuation in the Arabic words.

Special thanks go to my husband whose unwavering support and encouragement have enabled me to complete this study. I am also grateful for his infinite patience.

My warmest thanks to my twins, who through their sustained support and understanding, made the completion of this thesis possible.

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and children.

INTRODUCTION

The belief that men are superior to women characterizes all the major religions of the world, including Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Islam¹ signifies:

that religious civilization and community of faith established by the revelation of the *Qur'an*² and shaped by the wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad as interpreted and transmitted to us by generations of the spiritually learned of that community ... the last and most developed manifestation of the larger tradition of patriarchy.

(R. W. J. Austin, 1983: 36)

Here, Austin highlights not only the patriarchal nature of Islam but also the community of faith. Riffat Hassan (1994: 18) endorses this seemingly complex relationship but also points to the fact that both 'Islam' and 'Christianity' refer not only to religious traditions but also to multifarious cultures encompassed by the terms 'the world of Islam' and 'the world of Christendom' and this is also true of Judaism. It is perhaps paradoxical, therefore - given this broad patriarchal frame of reference that is evident in the *modus vivendi* of all three of these religions - that although neither Christianity nor Judaism has played an important role in promoting gender equality, millions of Jewish and Christian women do, none the less, today enjoy a dual privilege - human rights on the one hand and access to an inspirational religious tradition on the other. Yet one finds the one religion which appears to remain a stumbling block on the road to the application of democratic principles; one religion which seems more repressive than Judaism and Christianity: Islam alone is condemned by many Westerners as blocking the way to women's 'rights'. In the context of the literary texts chosen for discussion in this study as well as the primary theoretical critique - by Islamic women - this raises an important question: is Islam then opposed to gender equality?

In view of her dilemma, it is compelling for the Muslim woman to speak out, to question

the history of the past and, as Mariama Bâ so successfully does in her two works - *So Long a Letter* (1980; 1989) and *Scarlet Song* (1981; 1994) - to question the Muslim patriarchal tradition that confines African women to domestic space and to encourage women's struggle in claiming public space. For the purpose of this study a thematic approach to five selected texts by Nawal El-Saadawi (*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* [1958; 1988], *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* [1983; 1986], *God dies by the Nile* [1974; 1985], *Woman at Point Zero* [1975; 1983]; and *The Innocence of the Devil* [1992; 1994]) has been adopted to reinforce the notion that the Muslim woman, whether she be African or Arabic, has committed herself to the struggle of claiming public space in a Muslim male patriarchal tradition. Mildred Mortimer (1990: 77) points out that in Bâ's texts 'the written word becomes a creative tool of self-expression and a mighty weapon against the patriarchy'. And this is also true of the written word in the texts of El-Saadawi. These five texts also show that El-Saadawi shares the same concerns as Bâ although the former has developed some of the common themes more fully. What becomes clear from this comparison is that the Muslim woman has to break the silence by the spoken and written word, and by her attempt to establish her position, dignity, and identity in public space.

The impulse for the phrase 'Muslim women write back'³ in the title to this thesis, *Beyond the veil: Muslim women write back*, stems from another perhaps more central question, 'Can a woman be a leader of Muslims?' This rhetorical question was once posed by Fatima Mernissi, a Muslim Moroccan sociologist, in addressing the problem of full human rights in Islam (*Women and Islam*, 1992: 1). Her more radically female-centred question, tried out in her local grocery store, was met by the shocked reply of her grocer, 'a true

barometer' of public opinion in Mernissi's view. The grocer's reaction typifies patriarchal narrow-mindedness. He reportedly retorted: 'Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!' This is, in fact, a famous maxim attributed to the Prophet Muhammad⁴ himself, and it is one of many such aphorisms (or infamous, in the context of this study) which seem to denigrate women. In Muslim theocracy, the *Hadith*⁵ collections have shaped Muslim ethics and values for centuries and they are as implacable as they are topographically popular. It might be in accordance with the casual stereotypes applied to the Arab world from a Western perspective to interpret the Moroccan constitution, which gives women the right to vote and be elected (but grants only the former in political reality) as a sign of 'stagnation' and 'backwardness' (Mernissi's terms, 1992: 2). However, as Mernissi observes, it would be more insightful to see this notion as a reflection of changing times and the intensity of the conflicts between the aspirations of women and the resistance of men, who imagine, despite the laws in force, that power is necessarily male.

An attempt to shed more light on those obscure zones of resistance, those entrenched attitudes, and to understand 'the symbolic - even explosive - significance of that act which elsewhere in the world is an ordinary event: a woman's vote' (Mernissi, 1992: 4) presupposes at least some study of the relevant religious texts. The impetus for this thesis therefore lies in the confluence of two contributing factors. The initial focus is on the question of the status and role of women in Islam, especially in the context of the religious tradition. The multi-faceted and wide-ranging subject in terms of the belief that men are superior to women is rooted in the three foundational assumptions or myths which are: first, that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have

been created from man's rib and is therefore derivative and secondary ontologically; and then that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as 'Man's Fall' or expulsion from the garden of Eden, hence all daughters of Eve are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion and contempt; and finally that woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance (Hassan, 1994: 18). Three theological questions to which the above assumptions may appropriately be regarded as answers are fully explicated as part of the discussion in Chapter One. The second contributory is the question of the relationship between Islam as a patriarchal religious tradition and the whole phenomenon of the 'feminine' in human experience, which involves the male-female relation as an entity within the Muslim system, which is explored in Chapter Two. In the context of this study, the term 'feminine' does not refer to the historical experience of women, but rather to an abstraction of qualities traditionally associated with women. Fuller discussion of the term occurs in Chapters Two and Three of this study.

Part of the threat posed by the modern world for Islam - besides mounting political, cultural and social pressures - is the question of the status and freedom of women and the degree to which they are permitted to wield their influence in contemporary Muslim society. The survival of the whole fabric of the patriarchal civilization rests, inescapably, on the answer to this question. Islam, as a patriarchal tradition, thus has to preserve its own traditional structure, identity and purpose. In order to discuss the whole issue of the role and status of Muslim women it is necessary to devote a large portion of the argument in the initial chapters to both female and male writers, Muslim and non-Muslim writers, to the background of Islam which informs the discussion of the texts by the Senegalese

Muslim writer, Mariama Bâ, and Egyptian Muslim feminist, Nawal El-Saadawi.

In Islam we find a certain tension between a higher patriarchal idealism regarding women, and the lower patriarchal need to control the situation on the ground. On the one hand, the *Qur'an* clearly recognizes the spiritual equality of man and woman as human beings subject to God and encourages kind and just treatment of women (*Qur'an* 4: 19). On the other hand, the woman who is confident and seeks to use her power over men by taking initiative is seen most of all as the representative of that elemental feminine power which threatens to dissolve the patriarchal religious tradition which the Muslim religious establishment has always feared, condemned and denigrated. Women in the history of the Muslim society have therefore been treated more strictly and allowed less scope than the letter of the Law permits, in contrast to the stipulations and spirit of the *Qur'an* and Prophetic example (Austin, 1983: 43).

It is precisely this split between the public and the private, as symbolized by the cultural dichotomy, that Mariama Bâ persistently refutes and attempts to subvert in her two novels. Both of Bâ's works under discussion deal with the problems Muslim women face in Senegal, a society steeped in traditional values. The extent to which these women accept the customs of their society also determines the limitations they place on the choices available to them. Thus, while aware of the need for change in an oppressive society, Bâ also shows concern for the effect of these changes on the uniqueness of African culture. Mortimer observes in her essay 'Enclosure/ Disclosure in Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre*' (1990: 69) that women who have been catalysts for change either disappear or are recuperated by the patriarchal structure. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995:

208) endorses this viewpoint when she claims that the protagonist in the Saadawian literary corpus is doomed to fight a battle against the Muslim patriarchal tradition that she rarely wins.

Many contemporary publications on the rights of women in Islam are swallowed up by the central debate on the *Hadith* as regards women's rights and reflect Sa'id Al-Afghani, a contemporary historian's viewpoint on the participation of women in the exercise of power: if Aisha (the Prophet's wife who led an armed opposition against the caliph who ruled at that time, 656 AD) had not intervened in the public affairs of the Muslim state, 'Muslim history would have taken the path of peace, progress and prosperity It seems that Allah created women to reproduce race, bring up future generations and be in charge of households ...' (quoted by Mernissi, 1992: 6-7). Mernissi (1992: 6-7) poses the following questions: 'From what sources of religious history did he [Al-Afghani] draw the arguments that permit him to generalize, to move from the case of Aisha to that of all other women, thus stripping millions of women citizens of their political rights? In what pages did he, as historian and expert, find the documents that allowed him to exclude women from public life, to relegate them to the household and reduce them to the role of silent spectators?'

Mernissi further claims that not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated by historians and politicians, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies (1992: 8). Since power, as Mernissi points out, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false *Hadiths* (traditions). The question

then becomes: to what extent can one do violence to the sacred texts? This question is dealt with in depth by El-Saadawi in the novels *God dies by the Nile* (1985) and *The Innocence of the Devil* (1994) when she exposes the corrupt system of a patriarchal tradition that has pushed for false interpretations of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadiths* in order to sustain its oppressing power.

The reduction of women to the role of 'silent spectators' hidden behind their veils renders Muslim women marginal to culture even when they are fully involved in cultural processes; 'thus ... it accounts for the universal devaluation of women, and of their fully cultural activities within the domestic sphere' as Christine Barsby (1988: 10) notes. Barsby maintains that it is women's association with the natural powers of reproduction that leads femininity to be defined as proximity to the body, a body so overwhelmingly 'present to itself' that it lacks the necessary distance that enables signification. 'Woman' thus becomes signifier to the male other: bearer of meaning and culture, crucial support for systems of representation, but never herself an agent of signification within these cultural systems and practices.

Various conflicting interpretations of the term *hijab* (veil) have reinforced this notion of 'woman' as signifier to the male other, an aspect which is explored more fully in Chapter Two of this study. Mernissi, in her book *Beyond the Veil* (1975: 81), describes Muslim sexuality as territorial since it consists of a strict allocation of space to each sex. The symbolism of sexual patterns reflects the society's hierarchy and power allocation in the Muslim order. Strict space boundaries divide Muslim societies, for instance, into two sub-universes: the universe of men, the *Umma*⁶ universe of religion and power, and the

universe of women: the domestic universe of sexuality and the family. In order to prevent sexual interaction between members of the *Umma* and members of the domestic universe, seclusion and veiling (a symbolic form of seclusion) were implemented. Traditionally, women using public spaces, trespassing on the *Umma* universe, are restricted to few occasions and bound by specific rituals, such as the wearing of the veil.

Two questions therefore arise with regard to the function of the veil in Muslim societies: if the women in Islam and, specifically, during the time of the Prophet, were allowed to walk unveiled, and if Mernissi's claim (1992: 85) that the *hijab* - literally 'curtain' - descended during year five of the *Hijra* (627 AD) not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men, is true, how did the tradition succeed in transforming the Muslim woman into the submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils? Why does the Muslim man need such a mutilated companion? More light is shed on these central issues in Chapter Two, which undertakes an in depth study of the descent of the *hijab* in an historical context.

To defend the violation of women's rights, Mernissi (1992: vii) contends that it is necessary to go back 'into the shadows of the past', to 'raise the sails of the memory-ship ... and to lift the veils with which our [Muslim women's] contemporaries disguise the past in order to dim the present'. The denial of the Muslim women's claim to democracy is, according to Mernissi, rooted in the belief that the Muslim women are ignorant of the past. However, this argument, proffered by some Muslim men, can never convince anyone with an elementary understanding of Islam's history. Mernissi further argues that the woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship does not exclude herself

from the *Umma* and she is not a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda. The Muslim man who believes this misguided patriarchal premise is a man who misunderstands his own religious heritage, his own cultural identity, since the vast and inspiring records of Muslim history by scholars such as Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa'ad, Ibn Hajar and Al-Tabari speak to the contrary. Mernissi's viewpoint (1992: 21) is echoed by many other contemporary Muslim female writers when she argues:

We Muslim⁷ women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the question for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but it is a true part of the Muslim tradition. Of this I am certain, after reading the works of those scholars mentioned above and many others.

The contemporary Arab Muslim's concern for the study of history - in reaction to the mounting political, cultural and social pressures from the modern Western world - is a part of his/her total search for dignity, identity and purpose. In order to preserve its own traditional structures and identity, the whole question of the status and role of women in contemporary Muslim society is becoming a major indicator as to the future success, or otherwise, of this Islamic revival. It would, however, not be inappropriate to insist that the contemporary Muslim woman's quest equally concerns a search for dignity, identity and purpose. If the impact of the power of the West has challenged to the core this concept of who the Muslim man is and where his destiny lies; if it has questioned his perception of the world and the totality of life; if his faith in the adequacy of his norms and ideals has been eroded, it can be argued that, in a similar manner, the Muslim woman's status and position, too, have been severely affected.

In Chapter Three of this study, an exploration of Third and Arab world feminisms is

undertaken in order properly to contextualize this status and position in its broadest frame of reference. The term 'feminism' as it is encoded in both the Third and Arab world is defined and examined to show that feminist theory, despite the various touchstones, can never be viewed as singularly or universally 'true'. In order to materialize a feminist praxis and theory that is applied within a cross-cultural, international framework whereby a unitary sisterhood - notwithstanding its various differences - can be attained, the practice of reading is advocated which transcends all boundaries of juridical, political, anthropological and artistic discourses. In line with this practice is Mernissi's viewpoint, as well as those of various other Third world and Arab Muslim feminists, that the Muslim woman's quest for dignity, democracy and human rights stems from no imported values.

In view of this contention, Mernissi (1992: ix) therefore claims that if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the *Qur'an* nor the Prophet's teaching, nor yet the Islamic tradition, but rather simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male élite. The élite faction, according to Mernissi, is trying to convince Muslim women that its egotistic, highly subjective view of culture and society has a sacred basis. Yet one thing that women and men of the late twentieth century can be sure of is that Islam was not sent from heaven to foster egotism and mediocrity. 'It came to sustain the people of the Arabian desert lands, to encourage them to achieve higher spiritual goals and equality for all, in spite of the conflict between the weak and the powerful' (Mernissi, 1992: ix). It is this more positive sustaining ideal which informs both Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi's fictional and semi-fictional works.

In this regard, a significant challenge has been posed by those who adhere to the ideals

of the Western womanist movement and its attempt to raise the social standards in the Muslim countries according to its own conceptions of female self-determination and rights. This challenge, of course, has engendered a continuing response from conservative Muslims who cannot tolerate this development, seeing that it seeks to undermine and relativise the very principles of absolutism and spiritualism upon which patriarchal traditions are founded, Islamic or otherwise. Crucial to the analysis of this part of the study is a consideration of the response of the Muslim community and individual critics to such challenges. As a result, various elements have been appropriated or rejected; guidance and answers have been sought to the perplexing problems faced by Islam today, which have set in motion new ideas and generated new forms of religious response. However, these are not the focus of this study.

A guiding principle in undertaking this study is the consciousness of the Muslim contention that to understand the true meaning of Islam is in fact to be addressed by God's truth, which Yvonne Haddad (1982: xiv) so pertinently points out. Consequently, for many Muslims, any non-Muslim scholar can grasp only a partial understanding, for to truly understand is to know and bear witness to the 'truth', thus to speak from a position of commitment. Despite efforts on the part of many Western scholars of Islam to do justice to the material they are studying, many Muslims maintain a deep distrust of the motives of non-Muslims. Haddad (1982: xiv) also refers to another dimension of this issue: the question raised by many Muslims as to whether or not a non-Muslim can adequately present and expound on the teachings of Islam. For Muslims then, to teach is to inculcate, and to teach Islam properly is to teach God's eternal and final message to humanity. Islam therefore, in this context, (to which the literary critic does not necessarily

have to subscribe) can only be articulated by a committed Muslim. All other efforts are marginal because they do not address humanity with the complete truth.

This problem also relates to the question of the appropriateness of a non-Muslim attempting to see the world and the flow of history as the Muslim sees it. The perpetual fear of criticism by Islam that it somehow may be judged inadequate or obsolete still pertains. Even the Western approach of dispassionate and objective judgement with regard to the study of religion falls short of the sensitive understanding necessary to see that each phenomenon of religious life must be dealt with in the context of the whole. On another level it is also true that 'to study Islam is to change it When we say that Islam is what Muslims say it is we must constantly ask, which Muslims?' (Haddad, 1982: xv).

Despite these very real problems, it may also be the case that the non-Muslim willing to approach his or her material with sensitivity and appreciation is in a good position to balance attempts at sympathetic interpretation with objectivity that sometimes only distance can afford. With an awareness that one can never completely escape one's own prejudices, as Haddad puts it, this thesis aims to present as descriptively as possible the conflicting ways in which the status and role of women have been perceived by the *Qur'an*, the Prophet Muhammad, historians and contemporary Muslims. However, this study is not an attempt to redefine Muslim theology - the approach is essentially a literary one and thus the foregoing discussion provides the framework to the literary criticism offered in this thesis. Analysis and critical evaluation of material - in so far as it is offered - is therefore given both from the perspective of the individual writers and in

light of the criteria Islam holds up for itself and from that of Western theories or forms of reference.

To date, literary reviews and studies of the two texts *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* have, almost exclusively, adopted a generic approach with a feminist bias. As a result, these two novels have been primarily interpreted from a feminist perspective. For example, Kathy D. Jackson (1993: 13) refers to Bâ's novels as a woman of colour expressing her views on a number of issues. Elinor C. Flewellen (1985: 13) makes the statement that the two novels examine the effects of decolonization on a society which asserts male superiority as part of its religious doctrine.

While recognizing the value of earlier research and the significance of such studies, the present study attempts to fill a perceived gap. The initial arguments and material very often become, because of the nature of the study undertaken, non-literary (socio-historical) and theological. This newer and, in literary terms, less orthodox approach, is perceived as a contribution in the sense that it offers comparative religious viewpoints - recorded in the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* - and since it does not centre on standard literary viewpoints alone. Research findings have confirmed the opinion that Fatima Mernissi's *Women and Islam - An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1992) is suitable to fulfil the role of a seminal text in this study. She acknowledges Professor Ahmed Al-Khamlichi - who teaches Muslim law at the Faculté de Droit of the Université Mohammed V, and who in his capacity as '*alim* (religious scholar) is also a member of the council of '*ulama* of the city of Rabat and a specialist in problems dealing with women in Islam - and the renowned philosopher, Ali Oumlil, who supported her and gave her advice during her

research.

An attempt is therefore made to highlight the key challenges as perceived by the Muslims and the tension between theory and practice regarding the status of women in Islam. One of the aims is to determine whether or not amid the various kinds of responses there is any **one** answer to the question posed by the confrontation with the modern world and the discipline of the study of history that can be called 'the Muslim answer' (Haddad, 1982: xvi). In *So Long a Letter* (1989) Mariama Bâ reflects the complexity and polemic inherent in such a question when she has her narrator, Ramatoulaye, pondering the question for modernity:

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. (18-19)

Thus it becomes evident that the women's movement has reached Senegal, and both urban and rural women are becoming more and more vociferous in their cries for change in home and family relationships as much as in economic and political arenas. Given this context, Abena P. B. Busia (1988: 16) regards the two texts as informed and transformed by a new consciousness which recognizes that bridges are to be built in an attempt to create a unified community of women.

Yet this study is not a work of history, as history, in Mernissi's words, is always the group's language. It is rather a 'vessel journeying back in time to find a fabulous wind that will swell our sails' as Mernissi (1992: 10-11) puts it, and Bâ and El-Saadawi so vividly

portray it, to send us gliding towards new worlds; new worlds which are rooted in the past and in the future. The past is embodied in the beginning of the *Hijra*, when the Prophet introduced an Islam where the women had their place as unquestioned partners in a revolution that made the mosque an open place and the household a temple of debate. The future is grounded in intellectual ferment and religious sensitivity. Both are working together to help provide meaning and direction to an Islamic society that has become fractured, as well as purpose to a religious society that has been seriously challenged by pressures from the modern Western world.

The rationale behind the order of sequence in this study is one based primarily on a theoretical approach founded in ample historical evidence, evidence which occurs in the works of religious history and in 'the biographical details of *sahabiyat* by the thousand who built Muslim society side by side with their male counterparts' (Mernissi, 1992: ix). Chapter One is thus an attempt to recapture some of the events in the first Muslim city in the world, Medina, of the year 622 AD when young women and slaves were drawn to a new mysterious religion, Islam, and to the egalitarian message advocated by the Prophet Muhammad. In order to counterbalance the misogynistic attitude of many contemporary Muslim men, an in depth study of some of the relevant religious texts - in both Chapter One and Two - is undertaken to prove the contrary viewpoint as recorded in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadiths*. As discussed above, Chapter Three explores Third and Arab world feminisms as breaking the silence by establishing a sisterhood across cultural divides..

Chapters Four and Five focus on a close critical analysis of *So Long a Letter* (1989) as well as *Scarlet Song* (1994) in terms of the proposition of Muslim women talking/writing

back. A comparison is also drawn between the two texts in order to point to distinctive qualities of these two works, be these generic - autobiography versus fiction - or ideological/explorative versus philosophical/meditative. The range of texts by El-Saadawi, as discussed in Chapter Six, invites an examination of cultural, religious and class-based differences in the nature of the 'violence' that Muslim women have experienced under the rule of a traditionally Muslim orientated patriarchy. The costs of breaking cultural taboos (as El-Saadawi so pertinently points out in her texts) by speaking out, and the strategies enabling women to speak/write back without forfeiting the chance to be heard are explored and highlighted in this chapter.

The Epilogue is, of necessity, both synoptic and voyeuristic in the sense that it attempts to predict how Mariama Bâ's writing might have developed, had her life not been so tragically cut short at the height of her writing career. It is noted that the writings of Nawal El-Saadawi can conveniently be seen as demonstrating this imagined thrust. A few speculative remarks are also offered on the likely future of women's liberation in Muslim societies, based on a projection from the current situation.

* * *

In the compilation of notes to the chapters as well as of the Select Bibliography, an annotated Harvard System has been followed.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. There are several ways of looking at Islam as an historical religion. One is to see it as established in a certain place at a certain time, its faith having been preserved in the experience and life of the 'historical' community which is in constant awareness of the special role it has as the community of faith practising the religion that God revealed to His Prophet Muhammad. The *Hijra* stands for the constitution of year one of the Muslim calendar, 622 AD, when Muhammad emigrated to Medina from Mecca and constituted the first Muslim community in the world based on the new religion, Islam. Related to that conception, but subtly different from it, is the idea of Islam as the religion of God which He has revealed to pious men from the earliest historical times. In this understanding Muhammad is not the initiator of the faith but is rather the restorer, correcting and confirming previous experience and bringing the final revelation in the series of revelations that have constituted the religion of God. In a third sense Islam is historical in so far as it has had a certain number of years of specific continuity of existence and of experience as a community of faith (Haddad, 1982: xii).

2. According to Muslim tradition, the language of the *Qur'an* is Arabic and, because it is the uncreated work of God many consider that it cannot and should not be translated into other languages. When it is rendered into another tongue, however skilfully, the words are no longer those spoken by God, and therefore no longer the *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* is not organized in any chronological or sequential manner. Although some of the text was written down under Muhammad's supervision, it is agreed that it was completed in its present form at the time of Uthman the third caliph (644-656 AD). Its content reflects the manner in which God revealed His message to the Prophet over a period of twenty years.

On close examination it becomes clear that there is a structure, which reflects an intention to demonstrate that aspects of life should not be seen separately, but accepted as a whole based on the divine will. Muslim historians agree that parts of the same revelation are sometimes widely separated in the pages of the book. The *Qur'an* is roughly the size of the New Testament. It is divided into 114 *suras* (chapters), each of which bears the name of something contained in it. The *suras* are divided into *ayat* (verses). The *suras*, with one exception, are arranged roughly in order of length, with the longest first, and it is generally agreed that the shortest ones, coming at the end, date from the Prophet's earliest days. There is probably no other book in history, including the Bible, that has been subjected to so much study and analysis. Commentaries (*tafsirs*) on it fill entire libraries. The best known of these is by Al-Tabari (923 AD) which is a phrase by phrase analysis filling 30 volumes (D. S. Roberts 1981: 39-41).

3. The notion of 'writing back' was first coined by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (Aschcroft *et al*, 1989) in the context of postcolonial studies. Whereas their usage is essentially political, involving the margin writing back to the metropolitan centre, my own use of the term foregrounds the personal human term in a broader socio-religious context - that of an all embracing Muslim theocracy.

4. Muhammad was born in Mecca about 570 AD. Compared to the Romans and the Persians, the Arabs appeared to be a backward people, reduced to the state of vassal when their territory was not occupied. In 610 AD Muhammad received his first revelation through the angel Gabriel. In 628 AD, at the age of 58, Muhammad - who had been preaching Islam for twenty years - promised the Arabs who converted to his religion the conquest of the Roman and Persian empires. Fifteen years later Iran would be conquered and Islamicized forever. So, beyond its spiritual dimension, Islam was first and foremost a promise of power, unity, and triumph for a marginalized people, divided and occupied, who wasted their energy in intertribal wars (Mernissi, 1992: 26). It is important to understand that for Muhammad, and for all Muslims, the revelations which began so dramatically and continued over a period of twenty years, came from a source outside the Prophet. In his own lifetime he became known, even to his wives, as the Messenger of Allah. Neither Muhammad nor any of his followers ever claimed that he had any direct relationship with God. It is perhaps the fundamental principle of Islam that God is alone and unique. Even in making His will known to Muhammad, he used an intermediary in the form of the angel Gabriel (Roberts, 1981: 39-41).

5. After the *Qur'an* the second foundation of Islam is the *Sunna*. This seeks to designate the sayings, actions and behaviour of the Prophet during his lifetime. It was found after Muhammad's death that people faced problems that reference to the *Qur'an* alone did not solve. It was natural therefore that they should seek guidance from what people before them had done, and in particular from what the Prophet and his followers in the ideal Muslim community of the first generation had said or done in comparable circumstances. Thus, the search for precedents became all-important. Over the years, however, situations arose for which there was no exact historical precedent. Traditions began to be fabricated, and some believed that they understood Muhammad's mind so well that they could speak for him, perhaps because he is believed to have said, 'Whenever someone says something true, it is as if I said it'. Eventually there was a reaction which resulted in systematic studies designed to sift the reliable from the fabricated. Such controversies were finally resolved by the jurist al-Shafii (820 AD), who held that the *Sunna* of the Prophet alone is authoritative. The *Hadiths* are literally oral reports going back in an unbroken chain to the Prophet. The nature, character and reliability of each witness in the chain was minutely examined by students of the *Hadiths*, together with the action or saying in question. Eventually a vast body of

biographical material was accrued to assess the strength and reliability of each *Hadith*, and by the third Islamic century several great collections of *Hadith* had emerged, which have since become recognized as second in authority only to the *Qur'an*. The collections are known as the Six Sound Books. Controversy still exists about the *Hadiths*, however. In the last hundred years, disagreement about their reliability has emerged among Muslim scholars. Some still place full reliance on the historical accuracy of the classical method, whilst others reject the *Hadiths*, and seek guidance only from the *Qur'an* (Roberts, 1981: 41-42).

6. *Umma*: community of believers. Members: the believers. Women's position in the *Umma* universe is ambiguous; Allah does not talk to them. The assumption is that the *Umma* is primarily male believers. The *Umma* stands for equality, reciprocity, aggregation, unity, communion, brotherhood, love and trust. The universe of the *Umma* is communal; its citizens are persons who unite in a democratic collectivity based on a sophisticated concept of belief in a set of ideas, which is geared to produce integration and cohesion of all members who are participating in the unifying task (Mernissi, 1975: 81- 2). Paradoxically, the democratic principle has not been seen to apply to sisterhood!

7. The expression 'we Muslims' does not refer to Islam in terms of an individual choice, a personal option. What the individual thinks is secondary for this definition. Mernissi defines being Muslim as belonging to a theocratic state. Being Muslim is a civil matter, a national identity, a passport, a family code of laws, a code of public rights (Mernissi, 1992: 20-21). The centrality of the communal ethos to Muslim ideology is such that it defines the thrust of Chapter One.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALISING ISLAM

The study of women in the context of any one religious tradition - be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism or any other - is a vast and complex enterprise. To write about women and Islam is to write about a host of issues only one of which is the role and status of women in Islam. Azizah Al-Hibri writes in her essay 'A Study of Islamic History: Or how did we ever get into this mess?' (1982: 207) that Islam and women have shared an enduring though often turbulent relationship throughout the patriarchal upheavals of the past fourteen hundred years in the Arab World. To understand this relationship fully, it is necessary to comprehend first the socio-political conditions affecting women in the Arab peninsula before the rise of Islam, and the subsequent impact of Islam upon the lives of these women, as well as upon society as a whole.

Pre-Islamic society - or the age of *Jahiliyyah* - was composed of numerous tribes that lived in the desert and in towns under varying economic circumstances. The word *Jahiliyyah* comes from *jahl* or ignorance. Thus the age of *Jahiliyyah* refers to the age of ignorance existing in the pre-Islamic Arab peninsula (see Al-Hibri, 1982: 208). It is unclear what time span is covered by that age. Sometimes it covers all pre-Islamic history, but more often it refers only to the last century before Islam, as Al-Hibri points out. She maintains that in either case, it is a mistake to conclude from this designation, as some have, that the age of *Jahiliyyah* refers to an age of barbarism. Al-Hibri (1982: 208) further asserts that it is an established historical fact that certain parts of the pre-Islamic Arab peninsula knew civilizations comparable or superior to others existing at that time. Suffice it to say that the kingdom of Sheba in the South was well known for its sophisticated technology and civilization. Only compared to the age of Islam, did Arabs judge the pre-Islamic age as that of ignorance.

An overwhelming amount of evidence indicates that at least the most recent pre-Islamic era in the northern part of the peninsula was patriarchal. However, according to Al-Hibri (1982: 208) matriarchal trends existed in that region too. Abdallah Afifi (quoted by Nawal El-Saadawi in her essay 'Women and Islam' 1982: 194) maintains that some tribes in pre-Islamic society, such as Khandak and Jadila, were more or less matriarchal in structure. Kings before Islam were sometimes named after their mothers as in the case of Umar Ibn Hind. So too, was Muhammad the Prophet proud of his lineage from the women of his tribe and was wont to say of himself: "I am the son of the Awateks from the tribe of Sulaym" (El-Saadawi, 1982: 194). El-Saadawi further notes that women in the desert areas and oases enjoyed a greater degree of liberty and independence than women in the towns because they were involved in obtaining the means of livelihood. These desert women mixed freely with men and did not wear the veil.

Both male and female goddesses were known in the pre-Islamic era, and some Arabs believed that the god or goddess of each tribe played an active role in war, and were instrumental in 'fighting' to ensure victory for its people. The northern people of *Jahiliyyah* built shrines for their goddesses. Al-Lat and Uzza were both goddesses of Abou Suffian's tribe, and together with his active and strong wife, Hind, constituted a female force which brought victory over the Muslims in the battle of Uhud. The important position occupied by some goddesses was symbolic of the relatively higher prestige enjoyed by women in Arab tribal society, and a reflection of the vestiges of matriarchal society that still lived on in some of the tribes, as El-Saadawi (1982: 194) points out. Austin (1983: 40) too, endorses the important role played by the above-mentioned goddesses in the pre-Islamic past of Arabia, in general, and of Mecca and the Ka'ba in

particular. The Ka'ba and its black stone are at the very heart of Islamic ritual and symbolism. As far as Islam is concerned, it is a purely patriarchal site. However, as Austin points out, it was certainly, for a period, a polytheistic pantheon. The goddess Al-Uzza was one of the three aspects of the Triple Goddess celebrated from Ireland to India. The goddesses were worshipped as virgin-mothers in the sense that whatever their relations with gods or men, they remained in their divinity unpossessed and self-sufficient (Austin, 1983: 40). These goddesses were so influential in their roles that reference is made to them in the pages of the *Qur'an* itself, and by the Prophet, albeit to deny their existence.

The above-mentioned aspects of matriarchalism, as El-Saadawi (1982: 194) states, might possibly explain the relatively important role played by women in both pre-Islamic and Islamic society. In the context of the discussion of the two postcolonial texts by Mariama Bâ, which are the initial literary focus of this study, it may be pertinent to note that there is little evidence of Senegalese women of real stature in the body politic. Ramatoulaye (the protagonist in *So Long a Letter*, 1989: 60-61) comments:

Four women [in the Assembly], Daouda, four out of a hundred deputies. What a ridiculous ratio! Not even one for each province Nearly twenty years of independence! When will we have the first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of our country? And yet the militancy and ability of our women, their disinterested commitment, have already been demonstrated. Women have raised more than one man to power.

Other hints and traces at an ancient matriarchal culture exist with reference to the northern Arabs of *Jahiliyyah*. Al-Hibri (1982: 208) mentions the fact that some of the women seemed to be possessed of self-determination in sexual and other matters. They joined combat, recited poetry, and conducted business. This question of self-

determination - which reaches its apex in the figure of the divorced career woman - is reflected in Aissatou's position, an event which precedes the commencement of the epistle from her friend, Ramatoulaye, the narrative voice in *So Long a Letter*. Furthermore, other women were sought by their tribes for the wisdom of their advice. Polyandry was practised; a woman could marry more than one man simultaneously and she exercised the right to choose her husband and to divorce. However, it is important to keep in mind, as Al-Hibri notes, that these practices were exceptions to the patriarchal rule of marriage and therefore, as Mahmasani (quoted by Al-Hibri, 1982: 208) points out, were traces of an older, largely defunct matriarchy. In the novel, *The Innocence of the Devil* (discussed in Chapter Six), the pre-Islamic goddess, Al-Lat, is revived by El-Saadawi in a subtle gender and word game when the protagonist Ganat and her grandmother both transform a grammatically male deity into a grammatically female one.

Another fact about *Jahiliyyah* was that a man could marry up to a hundred women. His wives would become part of the inheritance upon his death. By contrast, women were not permitted, by law, to inherit. Finally, as Arab men discovered the economic advantage of daughters, some of them were forced into prostitution. Relatively independent women seem to have been living side by side with hopelessly enslaved ones. Al-Hibri (1982: 210) reasons that if we are willing to accept the reasonable assumption that the evidence, presented earlier, indicates traces of a defunct matriarchal culture, then the history of the Arab peninsula could be viewed as one of a dynamic struggle between the forces of the matriarchy and patriarchy extending over a period of hundreds of years. By the late *Jahiliyyah*, while patriarchy was supreme, it had still not wiped out some pockets of matriarchal resistance and some ancient practices. Al-Hibri therefore poses the following

important questions pertaining to the status of women: how did women lose their status in the peninsula or conversely, how did patriarchy take over? However, before an attempt is made to answer these questions, it is necessary first to discuss the constitution of Islam (622 AD) by the Prophet Muhammad in historical context and its influence on the status of women in ancient Islam.

This raises a further question, one regarding imperialism, which Mernissi (1992: 25), in fact, poses: how could a very ethnocentric Arab who knew no foreign language, who had travelled very little, throw the world into an upheaval with a message that gave, and still gives, meaning to life and to people (men and women) belonging to very different cultures - from China to Senegal; from Russia to India? In order to answer this central question, a short synopsis is undertaken and the text *Women and Islam* (1992), by Fatima Mernissi is used as primary source to explain the life and times of the Prophet. Being born in 570 AD, as already mentioned (see Introduction: footnote 4), he received his first vision from Allah in his fortieth year, 610 AD. This first revelation was the first verse of sura 96, which contained the instruction '*Iqra*' (Recite/read).

So Islam began with an order to recite, to inform oneself. As the Prophet received Allah's message orally and transmitted it orally, it seems singularly appropriate that Mariama Bâ chooses first to 'write back' in the mode of an epistolary [autobiographic] novel as the title of her first published work *So Long a Letter* indicates. The order given to the revelations in the written text of the *Qur'an* answered a more pedagogic need, as already pointed out in the end notes to the Introduction. It can thus be said that it was at Medina that Islam as *shari'a*, that is, as social law of divine origin, was born. Khadija, the Prophet's first

wife, celebrated the event by converting to the new religion of her husband; she was Islam's first adherent. The 'new' religion was going to cause great changes in polytheistic Mecca, which housed in its temple, the Ka'ba, no less than three hundred idols. The Meccans found the idea of one single God, which Muhammad was now proclaiming publicly after having preached secretly for the first three years, absurd.

In 622 AD, the Prophet emigrated to Medina since the Meccans were searching for him in order to kill him. He had insulted their gods, and above all their cherished goddesses, Al-Uzza, Al-Lat and Al-Manat. Medina became the first Muslim community and was led by Muhammad as the political and military chief, the arbiter and the legislator inspired by God Himself. The problem of the *Hadiths* came up after the death of the Prophet 632 AD, ten years after the *Hijra* (622 AD). After his death the question of succession arose. It was necessary to replace the Prophet in both his political and his legislative role. As a solution to the political problem, Muslim experts developed the political theory of the caliphate. According to Mernissi (1992: 39) Abu Bakr, the first caliph, was appointed through a process in which only the elite were involved. They negotiated to preserve what was essential to them - and the essential varied according to the interests of the participants. The reign of the first caliphs ended when the fifth caliph, Mu'awiya, would simply name during his lifetime, his son Yazid as his heir. 'Islam, which wanted to avoid the system of tribal aristocracy, fell back into a similar pattern, but on the scale of empire - the dynastic pattern' (Mernissi, (1992: 42).

A summary of the process of choosing the first orthodox caliph intends to familiarize the reader with the historical events taking place when the Sunna (tradition, the *Hadith*) of

the Prophet was being elaborated. And it is particularly intended to raise an issue which, fifteen centuries later, Muslims still do not seem ready to resolve. This issue is voiced by Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter* (1989) when the narrator advocates the need for change in an oppressive society:

And now the Family Code has been passed, restoring to the most humble of women the dignity that has so often been trampled upon. But Daouda, the constraints remain; but Daouda, old beliefs are revived; but Daouda, egoism emerges, scepticism rears its head in the political field. (61)

Mernissi (1992: 42) too, raises this issue when she asks: 'How is the principle of equality of all believers (whatever their gender and ethnic or social origin) to be transformed into a practical political system which gives every one the right to participate in the choice of the leader of the community?' Mernissi further maintains that the 'period of orthodoxy' - today we would call it the democratic era - and especially its brutal end are both symptom and symbol for an understanding of modern political violence in Muslim countries and the dilemma of women in contemporary Islam.

Concurrent with the historical events, two contradictory tendencies that are at odds with each other in the elaboration of the *Hadiths* emerge: on the one hand, the desire of the male politicians to manipulate the sacred; and on the other hand, the fierce determination of the religious scholars to oppose them through the elaboration of the *fiqh* (a verifiable science of religion) with its concepts and its methods of verification and counter-verification.

According to Al-Bukhari, a good representative of these tensions and one of the religious authorities on the *Hadiths*, it is supposed to have been Abu-Bakra who had heard the

Prophet say: 'Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity'. Mernissi comments that this *Hadith* is included in the *Sahih* - those thousands of authentic *Hadiths* accepted by the meticulous Al-Bukhari - it is *a priori* considered true and therefore unassailable without proof to the contrary, seeing that a scientific terrain is dealt with. Mernissi's double investigation - historical and methodological - of this *Hadith* and its author, and especially of the conditions in which it was first put to use, serves as the informing principle of one of the theoretical angles offered in this chapter, namely the extent to which the manipulation of the sacred texts since the Monday of the year June 8, 632 AD (the day of the Prophet's death) has influenced the status of women in Islam thereafter. A panorama is thus provided of the magnitude of the political and economic stakes that presided, and still preside over Islam.

Following the manipulation of the sacred texts, Mernissi's question with regard to the mystery of misogyny that Muslim women have to confront even in the nineteen-nineties is pertinent: on what occasion did Abu Bakra recall the words by the Prophet: 'Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!', and why did he feel the need to recount them? Mernissi (1992: 50) remarks that Abu Bakra must have had a fabulous memory, because he recalled them a quarter of a century after the death of the Prophet, at the time that the caliph Ali retook Basra after having defeated Aisha, at the Battle of the Camel. Abu Bukra did not only refrain from taking part in the civil war or *fitna*, but, like many of the Companions who had opted for non-participation, he had made his position known officially. When he was confronted by Aisha, Abu Bakra made known his response to her: he was against *fitna* because he had heard the Prophet say on one occasion: 'Those who entrust power [*mulk*] to a woman will never know prosperity.'

Although many of the Companions and inhabitants of Basra chose neutrality in the conflict, only Abu Bakra justified it by the fact that one of the parties was a woman. The case of another Muslim pacifist, Abu Musa, is mentioned by Mernissi (1992: 57). Abu Musa was also opposed to civil war, *fitna*. Yet, unlike Abu Bakra's case, it was not a question of the sex of the leader which gave rise to Musa's opposition to the war, but primarily a question of opposing *fitna*.

Abu Bakra's 'misogynistic' *Hadith*, as Mernissi (1992: 61) points out, is not a unique case. In the *Hadith* compiled by Al-Bukhari (his source in this instance was Abu Hurayra, a Companion of the Prophet), the following verses occur concerning the 'polluting essence' of femaleness. The first verse reveals: 'Three things bring bad luck: house, woman, and horse'. However, as Mernissi (1992: 76) states, there is no trace in Al-Bukhari's *Hadith* of Aisha's refutation of this statement when she claimed that he only heard the end of the Prophet's sentence. What the Prophet in fact said was: 'May Allah refute the Jews; they say three things bring bad luck: house, woman and horse' (Zarkashi, as quoted by Mernissi, 1992: 76).

Another misogynistic verse, cited by Abu Hurayra, namely that 'The prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*' is equally polemical. Mernissi (1992: 65) claims that Abu Hurayra did not at all understand his *risala* (message), since he made woman an element that interrupted worship by interposing herself between the believer and the *qibla*. Mernissi refers to the fact that Muhammad's mosque, like the 'house of God' in the Christian religion is not a building, a construction, but a perspective. The mosque is

everywhere: 'The whole earth became my mosque' (Zarkashi, as quoted by Mernissi 1992: 69). All a believer has to do to pray is to face the direction of Mecca and place in front of himself an object that symbolically represents the sacred shrine. The *qibla* makes the universe turn, with an Arab city as its centre. Excluding women from the *qibla*, then as Mernissi remarks, is excluding them from everything - from the sacred dimension of life, as from the nationalist dimension, which defines space as the field of Arab and Muslim ethnocentrism. Aisha, too, disputed Abu Hurayra's statement. She maintained that she had seen the Prophet saying his prayers while she was lying on the bed between him and the *qibla* and in order not to disturb him, she did not move (Ibn Hayar-Al Asqalani, quoted by Mernissi, 1992: 70). The believers used to come to Aisha for verification of what they heard, as they were confident of her judgement, not only because she so was close to the Prophet, but also because of her own abilities. Yet, despite Aisha's words of caution and her refutation of this *Hadith*, the influence of Abu Hurayra has nevertheless infiltrated the most prestigious religious texts among the *Sahih* of Al-Bukhari.

Moreover, as Mernissi (1992: 61) points out, certain attitudes of the *fuqaha* (religious scholars) in the first centuries toward this misogynistic *Hadith* are still presented today as sacred, unassailable truth. Even though it was collected as *Sahih* (authentic) by Al-Bukhari and others, this very same *Hadith* was hotly contested and debated by many. The *fuqaha* did not all agree on the weight to give this *Hadith* on women and politics. While some used it as an argument for excluding women from decision making, others found that argument unfounded and unconvincing. Al-Tabari was one of those religious authorities who took a position against it, not finding it a sufficient basis for depriving women of their power of decision-making and for justifying their exclusion from politics.

Various methodological rules were applied by the *fuqaha* (religious scholars) in the verification of the authenticity of the *Hadith*, one of which was to consider 'this religion as science' in the tradition of Imam Malik. Mernissi (1992: 61) considers Ibn Anas Malik (born in year 93 of the *Hijra*, the eight century AD), together with Shafi'i and Abu Hanifa, the three most famous *imams* in Islam because of their contribution to distinguish the permitted from the forbidden. Ignorance, intellectual capacity and moral ethics were the three most important criteria for evaluating the narrator of a *Hadith*. Ibn Malik (cited by Mernissi, 1992: 61) once remarked:

There are some people whom I rejected as narrators of *Hadith*, not because they lied in their role as men of science by recounting false *Hadith* that the Prophet did not say, but just simply because I saw them lying in their relations with people, in their daily relationships that had nothing to do with religion.

Mernissi argues that if this rule of moral ethics is applied to Abu Bakra, he would have to be immediately eliminated, since one of the biographies of him tells us that he was convicted of slander, *qadhf* and flogged for false testimony by the caliph Umar Ibn Al-Khattab. Mernissi (1992: 61) therefore reasons that if one follows the principles of Malik for *fiqh*, Abu Bakra must be rejected as a reliable source of *Hadith* by every good, well-informed Malikite Muslim. Abu Hurayra is regarded by Mernissi (1992: 76) as the source of an enormous amount of commentary in the religious literature: he is the author of *Hadiths* that saturate the daily life of every modern Muslim.

Concurrent with the ongoing debate on the status and role of women in the religious context in Islam, as discussed above, is the traditional belief in monotheistic religions, including Islam, Christianity and Judaism, that men are superior to women. This belief, according to Hassan (1994: 18) is rooted in the three myths which are: first, that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib and is therefore derivative and secondary ontologically; and then that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as 'Man's Fall' or expulsion from the garden of Eden, hence all daughters of Eve are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion and contempt; and finally that woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not of fundamental importance.

Hassan (1994: 19) proffers three theological questions in an attempt to answer these above assumptions or myths. These are: first, 'How was woman created?' Second, 'Was woman responsible for the "Fall" of man?' Finally, 'Why was woman created?' Hassan claims that theoretically speaking, the Islamic and Christian religious traditions differ significantly in the way in which they answer these questions. But practically speaking, both Muslims and Christians have, in general, been patriarchal in their mind-set, creating societies in which men are regarded as the norm and women are be considered to be unequal and inferior to men.

In both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Mariama Bâ expresses her concern about this predicament which women face, not only in Senegal, but also in Western societies where the patriarchal tradition features strongly. In *Scarlet Song* (1994) Mireille writes to her

love, Ousmane:

As for Mother, she accepts everything that her husband says. She repeats to visitors whatever she can remember of his diatribes against "these lunatics" (father's expression), without giving them a chance to air their own opinions about what father calls "this tidal wave". (43)

Mireille, like Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* (1989), is willing to oppose the patriarchal system when she chooses to marry Ousmane. She accepts full responsibility for her own life when she writes in her letter to her father:

One cannot escape one's own fate I am turning my back on a protected past to face the unknown. I am aware of this If you can forgive me, write to me (76)

In order to interrogate the polemic around the role of women and her dependent/independent status in the religious context (as so vividly portrayed by both Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi), Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad's essay 'Eve: Islamic Image of Women' (1982) will be drawn upon too. Focusing on the figure of Eve as portrayed in the *Qur'an*, in Islamic tradition, and in contemporary Muslim writings, Smith and Haddad demonstrate that the way in which Eve is portrayed and understood, has immediate and obvious ramifications for the Muslim view of women in general.

The Biblical answer to the question 'How was woman created?' consists of two different sources, the Priestly and the Yahwist, from which arise two different traditions which are the subject of an on-going controversy amongst Christian scholars (Hassan, 1994: 19). Hassan further points out that the belief that woman was made from Adam's rib is rooted in the Yahwist writer's account of creation in Genesis 2.18-24. While Jesus's own attitude to women was positive (in Mark 10.6) - he indicates an affirmation of woman-man

equality in the creation - the formulators of the Christian tradition, in general, have interpreted the Yahwist account of creation to assert woman's inherent inferiority to man.

Moreover, the ordinary Muslim, too, believes, as seriously as the ordinary Christian, that Adam was God's primary creation and that Eve was formed from Adam's rib. Hassan (1994: 20), however, emphatically asserts the fact that 'this myth has no basis whatever in the *Qur'an*, which in the context of human creation speaks always in completely egalitarian terms'. Mariama Bâ too, shares this Qur'anic point of view when she claims in *Scarlet Song* (1994) that love can only thrive in an egalitarian relationship which has been ordained by God:

As her husband's equal, [Mireille] would challenge his ideas and decisions She considered she was his partner in the marriage. She would discuss matters on an equal footing. (148)

In underwriting egalitarian human creation, Hassan further emphasizes that in none of the thirty or so passages that describe the creation of humanity (designated by generic terms such as '*an-nas*', '*al-isnan*', and '*bashar*') by God in a variety of ways is there a statement that could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. The Qur'anic viewpoint notwithstanding, Muslims believe that *Hawwa'* (the Hebrew/Arabic counterpart of Eve) who, incidentally, is never mentioned in the *Qur'an*, was created from the crooked rib of Adam, who is believed to be the first human being created by God. Hassan (1994: 20) further points out that the term 'Adam' is not an Arabic term, but a Hebrew term which is a collective noun referring to the human species rather than to a male human being. In the *Qur'an* also, the term Adam refers in twenty-one cases out of twenty-five to humanity in general.

Hassan (1994: 20) therefore asks: 'If the *Qur'an* makes no distinction between the creation of man and woman - as it clearly does not - why do Muslims believe that *Hawwa* was created from the rib of Adam?' A possible answer to this central question, according to Hassan, is that it would appear 'that in ways yet unresearched, the Yahwist account of woman's creation became incorporated in the *Hadith* literature which is only the second source of the Islamic tradition (the first one, as already noted, being the *Qur'an*, which the Muslims believe to be the Word of God). Yet, notwithstanding this fact, the two most authoritative *Hadiths*, by Imams Bukhari and Muslim, state that woman is either created from a rib, or is like a rib which is crooked and can never be straightened. Hassan (1994: 21) ironically observes: 'Although in theory the *Qur'an* can never be superseded by *Hadith*, in the context of woman's creation this appears to have happened'. Hassan's observation concurs with Mernissi's claim that even the authentic *Hadiths* must be vigilantly examined. Al-Hibri (1982: vii), too, endorses the notion that it is the Muslim's tradition to question everything and everybody, especially since religious researchers finally agreed on clarifying the *Hadiths* in various categories ranging from the certain to the false.

The second theological question, 'Was woman responsible for the "Fall" of man?' would generally be answered in the affirmative by both Muslims and Christians. Yet Hassan (1994: 21) claims that 'nothing in the Qur'anic text warrants such an answer'. In the *Qur'an*, the *Shaitan* (Satan) has no exclusive dialogue with Adam's mate; nor is there any suggestion in the text of *Hawwa*' being tempted and deceived by the *Shaitan* and in turn tempting and deceiving Adam and so precipitating man's 'Fall'. Smith and Haddad (1982: 139) state that *Qur'an* makes it clear that the consequences are the same for both man and

woman. They see their own nakedness; they are both condemned to the eternal enmity of Satan, and, with him, both are expelled from the Garden. However, in the *Hadiths* additional burdens are said to be borne by Eve and by the serpent and only Eve is portrayed as overcome with shame. The negative impact on woman (Christian and Islam) will however, never be fathomed; through the centuries woman has been called the cause of man's 'fallen-ness' which as Hassan (1994: 21) observes, has been associated since Augustine with sexuality and the idea of original sin. In the framework of Qur'anic theology, however, there is no fall from heaven to earth or any mention of original sin. Yet despite this, Muslims, like Christians, have often regarded women as 'the devil's gateway, finding support for their misogynistic views in *ahadith* which, though lacking in authenticity, continue to be popular' (Hassan, 1994: 21). In the novel, *The Innocence of the Devil* (Chapter Six), El-Saadawi addresses the narrow-minded belief that God does not include the fallen woman in his forgiveness. The protagonist, Ganat ponders over her guilt as a 'fallen' woman and recalls her father's conversation with her mother:

God had listened to what Adam had to say and had forgiven him alone. That was what her father had explained to her mother It was Adam alone who was forgiven She understood that the curse included her Guilt grew under her ribs like a swelling in her flesh. She had to live this sin. No atonement could be made, no words of forgiveness could come from God. (1994: 117-8)

The third theological question, the idea that woman was not only made from man but also for man, has been much emphasized by traditional Christianity. Eve was created, in the eyes of many modern critics, to be protected. Twice the *Qur'an*, according to Smith and Haddad (1982: 136), ordains that among God's signs are the creation of mates 'that you might find rest in them' (*Qur'an* 7: 189, 30: 21). The *Qur'an* furthermore, according to Hassan (1994: 21) contends that the creation as a whole is 'for just ends'. Hassan

therefore claims that humanity fashioned 'in the best moulds' comprises both women and men who are equally called upon by God to be righteous, being assured that they will be equally rewarded for their righteousness. Austin (1983: 42) too, endorses this spiritual equality when he remarks:

The *Qur'an* clearly recognises the spiritual equality of man and woman as human being subject to God and encourages individual and just treatment of women, except where they threaten serious disobedience, just as the Prophet, throughout his life, loved and respected women and treated them very well. The *Qur'an* accords women far more rights and privileges than were enjoyed by Christian women until the 19th century, and Muslim women are, in Law, as much citizens as men, with certain disadvantages.

Yet Hassan (1994: 21) observes that in spite of the Qur'anic affirmation of man-woman equality, Muslim societies in general have never regarded men and women as equal, particular in the context of marriage: 'The alleged superiority of men to women that permits the Islamic tradition is grounded not only in *Hadith* literature but also in popular interpretations of some Qur'anic passages such as Surah 4: An-Nisa: 34' (Hassan, 1994: 22). Smith and Haddad (1982: 144) too, remark that '*Hawwa*' continues to be a foil in the attempts of modern Muslim writers to address questions of woman's role and function as well as her essential nature'. If certain voices are calling for her rejection of the 'un-Qur'anic view of her as either inferior or culpable' (Smith and Haddad's phrase), it is apparent that for many others the traditional interpretations of Eve serve as a useful purpose in the claim that woman's humanity is less than man's and will always be.

In an attempt to shed more light on the role women played in Islam, it is therefore of necessity to explore the prominent place women occupied in the social economic life of

the Prophet in early Islam. During the whole period of his prophetic mission, whether in Mecca (610 to 622 AD) or in Medina (622 to 632 AD), Muhammad gave a major place to women in his public life. Nawal El-Saadawi (1982: 196), too, underwrites this notion that some of the Prophet's wives were very prominent women among the Arabs at that time. She mentions Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet, who was known for her imposing personality and her independence both socially and economically. Khadija earned her own living through trade. During the twenty years of their marriage, Muhammad was monogamous. Flora Nwapa (1981) echoes this in the subject and title of her novel *One is Enough*. Muhammad practised polygamy only after Khadija's death. So too, are Ramatoulaye's, Aissatou's and Mireille's husbands happily monogamous for many years. They are ironically, and perhaps paradoxically, urged into polygamy by overbearing 'mothers'.

Another very prominent woman, Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet, is singled out as a living example of how women stood firm on many issues in those days. El-Saadawi (1982: 196) records that Aisha was well known for her strong will, versatile and incisive logic, and eloquence. She wielded a powerful intelligence and she did not hesitate in opposing or contradicting the Prophet. She fought in several battles and wars, and as already noted earlier, Aisha was actively involved in politics and cultural and literary activities to a degree that led the theologian of the Muslims, Urwa Ibn El-Zuheir, to say, 'I have not seen any one who is more knowledgeable in theology, in medicine and in poetry than Aisha' (as quoted by El-Saadawi 1982: 197). El-Saadawi further emphasizes that Aisha's achievements are remarkable if one takes into account that she reached the age of eighteen only after the death of Muhammad.

Imam Zarkashi (one of the greatest scholars of the Shafi'i school of his time) serves as an example of a religious scholar who did not adopt a misogynistic attitude towards women, but, who in fact, devoted a book to Aisha's contribution to Islam as a source of religious knowledge. It was dedicated to the Judge of Judges - the equivalent of the Minister of Justice in Islam today, the supreme authority in religious matters in a Muslim city. Mernissi (1992: 79) argues that Zarkashi undertook this work on Aisha because the Prophet recognized her importance to such an extent that he said: 'Draw a part of your religion from little *al-humayra*' ([sic] Al-Tabari, as quoted by Mernissi, 1992: 78).

Among other prominent women that are mentioned by El-Saadawi are Nessiba Bint Ka'ab who fought with her sword by the side of Muhammad in the battle of Uhud, and Um Sa Sulaym Bint Malhan who tied a dagger around her waist above her pregnant belly and fought in the ranks of Muhammad and his followers. Umm Salama, another wife of the Prophet was, according to Mernissi (1992: 116), one of those women of the Quraysh aristocracy in whom physical beauty and intelligence ensured her the privilege of being consulted on matters of vital concern to the community.

El-Saadawi claims that early Muslim women preceded the women in the world in resisting a religious system based on male domination. Fourteen centuries ago these women succeeded in opposing the unilateral use of the male gender in the *Qur'an* (when referring to both men and women) when they posed the question: 'We have proclaimed our belief in Islam, and done as you have done. How is it then that you men should be mentioned in the *Qur'an* while we are ignored!' (quoted by El-Saadawi 1982: 195). At the time both men and women were referred to as 'Muslimeen' (masculine for Muslims) but, in response

to the objection voiced by women, Allah hence forward made in the *Qur'an* the distinction between male and female believers by using the terms Wal-Mou'mineena (masculine) and Wal' Mou'minat (feminine)' (Ibn S'aad, as quoted by El-Saadawi 1982: 195).

Mernissi (1992: 119) holds the opinion that not only did the other women share Umm Salama's concern when she asked the Prophet: 'Why are men mentioned in the Koran [*sic*] and why are we not?' Furthermore, they also took the Prophet's answer from Heaven for what it was: a break with pre-Islamic practices, the calling into question of the customs that ruled relations between sexes:

Men who surrender unto Allah, and women who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, ... Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward.

(Quoted by Mernissi, 1992: 118)

The new regulations and laws 'affirmed the idea of the individual as a subject, a free will always present in the world, a sovereign consciousness that cannot disappear as long as the person lives' (Mernissi 1992: 121). Mariama Bâ furthers this struggle for the recognition of the female individual as a subject in both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. Ramatoulaye claims in *So Long a Letter* (58): 'You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand' and in *Scarlet Song* Mireille declares: 'I am determined to retain my own identity as far as essentials are concerned - the values that I believe in, the truths that light my path' (41).

Notwithstanding the new Islamic regulations and laws affirming the idea of the individual as a subject, many Muslim men could not come to terms with the Prophet's message. Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, a military chief, who later became the caliph - and who influenced

the Prophet to implement the *hijab* - represented the male hierarchy in Islam who could not accept the changes that Islam introduced. They felt that these changes should be limited to public life and spiritual life: 'The men were prepared to accept Islam as a revolution in relations in public life, an overturning of political and economic hierarchies' (Mernissi 1992: 142), but they were not prepared to change anything concerning 'relations between sexes'. To them the private life should remain under the rule of pre-Islamic customs, customs that Muhammad and his God rejected and condemned henceforth as out of step with the new system of Muslim values, which emphasized the equality of all, including the equality of gender.

The men's opposition to the women's status in Medina stems from the Prophet's simple manner of living which was embodied in the simplicity of lodgings and their closeness to each other and the mosque. Mernissi (1992: 111) claims that this manner of living was a threat to those around him since male supremacy can only exist and be consolidated if the public/private division is maintained as an almost sacred matter. This closeness of living gave a democratic dimension to the Islamic community, which, in Mernissi's words (1992: 111) makes us all dream about the lack of distance between the leader and 'his people'.

Mernissi (1992: 113) argues that the Prophet's architecture created a space in which the distance between private life and public life was nullified and which played a decisive role in the lives of women and their relationship to politics. At the heart of the debate is the attempt to limit the role of woman to that ascribed to her by the traditions and to which traditional patriarchal society has restricted her - that of wife and mother. Marriage, in Islam, is a central institution; 'it is seen as an important social duty incumbent on each

individual' (Haddad 1982: 57). It is prescribed by the traditional society and according to this traditional patriarchal society her only role is that of wife and mother, and, as Haddad ironically points out, 'it is to be her sole identity' (1982: 57). However, this is not the role the Prophet envisaged for women, as the opposite was clearly illustrated in his treatment of his wives.

Notwithstanding the verses affirming woman's equality and especially her right to inheritance in the *Qur'an*, a critical period followed for the women of Islam. Mernissi (1992: 129) remarks that although other verses came, which temporized on the principle of equality of gender, male supremacy was reaffirmed too. This reaffirmation of male supremacy in the *Qur'an*, nevertheless, 'created an ambiguity that would be exploited by governing elites right up until the present day' (Mernissi, 1992: 129). Muslim men seemed intent upon recuperating the customs of *Jahiliyyah*. They opposed the laws regarding the equality of women by rejecting them and applying the customs of the *Jahiliyyah* despite their conversion to Islam. They complained to the Prophet and tried to put pressure on him to change the laws. Finally, in desperation, they took to interpreting the text 'as a means of escaping it and manipulating them in such a way as to maintain their privileges' (Mernissi 1992: 121). Since all of this was done during the Prophet's lifetime, women's triumph, in fact, was of very short duration, to which the 'descent' of the *hijab* (veil) is testimony.

Thus a struggle in Islam began, as El-Saadawi (1982: 197) notes, a struggle and polemic that was never to end, between those who fought for equality, freedom, social and economic justice, and those who stood for class privilege, male domination, feudal

oppression and the occultation of the feminine by trying to veil it. And it is just these issues that Mariama Bâ examines in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* (Chapters Four and Five, respectively) and Nawal El-Saadawi addresses in her fictional and semi-fictional works (as will be shown in a survey of selected texts by El-Saadawi in Chapter Six).

CHAPTER 2

'THE VEIL' AND FRAGMENTATION

The polemic surrounding the authenticity of the *Hadiths* regarding the role and status of women touches on some very salient points one of which, as indicated in the previous chapter, constitutes the descent of the *hijab* (veil) as a central concept in Islam. It can be argued that if the authenticity of the *Hadith* is a subject peppered with contradictions, the polemic around the seclusion and veiling of woman, too, is a subject shot through by ambiguities, controversies and contradictions.

Although all the monotheistic religions are permeated with the conflict between the divine and the feminine, 'Islam has opted for the occultation of the feminine, at least, symbolically, by trying to veil it, to mask it, to hide it. Islam as a sexual practice is cited out in a scene where the *hijab* (veil) occupies a central position' (Mernissi, 1992: 81). Mernissi comments that this almost phobic attitude towards woman is all the more surprising since the Prophet had encouraged his adherents to renounce it as representative of the *Jahiliyyah* and its superstitions. Two central questions are therefore posed by Mernissi (1992: 81):

Is it possible that Islam's message had only a limited and superficial effect on deeply superstitious seventh-century Arabs who failed to integrate its novel approaches to the world and to women? Is the *hijab*, the attempt to veil women, that is claimed today to be basic to Muslim identity, nothing but the expression of the persistence of the pre-Islamic mentality, the *jahiliyyah* mentality that Islam was supposed to annihilate?

In view of these questions it is necessary to explore the significance of the *hijab* and what it really represents in the early Muslim context. Its logic and justification needs to be examined and answers will be provided to the following three central questions: when was it inaugurated, for whom and why? Related to these polemical issues is the question raised in Chapter One, 'How did women lose their independence?' An attempt is made to answer

these questions in this chapter by drawing upon Mernissi's seminal text *Women and Islam* (1992), as already indicated, and by focusing upon the male-female relationship in the patriarchal social context.

As intimated earlier, Mernissi (1992: 85) states that the descent of the *hijab*, an historical event, dates back to verse 53 of sura 33 of the *Qur'an*, which was revealed during year five of the *Hijra* (627 AD). Mernissi further makes the pertinent statement that the *hijab* - literally 'curtain'- 'descended', not to put a barrier between a man and a woman but between two men, (as noted in the Introduction to this thesis).

The 'descent of the *hijab*' - an expression used by the *fuqaha*, or religious scholars - covers two simultaneous events that take place in completely different realms: on the one hand, God's revelation to the Prophet, which is in the intellectual realm; and on the other hand, the descent of a cloth/*hijab*, a material object, a curtain that the Prophet draws between himself and the man who was at the entrance of his nuptial chamber. The verse of the *hijab* 'descended' and was received in the bedroom of the newly wedded pair (the Prophet and his wife Zaynab) to protect their intimacy and to exclude a third person, in this case Anas Ibn Malik, one of the Prophet's companions. Although Anas was excluded by the *hijab* he reported upon the event. Anas recalled the Prophet pronouncing 'the verse of the *hijab*':

Oh ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you Linger not for conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts.

(*Qur'an* 33: 53 as quoted by Mernissi, 1992: 85)

As the Prophet had just got married, he was impatient to be alone with his new wife, Zaynab. He was not able to get rid of a small group of tactless guests who had not yet departed. The veil was to be God's answer to a community with boorish manners whose lack of delicacy offended the Prophet. This at least is this interpretation of a very renowned historian and commentator on the *Qur'an*, Al-Tabari (922 AD). In describing the 'descent of the *hijab*' Al-Tabari does not try to give reasons for the irritation of the Prophet who was known for his composure and infinite patience. Paradoxically, in a society in which, according to Al-Tabari, people turned very quickly to the sword to settle problems, Muhammad was admired for his ability to absorb tension and remain calm. It remains to be asked, as Mernissi (1992: 89) indeed does: 'How then can we explain that such a minor irritation so rapidly precipitated a draconian decision like that of the *hijab*, which split Muslim space in two?'

In an effort to offer a possible solution to this crucial question, Mernissi resorts to the historical context, as she believes that the historical context alone can help the Muslim reader to begin to clear up the mystery of the splitting of the Muslim space into two by the descent of the *hijab*. Given the historical background, it becomes quite clear that year 3 of the *Hijra* (625 AD) was the Prophet's most disastrous year as military leader of a monotheistic sect that was trying to assert itself in an Arabia that was happy with a polytheistic set-up. Not only did the Prophet suffer a military defeat in year 3 of the *Hijra*, at the battle of Uhud against the Meccans, he also had to maintain internal order in a society that was threatened by *fitna*/disorder because of other military defeats. It was only in year 8 of the *Hijra* (630 AD) that the Prophet won a decisive victory over the Meccans, after which he conquered Mecca and then all of Arabia. For this reason,

Mernissi (1992: 92) argues that the incident that took place during the night of the Prophet's wedding to Zaynab must be resituated in the context of doubt and military defeat that undermined the morale of the inhabitants of Medina.

As noted earlier, verse 53 of sura 33, though not the only one on the event of the wedding, was the first of a series which in fact is regarded by the founders of religious knowledge 'as the basis of the institution of the *hijab*' and which led to the splitting of the Muslim space (Mernissi 1992: 92). She claims that a careful rereading of the verse reveals to us that Allah's concerns are about tact. In addition to the rules of etiquette, the last part of the verse relates to Allah's decision to forbid Muslims to marry the Prophet's wives after his death. The conclusion can thus be made that, apart from the incident about the lack of politeness at the wedding, the *hijab* came to give order to a society that was facing a very confused and complex situation. This situation was brought about by Muslim men who showed a lack of respect for the Prophet when they threatened to marry his wives after his death. Furthermore, these very men were fiercely opposed to the Prophet's message which advocated gender equality. Seen in this context, the Muslim society faced a severe internal crisis. Muhammad's political opponents, too, saw the opportunity to use his private life as a political weapon against him. All of this was taking place at a time when he was not only facing uncertainty in his military career, but also a physical decline due to his increasing years.

Nevertheless, 'the Prophet refused to minimize the sexual aspect of life, to hide it, to consider it marginal or secondary' (Mernissi, 1992: 162). Therefore, the descent of the *hijab* is only understandable if the extraordinary freedom of the Prophet's wives in the

public sphere is taken into account. The *hijab*, then, reveals a social reality which previously was one of no separation between the world of women and that of men, nor confinement to the household. However, a rapid reading, as in the case of Ana's testimony, as recorded by Al-Tabari, gives the opposite impression. Like the *fuqaha* (religious scholars) Mernissi, too, maintains the viewpoint that all the information at one's disposal, especially the linguistic dimensions of the word *hijab*, should be explored in order to shed more light on its meaning.

As regards the linguistic dimensions of the word *hijab*, Mernissi (1992: 93) points out that the concept of the *hijab* is three-dimensional which often braids into one. The first dimension is a visual one, hiding something from view, as in the case of the *hijab al-amir* (the *hijab* of the prince, the most powerful man of the Muslim community) to escape the gaze of his entourage. Kings and caliphs, too, used to sit behind a *hijab* (or *sitr*, which in Arabic literally means 'curtain') to avoid the gaze of members of their court. Here an act of making a threshold between two distinct areas is demonstrated. Yet the *hijab*, as in the case of the Sufi *hijab*, expresses the opposite idea, since it blocks knowledge of the divine, which is a negative phenomenon. In Sufi terminology the *mahjub* (veiled) is the one who is unable to go beyond the sensual or mental consciousness. This *hijab* imprisons one's consciousness from discovery. Therefore the *hijab* that separates one from the prince is to be respected, whereas the one that separates the Muslim from God should be destroyed. In the religious context too, one discovers the concept of a negative *hijab*, similar to the Sufi idea, an obstacle that prevents one from seeing God. The *Encyclopedia of Islam* explicitly states the role of the *hijab* as a means of separation, especially in the case of revelations by God because 'the veil has to protect the elect from the brilliance of

the divine countenance' (cited by Mernissi, 1992: 96).

The meaning of the *hijab*, as a veil that hides God from men, takes on an eminently negative significance in verse 50 of sura 41 where, according to Al-Tabari, the veil expresses the difficulties that the Quraysh, traditionally polytheistic, had in understanding the monotheistic message of Muhammad. Furthermore, for some theologians, the *hijab* is a punishment which 'tortures' the believer:

God, if Thou must torture me with something, don't torture me with the humiliation of the *hijab*.

(Al-Nisaburi as quoted by Mernissi 1992: 97)

Mernissi (1992: 97) therefore remarks that it is strange indeed to observe the modern course of this concept, which from the beginning has such a strong negative connotation in the *Qur'an*. 'The very sign of the person who is damned, excluded from the privileges and spiritual grace to which the Muslim has access, is claimed in our day as a symbol of Muslim identity, manna for the Muslim woman' (Mernissi, 1992: 97).

The concept of the *hijab*, according to Mernissi (1992: 95), is regarded as a key concept in Muslim civilization. She argues that reducing or assimilating this concept to a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on women to veil them when they go into the street is:

... to truly impoverish and drain the term of its meaning, especially when one knows that the *hijab*, according to the Koranic verse [*sic*] and Al-Tabari's explanation, "descended" from Heaven to separate the space between two men. The "descent of the *hijab*" had a double perspective from the beginning

(Mernissi, 1992: 95)

Mernissi singles out two aspects; one, the concrete aspect: the Prophet drew a tangible curtain between himself and Anas Ibn Malik, and two, the abstract aspect: the descent of the verse, from Heaven to earth, from God to the Prophet, who recited it. A relatively

minor incident, then, provokes a response so fundamental as the splitting of Muslim society into two universes - the interior universe (the household) and the exterior universe (public space) - or the profane from the sacred. This in turn, as Mernissi argues (1992: 101) spilled over in the segregation of sexes because 'it [the veil] was going to cover up woman, separate them from men, from the Prophet, and so from God'.

This separation from men and from God is even more ironic, if one takes into account that the Prophet, during his lifetime, promoted an egalitarian relationship in marriage, and since he believed in the total equality of all, as members of the community. And it was definitely not gender that determined this equality, but faith and the desire to obey God. Mariama Bâ, too, addresses the predicament that Muslim women have to face since the descent of the veil in a patriarchal Muslim society in her epistolary novel, *So Long a Letter*, when Ramatoulaye remarks that women have become 'instruments for some, baits for others, ... despised, often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed' (88). This unjust legislation, which was going to separate women from men by imposing the wearing of the veil, has led to 'social constraints ... ever present' (Bâ, 1989: 88).

Yet, as noted before, the fact that the Prophet was facing insecurity in his military career had a profound effect on his reputation. The Battle of Dhat Al 'Riga' (year 5 of *Hijra*) contributed to the social unrest in the Medinese society. The hostility of one section of the Medinese population led the city to the brink of civil war, and internal disorder or *fitna*. Mernissi (1992: 172) comments that the insistence by the Prophet on not setting up boundaries between his private life and his public life, which allowed his wives to be

directly involved in the affairs of the Muslim state, little by little, ironically, turned against him. The appearance of two new factions among the Hypocrites who opposed the Prophet, namely those in 'whose heart is a disease' (according to Al-Tabari, this implied obsessive sexual behaviour), and 'those who spread disorder' played a pernicious role in undermining the Prophet's authority. Not only did these Hypocrites attack the Prophet verbally by spreading rumours about him and his wives, they also started harassing the women at night when they attended to their personal affairs. Women, irrespective of their status (being the wives of the Prophet) were harassed in the streets and pursued by men who subjected them through committing *zina*, an illicit sex act.

In order to defend their illegal practice, the Hypocrites simply claimed: 'We only practise *ta'arrud* with women we believe to be slaves,' (quoted by Memissi, 1992: 180). They thus excused themselves by claiming confusion about the identity of the women they approached. Memissi points out that another 'relentless verbal attack' upon the Prophet occurred when a chief of an Arab tribe came to see the Prophet and announced that he intended to marry one of the wives of the Prophet after Muhammad's death. The Prophet, in turn, responded by pointing out that the title, 'Mother of the Believers', made them forbidden to other men. According to Al-Tabari, the second part of the verse of the *hijab* (which forbids other men to marry the Prophet's wives) was revealed after these events.

An even more serious 'scandal', which contributed to conflict in the Medinese community, occurred in year 6 of the *Hijra*, when Aisha was accused of committing adultery by the Hypocrites. Though the Muslim *fuqaha* and imams called the incident a lie, it had far-reaching implications for the Prophet. The solution of instituting the *hijab* was advocated

by Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, military chief of the Muslims, when he proposed to the Prophet: 'Why do you not order the *hijab* for the "Mother of Believers?"' (Al-Nisaburi as quoted by Memissi, 1992:184). Memissi (1992: 185) remarks that Al-Khattab, despite his love for the Prophet of God, was unable to visualize the Prophet's dream, a dream which encapsulated key elements of the new religion and Muhammad's egalitarian project. The *hijab*, for Muhammad, represented the exact opposite of what he had wanted to bring about. It was the 'incarnation of the absence of control; it was the veiling of the sovereign will, which is the source of good judgement and order in a society' (Memissi, 1992: 185). Yet, to Al-Khattab, the only way of re-establishing order was to put up barriers, and to hide women, as they were the objects of envy. Memissi argues that the reaction of Al-Khattab reflected the horde mentality that was the pillars of Arabia during the period of ignorance, *Jahiliyyah*.

In the light of the social unrest and rumours, the Prophet's 'entourage', as Memissi (1992: 178) calls it, presented one solution only: a slaveholding solution to protect women - free women only - by veiling them. Slaves would remain unveiled. The Prophet, hurt and weakened, lost his ability to stand up to Al-Khattab. He agreed to the confinement of women. He gave his consent to the *hijab*. He thus gave his consent to the re-establishment of male supremacy. The Hypocrites' justification that the women they attacked were taken for slaves, led to the following verse descending from heaven:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks around them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognized and not annoyed.

(*Qur'an* 33: 59, as quoted by Memissi, 1992: 186-7)

Muhammad's dream of a society in which women could move freely around the city was

defeated by the Hypocrites who regarded women aristocrats as objects of envy and violence. In order to protect them, women slaves were sacrificed: 'The female Muslim population would henceforth be divided by the *hijab* into two categories: free women against whom violence is forbidden, and women slaves toward whom *ta'arrud* is permitted' (Mernissi, 1992: 187). Pre-Islamic violence against women triumphed. In future, slaves would continue to be harassed and attacked in the streets. As Mernissi (1992: 182) points out, the *hijab* for women, as defined by a Medina in a state of civil war, is in fact a recognition of the street as a space where *zina* was permitted. Given this historical context, Mernissi claims that the *hijab* incarnates, expresses and symbolizes an official retreat from the principle of equality. Symbolically, regression on social equality became entangled and implicated in regression on gender equality in the case of the female slave. Since the *hijab*/curtain descended on both inequalities, the two ideas were mingled and confused in the consciousness of Muslims during the fifteen centuries that followed. Tribal power, as social institution, had to disappear in the constitution of Islam (622 AD) in order for God to exist as the locus of power, the law and social control. Introducing the *hijab* reintroduced the idea that those who could not contain their desires needed social control, embodied in the tribal power and in tribal chieftains.

In view of the military crisis in Medina in years 5, 6 and 7, the Prophet had only two choices in coping with the lack of security in the city. He could wait for the new source of power, God and His religion, to take root in the Muslim community through military successes. Yet this choice implied living with insecurity for an indefinite period of time. The only other choice available to the Prophet was to reactivate the tribe as the police

force of the city, which would ensure security in the city immediately. The tribe, as Al-Hibri (1982: 212) points out, was the highest political, economic, military and legal authority, without which the individual had no significance whatsoever. Thus it followed that the 'paternal bond', which was the supreme bond in the society of *Jahiliyyah* and which permeated all facets, founding all power within it, once more became the core and essence of a patriarchal system in Islam. Reactivating the tribe, however, implied that Muhammad's message, his dream of a community in which individuals are respected and have rights, not because they belong to a tribe, but simply because they are able to believe that they have a link with God, would be defeated. Moreover, as Mernissi (1992: 188) emphasizes, 'this body of thought - the individual's role in society - [which] made *dar-al-Islam* (the land of Islam) at the outset a pioneering experiment in terms of individual freedom and democracy', would disappear too.

Al-Hibri underwrites this notion of freedom when she writes in her essay 'A Study of Islamic History' (1982: 214) that she does not intend to claim that Prophet Muhammad's record was that of a feminist revolutionary, but he 'certainly made one brave and successful attempt, at the time, to undercut patriarchy and to regain for women some of their lost rights'. The Prophet, in exchange for these regained rights, had to work out a compromise with the powerful patriarchal forces. In turn, they were promised paradise for living in accordance with Islam's teachings.

Notwithstanding this compromise 'Patriarchy was able to devour Islam quickly and make it its own after the death of Prophet Muhammad' (Al-Hibri, 1982: 215), as many Arabs attempted to turn to their old ways. Almost simultaneously, the patriarchal takeover of

Islam commenced from inside its male ranks. Since women were still at the early stages of building their powerbase, they were ultimately unable to stop 'this turn of tide' (Al-Hibri's phrase, 1982: 215).

In support of this viewpoint, El-Saadawi (1982: 197) maintains that Arab women did not lose their independence and positivity suddenly. She regards it as a gradual, rather slow process related to socio-economic changes taking place in society. These changes dated as far back as *Jahiliyyah*. The Prophet's constitution of Islam contributed to asserting the fundamental principles of social justice, freedom and equality for women. Yet, these principles were gradually buried under the growing authority of men over women, and the growing prosperity of the new ruling class. The Arab women's 'plunge' into a long night of feudal oppression and foreign domination can therefore be ascribed to the third caliph of the Muslims, Usman Ibn Affan, in the eight century. Mernissi (1992: 194-195), too, endorses this viewpoint as regards the 'downward slide of women'. She draws on the source of Jurji Zaydan, who claims that Muslim women were completely marginalized and condemned to hide behind the veil in the Abbasid dynasty - the period of the Golden Age (eight and ninth centuries). During this period of international conquest for the Muslims, the arrival of *jawari* (women slaves) from conquered countries commenced. Zaydan, as quoted by Mernissi (1992: 195), writes that with the economic boom and the expansion of the cities, 'the Arab woman was completely marginalized; she had lost all her freedom and pride Then she began to be treated with contempt. She was imprisoned behind locked doors and windows'.

Paradoxically, for the Arab woman, the Golden Age was not a promise of happiness and

prosperity. In fact, it only brought about a dark period of enclosure and oppression. Ever since, as Mernissi (1992: 195) observes, the Muslim woman [has been] transformed into 'a submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils'. Al-Hibri (1982) mentions the fact that women were shrouded in black from head to toe and segregated from men as a sign of the loss of their personal rights. Their voices were not to be heard, so at weddings they developed the characteristic shriek achieved either by placing a knuckle in their mouths or vibrating their tongues - 'all this in order to express joy in a land where their voices may not be heard. And this was done in the name of Islam!' (Al-Hibri, 1982: 215).

It is precisely this dilemma of the Muslim woman that has prompted Mariama Bâ to speak out in her two works *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* and Nawal El-Saadawi in her texts (as will be shown in Chapters Four, Five and Six respectively). The authors suggest that it is of absolute necessity for the Muslim woman to break the silence by the spoken and written word and subsequently to break free from the marginalized position patriarchy has cast her in.

Contributing to the re-establishment of the position, dignity and identity of the Muslim woman is the threat posed by the modern Western world for Islam, embodied in the question of the status and freedom of action of women. The degree to which they are permitted to wield their influence, in all its aspects, will ultimately be a determining factor. Austin (1983: 46) observes that 'on the answer to [this] question rests, inescapably, the survival of the whole fabric of patriarchal civilization'. Since Islam, as a patriarchal tradition, cannot afford to permit women anything but a supportive and confirming role

in the society, it has been reacting very strongly to mounting political, cultural and social pressures from the modern world.

It is opportune, therefore, as Austin suggests (1983: 36), to explore in a general way, not only the question of the status and role of women in Islam, but also the question of the relationship between Islam as a patriarchal religious tradition and the whole phenomenon of the feminine (here signifying female characteristics as explained a little later on) in human experience. In her book *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi (1975: viii) advocates the theory that in order to understand this complex relationship between Islam and the feminine, it is necessary to interpret and understand the male-female relationship as an entity within the Muslim system, a basic element of its structure. Mernissi claims that it appears that the Muslim system is not so much opposed to women as to the heterosexual unit. What is feared, according to Mernissi, is the growth of the involvement between a man and a woman into an all-encompassing love, satisfying the sexual, emotional and intellectual needs of both partners. 'Such an involvement constitutes a direct threat to the man's allegiance to Allah, which should be the unconditional investment of all the man's energies, thoughts and feeling in his God' (Mernissi, 1975: viii).

Concurrent with this traditional viewpoint is the argument that the family structure, because divine, is assumed to be unchangeable. Mernissi (1975: xv) points out that this controversy regarding change in the family structure has raged throughout the century between traditionalists who claim that Islam prohibits any change in the sexes' roles, and modernists who claim that Islam allows for the liberation of women, the desegregation of society and the equality of gender. These modernists believe that 'Islam *as it is*

practised today is utterly patriarchal, but that *true* Islam is not' (Al-Hibri, 1982: 207). Yet both factions agree on one thing: Islam should be kept as the sacred basis of society.

For the traditionalists, then, Islam, being patriarchal in its nature, must be androcentric and androcratic which, as Austin (1983: 37) explains, implies an inevitably secondary and satellite role for woman and what is feminine within the structure of its theology and society; and it is in response to such an inevitability that Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi 'write back'. In the patriarchal Muslim system, marriage is based on male dominance; women should be under the authority of fathers, brother or husbands. Mernissi (1975: xv) comments that since the woman (in this system) is considered to be a destructive element, she is to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. Austin (1983: 37) too highlights this kind of 'othering' when he explains that, based on the patriarchal principle, and in view of the vulnerability of the male in the maternal context, a separative consciousness, the 'I' as opposed to 'them' is required. The subject, according to Austin, seeks to know and possess the object. It expresses its ideas and decisions by words and makes sense of and abstracts the 'other' in verbal and mental formulations.

The patriarchal religious traditions, including Islam, are therefore characterized in their higher forms by a preoccupation with identity-consciousness, name, word, spirit, intellect, truth and unity. Austin further points out that they are more concerned with the hereafter rather than with this world, with the intangible than the sensible, with the ideal than the actual, with recorded history rather than myth, with what the mind believes and knows rather than with what the body feels and experiences. Contrary to the Western cultural

supposition, which feminists object to, because they see it as based on the principle that woman is biologically inferior to man, 'Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority' (Mernissi, 1975: xvi) as is implied by earlier discussions of this issue. Existing inequality, according to Mernissi, does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power. 'Woman is regarded as the representative of the earth-life pole and she is seen as a threat to the continuing detachment of this principle, except as fulfilling a subordinate and supportive role' (Austin 1983: 38).

Al-Hibri (1982: 211) endorses the viewpoints proffered by both Austin and Mernissi when they claim that woman is seen as a threat by the patriarchal society:

... rarely in the annals of ancient Arab history have I seen stories attributing physical or mental inferiority to women. In that I am in partial agreement with Fatima Mernissi who argues ... that the whole Islamic [and I add, *Jahiliyyah*] system was "based on the assumption that the woman is powerful and a dangerous being" which must be contained.

It is precisely because of the fact that woman is a powerful being that El-Saadawi's character Firdaus, in *Woman at Point Zero*, is sentenced to death. She has been the only woman who 'had torn the mask away' (*Woman at Point Zero*, 1983: 100) and who is willing to expose the corruption of the patriarchal rule. And because she has the courage to address this issue, she is contained and condemned to death.

Accordingly, all the dominant functions in religion and society are given to males whereas females are excluded from areas regarded as specially sacred. All sexual institutions (such as polygamy and sexual segregation) are perceived by Mernissi (1975: xvi) as a strategy for containing women's power. Consequent upon this argument, is Austin's observation

that individual consciousness in human experience is championed in an exclusively Islamic male sphere; and forces contrary to patriarchal aspirations, for example the feminine, are rejected and resisted. Austin's argument is further informed by his definition of the feminine which endorses that given in the Introduction to this study. The concept 'feminine' is seen as 'not only the sphere of the human woman, but also that whole complex of life-body experience of the natural cosmos of which the human female is the natural symbol, focus and representative, in which she is naturally dominant and which the patriarchy is so keen to limit and control' (1983: 38).

Austin (1983: 38) therefore claims that for patriarchy and especially Islamic patriarchy, the feminine is a world of experience. Its concerns are psycho-physical rather than mental-intellectual; the communal rather than individual; the vital rather than spiritual, with wholeness rather than with perfection and with the actual rather than the ideal. 'This then, is the dimension of human experience which patriarchal religion seeks so carefully to suppress and control' (Austin, 1983: 38) and which, as observed by Mernissi (1975: xvi), is restrained by Islamic social institutions, namely segregation and the legal subordination of the woman to the man in the family structure. Mernissi (1975: xvii) claims that in the Muslim society the emancipation of women (if that only means equality with men) is not at stake, but rather the fate of the heterosexual unit. Muslim ideology, which views men and women as enemies, tries to separate the two. Friendship and love in a desegregated society pose a threat to the patriarchal tradition. Therefore men are empowered with institutionalized means of oppressing women.

According to Mernissi (1975: 20) the fear of female self-determination is basic to the

Muslim order and is closely linked to the fear of *fitna* (disorder). If women are not constrained, men are faced with an irresistible sexual attraction which inevitably leads to *fitna* and chaos. The Muslim feminist Kacem Amin, in his attempt to grasp the logic of woman's seclusion and veiling and the basis of sexual segregation, comes to the conclusion that women are better able to control their sexual impulses than men and that consequently sexual segregation is a device to protect men, not women. Mernissi subscribes to this viewpoint when she asks: 'Why does Islam fear *fitna*?' (1975: 4).

In an attempt to answer this question, she draws on both the 'implicit' and 'explicit' theory which is inherent in Muslim society. Although many contradictory viewpoints are advocated by these two theories, both have one component in common, woman's power (*qaid*), 'the power to deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue' (Mernissi, 1975: 4). But while the explicit theory, as represented by Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad, links the female's *qaid* power to her weak, inferior constitution, the symbol of her divinely decreed inferiority, Iman Ghazaii (representative of the implicit theory) sees her power as the most destructive element in the social order. On these grounds, the social order attempts to subject her power and neutralizes its disruptive effects. Paradoxically, while at the beginning of the twentieth century there was a coherence between Muslim ideology and Muslim reality as embodied in the family system, there is now a wide discrepancy between that ideology and the reality which it pretends to explain. Any change in male-female relations is a threat to the *Umma's* strength and a direct attack on the traditional coherence between Muslim ideology and Muslim reality.

Mernissi (1975: 81) pertinently points out that Muslim sexuality is a territorial one which

divides the Muslim society into two sub-universes, the universe of men, the *Umma* universe of religion and power, and the universe of women, the domestic universe of sexuality and the family. Interactions between these two universes violate the space rules which are the pillars of the Muslim sexual order. In order to prevent sexual interaction between members of the *Umma* and members of the domestic universe, 'seclusion and veiling (a symbolic form of seclusion) were implemented' (Mernissi, 1975: 85).

Two perceptive remarks about space in Middle Eastern, Arabo-Muslim societies made by Edward Hall in *The Hidden Dimension* are cited by Mernissi (1975: 85). First, Hall mentions 'there is no such thing as an intrusion in public. Public means public ...' which according to Mernissi is quite true as it is not possible for an individual to claim a private zone in a public space. The second remark is that space has a primarily social rather than physical quality. The notion of trespassing is not so much related to physical boundaries as it is to the identity of the person performing the act. Therefore a friend, for example, never trespasses, while a foe always does. A woman is always trespassing in a male space, because she is, by definition, a foe. A woman has no right to use male spaces. She is actually committing an act of aggression against men merely by being present where she should not be. A woman in a traditionally male space upsets Allah's order by inciting men to commit *zina*, which Mernissi (1975: 24) describes as 'illicit intercourse - sexual intercourse between two persons who are not in a state of legal matrimony or concubinage' and which is a crime against God and his law and order. In this encounter, the man has everything to lose: peace of mind, self-determination, allegiance to Allah and social prestige, as Mernissi (1975: 85) points out.

El-Saadawi's comment (1982: 198), as noted earlier, that paradoxically in the *Qur'an* 'monogamy remained a moral code only for women, lest the patriarchal system be eroded and collapse', is of particular importance here. Ironically the man, as subject, has everything to lose, whereas woman is merely considered as an object who is the cause of man's 'fallen-ness' (Hassan's phrase [1983: 21] as already indicated in Chapter One) and alienation from Allah. The problematic issue of honour and the 'fallen-ness' of woman is addressed by El-Saadawi in the texts *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* and *The Innocence of the Devil* (to be discussed in Chapter Six). Contributing to the problem of *zina* is women's increasing use of traditionally male spaces which greatly intensifies the sexual aspect of any encounter between men and women, especially in urban centres. Mernissi (1975: 87) observes that not only are women trespassing on the universe of the *Umma* when they go to work, but they are also competing with men for the few available jobs.

In contrast to the perception of literature by male Muslims that changes in Islam in conditions for women are solely a religious problem - since they are a direct attack on Allah's realms and order - is Mernissi's claim (1975: 99) that the liberation of women from a patriarchal traditional constitution is predominantly an economic issue, a question of the allocation of resources. Haddad's examination (1982: 55) of the role which the National Charter (published in May 1962 in Egypt) played in reflecting change highlights the polemic around the role of woman in Islam as regards her position in economics and politics. The Charter proclaims:

Woman must be regarded as equal to man and must therefore shed the remaining shackles that impede her free movement so that she might take a constructive and profound part in shaping life.

(Quoted by Haddad, 1982: 55)

In addition to this proclamation, Article 11 of the constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, for instance, states:

The state shall guarantee the proper co-ordination between the duties of woman towards the family and her work in the society, considering her equal with man in the fields of political, social, cultural, and economic life without violation of the rules of Islamic jurisprudence.

(Quoted by Haddad, 1982: 55)

Following the Natural Charter (1992), Haddad offers two different perspectives, generally subsumed under normative Islam and acculturating Islam, which are relevant to an understanding of the way in which modern Muslims view Islam and history, change, and the women's role in Islam. The term normativist, according to Haddad (1982: 8), is applied to those who believe that Islam in its full articulation in history achieved its zenith somewhere in the past, whether that point was in the Medinan society under the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad or whether it includes the time of the four rightly guided caliphs, and whether or not it also encompasses the law of the faith as developed during the early centuries of Islam. Focusing on the past, 'Islam is conceived as a closed cultural system that allows for no change' (Haddad, 1982: 8).

The term acculturationist, on the other hand, is used by Haddad to designate those who deliberately attempt to provide a contemporary Western ethos in Islam. Acculturationists, therefore, argue that Islam is always to be seen as 'open' to reinterpretation. It can 'interact' with 'alien' cultures and appropriate what is beneficial for the *Umma*. It maintains its ability to sustain life, to grow, and to participate in the modern world. Haddad (1982: 8) points out that both the proponents of the normative and acculturating Islam share a pride in the glory of the past, are unhappy with the situation of Muslims in the present and

have confidence in the prospects of a better future. Mernissi (1975: xv), too, emphasizes the notion that both factions agree on one thing: 'Islam should be kept as the sacred basis of society'. Yet their views of the past, the present and the future vary greatly.

The normativists, according to Haddad (1982: 8), find the authority of the past valid for the present and the future. They refuse to compromise on technology and identity. The past is ideal, and if Islam were to reappropriate it, it would regain its ascendancy in the world: 'For the normativist then, religion is not only the central part of life, it is the totality of life, that from which all reality proceeds and has its meaning' (Haddad, 1982: 9). Haddad's observation that the normativists dwell in the past is echoed by Mernissi's claim (1992: 15): 'Muslims suffer from a *mal du present* We experience it as a clear desire for death, a desire to be elsewhere, to be absent, and to flee to the past as a way of being absent'. She further maintains that the Arab male reader turns to the past in order to draw from it the strength that the present denies him, and she refers to Al-Jibri who gives copious historical examples to prove that in Islam the politicians quickly realized that they could only authoritatively manage the present by using the past as a sacred standard. Al-Jibri therefore proposes that in order to understand the ancient texts one has to be rooted in the present and there needs to be some distance from the texts in order to ascribe meaning to them. Closely related to the concept of a 'relationship to time', as Mernissi (1992: 21) argues, are the two concepts 'relationship to power', and 'relationship to femaleness' both of which are connected in a 'discourse on identity'.

Both Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi subscribe to Mernissi's viewpoint on identity, which, in turn, is firmly embedded in acculturating Islam. Bâ, too, apparently advocates

the notion that religion has a personal status that has bearing on the individual life divorced from the social and cultural context as is suggested by the narrator, Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* (1989):

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. (4)

This viewpoint is shared by Yvonne Haddad (1982). Whereas the normativists see culture as a product of Islam, acculturationists or at least the secularists among them, as Haddad points out, see religion as one of the several factors that make up the fabric of culture. Although both factions feel that the condition of the Muslim needs reform, the normativists believe that the only way to save Islam is to 'eliminate surgically', if necessary, 'all these foreign bodies' (Haddad's terms, 1982: 10). The acculturationists, on the other hand, perceive reform as 'creative innovation'. To progress in health, reform needs 'new sustenance and changes' in its 'stultifying habits' (Haddad, 1982: 10). These changes, of necessity, involve the 'liberation of women, the desegregation of society and the equality of sexes' (Mernissi, 1975: xv).

Both Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi recognize this need for change in an oppressive society. Yet they also show concern about the effects of these changes on the uniqueness of the African and Arab culture. Contrary to the hostile attitude of the normativists towards Western impingement and values, Mernissi (1992: viii) claims that the Muslim woman's quest for identification and the right to citizenship 'stems from no imported Western values, but that it is a true part of the Muslim tradition'.

Paradoxically, the 'eternal message of Islam, the same message given to man at creation', furthered in a 'new articulation of faith, relevant for modern challenges, but not a new Islam' is proposed by the normativists (Haddad, 1982: 11) in reaction to the declaration of political, social, cultural and economic equality in the National Charter. Haddad (1982: 56) explains that in this context, given the 'equality' of women, normativists view Islam as 'the culmination of the historical development of the liberation of women. Islam, the religion of God, has liberated women and restored them to their role, to which they were preordained'. Within this broad framework Islam did not only free women from slavery, it elevated their status to that of human beings and gave them the right to live, to inherit, the right to learn, the right to keep their own names and the right to have possessions. Haddad (1982: 56) cites Al-Afaghani when he critically remarks:

However, no matter how extensive their collection of material may be, one is incapable of discerning a correct general opinion about women in Islam. How did Islam save her? How did Islam elevate her to new heights? Rather, one finds in most of it general rhetorical words that need verification, documentation, and evidence.

In a similar manner, Al-Hibri wryly comments that male Muslim writers have seized every opportunity to remind Arab women of the various ways in which Islam, from its very inception, sought to defend the rights of women and improve their stature. Such an impressive list has been compiled by these writers and so many changes were introduced that Umar Ibn Al-Khattab is known to have said:

By God, we did not use to pay attention to women in *Jahiliyyah* until God said about them in the *Qur'an* what is said, and gave them their share in matters.
(Recorded by Al-Afaghani, as quoted by Al-Hibri, 1982: 212)

In view of the 'liberation' of women ascribed to them by Islam, Haddad (1982: 56) argues

that what appears to be at stake for most authors is not the role of woman *per se*, but rather the validity of Islam as the final revelation from God for mankind. Al-Hibri (1982: 213), however, claims that the major contribution of Islam towards the ultimate defeat of Patriarchy [*sic*] does not lie in any such lists of reforms: 'Rather it lies in the fact that Islam replaced the paternal bond of *Jahiliyyah* totally by the religious bond within which everyone - male or female, black or white, young or old, rich or poor - is equal'.

As already noted in Chapter One, at the heart of the debate to restrict woman to the position ascribed to her by patriarchy is the role of wife and mother. Marriage is seen as the central institution in Islam. In this context, marriage is seen as providing physical fulfilment for natural desires as well as the maintenance of society through progeny: 'Thus a Muslim girl should be brought up and educated in preparation for these roles. Any other education is at best superfluous, if not actually harmful' (Ibrahimis quoted by Haddad, 1982: 57). The normativists agree that education for women should not be taken for granted and that a different education for women is necessitated, not only by the roles they have to assume, but also by the fact of basic differences between the sexes, which are the essence of the creation. Al-Abrashi, (as quoted by Haddad, 1982: 58) further advocates: 'We must guide boys to roles that affirm their capabilities, and likewise the girls. Thus every sex [*sic*] should be placed in a fitting role'.

In placing the segregation of sexes, which inevitably leads to the splitting of the Muslim sub-universe into two, at the determining core of Islam, the traditionalists and the normativists propagate a controversial and contentious ideology which has far-reaching effects for the Muslim woman. This controversy has already been highlighted in the

discussion of the descent of the *hijab* which split the Muslim space into two and which, through the veil, has reduced the Muslim woman to a marginal, submissive creature. Mernissi (1992: 194-195) maintains that the modern Muslim man who accepts his wife as veiled, crushed and silent symbolizes the whole matter of the relationship of the Muslim man to time 'of amnesia as memory, of the past as warping the possibilities of the present'. For Mernissi, the man who needs such a mutilated companion is handicapped by the 'time-mirror' wherein he looks at himself and women to foresee his future. Mernissi (1992: 195) therefore suggests that once the Muslim man has rooted his future in a liberating memory, his image of 'his' woman will change. In this context, *So Long a Letter's* Ramatoulaye can be singled out as an outstanding example of a Muslim woman who succeeds in asserting her identity and dignity through a liberating memory, rooted in the future and not in the past:

In many fields ... we have taken advantage of the notable achievements that have reached us from elsewhere, the gains wrested from the lessons of history. We have a right to pursue the furthest limits of our intellectual opportunities (60-1);

and

I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything - disappointments and humiliations - hope still lives on within me I shall go out in search of it. (1989: 89)

Paradoxically, at the heart of the normativist's argument is the traditional interpretation of sura 4: 34 of the *Qur'an* that the woman's role as wife and mother is to be her sole purpose and identity : 'Men are in charge of women, because God has endowed the one with more, and because they spend of their property for their support'. Notwithstanding the patriarchal notion that the *Qur'an* propagates a non-egalitarian relationship in marriage, Jamal A. Badawi chooses to endorse Muhammad's viewpoint when he writes

in his book, *The Status of Woman in Islam* (no date: 11), that a divine revelation echoed in the wide desert of Arabia with a fresh, noble, and universal message to humanity:

O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women. (*Qur'an* 4: 1)

Badawi (no date: 11) records a scholar's citation as he pondered about this verse:

It is believed that there is no text, old or new, that deals with the humanity of the woman from all aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth and originality as this divine decree.

Badawi treats this notion of equality, which is a noble and natural conception, in a similar manner to Smith and Haddad (1982: 141) who also claim that the phrase 'from it' refers to the 'same kind' or 'of like nature, God created its mate'. There is no trace in the *Qur'an* of a parallel of the biblical concept that Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs. Both these issues have been fully discussed in Chapter One. The clear cut evidence that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her spiritual rights and responsibilities is in accordance with the Qur'anic verses that ordain that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society. The verse (*Qur'an* 2: 228) 'that men are a degree above them' (according to Badawi (no date: 17)), means *Quiwama* (maintenance and protection). In this context, it simply refers to that natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker sex to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before the law. In a similar manner, the man's role of leadership in his family emphasizes the importance of taking counsel and mutual agreement in family decisions. Kind treatment of women and companionship with them are also stressed in the *Qur'an* (4: 19) when it instructs: '... But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good'.

According to Badawi (no date: 16), the objectives of marriage, besides perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy; therefore, according to Islamic Law, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. This Islamic Law is endorsed by the *Qur'an* 30: 21, in its instruction: 'He ordained between you love and mercy'. Bound up with this notion of love is the narrator's concern as expressed by Lamine in *Scarlet Song* (1994: 99): 'Married life is based on tolerance and a human approach'. And in *So Long a Letter* (1989: 58) Ramatoulaye speaks out for the first time after 'thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment':

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 What of your wives, Tamsir? Your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children I shall never be the one to complete your collection.

With regard to the question of polygamy, as dealt with in the *Qur'an*, El-Saadawi comments (1982: 198) that it is so ambiguous that the opinions of religious thinkers differ widely. A group of them believes that polygamy is not allowed and base their position on what was mentioned in the *Qur'an* under Sourat El-Nissa', Verse 3, (as quoted by El-Saadawi, 1982: 198):

Marry as many women as you wish, two or three or four. If you fear not to treat them equally, marry only one. Indeed you will not be able to be just between your wives even if you try.

This group of religious scholars insists that the *Qur'an* has forbidden polygamy, since a man is not permitted to marry more than one woman unless he can treat them equally and not differentiate in the slightest degree between them. As a matter of fact, as El-Saadawi (1982: 198) notes, the Prophet himself was not able to treat his wives with absolute equality. He used to prefer Aisha to his other wives and loved her more deeply. Mariama

Bâ explores this polemical issue in *Scarlet Song* (1994: 6) when Djibril Gueye (Ousmane's father) expresses his philosophy:

A man must be like an evenly balanced scale. He must weigh out in equal measures his compliments and his reproaches. He must give equally of himself. He must study his gestures and behaviour and apportion everything fairly!

Ousseynou, Ousmane's 'hut-brother's' comment epitomizes the narrator's viewpoint when he ironically remarks: 'Those principles are very difficult to put into practice' (1994: 7).

Contrary to the group of religious scholars that insists on monogamy, the other group of religious scholars insists that the *Qur'an* does allow for polygamy and bases its position on the fact that Muhammad the Prophet married several wives and that justice of equality between the wives is possible. Other scholars argue that the virtues of polygamy contribute to social benefits: it helps restore population in underpopulated areas. So too, did God make 'marrying more than one wife contingent on solving the problem of orphans, especially after a war' (Al-Madani, as quoted by Haddad, 1982: 65).

Badawi (no date: 19), however, maintains that as the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognised, so also is her right to seek and end an unsuccessful marriage. This is precisely what the nameless female protagonist in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* does when she decides to exercise her right - as ordained by the *Qur'an* - to end her unhappy marriage (as will be discussed later in Chapter Six). When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a gracious end for it. The *Qur'an* 2: 231 states:

When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits).

Badawi (no date: 20) further points out that next to the worship of God, Islam considers kindness to parents as very important. The *Qur'an* has a special recommendation for the good treatment of mothers and fathers: 'Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents ...' (*Qur'an* 17: 23).

As regards the economic and political aspects, Badawi (no date: 21) argues that Islam decreed the right of which woman was deprived before Islam and after it (even as late as this century) the right of independent ownership. According to Islamic Law, a woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully acknowledged. Historically, this suggests a movement beyond the veil for, as already noted in Chapter One, women had no right of inheritance before the constitution of Islam. This liberation, which entails more than just the right of independent ownership is succinctly encapsulated in the aphorism: 'Tomorrow is indeed the end of my seclusion' (*So Long a Letter*, 1989: 71-72). This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married. As far as the woman's right to seek employment is concerned, there is no decree which forbids her from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it. However, Badawi maintains that Islam regards the woman's role in society as a mother and wife as the most sacred and essential one.

Badawi further claims that woman's equality with man (in what is called 'political rights') is found in the history of Islamic civilization. This includes the right to election as well as the nomination to political offices and the right to participate in public affairs. Both in the *Qur'an* and in Islamic history there are examples of women who participated in serious discussions and argued even with the Prophet himself (see *Qur'an* 58: 1-4 and 60: 10-

12). Since the *Qur'an* affirms male and female equality in the sight of God, woman, as a partner in the initial formulation of humanity, has the undeniable right to education and religious responsibility before God.

With regard to the right of equality in the field of economics, Haddad, in a similar fashion to Mernissi, observes that as more women have access to education and employment - a supplementary means of support - they are not only breaking the restrictions of seclusion by coming into contact with other people, both male and female, 'but they are also flirting with independence' (Haddad, 1982: 61).

Haddad contends that in an attempt to understand this contemporary liberation of women in the Arab world Westerners must seek to comprehend the objections and restrictions that this movement faces. Primary amongst the objections is that God's word was not made manifest to redeem the individual and set him free; its goal was the establishment of a community living under the law and guidance of God. Though Mernissi endorses the latter part of this viewpoint she, however, also contends that Islam affirmed the idea of the individual as a subject, a free will always present in the world, a sovereign consciousness that cannot disappear as long as the person lives, as noted in Chapter One.

Mernissi's argument that it appears that Islam is not so much opposed to women as to the heterosexual unit because it constitutes a direct threat to Allah seems valid. Her appeal for equality and the emancipation of women is echoed in a similar manner by Quasim Amin, one of the male pioneers of women's liberation through education in Egypt:

I have searched extensively in families where it is said that there is total harmony,

but I have not yet found a man who loves his wife, nor a woman who loves her husband. As for the apparent harmony between the pair ... Harmony has been bought at a high price - the disintegration of one of the partners for the sake of the other It is lack of love on the part of the husband because his wife is below him in mentality and education - so that there is almost no communication that would lead to an instant of mutual happiness That is because she is so distant from his emotions, understandings, and matters that appeal to him, while she indulges in things in which he has no interest.

(Translated and cited by Haddad, 1982: 69)

Amin here isolates one of the factors that plagued the Egyptian society of his time. Yet this lack of love in marriage is not an isolated case, topographically restricted to Egypt only: rather it appears to be of universal character. So do Mariama Bâ (a black African novelist) and Nawal El-Saadawi (an Arab novelist) - who are the focus of this study, very pertinently touch on the notion of love in marriage in, for example, *So Long a Letter*, *Scarlet Song* and *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* which are set in an African and Arabo-Islamic setting. Both Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi's texts encapsulate the argument proffered by Amin in advocating that the education of women would lead to mutual respect, understanding, and compatibility. The proposition Muslim women talk/write back, which stems from the title to this thesis, is epitomized in Bâ's epistolary novel when she writes: 'My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment This time I shall speak out' (1989: 57-8). And she speaks out indeed when she commits herself to the emancipation of women, advocating universal sisterhood, a concept which is embodied in the aims of the director of the college Ramatoulaye and Aissatou attended in order to become teachers:

... lift[ing] us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, ... [making] us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, ... [raising] our vision of the world, cultivat[ing] our personalities, strengthen[ing] our qualities, ... [making] up for our inadequacies, ... develop[ing] universal moral values (1989: 15)

Writing back from 'beyond the veil' - irrespective of colour, race and boundaries - constitutes the notion of protest against gender discrimination, the marginalization and silencing of women who are oppressed by a patriarchal rule, women as the objects of male gaze and violence which, at times, results in madness. Writing back also subscribes to the assertion of women's identity, equality and dignity. These ideas are explored in Chapter Three in a fuller exploration of Third and Arab world feminisms; in the close critical analyses of *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* which follow in Chapters Four and Five, respectively, and in Chapter Six in a survey of selected texts (fictional and non-fictional) by Nawal El-Saadawi.

CHAPTER 3

THIRD AND ARAB WORLD FEMINISMS:

A PERSPECTIVE

This chapter, which provides a perspective of Third world and Arab feminisms, is an attempt to address whatever cultural divide, distance and silence that may still remain in Western feminist criticism regarding non-Western literature and criticism by women in both Third and Arab worlds. It does this by foregrounding recent Third world criticism which seeks to redress the more customary Eurocentric vision. In the past, as Deirdre Lashgari (1995: 1-2) correctly observes, 'mainstream arbiters of literary equality' have sometimes worked from assumptions unconsciously rooted in gender, class, and Eurocentric culture, with what she calls a bias toward 'authorial distance'.

Fortunately, since the publication of Tillie Olsen's provocative article 'Silences in Literature' in 1965, feminist writing in the United States, as in Europe, has taken seriously the roles of silence and anger in the lives and literary production of women. Until fairly recently, however, relatively little had been written, as Lashgari points out in her introductory essay to *Violence, Silence and Anger: 'To speak the unspeakable: Implications of Gender, "Race", Class and Culture'* (1995), on the specific conjunction of feminist issues with women's culturally shaped responses to violence in all its multi-faceted forms. The Afro-Arabic responses by Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi, for instance, provide an example of a kind of non-violence/violence through their liberal authorial approach to moving beyond the veil.

The liberatory voice ... is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift - that we learn to talk - to listen - to hear [and to write] in a new way.

(bell hooks, 1989: 9)

Although opposition and resistance imply violence, hooks clearly defines this violence

as non-physical and cerebral, as amelioratory rather than revolutionary. Hence, the perception of 'violence' depends, of course, on perspective, on what one terms the angle of one's vision. Having identified the nature of this sort of violence, it can be difficult to name it publicly, and difficult for writers and critics to make themselves heard, as Lashgari notes (1995: 1) and Bâ and El-Saadawi demonstrate. When Cherrîe Moraga (1986: 181) speaks of 'the threat of genocide' suffered by people of colour, she is referring not only to the violence of overt action but also to the hidden, structural violence of patriarchal oppression and to the passive acquiescence of women in society who permit it to continue. So, too, economic and socio-religious violence in the texts of both Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi (the literary focus of this study) feature as 'noisy silence' (Dorothy D. Wills's term in Lashgari, 1995: 158). A fuller and ongoing discussion of the concept of 'violence', and its attendant paradigm shifts within the contextual framework of feminism and feminist criticism or writing in the Third and Arab worlds is continued later in this chapter and in Chapters Four to Six.

For the purposes of this present discussion, the exploration of feminism necessarily involves definitions of African feminism and Arab feminism. Chandra Malpade Mohanty, co-editor of the text *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991) - naturally moderated by other leading feminists in both the First and Third world contexts - is used as the seminal text in examining African and Arab feminist literary theory and the historical literary practice against a socio-political background. The term 'feminism', as it is encoded in the Arab feminist world, is defined and examined to show that feminist theory, despite the various touchstones, can never be viewed as singularly or universally 'true'. The role of religion (Islam) in the Arab world and its several effects on women are

touched upon here and more fully elaborated on in later chapters.

The practice of *métissage* - through the concept of *heteroglossia* - in order to enable *travesía* (or crossing) is proposed as a possible solution to materialize Mohanty's plea that feminist praxis and theory should be written and applied within a cross-cultural, international framework whereby a unitary sisterhood, notwithstanding its various differences, can be attained. For this reason, many comparativists today 'weave together multiple disciplines in a reading practice that is called *métissage*, a practice which recognizes that representation cuts across the boundaries of juridical, political, anthropological, and artistic discourses' as Margaret R. Higonnet (1994: 2) notes. For literary purposes, *heteroglossia* is defined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 263, 428) as a word 'uttered in that place and at that time that will have a meaning different than [*sic*] it would have under any other conditions'. It incorporates 'a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships' which 'disperse into rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia ... dialogization'.

Therefore, the task, which confronts both comparative literature and feminist critics seeking to realize Mohanty's ideal of a 'sisterhood' without borders, mentioned above, is that of reading at the crossroads, of 'reading along the borderlines of silence' as Higonnet observes in her introduction to *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature* (1994: 16). (It must be noted that the term 'crossroads' has its own inherent 'nuances' as it is used to define what is effectively the witching hour in Igbo mythology. The use of the term 'crossroads' here, does not serve to invoke Achebe's temporal, mythopoeic usage. Rather, it involves the process of writing back.) Gloria Anzaldúa's

epigraph (1987: 195): 'To survive the Borderlands you must live *sin fronteras*' voices a dream which, according to Mariama Bâ (see especially Chapter Five and the analysis of *Scarlet Song*), should be cherished by all human beings. Borderlands, as Higonnet (1994: 1) remarks, may feed growth and exploration or may conceal a mine field. Nonetheless, calls to redraw boundaries, or to 'find theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries' (Anzaldúa, 1987: xxv) are being and should be made with increasing insistence.

The practice of operating across the boundaries is underlined by Mohanty (1991: 40) when she cites the poem 'I Ain't the Right Kind of Feminist' (written by Cheryl L. West) to problematize the idea of the 'politically correct' feminist, or the normative white, liberal feminist for whom gender is the primary (or only) ground of struggle:

I am a woman
You are a lady
We are sisters in the movement
Its about neapolitan ice cream
Mixed and oh so sweet
Its not about white and sterility ...

Come share with me sister feminist
Let us dance in the movement
Let my blackness catch your feminism
Let your oppression peek at mine
After all
I ain't the right kind of feminist
I'm just woman.

Mohanty, in citing West, reinforces the 'urgency and necessity to rethink feminist praxis and theory written within a cross-cultural, international framework' (1991: 39). She acknowledges the term 'Third world' as a much maligned and contested one, yet she uses it deliberately, preferring it to postcolonial or developing countries. Although for Mohanty (1991: ix) 'Third world' refers to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized

countries (of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latino, and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia, she rejects these standard cartographic and pointed parameters. In this frame of reference, Mohanty prefers to employ 'Third world' as a term that serves to define bases of power. African feminism is seen rather as signifying the 'common context of struggle' against exploitative structures and systems - be these historical or contemporary.

In Mohanty's viewpoint, therefore, the term does not merely indicate a hierarchical cultural and economic relationship between First and Third world countries; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonization and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between First and Third world peoples. According to Mohanty, in drawing on histories of anti-racist, anti-imperialist struggles around the world, the term 'Third world' embraces a form of self-empowerment. However, the term could also suggest that 'Third world' cultures or ethnicity are the primary basis of the politics of Third world women. But, as the end of a (Christian) millennium draws near, and as Mohanty (1991: x) points out, the spirit of what she calls 'our struggles' is still one 'of deep commitment, contradiction, and disagreement in the context of forging networks across cultures'. It is in this spirit that a consistent dialogue amid political and intellectual disagreements is maintained.

Unlike the history of Western (white, middle-class) feminisms which, according to Mohanty, have been explored in great detail over the last few decades, histories of Third world women's engagement with feminism are in short supply (as has been pointed out

in reference to Lashgari in an early paragraph in this chapter). Yet the very notion of addressing what are often internally conflictual histories of Third world women's feminisms under a single rubric, as Mohanty admits, may seem ludicrous - especially since 'the very meaning of the term *feminism* is continually contested' (Mohanty, 1991: 4). Just as Western feminism cannot be called a singular entity, Third world feminisms cannot be generalized. But having foregrounded Third world women as an analytical and political category in this chapter, in a similar fashion to Mohanty in her text, it is necessary to recognize and explore analytically the links between the histories and struggles of both Third world and Arab women against polygamy, violence, gender discrimination, morality, class and monopoly capital. An 'imagined community' of Third world oppositional struggles is suggested, or 'imagined', as Mohanty (1991: 4) maintains, not because it is not 'real', but because it implies potential alliances and collaborations across decisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within Third world and Arabic contexts, a significant, deep commitment is displayed to what Benedict Anderson (1983, especially 11-16) calls 'horizontal comradeship'.

Thus, as Mohanty argues so eloquently, it is not colour or gender which constructs the ground for these struggles, it is rather the *way* we think about race, class, and gender - the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. Potentially, women of all colours can align themselves with these imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations because they are all woven together by the '*political* threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic' (Mohanty, 1991: 4). White South African feminist critics, for instance are, according to Cecily Lockett (1996: 17), in an invidious position *vis-à-vis* oppression in

South Africa. In racial terms the historical paradigm of power in South Africa considered whites as the self and blacks as the other. This meant that white women were generally subsumed into the masculinized self and black men into the feminized other. Yet, as Lockett points out, when the paradigm of literary power is considered, the work of black men is found to have been largely taken up by the establishment - Serote, Mtshali, 'Soweto Poetry' - while that of black women, and of white women who cannot be appropriated by the paternalistic tradition, has not.

In this respect, white women are, with their black counterparts, 'part of the oppressed Other as opposed to the Self of the academy' (Lockett, 1996: 17). Lockett, therefore, asks the vexed question whether we, as white women, have the right to speak for or about black women when we - in our turn - reject the discourses that our oppressors have made about us (1996: 17). In response to this question Dabi Nkululeko (1987: 101) argues:

As alien to [black] experience, Euro-Settler women have to overcome most of the trappings of their own experience, such as their own class interests and status, and they have to study closely their experience as part of the colonist-settler nation, dissociate themselves from it before they can begin to comprehend the experience of the native women under colonialism In order to extricate themselves from culpability in the oppression of African women, settler women - the 'feminist socialists' - must work among their own people to create conditions for the destruction of such oppression, while their counterparts among the native women must do the same within our ranks. The work which both must do to create such conditions will have to include theorization of the social relations between the two segments and their respective nations, the nature of the struggle which goes on and the connections between that struggle and other struggles in the society as a whole. It will have to locate women in the order of priority in the society as a whole.

Nkululeko's argument makes it clear that 'feminist socialists', as she calls them, have to take into account the position of the subject and her history as part of this discourse. Only

a feminist criticism that accommodates both class and gender, as Maggie Humm notes in her text, *Feminist Criticism* (1986: 87), can account for textual discourse in its full complexity.

Having chartered the cartographies of struggle geographically, it is of absolute necessity, as Mohanty (1991: 5) points out, that Third world and Arab women should not be identified merely as social categories. The location of these women in terms of the underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, fanaticism, and 'overpopulation' of particular Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries only serves to 'freeze' Third world women in time, space, and history, as these presumably 'objective indicators' by no means exhaust the meaning of women's day-to-day lives (Mohanty, 1991: 5). This latter focus on quotidian reality or on *journalisme-vérité* is discussed in some detail in the three chapters that follow in an analysis of the literary texts in this study.

Mohanty (1991: 6-7) rightly maintains that the 'social indicators' referred to above are inadequate descriptions: 'What seems to constitute "women of color" or "third world women" as a viable alliance is a "*common context of struggle*" rather than color or racial identifications'. Similarly, it is the oppositional political relation of Third world women to gender, racist and imperialist struggles that constitutes a potential commonality.

Intricately related to the constitution of Third world women is the term 'feminism' and the location of women in relation to this term. Mohanty (1991 : 7) claims that the term *feminism* is itself questioned by many Third world women. Factors like cultural

imperialism, short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia have led to a 'falsely homogeneous representation of the movement by the media' and a very real 'suspicion' of 'feminism' as a productive ground for struggle as Mohanty describes it (1991: 7). 'Black feminist criticism began as a subversion and counterarticulation to the terms of both Black and feminist criticism Its limitation, so far, is that it is almost wholly located in African-American women's experiences' (Carole Boyce Davies: *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 1994: 31). Notwithstanding this suspicion, Third world women - in particular - have always engaged with feminism, even if they have rejected the labelling of feminism in a number of instances in favour of terms such as womanism or genderism.

Various non-Western writers have, of course, employed the now dated term 'feminism'. Kumari Jayawardena (1986: 2), in writing about feminist movements in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, defines feminism as 'embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system'. Cheryl Johnson-Odim (1991: 315) modifies this term by distinguishing between a limited, liberal 'women's rights' focus and what she sees as a more productive 'feminism as philosophy' focus. Leopold Senghor's earlier Negritude movement is resuscitated by Grewal *et al.* (1988: 6) in their text *Charting the Journey*, which highlights the 'idea of Blackness' in contemporary Britain. Their focus on 'the unity of action' as the basis for black and Third world women's engagement with feminist politics foreshadows Mohanty's idea of a 'common context of struggle' (cited above) and simultaneously corresponds with *This Bridge called my Back: Writings by Radical*

Women of Color (1983). In her introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Mohanty (1991: 8) points to Cherié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's major areas of concern for a broad-based political movement of U.S. Third world women. The effects of racism, cultural class, and gender differences, for instance, that divide women of colour in the U.S. incorporate, for example, the ways in which visibility /invisibility as women of colour forms radicalism; the ways in which Third world women derive a feminist political theory specifically from racial/cultural background and experience; the destructive and demoralizing effects of racism in the women's movement; the cultural, class, and sexuality differences that divide women of colour; Third world women's writing as a tool for self-preservation and revolution; and the ways and means of a Third world feminist future (1983: xxiv).

Aida Hurtado (1989: 849) furthers this argument when she distinguishes between the relevance of the public/private distinction for American white 'middle and upper class women, and working-class women and women of color' [*sic*] who have always been subject to state intervention in their domestic lives: 'There is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color [*sic*] except that which they manage to create and project in an otherwise hostile environment' (1989: 849).

Maggie Humm's question (1986: 6) as to what feminist criticism constitutes or could constitute has received various responses ranging from feigned incomprehension to genuine attempts to confront the terminology. Rebecca West, according to Humm (1986: 6), declares: 'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that other people call me a feminist when I express sentiments that differentiate me

from a doormat ...'. Adrienne Rich, on the other hand, chooses to define feminism more directly: 'Feminism is the place where in the most natural, organic way subjectivity and politics come together' (Gelpi & Gelpi, 1975: 114). Relevant to the later discussion of Nawal El-Saadawi's texts - both fictional and non-fictional - she herself furthers this notion of organization in feminism when she claims that no oppressed social group can become an influential political force unless there is political organization and the economic ability to organize. This ability, in turn, will facilitate solidarity among women of all colours, as well as 'an awareness which necessitates the lifting of the veil' (1988: 5, 16) which is, of course, particularly pertinent to this thesis.

Even more significant in terms of this study, Nahid Toubia, in her foreword to *Women of the Arab World: The Coming Challenge* (1988, no page reference) states that feminism may have a multitude of definitions, encompassing the choices of women of all colours and social groups throughout the world, provided there is a choice. Her personal, most eloquent definition of feminism (1988, no page reference) agrees with Humm's theory that feminism involves emotion and caring:

To me, feminism is foremost a "feeling" - of which I am not ashamed. It is the state when women no longer suppress their feelings of anger and love, of rage and ecstasy, of revenge and beauty. It is when women feel free to use their own immense emotional energy to explore and redefine their position in the world. It is when they use their intellect and wit, education and skills, and their rich heritage of knowledge and wisdom to redesign their role in the past, present and future of humanity. Feminism is the fire that melts, but does not destroy.

As with both Bâ and El-Saadawi, for Carole Boyce Davies (1994: 28) feminist discourse questions and seeks to transform what it is to be a woman in society, to understand how the categories woman and the feminine are defined, structured and produced. Feminist

politics, in Boyce Davies's understanding, is a resistance to the objectification of women in society, in literature, art and culture. It is also the articulation of a critical and an intellectual practice which challenges all patriarchal assumptions and norms, as well as a politics of possible transformation. The texts of Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi in succeeding chapters are particularly useful as illustrations of this kind of challenge. The thrust of Bâ's *Scarlet Song*, for instance, points to a way forward, a burning way that 'melts' without destroying (see Toubia's quotation above).

Third world feminists, therefore, have argued for 'the rewriting of history based on the *specific* locations and histories of struggle of people of color [*sic*] and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples ...' (Mohanty, 1991: 10). Furthermore, Mohanty notes: 'While discursive categories are clearly central sites of political contestation, they must be grounded in and informed by the material politics of everyday life, especially the daily life struggles for survival of poor people - written out of history' (1991: 11).

However, as previously pointed out, although Third world women share what Mohanty calls a common context of struggle, this context does not exclude white feminism from this struggle. In fact, in terms of context, the history of white feminism is not very different from the history of the feminisms of Third world women, since all of these verified histories, as Mohanty (1991: 12) states, emerge '*in relation* to other struggles'. Hence the claim that feminism is not just the purview of women, but of women and men. This statement is reiterated by Mariama Bâ in dedicating *So Long a Letter* to '*all women and to men of goodwill*'. Nahid Toubia, on behalf of the Arab Women's Solidarity

Association, welcomes the one contribution from a man, Dr Fuad Zakaria, hence reflecting the association's policy of not excluding those men who stand in solidarity with the gender struggle.

In her introductory essay to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Mohanty (1991: 15) suggests five provisional contexts for understanding Third world women's engagement with feminism. Colonialism, class and gender serve as the first context for a better understanding of women's issues and dilemmas. According to Mohanty (1991: 21) feminist struggles are waged on at least two simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level which addresses questions of representation (womanhood/femininity), and a material, experiential, daily-life level which focuses on the micropolitics of work, home, family, sexuality, and so on which are the principal areas of concern in the discourse of the writings of Bâ and El-Saadawi. Colonial relations of rule form the backdrop for feminist critiques at both levels, and it is the notion of 'the *practice* of ruling' which, accordingly, may allow for an understanding of the contradictory gender, race, class, and caste positioning of Third world women in relation to the state.

The 'equation of the color [*sic*] line with the power line with the poverty line' is the second provisional context introduced by Mohanty (1991: 27) and encapsulates the contours of racial formation under a previous system of apartheid. The meanings of race are, in Mohanty's viewpoint, necessarily shaped as much in collective and personal practice (identity politics) as by the state (colonial or contemporary capitalist).

In close correspondence with the colonial or capitalist context is the 'social agency of

women who are subjected to a number of levels of capitalist discipline' (Mohanty, 1991: 29). As Mohanty points out (1991: 29) few studies so far have focused on this third context, on women workers as '*subjects*'. Most studies of Third world women locate them as 'victims of multinational capital as well as of their own "traditional" sexist cultures'. Aihwa Ong (1987: 220) reinforces Mohanty's notion that Third world women are agents who can and do make choices, who have a critical perspective on their own situations, and who think and organize collectively against their oppressors:

Assailed by public doubts over their virtue, village-based [Malay] factory women internalized these disparate disciplinary schemes, engaging in self - and other - monitoring on the shopfloor, in *kampung* society and within the wider society.

Another analysis (Maria Mies's *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market*, 1982) is cited by Mohanty as an example of a careful, politically focused, local analysis. Mies's analysis shows the effect of a certain historically and culturally specific mode of patriarchal organization, an organization constructed on the basis of the definition of the lace makers as 'non-working housewives' at familial, local, regional, statewide and international levels. Mies's insights illustrate how the category of women is constructed against a variety of political backgrounds that often exist simultaneously and are overlaid on top of one another. There is thus no easy generalization in the direction of 'women' in India, or 'women' in the Third world; nor is there a reduction of the political construction of the exploitation of the lace makers to cultural explanations about the passivity or obedience that might characterize these women and their situation. As Mohanty (1991: 65) stresses, Narsapur women are not mere victims of the production process, because they resist, challenge, and subvert the process at various junctures.

The fourth provisional context mentioned by Mohanty is anthropology as an important discursive context in her cartography of Third world women, since it is an example of disciplinary knowledge which signifies the power of naming and the contests over meaning of definitions of the self and the other. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) emphasizes the importance of feminist anthropology in addressing the question of both representing Third world women in anthropological texts and simultaneously speaking for them.

Consciousness, identity and writing are concepts which are regarded by Mohanty as the fifth provisional context for Third world women's engagement with feminism. While the above mentioned contexts can, according to Mohanty (1991: 32), be addressed within the framework of organized movements, the level of everyday life should never be reduced to 'automatic self-referential individualist ideas of the political (or feminist subject)'. Therefore the existence of Third world women's narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities, but it is the way in which they are read, understood and located institutionally, as Mohanty emphasizes, which is of paramount importance.

Written texts, in Mohanty's viewpoint (1991: 35), display a number of crucial elements of the relation of writing, memory, consciousness, and political resistance: (a) the codification of covert images of resistance during non-revolutionary times; (b) the creation of a communal (feminist) political consciousness through the practice of storytelling; and (c) the redefining of the very possibilities of political consciousness and action through the act of writing.

The act of writing by non-Western women has, in addition, precipitated the discursive construction of Third world women in Western feminism. Mohanty, in her essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1991: 51), analyzes the production of the 'Third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject in some Western texts. The critiques she offers of 'Western feminist' discourse on Third world women, however, also pertain to Third world scholars writing about their own cultures and who employ, like some of their Western critics, identical analytic strategies.

More pertinently perhaps to this study, Mohanty (1991: 53) maintains that the relationship between 'woman' - a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, and so on) - and 'women' - 'real, material subjects of their collective histories' - is one of the central concepts that the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. By contrast, an analysis of 'sexual difference' (as Mohanty, 1991: 53 emphasizes) in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what she calls, 'the Third world difference' or 'Third world woman'.

Western discourse, according to Mohanty (1991: 55), very often tends to the crucial assumption that 'all of us of the same gender, across cultural classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis'. Thus, what binds women together is a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression. This, in turn, results in the construction of Third world women as a homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as 'implicit *victims*' of particular socio-

economic systems (Mohanty, 1991: 55). Mohanty's viewpoint is echoed by Cheryl Hendricks and Desiree Lewis - who, according to Margaret J. Daymond, in her *Introduction to South African Feminisms*, 1996: xxiv - position them as what they themselves call 'Voices from the Margins'. Although the centre to which they speak is clearly that of white authority in South Africa, the plural form which they use for themselves indicates their view that black women occupy several marginalities. There are, for example, the African-American and the West African theories whose arguments they report, but the plural also refers to the several marginalisms of black South African women. Daymond further notes that, in writing, Hendricks and Lewis resist the solidarity claim that all oppressed black women experience and understand their circumstances in the same way. Their varied social circumstances mean that they do not, by virtue of their blackness, share 'fixed attributes' (1996: xxiv) and this is borne out, for example, in the discussion of the writings of Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi.

Having provided us with five contexts to facilitate an understanding of Third world women's engagement with feminism, Mohanty (1991: 57) identifies five categories of analysis in much feminist criticism by white and non-white feminists that serve as the all-time equalizer of 'third world women': (a) women as victims of male violence; (b) victims of the colonial process; (c) victims of the Arab familial system; (d) victims of the economic development process and finally, (e) victims of the Islamic code. On behalf of African feminists, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmat (1984: 7) argue quite persuasively that 'Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as "feudal residues" or label us "traditional," also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism. They need to be continually challenged ...'.

This supports Mohanty's argument that 'women' is never a coherent group or category prior to their entry in any process.

Fran Hosken's statement that 'male sexual politics' in Africa and around the world 'share the same political goal: to assure female dependence and subservience by any and all means' is cited by Mohanty (1991: 58) as an example of the assumption by critics that sisterhood can be assumed on the basis of gender. She objects to both the generalization of all Third world women as the victims of male control, as well as the definition of women as archetypal victims frozen into 'objects-who-defend-themselves', men into 'subjects-who-perpetrate-violence', and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people. The notion that male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies is reiterated by Mohanty when she claims that sisterhood must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis.

As Boyce Davies (1994: 5) points out, even the terms that black women use to name themselves, for instance, black, African, women of colour, Third world, and so on, carry their string of echoes and inscriptions. Each term represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation. In other words: 'At each arrival at a definition, we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new reception of meaning, new contradictions' (Boyce Davies, 1994: 5).

This current enterprise is not, of course, a quest for appropriate nomenclature. What is of concern to this present discussion of feminism, and to the research project as a whole is to provide a broad context for the so-called feminist practice of 'writing back', of giving

voice to or articulating the nature of the 'burden' of non-white African women - through the autobiographical and fictional writings of two such 'Third world' women (where the term 'Third world' designates a politico-religious constituency [Islam] more than a physiological or sociological one).

This broader context involves not only the polemic inherent in naming/self-naming but also of group classification. The belief that black women are universal dependants, that '... all African women are politically and economically dependent (to use the phrase of Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, 1983: 13 - an Italian writer, sociologist, Marxist and feminist) is, as already mentioned, contested by African feminist criticism. Mohanty reasons that she has nothing against women from the continent of Africa being descriptively characterized as 'women of Africa'. It is when 'women of Africa' becomes a 'homogeneous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness (or even strengths) that problems arise - we say too little or too much' (Mohanty, 1991: 59). Cutrufelli's analytic strategy denies any historical specificity to the location of women in terms of binarisms, for example, as subordinate/powerful, marginal/central. But, the problem with such a strategy, as Mohanty (1995: 59) so significantly notes, is that 'it assumes [that] men and women are already constructed as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations' (1991: 59).

As representative of the womanist challenge, Michelle Rosaldo proffers a very coherent argument in ascertaining that women should be seen as a power group: 'Woman's place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but rather the meaning her activities acquire

through concrete social interactions (1980: 390). Boyce Davies (1994: 28) reinforces this representation when she comments: 'The notion that woman is constructed as living the gift or donation of *herself* to the fulfillment [*sic*] of all others' desires and needs - i.e., to making everyone else happy - is an originary myth that is still in need of deconstruction'. Therefore, it is important to note that the notion 'woman mother', in a variety of societies, is not as significant as the value attached to the act of mothering. The status attached to it is a very important one - one that needs to be stated and analyzed contextually (Mohanty, 1991: 60).

Juliette Minces (1980: 23), in citing *the patriarchal family* as the basis for 'an almost identical vision of women' that Arab and Muslim societies have, falls into the very same trap of analysing women prior to their entry into social relations. Mohanty (1991: 61), in response to Minces's statement, points out that the particular historical, material, and ideological power structures that construct such images need to be addressed continually. As has already been emphasized in Chapters One and Two, it is problematical to speak of a vision of women shared by all Arab and Muslim societies. Since there are over twenty different Arab and Muslim countries, the question can indeed be raised: which Muslim? And to speak of the patriarchal family or the tribal kinship structure as the origin of the socio-economic status of women is to again assume that women are sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the family. From this viewpoint, women, regardless of class and cultural differences, are affected by a system that views all Arab and Muslim women as a single entity, a homogeneous oppressed group, without taking into account various practices within each family which serve to constitute women as wives, mothers, sisters, and so on. Mohanty, too, subscribes to this notion, hence her wry remark: 'Arabs

and Muslims, it appears, don't change at all. Their patriarchal family is carried over from the times of the prophet Mohammed [*sic*]. They exist, as it were, outside history' (1991: 62).

A further example of the use of 'women' as a category of analysis is the reductionism in describing the relationship between the economy and factors such as politics and ideology. All specificities to the question of women is denied. But, Mina Modares, in her careful analysis in *Women and Shi'ism in Iran* (1981), offers a critique of feminist writings that treat Islam as a separate ideology. Islamic ideology, as pointed out in Chapters One and Two, is not to be separated from social relations and practices. Rather, it is a discourse which includes rules for economic, social and power relations within each society. A certain unification is, almost inevitably, imposed on all Islamic women, regardless of their different positions in society. Marnia Lazreg (1988: 87), too, claims that there is a certain reductionism inherent in scholarship on women in the Middle East and North Africa:

A ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to the religion as *the* cause of gender inequality just as it is made the source of underdevelopment in much of modernization theory. In an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa mirrors that of [the] theologians' own interpretation of women in Islam

The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being. Because women are subsumed under religion presented in fundamental terms, they are inevitably seen as evolving in non-historical time. They virtually have no history. An analysis of change is therefore foreclosed.

The patriarchal religious system, referred to in the above excerpt, reflects back to bell hook's [*sic*] call for a paradigm shift, as well as the feminist's preoccupation with naming and self-naming.

Mohanty (1991: 64) reiterates her claim about the problematical reductionism of Third world women as a stable category of analysis when she maintains that it

assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their sub-ordination [*sic*]. Instead of analytically *demonstrating* the production of women as socio-economic, political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities.

Moreover, if the reductionism of Third world women is inherent in the various scholarships and proves to be problematical, so too, is the Islamist position that is essentially reactive in nature regarding the Arab and the Muslim women, as Leila Ahmed notes in *Women and Gender in Islam: Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992: 236). Notwithstanding the nature of Arab discourse, as Ahmed points out, whether it be discourses of collaboration or resistance, the goals and ideas they articulate and 'even the rejection of and often-legitimate anger at the West that they give voice to are formulated in terms of the dominant discourse - Western in origin - of our global society' (1992: 236). Just as the initiating colonial discourse had done, women - and the reaffirmation of indigenous customs relating to women and the restoration of the customs and laws of the past Islamic societies with respect to women - are, as Ahmed (1992: 236) calls it, 'the centrepiece of the agenda of political Islamists'.

The notion of returning to an 'original' Islam and an 'authentic' indigenous culture (Ahmed's terms) is in itself, then, a response to the discourses of colonialism and the colonial attempt to undermine Islam and Arab culture and to replace them with Western practices and beliefs (Ahmed, 1992: 237). But, as Ahmed emphatically asserts, what is needed now is not a response to the colonial and postcolonial assault on non-Western

cultures, which merely inverts the terms of the colonial thesis to affirm the opposite. Rather, a move beyond confinement within those terms and a rejection or incorporation of Western, non-Western, and indigenous inventions, ideas and institutions on the basis of their merit, not their tribe of origin, is crucial.

For the lay Muslim women, as Ahmed (1992: 239) notes, it is not the legalistic voice of Islam, but rather its ethical, egalitarian voice (and this, too, is the case with Christianity and Judaism as regards the moral and spiritual equality of all human beings) that speaks most clearly and insistently. It is because Muslim women hear this egalitarian voice that they often declare that Islam is 'nonsexist' (Ahmed, 1992: 239). And it is exactly because of this egalitarian voice that Arab feminist literary theory underscores the notion that gender in itself does not determine the nature of literary creation. Rather, as Joseph T. Zeidan (1995: 3) remarks in his introduction to *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*: 'gender ... underscores difference in experience, differences that are manifested in literature'.

Since feminist literary theory is still mostly the domain of Western feminism, Zeidan calls upon both the Arab and Western critic to be mindful of the problems involved in applying theories developed in the West to the literature produced in the Arab world. For Zeidan, the danger lies in imposing these theories (though they can be valuable tools for interpreting certain literary phenomena and techniques) on a literature which, compared to Western literature, does have a different historical-cultural context (1995: 3).

Fortunately, feminist theory - as has already been touched upon, and as Zeidan remarks

- although certainly not 'universally "true" in any single development or application, has a built-in allowance for (and indeed, an insistence on) the contextualization of theory, theorists and subjects of study ...[which] means that it is highly adaptable' (1995: 3).

It is precisely the terms 'feminist discourse' and 'feminist vision' within an Arab and Muslim context that are interrogated by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke in their text *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (1990: xiv), which they call: 'the recovery of a debate presumed not to have existed'. The rhetorical questions posed by these two writers, namely: 'Are the connotations the same for the Arab world [one could add the Third world] as for Europe and America?' and 'Are there discrete feminisms that emerge in response to indigenous circumstances?' are simultaneously answered when they state: 'In our research and through our contacts with Arab women, we have explored expressions of feminist consciousness beyond the horizons of western [*sic*] expectations' (1990: xiv).

While in French - the dominant language of the Egyptian Feminist Union women - the distinction between *féminine* and *féministe* is clear, as Badran and Cooke (1990: xiv) point out, the word *nisai* (women) in Arab remains ambiguous and is clarified only by its context. No unambiguous term for feminist in Arabic has yet been coined. 'However, Arab women produced a discourse that can be identified as feminist before there was an explicit term for feminism' (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xiv). These two writers refer to the first written evidence of feminist writing that occurred in the poetry of an Arab woman and which was published in the 1860s. According to Badran and Cooke this means that for about half the time span covered in their book, there were no Arab women who called

themselves 'feminists' and there was no women's discourse labelled 'feminist'.

The first explicit identification of middle- and upper-class Arab women coincided with the founding of The Egyptian Feminist Union and the 'public political unveiling by two upper-class women' in Egypt in 1923 (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xv). This claim to 'unveiling' represented a symbolic and pragmatic announcement of the rejection of a whole way of life built on hiding and silencing women. Much of Arab women's feminist expression, in Badran and Cooke's viewpoint, has eluded people because of its historical invisibility. The primary aim of the study of the texts of Bâ and El-Saadawi is precisely to attempt to make the unheard heard, to make the invisible visible, to lift the veil.

Margot Badran's work on the history of feminism in Egypt therefore makes a distinction between invisible and visible feminisms, an aspect which preoccupies El-Saadawi as the discussion in Chapter Six shows. This distinction is treated in a similar fashion by Mernissi in her text *Women and Islam* (1992). Thus, this feminism is rescued from being understood as an exclusively public and explicit phenomenon. Rather, it provides an analytic framework within which to locate and explain the more comprehensive Islamic feminist historical experience. Historical moments appear to be the moments when patriarchal authorities suppressed public feminist movements, as was the case in Egypt from the middle 1950s until the early 1970s. So, too, are there private moments when authorities within the family, usually husbands, enforced silence. Significantly, however, as Badran and Cooke argue, 'Feminism may be removed from sight, but it is not necessarily extinguished' (1990: xv), a fact which is testified to in the writings of Muslim authors like Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi examined in this thesis.

In their book *Opening the Gates* (1990), already referred to, Badran and Cooke employ a broadworking definition of feminism deriving from the expression of Arab women's voices and activism over nearly a century and a quarter. According to these two writers, Arab feminism involves one or more of the following: an awareness by women that as women they are systematically placed in a disadvantaged position; some form of rejection of enforced behaviours and thought; and attempts to interpret their own experiences and then to improve their position or lives as women.

There is no doubt, as Nawal El-Saadawi points out in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980: ix), that to write about women in Arab society, especially if the author is herself a woman, is to tread on difficult and sensitive areas:

It is like picking your way through territory heavy with visible and hidden mines. Almost every step might touch an electrified wire, a sanctified and sacred spot which is meant to be untouchable, a value that is not to be questioned because it is part of the religious and moral structures that rear themselves up like heavy iron bars whenever questions related to women are raised and hands stretched out to set her free.

El-Saadawi further emphasizes the fact that although there are certain characteristics common to feminist movements all over the world, fundamental differences are inevitable when dealing with different stages of economic, social and political movement. In underdeveloped countries, as she asserts, liberation from foreign domination often still remains the crucial issue; and this kind of external expression influences the content and form of struggle in other areas including, of course, that of women's status and role in their society. Cultural differences between the Western capitalist societies and Arab Islamic countries are also of importance. As El-Saadawi reminds likeminded feminists, if all is not taken into account and studied with care, enthusiasm and the spirit of solidarity

on its own may lead feminists to taking a stand that is against the interest movements in the East, which would therefore be harmful to the struggle for women's emancipation elsewhere too (1980: ix).

In addition, El-Saadawi (1980: xiv) contends that she does not agree with those women in America and Europe who call Arab women the victims of medieval systems that condone female circumcision and other practices. And she voices this disagreement quite specifically, declaring (1980: xiv): 'I am against female circumcision and other similar retrograde and cruel practices. I was the first woman to denounce it publicly and to write about it in my book *Women and Sex* (1972)'. Furthermore, she maintains that although women in Europe and America have perhaps not been exposed to surgical removal of the clitoris, they, nevertheless, are the victims of cultural and psychological clitoridectomy. Such a brash claim is naturally contentious and is, somewhat ironically, a precise reflection - in reverse - of Lashgari's indictment of an overly Eurocentric mindset, referred to in the opening paragraph of this chapter.

In El-Saadawi's unconsciously Afrocentric opinion, feminism in the Arab Islamic countries does not merely involve 'free thought' versus 'belief in religion'. Nor does it concern feminist rights (as sometimes understood in the West) in opposition to 'male chauvinism'; nor yet does it aim at some of the superficial aspects of modernization characteristic of the developed world and the affluent society. In its essence, according to El-Saadawi (1980: ix-x), the struggle which was then, and is still now being fought seeks to ensure that the Arab peoples - male and female - take possession of their economic potential and resources, and of their scientific and cultural heritage so that they can develop

whatever they have to the maximum and rid themselves once and for all of the control and domination exercised by foreign capital interests. They seek to build a free society with equal rights for all and to abolish the injustices and oppression of systems based on class and patriarchal privilege. This quest for a free society, equality and justice is not only the ideal propounded by the Prophet in early Islamic theocracy (see Chapter One of this thesis), but also that of the American Charter of freedom which reconciles Eurocentric and Afrocentric aspirations.

Furthermore, as El-Saadawi (1980: xi) argues, the struggle of women in underdeveloped countries is not a narrow fanatical movement prejudiced in favour of the female gender and rising to its defence at any cost. A similar statement has also been made by Mohanty when she claims that gender is but one aspect of feminism, as previously discussed in this chapter. So, too, does El-Saadawi maintain that progress for women and an improvement of their status can never be attained unless the whole society moves forward. Victory in the long and difficult struggle for women's emancipation requires that women adopt a flexible attitude and that they should be ready to co-operate with democratic and nationalistic forces, progressive religious movements, as well as with socialist and Marxist orientated trends and organizations (El-Saadawi, 1980: xi).

Progress and emancipation were and are indeed pertinent issues to the Arab woman. Yet, contrary to the popular thinking that feminist debates began in the Arab world in 1899 with the publication of the Egyptian male lawyer, Quasim Amin's book, *The Liberation of Women*, certain texts in *Opening The Gates* (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xvi) indicate that feminism originated much earlier in the Arab world. This argument is in line with

Mernissi's claim, as already noted in Chapters One and Two, that feminism stems from no imported values. However, Badran, in her research on Arab women, notes fundamental differences between early female and male generated discourses. Men's pro-feminist stands arose out of contact with European society in which women were visible.

Generally speaking, women's feminism was initially an upper-class phenomenon and it grew out of expanded learning and observation of their own lives during times of great change. Muslim women argued that Islam guaranteed women rights of which they had been deprived because of 'customs and traditions' imposed in the name of religion. As already discussed in Chapter One, Islamic women succeeded in opposing the unilateral use of the male gender fourteen centuries ago. So, too, did the new regulations and laws recognize individuals (male and female) as subjects. Through the correct understanding and practice of Islam, women could regain basic rights, and their families and societies would also benefit. Pro-feminist men, too, affirmed that some of the practices in Arab society were not sanctioned by religion. They maintained that Arab society was backward because of lack of education and because of social customs, such as veiling and seclusion practised in the middle and upper classes (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xvi).

Contrary to these supposedly more liberal viewpoints, influential circles (particularly in the Western imperialist world), as El-Saadawi notes (1980: i), depict the problems of Arab women as stemming from the substance and values of Islam, and simultaneously depict the retarded development of Arab countries as largely the result of religious and cultural factors. For them underdevelopment is not related to economics and political factors, at the root of which lies foreign exploitation of resources. Development is

visualized as a process of cultural change, of modernization along the lines of Western life and technological advance.

Badran and Cooke (1990: xvi) maintain that, in view of these contentions, Arab feminism has been greatly misunderstood and misrepresented in both the Arab world and in the West. Some Arabs have attacked feminism as being Western - the cultural arm of imperialism or neo-imperialism which destroys indigenous cultural identity. These Arabs argue also that feminism is anti-Islamic: it undermines the religious foundations of the family and society; it is also élitist, and therefore irrelevant to the majority. Westerners have contended that an indigenous Arab feminism is impossible. Badran and Cooke (1990: xvi) proffer the following reasons for this Eurocentric point of view: Islam is interpreted as being oppressive of women; or it exists as a unique Arab phenomenon; or it is a local manifestation of a universal feminism. The irony of this kind of dogmatism has already been discussed in terms of the caution voiced by Lashgari.

In fact, contrary to the Western beliefs articulated above, early Islam promulgated social equality and public ownership of wealth in its earliest form (see Chapter One of this study). El-Saadawi (1980: iii) claims that early Islam 'laid the first foundations of what might be called a primitive socialism, for the money deposited in the "House of Wealth" belonged to all Muslims equally, irrespective of their tribe or class'. Yet this so-called primitive socialism did not last long, as the fourth caliph, Usman Ibn Affan (in the eighth century AD) started to plunge the Arab Islamic peoples into a long night of feudal oppression. (An overview of these historical events have been given in Chapters One and Two.) In practice, women were soon 'condemned to toil, to hide behind the veil, to quiver

in the prison of a Harem fenced in by high walls, iron bars, windowless rooms, and the ever present eunuchs on guard with their swords' (Saadawi, 1980: iii).

Prior to the appropriation of their own historical sources, inequality, injustice and poverty tended to characterize the lives of a vast majority of people in Arab countries. The result is that these people could not always provide their children with the required economic means. There are women, like Bâ and Saadawi, who were and are educated, and who were able to find rewarding occupations. Nevertheless, in a number of cases their husbands might continue to dominate them. (This, too, was the case of El-Saadawi. She divorced her first two husbands, both of them who expected her - notwithstanding her qualifications as a medical doctor - to stay at home and not to engage in any writing.) Thus it is that Islam, which is characterized not only by its philosophical and theological content, but also by its ability to penetrate the arena of politics and the economic and social lives of people has been and still is 'the banner and inspiration for conflicting forces', as El-Saadawi calls it (1980: iv).

Notwithstanding conflicting forces, and 'while affirming the universality as well as the diversity of feminism, scholars have begun to use the term "feminisms" to acknowledge the plurality within the unity' (Badran and Cooke, 1995: vii). In addition, while Eastern feminisms are being uncovered and studied, understanding of Western feminisms is being refined. This new scholarship also undermines the myth of a monolithic Western feminism and refines the understanding of feminisms as products of particular times, places and classes. This scholarship, as Badran and Cooke (1990: xviii) observe, also sensitises the reader to the danger of 'essentialising Arab Feminism'. A useful adjunct to the terms

feminisms is the phrase 'common differences' which Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis use as the title to their book, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (1981) to express the oxymoron of plurality within unity.

In Badran and Cooke's viewpoint (1990: xviii), in questioning the inherited 'wisdom' passed down by patriarchal authorities and surrogates, a new ideology reflecting the changing everyday lives is shaped. Contemporary Arab feminists reject imposed patterns of thought, and 'they breach walls of silencing' (Badran and Cooke, 1995: xviii). As these two writers point out, namelessness is eradicated by affixing one's signature to one's words. The feminist discourse of Arab women writers destroys patriarchally produced female archetypes and replaces them with other gender-based prototypes: women who have voices, needs, desires and aspirations such as those articulated in the fictional and non-fictional writings of women like Bâ and El-Saadawi, among others.

Arab feminism is, of course, much older than commonly thought, perhaps because of its invisibility. It is important to note that, in the Arab world, women's feminism first arose in a pre-colonial context following the rise of capitalism and the modern state. In Egypt, the rise of women's feminist consciousness preceded the emergence of a nationalist consciousness. From the start, women grounded their feminism first in Islam and later in nationalism. So did Aisha, a wife of Prophet Muhammad, issue religious interpretations (as already discussed in the previous two chapters).

Badran and Cooke (1990: xxix) note that response from the male patriarchy to publications by feminists was one of keeping the silence to show contemptuous neglect.

In the patriarchy's view women were not writing important texts; they were, at best, deemed harmless and irrelevant. At worst, as Badran and Cooke point out, when writers like El-Saadawi began to link women's oppression with class oppression, women's writing was seen as threatening to patriarchal interests. Socialist men did not welcome new allies. Hence, the Sadat regime resorted to the imprisonment of all liberal, outspoken writers, including El-Saadawi and other pro-male and female feminists. While some Arab feminists like the Moroccan, Fatima Mernissi and the Egyptians, El-Saadawi and Amina Said, remain outspoken, most are guarded or publicly silent for fear of their lives. (El-Saadawi's name appeared on the so-called Death List in Egypt.) However, as Mernissi satirically quips in the introduction to the 1987 edition of her classic Afro-feminist text, *Beyond the Veil*: 'Are we all going back to the veil, back to the secluded house, back to the walled city, back to the national, proudly sealed imaginary boundaries?... It is very unlikely' (1987: 3).

Despite persistent male contempt and neglect, as well as domestic constraints or tyrannies in the Arab countries and Muslim societies in particular, women continue to write. Historically, women have long attempted to subvert patriarchal control of the distribution of their writing. For example, the Egyptian Feminist Union issued its own publications from as early as the 1920s. Only in the 1980s, however, have women succeeded in founding and running their own publishing houses, such as the press run by the Arab Women's Solidarity Association in Cairo, the Gada Samman Publishing House in Beirut, and the Post-Apollo Press founded by the Lebanese feminist, Simone Fattal in California (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xxix).

In the earlier years, novels, poetry and short stories were the preferred genres after article writing and they became powerful vehicles for feminist thought, especially when invisibility was needed or sought. The defining label of autobiography, middle-class women's revolt against social conventions has, until recently, been a common tool for diminishing women's literary voices. Implicit in the label is the notion that these women have only one story, their own (Badran and Cooke, 1990: xxxi). However, generic classification was not crucial. The message of refusal was so strong that it unleashed a wave of feminist literature. This literature, in turn, emerged in a feminist school of women writers and this has implications for the further development of women's literature. In the 1980s, the number of Arab women writers increased so dramatically, as Badran and Cooke (1990: xxxiii) observe, that 'mutual awareness and acknowledgement or competitive rejection has become the norm'.

The question, 'What are Arab feminisms?' (as posed by Badran and Cooke, 1990: xxxiii) invokes a multiplicity of answers. Badran and Cooke point to the truism that meanings are not the same everywhere. And, in exactly what way the differences occur is a subject of an ongoing debate among feminists, semioticians and other theorists around the globe. In order to demonstrate their argument, Badran and Cooke adopt something of a New Historicist approach. Badran and Cooke (1990: xxxiii) suggest that when one woman writes to another praising her poetic expression, this raises an important question: 'How can this be feminist?' Yet they both take cognizance of the circumstances in which these women lived (when visiting was at best confined to female family members; and when most women did not write because the act of writing was considered inflammatory and a moral threat). Therefore, such a communication takes on special meaning. The simple

examples from everyday life (*journalisme-vérité*) serve to illustrate the implications - that signification is embedded in context. Badran and Cooke (1990: xxxiii) rightly assert that when an analysis of Arab women's discourse is done it allows one to see feminism where one had not previously thought to look. Because Islamic theocracy embraces the body politic as well as the soul, Arab feminism is necessarily grounded in the traditional role of women, and it is, *de facto*, more nearly related to social conventions than perhaps even African feminism is.

El-Saadawi's claim (1980: xv) that more and more women are being drawn into the struggle for social transformation in the Arab countries is in line with the above argument. These women feel the need for a modern theory of social transformation that 'links thought to action, intellect to feeling and emotion, and that is able to build up a new and higher relationship between women and men in their struggle for a better world', as El-Saadawi (1980: xv) observes.

Notwithstanding the difference in the historical-cultural context of Arab feminism, Arab, African and Western feminisms show remarkable 'common' features. Maggie Humm (1986: 6) remarks that an even more important task than re-evaluating women's writing or women's intellect is to re-evaluate the whole terrain of criticism itself as mapped out and colonized by men; that is, 'to change the language of literary criticism from one of power and possession to one of emotion and caring'. Only when caring features dominantly in both male and female's lives (caring for one another is also an injunction ordained by the *Qur'an*, as previously noted in Chapters One and Two), when humane treatment features first and foremost, as Mariama Bâ so vividly portrays in *Scarlet Song*,

can the terrain of criticism be re-mapped.

If cognizance is taken of Zeidan's notion (as previously noted) that, although feminist criticism is not 'universally true', it is still highly adaptable in its contextualization, critics writing what they call 'feminist criticism' seem to share (in Humm's opinion, 1986: 7) three basic assumptions. The first is that literature and criticism are ideological since writing manipulates gender for symbolic purposes. However, as Humm cautions, ideology is one's way of coping with the contradictions of experience. The second major assumption is that there are 'sex-related' writing strategies. Of course, as Humm also points out, how women wrote is how they were allowed to write (this notion has already been discussed in highlighting Arab feminist writing above). As previously suggested to, the socialization and subordination of middle-class women limited their access to, and means of, expression. But in linguistics, as Humm (1986: 7) claims, from the work of Robin Lakoff onwards, researchers have pointed out that, given a dependence on social process, men and women do use language in different ways. They have different vocabularies in different kinds of sentences. Women, thus, 'speak in a sexually distinctive way from men To celebrate the multiplicity of women's writing rather than simply its difference (thereby avoiding the dangers of "oddness") is to prove the extent, and normality, of women's experience' (Humm, 1986: 7). The last assumption, in feminist criticism, according to Humm (1986: 8), is that even if some critics acknowledge the first two postulates of feminist criticism, the continuing tradition of literary culture, like the economic social traditions of which it is a part, uses male norms to exclude or undervalue female writing and scholarship.

Hence, as Humm (1986: 14) states,

Feminist critics may share one single assumption that literary history is a constructed male fiction, but feminist criticism ... confronts the centrality of "literature" in literary history and examines the implications of centralising literature itself; it involves historical explanation, reconstruction and a recognition that reading is always rereading.

In addition, Humm (1986:14) proposes that feminist criticism addresses and opposes three problems in literary criticism. First, the problem of a gendered literary history is addressed by re-examining male texts, noting their assumptions and showing the way women in them are frequently moulded within tight cultural and social constraints. This criticism is thematic since it focuses on women's oppression as a theme in literature and assumes a woman reader as a consumer of male-produced works. This criticism, in turn, can then replace this oppression with a new literary history which gives full weight to texts of neglected women, and women's oral culture, previously regarded as extra-literary. Second, feminist criticism confronts the problem of creating a gendered reader by offering her new methods and a fresh critical practice. Such practice focuses on techniques such as signification, for instance the mirroring of mothers and daughters. Third, feminist criticism has to make us '*act* as women readers supported by a language spoken for and by women' (Humm, 1986: 15).

Deirdre Lashgari (1995: 3) rightly maintains that as long as the dominant [whether that be the male, or what she calls the superior white women's discourse] hear no voices but their own, 'their monologic "truth" blinds them' (1995: 3). In order to free this monologue from its constraining knots, Lashgari advocates the concept of *heteroglossia*, a concept which emerges from the specifics of its social context, as noted earlier. She argues that

as soon as a multiplicity of voices enters the discourse, when the margins talk back to the imperial or neocolonial centre, the 'binary structure unravels' (1995: 3) and to borrow El-Saadawi's term, the veil is lifted (1988: 5).

In Lashgari's opinion (1995: 3) dialogics, the constructive discourse of conflict, becomes possible when polyvocal discourse interrupts the dominant monologue. Mikhail Bakhtin, as explained by Jeremy Hawthorn (1992: 40), views verbal interaction as the fundamental reality of language: both in the history of the individual and also in the history of the human species, language is not born within the isolated being, but in the interaction between two or more human beings. For Bakhtin, the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. The opposite of dialogue for Bakhtin is, logically, monologue. The dialogic process is inherently confrontational, as Lashgari maintains (1995: 3), since it exposes discrepancies, contradictions and rifts. The perceived objection that everything was 'nice and harmonious before' (Lashgari's phraseology) has not taken into account that the divisions and differences were there all along but were simply whitewashed into invisibility. In fact, 'Dialogics allow us to begin to see' as Lashgari (1995: 3) aptly remarks. This is indeed the case when contrary to the deafness of monologism, and hence the coterminous invisibility caused by the veil, dialogue is open to others' responses. This response, in turn, will take place on an equal footing and will contribute to the lifting of the veil.

The movement toward understanding is called *travesía* or crossing by Lashgari, which is the opposite side of the coin to transgression. Whatever ground one stands on, whether centre or margin - as Lashgari notes (1995: 4) - one faces in each moment an 'Other' ground, which is the threatening not-known. Therefore, as Lashgari quite correctly perceives, only by violating the boundaries of the familiar and proper, risking conflict, can one reach toward connection. She refers to Bakhtin who observes that the word calls forth response and comments as follow, 'Conflict becomes music, or dance, exhilarating as well as dangerous' (Lashgari, 1995: 4).

The concept of both music and danger is echoed by Anzaldúa's dream of living *sin fronteras* (already mentioned) and links with Higonnet's theory that borderlands can feed growth or conceal a minefield (also previously noted in this chapter). Higonnet (1994: 3) remarks that the border has been a privileged, if hazardous, trope for feminist activity. She borrows the phrase 'border feminists' coined by Sonia Saldívar-Hull in *Criticism in the Borderlands* (1991), who examines processes of marginalization that exclude texts produced by minority groups and devalue 'minor' genres or movements.

Boyce Davies (1994: 17), too, subscribes to the viewpoint that there is a need to reconstruct destroyed historical consciousness and the hierarchies of meaning bestowed there. She maintains that all of these issues relate to literature in a cross-cultural perspective. Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, as noted by Boyce Davies, makes 're-memory' central to the experience of that novel; the recalling of what she calls the 'unspeakable thoughts unspoken' and the 're-membering' or the bringing back together of the disparate members of the family in painful recall. Morrison, in Boyce Davies's viewpoint, is clearly

talking here about crossing the boundaries of space, time, history, place, language, corporeality and restricted consciousness in order to make reconnections and mark or name gaps and absences (1994: 17).

The process of 're-membering' is echoed by a number of other feminist writers. For Paula Gunn Allen, remembering in *The Sacred Hoop* (1992) heals; the oral tradition mends and restores the tribes. Trinh Minh-ha in *Women Native Other* (1989) also talks about the story that similarly 'links women and storytelling in the experience of people of color [sic]' (Boyce Davies, 1994: 17). Mohanty (1991: 35), as previously noted, suggests that a number of crucial elements are entailed in the relation of writing, memory, consciousness, and political resistance. For Mohanty, writing, in particular (and one could add memory or storytelling), becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. Both the processes of 're-membering' and writing are therefore those of boundary crossing.

In line with this argument Higonnet (1994: 4), therefore, poses an important question: 'What might the expansion of boundaries bring about, or conversely, what might feminist engagements with comparative literature yield?' For Higonnet (1994: 4) the idea that feminist theories can renovate not only literary study at large but comparative literature specifically has wide currency. The logic of feminist scholarship, according to Lillian Robinson (1992: 29) in a volume on 'decolonizing tradition ... necessarily entails rethinking the entire literary tradition' to 'encompass excluded races, national groups, sexual minorities, and ideological positions What this means is a more truly comparative literature'. So, too, has Gayatri Spivak spoken of 'feminism as the movement

with the greatest radical potential within literary criticism' (1990: 118).

The question of who cuts the border, necessarily involves the position of the critic. This question therefore pertains to the manner in which the critic's voice speaks and translates. If women do not speak themselves but are 'spoken' by language and culture (as Higonnet claims (1994: 11)) what does it mean to engage in the critical activity of interpretation and explanation? Tony Morrison (1990: 208) reminds us: 'Cultures, whether silenced or monologicistic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in language and images available to them'.

In many cultures and periods, the only women likely to have access to literacy and to a literary tradition, as well as recourse and leisure for writing, were the daughters or wives of rulers or aristocrats and religious leaders. In the Arab world and Iran, women Sufis wrote some of the earliest mystic poetry in the tradition (in the eight century in Arabic, eleventh in Farsi). In many oral cultures, from pre-Islamic Bedouin Arabia to the twentieth-century Inuit, each member of the community was considered a potential poet, and women along with men took part in the poetic competitions and celebrations that constituted the heart of their culture (Lashgari, 1995: 5).

In the present century, as Lashgari points out, postcolonial writers have worked in similarly complex cultural and linguistic situations. Black Senegalese novelists Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, for example, inherited both a written Afro-Arabian literary tradition, beginning with the early pharaohs of Egypt, and a rich ethnic oral tradition. So, too, did Nawal El-Saadawi inherit a rich Arabo-Egyptian tradition. But, whereas El-

Saadawi has written several of her texts and novels in Arabic (though most of her writings have been translated into English), the two Senegalese novelists have chosen to write in the language of the French colonizers, which is more widely accessible than their native languages.

Higonnet's claim (1994: 11) that critical activity involves interpretation and explanation, and her question as to who speaks for whom in the literary context become very pertinent. If reading, then, is a form of dialogue with an interlocutor, how can the critic avoid usurping the voice of the other? Trinh Minh-ha (1989: 16) too, asks a corresponding question namely, '... how can one recreate without re-circulating domination?' Marnia Lazreg (1988: 99-100) poses a similar question: 'To what extent can Western feminism dispense with an ethics of responsibility when writing about different women?' If the point is neither to subsume other women under one's own experience nor to uphold a separate truth for them, then 'it is to allow them to *be* while recognizing that what they are is just as meaningful, valid, and comprehensible as what we are ...' (Lazreg, 1988: 99-100).

Lashgari (1995: 9), in line with Lazreg's argument, advocates that binary structures have to be undone. This notion, in turn, means destabilizing not only the master narratives of the patriarchs but also women's own. In a similar fashion to Mohanty's notion in her essay 'Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism' (1989) which calls for a 'positive elaboration' of the human, and that such an elaboration is essential if contemporary political-critical discourse is to avoid the incoherences and weaknesses of a relativist position, Laura E. Donaldson (1992: 12) argues for the need to do away with what she calls the 'Miranda effect', the tendency among feminists to construct and then

be trapped by a universalizing image of women's solidarity. Lashgari remarks that in ignoring differences of history, economic class, and culture, one falls into a blindness akin to the blindness that kept Miranda from 'seeing' Caliban.

In her provocative essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 1988: 271-313), Spivak addresses the way the 'subaltern' woman as subject is already positioned, represented, spoken for or constructed in a fixed socio-political category prior to her entry thereof. In this process she is constructed as absent or silent or not listened to at all in a variety of discourses. Her speech, as Boyce Davies comments (1994: 21) 'is already presented as non-speech'. Boyce Davies furthers the notion of non-speech when she refers to incidents where Spivak's meanings were forcibly clarified and activated for many by witnessing the way Anita Hill's speech and Lani Guinier's writings (other black women speakers) were mis-characterized, ignored, distorted, and erased at several occasions when they did take to voicing their opinions.

Both Spivak's highly nuanced question (Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 1988: 308) whether the act of criticism necessarily constitutes 'information retrieval' and her subsequent conclusion that

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish ...

correspond with Lashgari's claim that there are proximate others that one can represent and speak for.

In representing and speaking for others it is of crucial importance not to hypostatize the female or the male reader, as Higonnet points out (1995: 12). It is here, according to Higonnet, that the 'polysexual' critic, advocated by Greta Gaard, offers a fresh alternative to rigid positioning.

Adrienne Rich subscribes to the notion of positioning when she, according to Jane Hoogestraat (1995: 25), chooses the middle ground relevant to the meaning of language. Margaret Homans explains in another context (1983: 205): 'The ambiguity entailed in the presentation of unrepresentability might, then, be an instance in which the French and American assumptions are equally correct - but only when taken together'. Hoogestraat claims that the 'French' assumption is that official languages are so thoroughly male dominated that women cannot use such languages to represent female experience. The 'American' assumption, on the other hand, is that although language may have been historically dominated, it has also been used by women and indeed can be used, in variations of existing forms, to represent the experience of women. Surely, the middle ground is directly relevant since it allows for the possibility of representing silences, including the silences of women who have been excluded from official languages.

Personal and cultural silences can, of course, be broken. Adrienne Rich's claim that 'all silence has a meaning' (1989: 45), emphatically stresses the imperative that human responsibility entails working towards a metaphorically less violent world in the future. One can work at the border without absorbing, usurping, or silencing another, although it is not an easy task. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the emerging play of multiple voices in a social context is, to quote Bakhtin (1981: 277): 'the natural orientation of any

living discourse'. Tony Morrison insightfully maintains that oppression is destructive for the oppressor as well as for the oppressed. So, as Gloria Anzaldúa shows (1987), it is always at the boundaries and the margins that the most exciting and transformative energies lie. And the voices that have been silenced or, speaking, have not been noticed hold the missing pieces of an understanding of human community, and perhaps of the self too.

Lashgari (1995: 12) reinforces Trinh Minh-ha's words that irrespective of feminists' choice to concentrate on another culture, or on their own culture, 'our work will always be cross-cultural ... because of the heterogeneous reality we all live in today, in postmodern times ...'. As already noted, Lashgari (1995: 14) states that *travesía* is the only way to cross cultural borders successfully. She elaborates:

Once our polyvocal discourse has broken free from the strangleholds of polarization, so that those born into dominator status can stop fighting to silence the voices of the Other and those in the borderlands can stop fighting to be heard, then we can look around us and see what is to be seen in all its disconcerting and empowering multiplicity. We can, together, get on with the business of envisioning and weaving a world conducive to human life.

In close correspondence to Lashgari's observation that the literary critic has to resort to a polyvocal discourse, Rigoberta Menchú (1983: 247) maintains that 'structures of institutionalized violence ... [and one could add polarization] must be undone ... we have to erase the barriers which exist between ethnic groups, ... between men and women, between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, and between all the linguistic areas'. She further maintains that to foreground lines of difference can make action and change possible. Yet, she also warns us that no narrative can exhaust her readers' desires or be fully transparent, free of boundaries: 'I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret Not

even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets' (Menchú, 1983: 247).

Not being able to find out all the secrets of a specific identity is indeed true in the case of the Arab woman. Leila Ahmed (1992: 248) aptly remarks: 'Research on Arab women is a much younger field [than research on Western women]'. Analysis of the complexity of Western feminism, and its uncritical adoption of the ideals of individualism, is rare in work on Arab women: 'The sum of what is currently known about women and gender in Arab societies - the many and different Arab societies and cultures that there are - is minuscule. The areas of women's lives and the informal structures they inhabit that are still unexplored are vast' (Ahmed, 1992: 248). It is precisely this omission which lends impetus to the thrust of this thesis.

The noted Indian anthropologist T. N. Madan is cited by Ahmed (1992: 248) for suggesting that a productive starting point could be looking to other cultures in an attitude of respect and in acknowledgement of their affording opportunities for critiquing and enhancing awareness of the investigator's culture. The study of anthropology - and by extension the practice of literary criticism - 'should not merely tell us how others live their lives: it should rather tell us how we may live our lives better' and ideally, as Ahmed notes, it should be grounded in the affirmation 'that every culture needs others as critics so that the best in it may be highlighted and held out as being cross-culturally desirable' (1992: 248).

In a similar fashion to Chandra Mohanty, Leila Ahmed advocates that feminism perhaps

could formulate some such set of criteria for exploring issues of women in other cultures, including Islamic societies. Such criteria would, of necessity, undercut even inadvertent complicity in serving Western interests alone. Yet, at the same time, these criteria would neither set limits on the freedom to question and explore nor in any way compromise feminism's passionate commitment to the realization of societies that enable women to pursue, without impediment, the full development of their capacities and to contribute to their societies in all domains. The role of the writer and the literary critic complements that of the anthropologist and feminist in seeking to suggest such criteria.

Nahid Toubia (1988, as already noted) has claimed that the ideal feminist is one who uses her rich heritage of knowledge and wisdom to redesign her role in the past, present and future of humanity, a project which Mariama Bâ defines as '*Nit, nit, modi garabam*' ('Man, man is his own remedy!' (see *Scarlet Song*, Chapter Five) and that El-Saadawi describes as a more mystical love in the Sufi context (*Woman at Point Zero*, Chapter Six). With regard to this ideal concept of humanity and love, Toubia's conclusion (1988, no page reference) is both eloquent and visionary when she maintains: 'We are making our voices heard. May the world stop to listen'.

This is what Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi seemingly set out to do when they wrote their distinctive autobiographies and novels. They made their voices heard. The onus is, of course, on the reader and literary critic to take time to listen to them ... and to respond.

CHAPTER 4

SO LONG A LETTER (1980; 1989)

Why is it that **silence and immobility** [my emphases], that is, the signs and manifestations of inertia, are criteria for the beauty of the Muslim woman? What has beauty to do with the right to self-expression? Why is a woman who does not express herself, supposed to arouse desire in man, according to the Muslim canons of beauty?

This compelling series of questions, raised by the Muslim woman Fatna Ait Sabbah (translated and quoted by Edris Makward, 1986: 271-2) has relevance in the world of the late Mariama Bâ, the Senegalese author of the celebrated *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. Makward (1986: 272) points out that although the literary, cultural and theological corpus on which Fatna Ait Sabbah's study is based is, above all, Middle Eastern - and Arab and Persian, in particular - there is no denying that this corpus has had a very strong influence on many Islamized 'Sub-Saharan' African societies over several centuries. And Senegal is undoubtedly among these countries, considering its age-old contacts with North African and Middle Eastern Islam.

Mariama Bâ, following the Noma Award in 1980 for her epistolary novel *So Long a Letter*, underlines the predicament of the Muslim woman when she explicitly states in an interview:

There is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world, a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry may be different, but there is still a certain unity.

(quoted by Mbye Cham, 1987: 89)

The nature of this universal feminine cry, a cry from the heart and from beyond the veil, on African soil, and its implications - personal, social, psychological, cultural, political and economic - constitute the principal focus of the narrative in both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*.

In detailing the nature and implications of this cry, Mariama Bâ explores the dominant issues of a Muslim patriarchal society in Senegal, and the conflict between this patriarchal tradition, which confines African woman to domestic space, and woman's struggle to claim public space. The women's movement has reached Senegal, and both urban and rural women 'are becoming more and more vociferous in their cries for change in home and family relationships as much as in economic and political arenas' (Flewellyn, 1985: 13). Mariama Bâ thus 'writes back' from 'beyond the veil' in terms of four interrelated socio-political themes, which will be elaborated on later in this chapter. The discrepancy and tensions that have occurred in the spectrum of relations between woman and man in society, which Mernissi labels as 'seclusion by the veil' (1992: 95) and Cham (1987: 89) calls 'abandonment', are explored in *So Long a Letter*.

According to Islamic law, equality is an entitlement, as suggested by the excerpt from the *Qur'an* 4, 1 (already quoted):

O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women

and by a later abstract from the *Qur'an* 16:97 (as quoted by Badawi, no date: 12-13):

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to their actions.

In line with this right, Mariama Bâ, as a Muslim woman, is clearly responding to perceived discrepancies between theory and practice in questioning her status, rather than responding to Western values, such as the Feminist movement. As already argued in the

previous chapters in this study, Mernissi (1992: 21) underlines this prerogative of the Muslim woman to question the status quo when she states:

We Muslim woman can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the question for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but it is a true part of the Muslim tradition. Of this I am certain, after reading the works of those scholars ... and many others.

Integral to this argument is the Islamic injunction in the *Qur'an* to recite/*Iqra*, to question and to become enlightened.

Therefore, keeping in mind the historical and cultural specificity of the text, rather than reading *So Long a Letter* and the other texts selected for this thesis simply through either the more familiar category of a gender-based viewpoint, or the more challenging lens of *journalisme-vérité*, an attempt is made to reconcile these two points of view. Instead of following the more traditional approach and focusing on the individual protagonist and her personal development only, Cham's 'human and social detail that capture[s] the soulbeat of a society in the midst of a historic effort to balance its weakness and strength for a healthier future' (Cham, 1987: 101) has been traced. Following an anti-hierarchical principle, both the above categories are presented as contiguous, which suggests a subjacent reconciliation between the two. This more holistic approach is also in line with the teachings of Islam and, as such, attempts to offer new insights into Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi's novels.

Both the more general gender-based theory and the kind of subversive *journalisme-vérité* called for by the Francophone African philosopher Paulin Hountondji, and proposed by Laurie Edson (1977: 13) in his essay, 'Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family', focus

on Ramatoulaye, a mother, as central character who speaks at length about her experiences as a mother and her shifting relationships with her children in a changing Senegal. Bâ, in presenting a strong, positive image of a progressive mother 'constitutes a break, not only with the male tradition of writing in Africa but also with the more recent writing of African female novelists' (Edson, 1977: 18). However, whereas some critics celebrate Ramatoulaye's personal 'coming to writing', her overcoming of silence and her gaining of selfhood through writing, thus emphasizing its preoccupation with the personal, individualistic level, the *journalisme-vérité* approach endorses the political import of Bâ's focus on the mother, which must be read against the background of cultural, social, and political events in Islamic Senegal in the 1970s.

In 'Daily Life in Africa: Elements for a Critique' (1992: 361), Hountondji explains that *journalisme-vérité* is a purposely anecdotal reconstruction of facts combined with organization and interpretation that leads readers to an awareness of the real conditions of daily life and exposes the structures that make them possible. Edson (1977: 14) remarks that Hountondji calls for a demystification, a return to what is real beyond the pretentious stream of discourses that obscure it. Hountondji puts it as follows (1992: 362):

The critique of the everyday must bring to light this weighty system that clutches at our heels and which we ended up by accepting as normal through sheer habit. The critique must identify this familiar system and make it recognizable

Edson (1977: 14) notes that Hountondji has not been the only African to encourage African writers to focus attention on the real conditions of daily life. In the 1970s, the *Nouvelles Editions Africaines* created a series called 'Les Vies Africaines' to publish

works that would enable Africans to recognize their everyday lives. Bâ's first novel, though not published in this series, documents the same kinds of concerns, namely 'the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the pressures that rapid Westernization has placed on traditional ways' (Alain Fresco, 1982: 176). Reading this novel in relation to this type of *journalisme-vérité* challenges more traditional readings of Bâ that focus on the central character's personal development or her psychology, and those readings by critics who call Ramatoulaye a victim of society who does not overcome obstacles or reproach the patriarchal structure.

So Long a Letter, seen through the lens of *journalisme-vérité*, exemplifies this 'return to the real', not only because Bâ's characters speak out and expose the all-too-common reality of abandonment in Senegal, but also because of her story of an abandoned family is firmly rooted in the detail of every day reality (Edson 1977: 14). The inadequacy of public transportation, or a motorcyclist accidentally running into children playing in the streets because of the lack of playing fields are both examples of this reality. Through her characters (particularly Modou), Bâ criticizes the exorbitant costs of building too many embassies, and inviting too many foreigners too often, especially when that money could be used more wisely for the building of schools and roads, the purchase of hospital equipment, and for an increase in wages. Bâ further deplores the small number of women in the National Assembly and, through her character Daouda, her own viewpoint is echoed when she perceives and challenges women's relative lack of interest in taking an active role in public life.

It can be argued, in fact, that Ramatoulaye's process of self-definition, and her progress

from an '*estranged widow*' to an '*embraced mother*' (A .P. Busia's terms, 1988: 28) can best be delineated in a mimetic environment. Elements of radical critique or social commentary are indeed required to contribute to a more 'holistic' process of self-definition, which, in turn, is firmly rooted in the historical context of the Muslim revival movement. This movement has had profound importance for West Africa, as already noted earlier. Sheldon Geller (1982: 88), too, points to the pervasive influences of Islam:

At the turn of the century, less than half Senegal's population was Muslim. Today, more than 90 percent [*sic*] of the people embrace Islam. Since independence, Islam has become an ascendant force in Senegalese society, thanks to the Muslim brotherhood's ability to adapt to changing social conditions, the spread of Koranic [*sic*] primary schools, and Senegal's growing ties with the Islamic world.

Flewellyn (1985: 165) reinforces the notion of Senegal's growing ties with the Islamic world when she observes that Bâ's portrayal of Ramatoulaye delineates the contradictions confounding Senegalese women who espouse traditional values while responding to the modern exigencies of an independent Senegal.

Given this historical framework, Mariama Bâ's novel needs to be read within the social and political context of Islamic fundamentalism after the Family Code became law in Senegal during the presidency of Leopold Sedar Senghor (president of Senegal from 1960-1980). Fundamentalism threatened to 'undo all the gains made by women' (Edson, 1977: 15). In Senegal, the Family Code gave women equal rights, protected them against arbitrary repudiation, and reinstated women's traditionally recognized rights as wives and mothers. Moriba Magassouba (as quoted by Edson, 1977: 15) further comments that religious leaders in Senegal, however, strongly opposed the Code, which they quickly denounced as a synthesis of tradition, Islamic Law, and the needs of modern life, claiming that the Code opposed the principles of the *Qur'an*. Although the Family Code became

law in the early 1970s, it was not uniformly applied because religious leaders simply refused to recognize civil jurisdiction involving marriage, divorce, or inheritance, and because most women outside of the urban centres did not even know it existed.

Edson (1977: 16), therefore, comments that the consequences of its lack of application is a major area of investigation in Bâ's novel. Ramatoulaye and her family are abandoned by Modou, who under the system of polygamy takes a second wife. Edson (1977: 16) argues that Ramatoulaye's statement, 'The success of a nation ... depends inevitably on the family' (89) should be read in historical context and that it is quite radical: 'It is radical in that Rama, a self-described devout Muslim who observes religious laws and customs, positions herself politically against Senegalese religious leaders fighting to abolish the Family Code and the gains made by women'.

Edson continues by pointing to the fact that if the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism towards the end of the 1970s, when Bâ was writing, is taken into account, the political nature of her text is even more apparent. Moriba Magassouba (as translated and quoted by Edson, 1977: 15) observes that some critics have seen a connection between deteriorating economic conditions in Senegal toward the end of the 1970s, the social unrest that resulted and this rise in fundamentalism. The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in Senegal was so strong that in August 1979 an Islamic political party was created by Ahmed Niass and quickly banned by the Senegalese authorities. As argued before, this social and political framework informs the predicament of the modern Muslim woman in a dominating Islamic patriarchal society.

Cham (1987: 90) comments that the issue of abandonment in *So Long a Letter* begins to take on the characteristics of a power struggle in which both sides, male as well as female, invoke canons of indigenous traditions as well as adopted non-indigenous values (conceived of as 'universal') to justify or contest attitudes, beliefs and actions. More specifically then, the novelist concentrates on the question of the misuse and distortion of power and privilege in a patriarchal socio-cultural milieu in which 'one segment of the population - male, acting independently or under pressures from outside forces ... deceptively perverts privileges bestowed upon it by tradition to the detriment of the female segment' (Cham, 1987: 90). In the light of such responses to the novel, and of the viewpoint of its leading character one can dismiss the stereotype of the docile, traditional African woman who mutely and passively surrenders to the whims and dictates of the African man.

Mariama Bâ's discourse, while never questioning the fundamental precepts of Islam (as noted above), nevertheless stems deliberately and convincingly from a dynamic conception of society, 'a strong belief in social and political change and progress' (Makward, 1986: 272). While Buchi Emecheta anticipates Nigeria's political independence in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Mariama Bâ looks retrospectively at this same historical event in Senegal. Setting her novel in Dakar approximately twenty years after Senegal's independence from France, Bâ accordingly evaluates from a 'contemporary perspective the outcome of the nationalist and feminist movements of the late 1970s' (Stratton, 1988: 159). While one of Bâ's focal concerns is the female experience, the national fate that provides the backdrop equally enlarges the scope of the novel:

The undermining by bourgeois materialism of the nationalist ideals of liberty and equality serves as a vehicle to illuminate the compromising by women as well as men of the feminist ideal of a marriage contract based on parity between sexes. (Stratton, 1988: 159)

Crucial to an understanding and assessment of this epistolary novel is an appreciation of the narrative framework Mariama Bâ has so skilfully and carefully elaborated. The narrative is told in the first person by Ramatoulaye, a devout Muslim woman, in the form of a letter-diary. She writes the letter following the death of her husband, Modou. Working within the genre of the pseudo-autobiography, Ramatoulaye's narrative is told not directly, but with subconscious evasion and revelation, during the four months and ten days of secluded mourning prescribed by Islam for widows. As will be shown, 'Ramatoulaye's physical confinement during this period of mourning in the house she once shared with Modou replicates her psychological confinement in a debilitating stereotypical view of a woman's role' (Stratton, 1988: 159). Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are Western-educated African women. They have both been very actively involved in the process of social change that has been taking place in their country within the framework of independence and post-independence in Senegal. Both women are initially happily married to dynamic and loving African husbands.

Makward (1986: 272) notes that these marriages are of a modern kind, in the sense that they originated from their own free choices and were not pre-arranged by their parents. Yet both women are later confronted with the second marriages of their husbands as a *fait accompli*. While Aissatou rejects the polygamous situation vehemently and takes up life in the Senegalese Embassy abroad, Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, chooses to stay with

her husband, Modou Fall. Hoping that he will at least follow the traditional Islamic rule and practice of equal attention and sharing of the husband in a polygamous household, she is utterly disillusioned when he abandons her and her family in favour of his new wife, Binetou. Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have to adjust to the isolation of married women and to polygamy sanctioned by Islam in conflict with their idealized views of monogamous marriage. By writing to Aissatou, the narrator introduces the tension between 'enclosure' and 'disclosure' (Mildred Mortimer's terminology, 1990: 70), the 'outward journey' and the Muslim woman's attempt to claim public space in a patriarchal culture whose religious tenets and social conventions 'as they are institutionalized and practised, serve to keep women subject' (Busia, 1988: 28). The creation of civic societies, represented by legal institutions, including patriarchal marriage, has disempowered and domesticated the feminine. The 'masculine' domain has been elevated and the 'feminine' private space degraded. Having helped build the 'still patriarchal state', as Busia (1988: 28) puts it, Ramatoulaye must reclaim 'her self' from it.

The narrator's voice, in expressing her view on a number of interrelated issues, speaks from within the form of the epistolary novel, a form 'invented by men writing about women and embodying male control of the literary images of women' (Mae G. Henderson, 1985: 14). Alice Walker, too, of the United States, has chosen to employ the epistolary form in her novel *The Color Purple* (1982). The formula followed by both Bâ and Walker is that of two people separated, but who maintain their relationship through letters. A testing or defining of character because of isolation and alienation emerges. The characters are forced to look inward and to examine their own feelings: 'The isolation of

the characters is essential to the epistolary formula because it throws the characters back into themselves, to probe their own thoughts, their own feelings' (Ruth Perry, 1980: 117). Thus an awareness of suffering is present which through the process of writing is described.

Of particular interest to the examination of this text is the fact that both Bâ and Walker have taken the general framework of the epistolary novel and have adapted it to a new way of thinking and a new way of presenting thoughts. McLaughlin (as quoted by Kathy D. Jackson, 1993: 13) comments: [Bâ and Walker] 'are part of the "Women of the intercontinental Black Renaissance" in which female writers are redefining themselves as well as language, ideas, images, forms of expression within frameworks of cultural continuity'. Busia (1988: 1) reinforces this notion when she writes, 'Our reality is not that we are "neither white or male", *our* reality is that we are *both* black and female'. Busia's remark serves as an informing principle in a woman's process of affirmation, proclaiming selfhood, which has heretofore been 'othered'. Women writers in Africa represent their gender, class, and race as suffering from a common victim syndrome. They need to transform themselves by becoming creative non-victims. Busia (1988: 5) further comments that both Bâ and Walker are acknowledging the primacy of language itself. If women do not find words for themselves, they will be lost. Mariama Bâ indeed employs language to shape her own and other women's realities. The reality of being an abandoned family is firmly rooted in the detail of everyday reality or of a *journalisme-vérité* environment. So too is the conflict between tradition and modernity, which is treated as equally dominant.

As Busia (1988: 6) rightly points out, language is not 'innocent':

... [it] *is* ideologically and culturally bound and it both expresses and conceals our realities Language can also shape our realities, and either enslave, by concealing what it truly expresses, or liberate, by exposing what might otherwise remain concealed.

Schipper (1989: 121-24) characterizes *So Long a Letter* as an epistolary novel that is very close to a diary. Because of its highly personal nature, as Edson (1977: 23) points out, *journalisme-vérité* 'has obvious links to both the epistolary novel and the diary form'. Given this context, the epistolary letter becomes a therapeutic vehicle which brings about healing, liberation and empowerment for Ramatoulaye in gaining or reconstructing her selfhood.

The epistolary text, the letter or 'diary' her 'prop in [her] distress' (1) enables Ramatoulaye to sort out her feelings, to cope with her problems and to work through her dilemmas. The text is Ramatoulaye's hitherto silenced voice. She finally finds her voice, and her epistle is testimony to that. Aissatou, in turn, understands Ramatoulaye and her dilemmas, and the devastating effect that marriage has on her. Aissatou is both an intimate friend and an important role model; for she, too, is divorced and has to cope with her own new independence. The choice of the epistolary mode as a vehicle for Ramatoulaye's revelation is important. Maurice Funke (1983: 4) emphasizes the fact that 'the epistolary novel allows the characters to discuss emotions too painful to be spoken'. When Ramatoulaye asks in her letter to Aissatou, 'What inner confusion led Modou Fall to marry Binetou? Was it madness, weakness, irresistible love?' (12) she is in fact asking herself the same painful question. She is following the formula of the epistolary novel - the probing of one's thoughts and feelings - and she also goes beyond the formula. Instead of merely

'wallowing in her feelings' or 'luxuriating in self-pity' (Perry, 1980: 121), Ramatoulaye focuses on the universality of suffering and the way to cope with it:

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 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. (11)

Mortimer (1990: 71) reinforces the notion that the value of the 'very long letter', ultimately a diary, is a vehicle for expressing Ramatoulaye's most intimate feelings, it 'will allow Ramatoulaye to express her intimate thoughts and justify her responses to life through the act of writing to her ideal reader, her closest friend'. The death of Modou, and not his second marriage and abandonment of Ramatoulaye and her children, ultimately precipitates the writing of the letter. Busia (1988: 29) highlights certain qualities of the letter as follows:

In this work Ramatoulaye shifts from a notion of woman as subject female to one of the *complementarity* of man and woman as the vital unit of that national whole in which she locates the liberated woman. In this movement, Bâ strikes at the heart of the motherhood issue ... by placing mothering firmly *within* a definition of the liberated female self and symbolically rewriting the history of maternal alienation from the modern state Ramatoulaye recollects the histories of women from *her* perspective and finds a place for them in her account of their new world. This novel writes women back into history by making it herstory also.

Structurally, and for the purpose of analysis, the novel itself can be divided into three fairly distinct sections within which the interrelated themes of marriage, motherhood, sisterhood, and education, informed by the dominance of patriarchy, are modified and transposed. Announcing the death of Modou and introducing the concept of *mirasse*, the first part (letters 1-4) puts forth the two structuring devices, 'enclosure' and 'disclosure'.

The second part (letters 5-17) depicts Ramatoulaye's journey through time. By means of analepsis, the protagonist gathers information that prepares her for the present. In the final part of the novel (letters 18-24) Ramatoulaye, having spent forty days in mourning, forgives Modou. However, as a widow, Ramatoulaye ultimately faces a series of emotional changes that test her judgement and values. These trials finally contribute to and complete Ramatoulaye's maturation process (Mortimer, 1990: 72).

The novel begins with a direct statement of purpose:

Dear Aissatou

I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain. (1)

Having just received a letter from Aissatou (announcing her forthcoming visit to Dakar), Ramatoulaye announces Modou's death, and at the same time she expresses her need for this correspondence as support in time of crisis. The important subtext in the work, revealed in the opening paragraphs, as Mortimer (1990: 71) points out, 'is the importance of female bonding, presented as a legacy of traditional Africa'. Ramatoulaye recounts the friendships between their grandmothers, mothers and finally recalls their shared childhood:

As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the koranic school (1)

and

I conjure you up. The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions We walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present. (1)

Hence, at the beginning of her letter Ramatoulaye acknowledges that Aissatou is her ideal reader owing to common experiences: a shared Islamic past, a long sustained friendship,

and a painful experience of polygamy: 'Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow' (1). Later, Ramatoulaye will come to terms with Aissatou's decision to divorce Mawdo and her choice 'to embark upon a new world and new life' (Mortimer, 1990: 71). Mortimer (1990: 72) quotes H el ene Cixous, leading exponent of the woman's movement in France, who writes: 'Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history - by her own movement'. Aissatou's decision to move to New York with her four sons demonstrates the liberating value of education. Her position as translator at the Senegalese Embassy enables her to acknowledge her selfhood, even in divorce, and to achieve self-fulfilment. Aissatou, indeed, has been able to put herself into the world and into history. The paramount question therefore arises: How does Ramatoulaye treat the conflict between the patriarchal Islamic tradition that confines her as an African woman to domestic space and how does she claim public space, if any? One of the reader's tasks in the work is thus to evaluate Ramatoulaye's inner journey. Mortimer's question reinforces this notion of a journey when she asks:

Does enclosure (brought about by the Islamic tradition of respectful mourning) lead to disclosure, or ironically, to concealment and therefore to the self-delusion of a protagonist who proposes an inner journey for the explicit purpose of lucidity and self-understanding? (1990: 70)

Focus upon Ramatoulaye regaining an authoritative voice serves as one of the pivotal points of departure in this study. Concurrent with this focus is the requirement of a 'sharp sense of human and social detail ... of a society' (Cham, 1987: 101) and the historic effort to balance weakness and strength 'in order to ensure a healthier future'. Contributing to this 'healthier future' (Cham, 1987: 101) is the presentation by the narrator of Ramatoulaye and the difficulties she encounters in her effort to 'put herself into the text'.

Once she has concluded the description of rituals surrounding Modou's burial and her open social criticism of materialism that spoils tradition, she begins, according to Mortimer (1990: 72), with two false starts: 'Victims of a sad fate ...' in which she proclaims herself victim, followed by a letter to Modou, not to Aissatou (letter 6), when she recalls with sentimentality their first meeting. Mortimer further claims that although Ramatoulaye praises Modou's progressive views, as she recalls them, his words and actions contradict her portrait; they reveal a young man locked into gender stereotypes.

The presentation of analysis, a flashback reaching thirty years into the past, poses the problem of the narrator's reliability, as Mortimer (1990: 72) remarks. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 100), in her book, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, considers personal involvement to be a main source of unreliability when she defines a reliable narrator as one who provides the reader with 'an authoritative account of the fictional truth'. In order to solve this problem, Mariama Bâ creates the narrative 'as a process of a dual sensibility, a dual need' (Busia, 1988: 34). Ramatoulaye, as first person narrator, or as an auto-diegetic teller, inserts the story of Aissatou into the novel. Thus, by writing about Aissatou in addition to writing to her - by using the structural device of doubling - objectivity and reliability are granted to the narrative. Mortimer (1990: 72) points to the fact that Aissatou serves not only as ideal reader (as already suggested) and role model, but as 'reality' anchor as well. Hence, Ramatoulaye's presentation of parallel events and experience endorses her own authoritative voice.

The doubling begins in the first letter (as has been pointed out earlier) when she remembers their shared childhood: 'Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous'

(1). They have been linked through the generations by relationships among the female members of their families. Both young girls were inspired by the extraordinary vision of their European school director. Being women of a generation of radical change they must accommodate both tradition and modernity and as Busia (1988: 35) observes: being women of their generation 'they must make journeys to places outside the walks of the compound and turn themselves into sisters of the world'.

Concurrent with the employment of the epistolary narrative and structural device of doubling is the Islamic concept of *mirasse*. Cham (1987: 91) claims that *So Long a Letter* derives much of its form and substance from the Islamic precept of *mirasse*, just as the cultural concept embodied in the Wolof proverb 'When one abandons one's own hillock, any hillock that one climbs thereafter will crumble' - quoted as proem to Chapter 5 - influences much of the form and substance of *Scarlet Song*. Ramatoulaye's enclosure, another important structuring element in the novel, according to Mortimer (1990: 71), takes into account the Islamic context - the latter influences both the narrative content and the structure. The mourning period, an obligation of Islam, provides Ramatoulaye with the time frame in which to write her letter. So, too, does Islam provide the vehicle for disclosure (*mirasse*) when it calls for the disclosure of all the possessions of the deceased for the purposes of inheritance. Cham (1987: 91) explains that *mirasse* is in essence an Islamic religious and juridical principle that defines and stipulates the nature of inheritance in the Islamic family, be it monogamous or polygamous. This notion of inheritance, laid out in the chapter on women in the Holy *Qur'an* encourages revelations of the deceased person's past, as noted earlier, so as to praise (or criticize) the individual, in this case, Modou.

Of much more interest and importance to this examination, however, is the skill with which Mariama Bâ extends and adapts the notion of *mirasse* 'to encompass material possessions as well as the non-material attributes and history of the individual' (Cham, 1987: 91), and 'financial and emotional treachery' to use Mortimer's terms (1990: 71). In extending the conceptual boundaries of *mirasse*, the novelist is able to provide Ramatoulaye with the structural and, indeed, cultural framework within which to undertake and examine intimate secrets of married life with Modou Fall, particularly his weaknesses as a human being.

Mortimer (1990: 71) observes that in this process, Ramatoulaye broadens the definition of disclosure to 'unveil Modou's emotional breach of faith in their marriage'. Ramatoulaye, being a devote Muslim, sees the stock taking as a religious duty mandated by the *Qur'an*: '*Mirasse*, decreed by the *Qur'an*', requires 'that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets, thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed. These exposures crudely explain a man's life' (9). Cham (1987: 92) argues that *mirasse*, therefore, becomes the principle that legitimates and regulates Ramatoulaye's act of systematic personal revelation, which simultaneously constitutes a systematic analysis of some of the most pressing socio-economic and cultural issues challenging women and society. Ramatoulaye's handling of the process of *mirasse* is indeed crucial to her journey towards lucidity, as Mortimer (1990: 71) puts it, and to the reader's understanding of the protagonist. By disclosing Modou's transgressions, she, the betrayed individual, shows signs of a healing process, and the ability to succeed in transcending and transforming - by word and deed - her experience.

Ramatoulaye's words, pondering over her role as pioneer of the promotion of African women in a patriarchal Islamic society, epitomise the second section of the novel:

How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed? (15)

The employment of the structural device of doubling is carried forward to this part of the novel: 'Our lives developed in parallel' (19), as well as the concept of burst soap bubbles and empty feelings in marriage. Looking back on their formative years as adolescents, Ramatoulaye views her school director as the one who was emancipated enough to free them from tradition. The teacher's message is revolutionary when she urges them to travel on a road of 'uncommon destiny' (15). She calls for individual choice, rather than submission, and lifts them out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom. Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou marry the men of their own choice. Ramatoulaye rejects the suitor chosen for her by her mother, and Aissatou, the daughter of a blacksmith, defies the traditional caste system by marrying Mawdo, a son of royalty. Mortimer (1990: 73) remarks:

Their rebellion has further consequences, their choices prepare the way for polygamy. Ramatoulaye chooses a man whose propensity towards infidelity is immediately recognized by her mother. Aissatou, who marries above her station, incurs the vengeance of a scheming mother-in-law who succeeds in bringing a second wife into her son's household.

Although the structural device of doubling creates the dimension of parallel lives in the novel, Mortimer (1990: 73) points out that the narrator very distinctly reveals that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are not mirror images of one another. 'In our different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burdens of custom' (19). When their

husbands enter into polygamous marriages for different reasons, the two women react in very different ways to polygamy. Whereas Aissatou rebels and divorces Mawdo after having written him a short letter explaining her viewpoint, Ramatoulaye acquiesces. Ramatoulaye writes a long letter, arguably upon Modou's death, and possibly because she is unable to write a short letter like her friend Aissatou, and thereby reject polygamy.

Following Mortimer's division of the novel into structural parts, the second part can be characterized as a failed revolt by Ramatoulaye, but it also prepares her for the series of trials or challenges that result in her final transformation. The preparation takes the form of comforting past memories on the one hand, and acts of independence on the other. Like Stratton, Mortimer (1990: 74), too, points out that Bâ establishes a direct link between the personal and historical political phases in the novel. As Ramatoulaye faces adult responsibilities in her personal life, Senegal assumes the responsibilities of nationhood: 'On the fine sand ... naïvely painted canoes awaited their turn to be launched into the waters ...' (21). Viewed metaphorically, as Mortimer (1990: 74) does, the canoes waiting to be launched on the vast ocean resemble the two idealistic couples' lives, lives that are filled with boundless dreams.

Ironically, Ramatoulaye's own crisis comes three years after Aissatou's divorce:

All he has done is to marry a second wife today Modou says it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it. He praises you for the quarter of a century of marriage in which you gave him all the happiness a wife owes her husband. (37)

Ramatoulaye initially greets the announcement of Modou's second marriage with a smile and feigns indifference: 'I must not give my visitors the pleasure of relating my distress.

Smile, take the matter lightly, just as they announced it' (38). She displays a form of submission and 'failed revolt' (Mortimer's phrase) since her deeply rooted religious beliefs prevent her acting otherwise. Although she claims that '... the final decision lay with me' (39), her decision results in: 'I chose to remain' which in a sense is an expression of her 'faithful love of [her] youth' (45). Her new choice of life is explained in terms of 'the play of destiny [which] remains impenetrable' (40). Ironically, she is unable to draw 'a clean line through the past' (40). Because Ramatoulaye fears loneliness, she prefers to stay; and she is even willing to risk the humiliation of waiting her turn as wife every second night. In contrast to her children's urge to divorce Modou, Ramatoulaye consoles herself rather feebly: 'If Modou was milk, it was I who had all the cream. The rest, well, nothing but water with a vague smell of milk' (39).

Notwithstanding Ramatoulaye's rationalization of her position, it is this very 'vague smell of milk' that threatens to entrap her and to suffocate her. This becomes quite clear in the following entry she makes in her diary, as she begins her period of confinement:

The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness. (8)

Dwelling in memories of the past, she fails to 'set in motion waves that, breaking [carry] away in their furl a bit of [her old self]' (23). This old self, though torn between the past and the present, nevertheless, deplored 'the hard sweat that would be inevitable ... [and] counted the possible losses' (19). Ramatoulaye's resolution as young school teacher - who was full of nostalgia because of the realization that nothing would be as before - was still 'absolutely progressive' (19). Yet the Ramatoulaye, 'once young and efficient ... messenger of a new design' ... who 'witnessed the birth of a republic, the birth of an anthem and the

implementation of a flag' (25), now makes an unfavourable self-deprecating assessment of her age, her loss of figure and beauty; she feels 'abandoned like a worn-out or out-dated *boubou*' (41).

Ironically, it is this inability of Ramatoulaye to cope and adjust to her new life as a single woman that entangles her in the web of the past. But for Rama the past is not a haven, as it is for her mother-in-law, Aunty Nabou who 'lived in the past, unaware of the changing world' (26), 'burning with the fierce ardour of antiquated laws' (30). Her previous willingness to cope with modernity within the traditional framework of a patriarchal Islamic society has now been reduced to 'nothing but water' (39). As representative of the Senegalese Westernized elite, Ramatoulaye is indeed ill-equipped to adjust to changes sanctioned by an Islamic society, yet which are in conflict with her idealized view of monogamous marriage. Mawdo's comment that 'between the joyous miracle of birth' and 'dark miracle of death lies a life, a destiny' (3), has become a rather common destiny of living death in life, in Ramatoulaye's case. And it is in pointed contrast to the 'uncommon destiny' (15) that the school director advocated. Aissatou, on the other hand, 'courageous pioneer of a new life' (34) is able to rid herself of the 'mask of suffering', and to crush the past beneath her heel. Rama's life changes from a full, contented life to an empty-handed one. Daba's prediction, 'You have not finished suffering' (46) is echoed by Ramatoulaye's neighbour, a *griot* woman (or black African, who is part-poet, part-musician, part sorcerer) when she argues that a woman is like a ball, who metaphorically speaking, is subject to pain and suffering through no will of her own:

A woman is like a ball, once a ball is thrown, no one can predict where it will bounce. You have no control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. Often it is grabbed by an unexpected hand (40)

Ramatoulaye, because of the support of Aissatou, her close friend and confidante - 'the stable reference point against which Ramatoulaye measures her own temporary condition of instability' - finally begins to 'chart a new direction and fashion a new and more resolute image of herself' (Cham, 1987: 93). Although the middle section of the novel depicts a protagonist who appears to have lost her earlier rebellious stance (and is therefore unable to revolt against her husband's abuse of power) as Mortimer (1990: 74) remarks, two specific incidents towards the end of the section indicate that, 'despite her initial acquiescence, Ramatoulaye will recapture both the spirit and the language of revolt' (1990: 74). The first of the two incidents is preceded by Ramatoulaye's oft asserted determination to survive: 'I was surviving' (51), 'I survived' (51), 'I survived' (52) and 'I survived' (53). Although she initially 'side-stepped [her] pain in a refusal to fight it' (52), she has now found consolation first in the radio's role as comforter:

At night the music lulled my anxiety. I heard the message of old and new songs, which awakened hope. My sadness dissolved I called eagerly to "another man" to replace Modou (53)

and

I shed tears of joy and sadness together: joy in being loved by my children, the sadness of a mother who does not have the means to change the course of events (53)

Following her declaration of 'survival', Ramatoulaye recounts her experience of braving the curious stares of a public who wonders why she is alone at the cinema. For the first time Ramatoulaye finds the courage to venture alone in public space and to face 'the surprised looks ... the slender liberty granted to woman' (51). The shows at the cinema fill her with delight and become a great distraction from distress. Aissatou indulged in

books to gain learning: '... books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you' (32). The power of books, the 'marvellous invention of astute human intelligence' (32) enabled Aissatou to better herself and to develop 'in peace' (32). Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, indulges and revels in films of all kinds:

I learned from them lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance. They deepened and widened my vision of the world, thanks to their cultural value. (52)

The second incident, related to Aissatou venturing into public space, occurs when Aissatou surprises her with the gift of a new car which allows her to travel more freely in the city. The Fiat proves to be a challenge. Viewed metaphorically, Ramatoulaye's joyful comment, 'And I learned to drive, stifling my fear ...' and 'I won this battle of nerves and *sang-froid*. I obtained my driving licence ...' (54) can be interpreted as foreshadowing and foregrounding the protagonist's essentially independent spirit and her transformation when she finally writes a short letter to Daouda Dieng, rejecting polygamy. Ramatoulaye, though psychologically confined within the memories of the past, finally takes the major step to 'write' herself back into the text by transcending the cold panic of 'fear' in claiming public space.

The fortieth day of mourning marks the beginning of the third and final section of the novel. At this point, as Mortimer (1990: 74) notes, Ramatoulaye, the widow, forgives her late husband: 'I have forgiven him. My God hear the prayer I say for him everyday' (57). Flewellen (1985: 17) proposes the labelling of 'submissiveness versus assertiveness' as qualities in the determining of Ramatoulaye's self-examination. Although both Flewellen (1985: 165) and Stratton (1988: 74) argue that Ramatoulaye has now become 'permanently housebound', 'a submissive doormat' and that she is unable to free herself

from domestic enclosure, Ramatoulaye in effect, 'creates an identity that blends traditional and modern elements. Rather than break with her society, she attempts to work from within By recording her journey to self-understanding, Ramatoulaye, writes her own revolutionary script' (Mortimer, 1990: 77). So too, does *The Color Purple* especially through Celie, explore the use of voice, writing, and art as means of self-expression for solace. Ultimately, art here too becomes the vehicle for salvation, self-preservation, and selfhood.

In a similar fashion to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye finally expresses her viewpoints in 'deliberately creating a self-consciously written text Ramatoulaye works out her salvation through conversation, through bonding with a sister' (Busia, 1988: 36). Busia further continues that Ramatoulaye's articulation of the self transpires in both speaking the self and inscribing the self. Two interrelated incidents precipitate Ramatoulaye's determination to break out of her metaphorical as well as literal confinement; the first, when, her forty days of mourning being over, Tamsir (Modou's brother) proposes marriage to her:

When you have "come out" (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife, and further, you will continue to live here (57)

Her subsequent reaction to this 'proposal' typifies her own moment of triumph. Busia (1988: 31) remarks that it is no accident that Ramatoulaye's moment of self-discovery is the moment she speaks defiance against her brother-in-law, in refusal of marriage. Ramatoulaye finds her own public voice and performs an act of revolutionary defiance against the patriarchal religious system which she sees as keeping her confined, according to custom, in her house:

I shall never be the one to complete your collection. My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis: no extra burden; my "turn" every day No, Tamsir! ... I shall never be your wife. (58)

Speaking her way out of marriage, as Busia (1988: 32) points out, is the moment when she begins to speak her way out of her confinement. Endorsing the title of this thesis speaking, like writing, is shown to be liberating. Ramatoulaye's voyages into the outside world are to begin again. Her defiant act of speaking marks only the beginning of her self-empowerment. The finding of her voice in her rejection of Tamsir, after thirty years of silence, is akin to the protagonist Avatura's 'bursting river' of words and tears in her lamentation of Jay in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983: 139):

Too much! ... Couldn't they have done differently? What would it have taken?... The answers were as formless as the questions inundating her mind. They swept through her in the same bewildering flood of disconnected words and images. All of it the bursting forth of a river that had long been dammed up.

So too, is the refusal of Ramatoulaye to remarry her private, just revenge and a blow against the male 'presumption of prerogative and absolute authority. But it is also deeply symbolic, for with it she insists that women, too, have the right of choice, and she *says* so, *publicly*, then tells her audience that she has said so' (Busia, 1988: 32). Ramatoulaye thus finds words to affirm her identity; she is no longer 'a thing in the service of the man who has married her' (4) and his entire family; she is no longer stripped of 'her personality, her dignity' (4). Ramatoulaye in fact, is no longer 'like a ball' that once it is thrown, takes on its own unpredictable momentum. She triumphantly knows where she is heading to. In Mernissi's words (1992: 10-11), she is like a vessel that has journeyed back in time in order to find a fabulous wind that will swell her sails and send her towards new worlds. She has indeed raised the sails and 'lifted the veil'.

Ramatoulaye's journey leads to what Mortimer (1990: 75) terms 'lucidity'. She learns to believe in herself. Like Aissatou she, too, succeeds in removing 'the mask', the smile of acquiescence and she, too, becomes a courageous pioneer of a life that has been 'refashioned', a life that promises new birth, one in which she 'can feel new buds springing up' (89) within herself. At the end of Ramatoulaye's journey, Bâ's protagonist, unlike Sembène Ousmane's catalysts in his novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1986), is neither eliminated nor recuperated by the patriarchal structure. On the contrary, in Bâ's text 'the written word becomes a creative tool of self-expression and a mighty weapon against patriarchy' (Mortimer, 1990: 77).

The written word, which becomes a tool of self-expression, is also echoed in the second incident, when Ramatoulaye rejects Daouda Dieng, whose motivation is affection, and not avarice, by writing him a short letter within her long letter:

Daouda,

You are chasing after a woman who has remained the same, despite the intense ravages of suffering Esteem is not enough for marriage, whose snares I know from experience. And then the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation. Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family (68)

By also refusing to marry Daouda, Ramatoulaye confronts and overcomes her loneliness.

Once more Ramatoulaye is looking reality in the face, in a similar manner to her looking 'reality in the face of Lady Mother-in-law' (49), and Binetou, the young friend of Ramatoulaye's daughter who had become rival wife of Modou. Yet this time Ramatoulaye's choice initiates a new stage of life: the role of a single woman.

Ramatoulaye, in expressing her conviction that the problem of polygamy is not a simple

one, touches on another interrelated theme in this epistolary novel, namely marriage and polygamy - which, according to Cham (1987: 89), is predominantly a female condition:

It is both physical and psychological, and it transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste The forces that set in motion the process that culminates in abandonment and the resultant impact of such a process ... are conceived by Mariama Bâ to be enormously out of proportion to each other. The whim or accidental fancy of the male and the calculated machinations of a female elder ... place upon the female a burden infinitely heavier than the cause of that burden.

Cham (1987: 92) further defines the term abandonment as not the result of a single act even though it may be a unilateral act, nor is it to be confused with divorce or repudiation even though it may share with the latter certain causal factors. Abandonment then, according to Cham (1987: 92), is a 'social disease':

It is the cumulative result of a process that could be referred to as the gradual opening and enlargement of the emotional/sexual circle that originally binds two partners (a husband and a wife) to introduce and accommodate a third partner (a second wife) in a manner so devious and deceptive that a new process is set in motion ... by either reluctantly accepting or categorically rejecting the enlarged circle.

Yakini Kemp (1988: 3) argues that Ramatoulaye's world-view is shaped by three sometimes conflicting forces: Muslim religious tradition; petit-bourgeois class allegiance; and Western education, along with the romantic tradition found in its literature. When Ramatoulaye condemns polygamy, this disapproval stems from her perception that the second marriage is founded in physical desire, which is morally wrong: 'In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal' (12).

Given this context, Femi Ojo-Ade (1982: 73) once made the statement that Mariama Bâ portrays 'Man, the unfaithful husband; Man, the womanizer; Man the victimizer' in all his

negative forms. In the light of this accusation, one could be tempted to conclude that Mariama Bâ's novels are nothing but pleas against polygamy. But as Makward (1986: 273) points out, such a conclusion would definitely be superficial, for Bâ's 'central preoccupation' in both her novels is more 'the pursuit of happiness than an outright attack on polygamy'. In the introduction to *So Long a Letter* (1981: 1989) Bâ is cited as claiming that the 'sacred mission' of the writer is to strike out 'at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our previous cultural heritage'. Therefore Mariama Bâ is convinced that happiness - and that encompasses both male and female - in fact, a whole society's happiness, must be based on monogamous marriage. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991: 565) points out that Ramatoulaye insists that 'a man's success depends on feminine support' (56). Notwithstanding this argument, both the character Ramatoulaye and Mariama Bâ have a deep respect for the marriage institution founded on Western and modern notions of matrimony:

I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage. (55-56)

Makward (1986: 273) describes this monogamous marriage in a modern context as meaning a close association between two equals, and the sharing of pains, joys, hopes, disappointments and successes. The foundation stone of this happiness is without doubt in the couple, a concept, an ideal that is clearly new in Africa. In writing to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye expresses this conviction:

The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. (89)

In rejecting Tamsir's offer, already discussed, to replace his brother in accordance with Senegalese Muslim traditions, Ramatoulaye expresses and reaffirms her desire to the

adherence of the ideal couple; especially when she exclaims: 'Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings' (88).

In emphasizing the idea of choice, *Ramatoulaye* is clearly advocating a tradition which does not allow for 'arranged' marriage where the couples do not have any choice because the family chooses the bride and groom. Given this context, *Mariama Bâ* does not attack tradition and custom. *Ramatoulaye* recounts: 'He never came again; his newfound happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us' (46). The effects of abandonment on her own family and the effects of this forced marriage on the young co-wife, *Binetou*, are examined by *Mariama Bâ*. *Edson* (1977: 17) observes that for *Ramatoulaye*, this pondering touches on the issue of modern perversion of the system of polygamy, which opens up questions about the economic, cultural and social consequences for women, children and the country. In Muslim regions of Africa polygamy is still widespread and there is a clear conflict between the traditional role of woman and the present day aspirations of many of them. *Bâ* herself points to this conflict when she describes *Binetou* in terms of the sacrificial lamb. *Susan Stringer* (1988: 39) emphasizes that this lack of clarity about the status of women is part of the general cultural conflict, a fact which is illustrated by the relationship between the position of women and the divisions established between the past and the present, the village and the city as will still be discussed. The narrator demonstrates an unflinching faith in the freedom of choice and the personal nature of marriage and romantic love.

Kemp (1988: 2), too, endorses this notion of romantic love when she argues that because of the idealized notion of male-female relationships that romantic love supports, and

because of the patriarchal institutions from which it springs, the concept of romantic love cannot be claimed as a feminist concept: romantic love neither demands nor inspires equality of sexes. However, the injunction in the *Qur'an* 2: 228 has already been made clear: 'And they [women] have rights similar to those [of men] over them, and men are a degree above them' which in this case implies maintenance and protection (as quoted from Badawi (no date: 17)). Although *So Long a Letter* is not an attack on polygamy, it is certainly confronts this pertinent social issue.

Ramatoulaye in a similar fashion, believes that marriage is a partnership in which each member should share equally, respecting 'the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman' (88). So, too, is Ramatoulaye, as a modern Muslim woman, pleased with the kind of marriage her daughter Daba and her husband have. Her husband cooks and also does housework. His statement that Daba is his wife, 'She is not my slave, nor my servant' (73) and Ramatoulaye's reaction to Daba's comment that 'Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life's programme' (74) epitomizes the narrator's viewpoint:

I sense the growing tenderness between this young couple, an ideal couple, just as I have always imagined. They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise. (73-74)

The narrator, like Badawi (no date: 16), ascribes to marriage the attribute that its objectives, besides perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony, as has been noted in Chapter Two. Ramatoulaye, too, (given her quoted statements on marriage) subscribes to the injunction in the *Qur'an* 30: 21 that 'love and mercy' are ordained between couples.

Concomitant with the theme of marriage in the novel is the interrelated theme of motherhood. Bâ's 'decision to present a strong, positive image of a progressive mother as the central character constitutes a break' with both the male tradition of writing in Africa (as has been pointed out before) and with the more recent writing of African female novelists (Edson, 1977: 18). Schipper (1989: 48) observes that previously, 'the image of women in the novel has been a male writer's affair, and women have usually been stereotyped as negative, "a source of perdition and of menace"'. When the mother is cast positively, as Schipper also notes, it is as a virgin or the virtuous maternal character: 'The positive view of woman is usually associated with her reproductive function, the dearly loved and loving mother who takes care of her children and sacrifices herself for them'. Notwithstanding this viewpoint, the *Qur'an* testifies to the notion that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibilities:

So their Lord accepted their prayers, [saying]: I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another
(*Qur'an* 3: 195, as quoted from Badawi, no date: 13)

With regard to the role of black women's writing, Busia (1988: 16) asserts :

One of the central concerns of black women's writing - in all its forms - is speaking out of our own peculiar context to unite with what our mothers spoke, to inform, and thus transform what the academy writes.

Interestingly, the leading female characters in such works tend to be educated and highly Westernized. Consider, for example, Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1989), Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981), Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982), *Destination Biafra* (1982) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). Yet, as Edson remarks, even in feminist novels (1977: 19) mothers are not absent. In some of these novels (*One is Enough*,

Destination Biafra, Double Yoke) conflicts between the generations arise when the protagonist's mother, embodying traditional African values, disapproves of her daughter's behaviour. In these novels, the protagonist is cast in the position of the daughter, breaking from the patriarchal values that her mother endorses. As K. Frank (1987: 16-17) says, 'Like their daughters, sisters and husbands, these mothers want to see their daughters securely married and perpetually pregnant'.

Quite a different story takes place in *So Long a Letter* where Bâ's protagonist is portrayed as the mother and not the daughter. Here it is the mother who decides to abandon patriarchal values and who struggles to claim public space, when raising her children. She asks fundamental questions about what women have learned or have failed to learn from their mothers and grandmothers so that they may teach other women and their children. Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, then, is depicted as an extension of Ramatoulaye and her values when she says: 'Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over life's programme' already quoted, and,

Each of us has equal opportunity to advance her ideas. We are given tasks according to our abilities in our activities and organizations that work the progress of women. Our funds go to humanitarian work; we are mobilized by a militancy as useful as any other, but it is a healthy militancy, whose only reward is our inner satisfaction. (74)

In view of this, *So Long a Letter* constitutes a break with the stereotyping of mothers seen not only in male-authored literature but in many female-authored texts as well. Bâ once said in an interview (quoted by Schipper, 1989: 46-7):

In the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organizations, discrimination reigns supreme The woman is heavily burdened by mores and customs, in combination with mistaken and egotistic interpretations of different

religions We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women.

Edson (1977: 19) therefore points out that Bâ is insisting that it is time to see mothers as 'subjects with minds of their own ...'. Both Edson and Bâ's viewpoints are echoed by Fatna Ait Sabbah (as noted earlier) when she questions the Muslim canon of beauty that insists on 'silence' and 'inertia'. Ramatoulaye, in declining Tamsir's proposal, 'speaks out' when she claims the right to identity, dignity and selfhood as a subject, and not an object: 'You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand' (57).

As pointed out earlier, the narrator believes that the harmony of the couple coalesces with the happiness of the country, and as Ojo-Ade (1982: 85) remarks, 'The family is a microcosm of the nation. Success. Solidarity'. And within this family motherhood is embedded and firmly rooted. Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye's feminist politician-friend, realizes and expresses this maxim too, when he says:

Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms. (61-2)

Busia (1988:7) also touches on this central issue when she says:

As black women [and one could add white women] we are constantly rewriting our lives not simply against powerful men, white or otherwise, but to contradict those definitions of theirs which constrain us; and in this conspiracy we must include those men we would call "our own".

Daouda, then, is depicted as one of those men we would call 'our own', who recognizes the value of woman. So too, it is not fortuitous that Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is dedicated to *All women and men of good will*.

Ramatoulaye, in her presentation as a progressive, liberated mother in her insistence on the importance of education for young girls, is portrayed as the antithesis of Binetou's mother:

As for Binetou, she had grown up in complete liberty in an environment where survival was of essence. Her mother was more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with education. Binetou ... was sharply aware of what she was sacrificing by her marriage. A victim, she wanted to be the oppressor. Exiled in the world of adults, which was not her own, she wanted her prison gilded. Demanding, she tormented. Sold, she raised her price daily. (48)

From the above excerpt it becomes clear that Binetou's mother pulls her out of school and forces her into marriage. Binetou's mother, cynically dubbed 'Lady Mother-in-Law' (49), has only one goal: to raise her own social standing through her daughter's marriage, and is not concerned about the happiness of her daughter who, in the end becomes a 'lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence' (39), the altar of materialism. It is clear that Bâ, like her persona, feels sympathy for Binetou, for she is 'sold' to please a greedy mother 'who wants so much to escape from mediocrity and who regrets so much her past beauty ...' (36).

Cham (1987: 95) argues that both Binetou in *So Long a Letter* and Ngone in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* become pawns in these useless and destructive adult games that invariably end 'by negatively affecting the educational and experiential development of the children'. In this process, as Cham points out, the institution of marriage is also distorted and the moral integrity and judgement of individuals, who for the most part, occupy high places of administrative, political, economic, religious and moral responsibilities in their communities, is compromised. Ironically, for Modou, Binetou is not seen as a partner with whom to build a life committed to a social, political, philosophical or moral ideal.

Ramatoulaye, in pointed contrast to Binetou, joined Modou in being 'the link between two periods' in the history of Senegal: 'one of domination, the other independence' (25). Ramatoulaye, too, advocated national unity and 'rallied around the dominant party, infusing it with new blood' (25). Ramatoulaye has indeed been one of the 'first pioneers of the promotion of African women' (14).

Yet, Modou does not seek any of these qualities when he marries Binetou. Instead, she becomes merely another object, a mechanism for rejuvenating himself: 'Modou would leave himself winded trying to imprison youth in its decline' (48). Binetou is described as 'beautiful' (48) but, as already pointed out, she becomes a prisoner, a victim of Modou, 'exiled in the world of adults' (48) and of the male patriarchal society. And it is exactly this victimised position of women in the perversion of polygamy, that Bâ condemns, and Fatna Sabbah laments, when she explores the Muslim canon of beauty which requires mere silence and immobility. In this canon, beauty without voice arouses desire. Mawdo, Aissatou's ex-husband, claims that the force of these desires and instincts are deep-seated in man:

... these instincts dominate [man] regardless of his level of intelligence A wife must understand, once, and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about the "betrayals of the flesh". The important thing is what there is in the heart; that's what unites two beings inside I satisfy myself with what is within reach. It is a terrible thing to say. Truth is ugly when one analyses it. (34)

Binetou comes out as the loser. Unlike Nabou, who seems to be more assertive in an engagingly positive sense (she fulfils herself in community work) Binetou, in a negative sense, submits to her mother's wishes when she sacrifices her youth and marries Modou. She is 'convicted' to the status of a child widow when Modou dies, with few marketable educational or professional skills. She becomes one more 'victim' in the growing band of

women who are expected 'to understand' and 'accept for once and for all' and who must 'forgive' (34), as Mawdo asserts - presumably in vindication of his own actions, which led to Aissatou divorce him.

Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, transcends the bounds of ordinary motherhood and takes a liberated step in the direction of emancipation when upon her discovery of the pregnancy of her unmarried daughter, also named Aissatou, she exclaims:

Her life and her future were at stake, and these were powerful considerations, overriding all taboos and assuming greater importance in my heart and in my mind. The life that fluttered in her was questioning me. It was eager to blossom. It vibrated, demanding protection. (83)

Ramatoulaye's decision to 'help' and 'protect', to 'console' and to 'forgive' (83) is an unusually brave step in a Muslim society steeped in traditional values; a society which condemns pregnancy outside marriage as a sinful act. Ramatoulaye is unusually supportive and also relieved that the girl will be able to avoid expulsion from school by wearing loose clothing and giving birth during the holidays. She wonders about the unfair system that denies education to girls who become pregnant: 'When will there be a lenient law to help erring schoolgirls whose condition is not camouflaged by long holidays?' (85).

Although Ramatoulaye does not come to terms with Aissatou's condition immediately - initially she 'was dumbfounded', 'silent', 'flushed and breathless'; she remained 'silent' and her 'teeth gnashed in anger' (81-2) - her maternal instinct ultimately overcomes all prejudice:

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. (83)

Ramatoulaye is, finally, more concerned with her daughter's happiness and welfare than with her own shame and feelings of anger: 'I accepted my subordinate role. The ripe fruit must drop away from the tree' (86); and she prays: 'May God smooth the new path of this child's life' (86) just as she had previously prayed for Modou's soul after his death: 'May God accept you among his chosen few' (37). In Ramatoulaye's case, oppression has become freedom, powerlessness has become empowerment and the self, initially stripped of identity, has become at once affirmed motherhood and selfhood. Busia (1988: 28) observes that it is crucial that Ramatoulaye begins her narrative as an '*estranged widow*' and ends it as an '*embraced mother*', as noted in the early part of the chapter. The process of self-definition takes her from an externally based definition of self, legally constructed in relation with a man, Modou, her dead husband, to a self-definition voluntarily articulated around her children as discrete individuals, regardless of the absent father.

The stark contrast between Ramatoulaye and the other mothers in *So Long a Letter* (mainly cast in the role of mothers-in-law) is meant to illustrate the point, as Edson (1977: 18) comments, that in a postcolonial age where Western cars, clothes, and nightclubs lure adults and children to Western ways of thinking and materialism, the guidance and decisions made by mothers *vis-à-vis* their children are of prime importance. With Senegalese culture in such a state of flux, the ideologies passed onto this generation of children by their mothers will serve as the foundations for the future direction of the country. Ramatoulaye tells her daughter towards the end of the novel: 'It is your choice, and not ours, that will direct the country' (73). The concept of choice, 'the act of choosing' is shown as being pivotal in human experience as Irene d' Almeida (1986: 161)

points out. Sartre, among other philosophers, has emphasized choice in human existence as a powerful act which gives shape and direction to human existence. D'Almeida (1986: 165) therefore remarks: 'Sartre, then, views choice as essential for the creation of the self when he posits that human beings are nothing other than what they make of themselves. And it is indeed through choice that both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou arrive at the ultimate affirmation of the self.

The primary reality of women in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, then, is a reality of abandonment and, more importantly, as Cham (1987: 93) observes, it is a reality of the need and resolve to transcend and overcome it. Ramatoulaye, Aissatou and Jacqueline are women who have had to face and contend with reality and challenge. Jacqueline, an African from the Ivory Coast who disregards her parents' opinion about marrying a non-Ivorian, is abandoned by her playboy Senegalese husband, Samba Diack who, in turn, makes no secret of his preference for 'slender Senegalese women' (42). Jacqueline, being a victim of marital neglect and deceit, suffers from a nervous breakdown. As a result of psychiatric treatment and the communal support of sisterhood - 'We tried everything to draw this sister out of her private hell' (43) - Jacqueline is finally restored to wholeness when she finds for herself an independent 'reason for living' (45).

Aissatou, intended recipient of the letter which becomes the story, is in a literal sense Ramatoulaye's 'alter ego' (Stratton's term, 1988: 163). She refuses to participate in a polygamous marriage when Mawdo marries Nabou. She leaves Mawdo and takes her life in her own hands when she courageously, both literally and figuratively, storms the 'walls' that confine her and becomes economically independent. Despite warnings that 'boys

cannot succeed without a father' (31), she proceeds to raise her sons successfully 'contrary to all predictions' and thus refutes the patriarchal insistence on a father figure. She upgrades her qualifications and, from her salary, is able to supply Ramatoulaye with a brand new model car (already alluded to).

The virtues of friendship, extolled by Ramatoulaye:

Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and serves couples. It has heights unknown to love ... (54)

encapsulate another central interrelated theme, communal sisterhood, which features very strongly in this novel, which makes it even more appropriate that the novel takes the form of this long letter to a trusted friend and confidante. Busia (1988: 3), too, advocates the case for unity. Whatever women's national roots or origins, both sacred and secular ideologies have worked to domesticate and disempower the female. Central to this proposition is the strategy to re-examine the role of women in society through the exploration of the role and nature of female bonding, and the creation of families of choice. The quest of unity is an integral part of black women's fiction from both personal and social points of view.

Like Telumee in Simone Schwartz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond* (1975), and Avatara in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Ramatoulaye, too, is a widow whose 'selfhood is explored through a journey toward unity with a matriarchy or sisterhood' (Busia, 1988: 17). As Busia further points out, all of these novels are informed and transformed by a new consciousness which recognizes that bridges are to be built not only across time, but also over the chasms of space - material, physical, cultural, and spiritual.

It is the sustenance of lasting friendship which enables Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to endure the tribulations of their own lives, to take stock and to begin again. As Cham (1987: 93) observes, it is the cumulative experience of these women that 'underscores the dialectic of oppression and regeneration that is one of the distinguishing features' of *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* and this dialectic, itself, undergirds the basic structure of both novels.

Another important common thread binds the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou into communal sisterhood. This common thread is, ironically and sadly, the antagonistic role of their in-laws in the process of abandonment, and the very absence of the unified community in sisterhood. Bâ indicts the misuse of the privileges of tradition and of the institution of the mother-in-law, in particular, for personal profit at the expense of the well-being of the children-in-law. And she uses the younger female voice, for instance, Daba's, to spell out the consequences of such selfish actions. As Cham (1987: 97) comments, when elders lose their sense of responsibility and self-restraint, children are thrust forward to assume the role of moral arbiters, and in this process cultural codes of conduct between elders and youngsters are shattered.

In pointed contrast to the traditional role of the village, a reverse situation is depicted. According to Susan Stringer (1988: 39), the traditional village ways, instead of being presented as the ideal, are portrayed as negative with regard to the standing of women. Aunty Nabou, in this instance, encourages polygamy and the total submission of the woman to the man. Aunty Nabou's sense of caste when she rejects Aissatou is used as a veil to perpetuate her hold on Mawdo, her 'only man' (26). Her relationship with Aissatou

is cold and antagonistic. Her strategy is 'a study in calculated trickery' when she evidently manipulates her brother, niece and son to wipe out what 'she considers a stain on the family' (Cham, 1987: 94). Like Lady Mother-in-Law, she sees marriage as a means of social mobility and material enrichment, a practice which Mariama Bâ condemns outright. Nevertheless, the powerful effectiveness of conversation and elements of the folk culture and oral tradition, in particular, feature strongly in Bâ's portrayal of the negative effects these elements have on sisterhood and motherhood:

Tales with animal characters, nostalgic songs kept young Nabou breathless. And slowly but surely, through the sheer force of repetition, the virtues and greatness of a race took root in this child. This kind of oral education ... has the power to bring out the best in the adult mind Softness and generosity, docility and politeness, poise and tact, all these qualities made young Nabou pleasant. (47)

As Busia (1988: 31) argues, the liberating power of the metaphor has been reduced to a 'charm' and the purpose of the telling of these folk-tales is to manipulate. Aunty Nabou's stories do not create harmonious sisterhood, but rather havoc. Furthermore, they are not stories designed to unite a community of equals through the communal support of sisterhood, but ones intended to separate the community into conquering males and submissive females. Aunty Nabou's *modus operandi* fits in one hundred per cent with the mother who reinforces the patriarchal values, who insists on the *hijab* and, who, indeed has become an instrument in affirming the woman's subordinate role as subject. Busia (1988: 31) remarks: 'Aunty Nabou's stories, rather than providing a weapon to fight against sexism perpetuate this inequality'.

Unlike Ramatoulaye, who accepts her 'subordinate role' and realizes that she cannot imprison her own daughter in her own value system, Aunty Nabou and Lady Mother-in-

Law epitomize the absence of female solidarity and the presence of seclusion by endorsing the veiling of the women, by subordinating them to domestic space only. A focal point in Bâ's novels is highlighted by the younger Daba's probing question, 'How can one woman destroy the happiness of another woman?' (39). Rosalie's response with regard to the absence of female solidarity and communal sisterhood in *Scarlet Song* reinforces the notion of this concern of Mariama Bâ: 'What a spectacle! Her attitude is unworthy of a woman of this century. Women should unite' (136). The phenomenon of women deliberately and maliciously sabotaging the happiness of other women in a male-dominated society recurs when Aunty Nabou's 'revenge' is recorded by Ramatoulaye's remark: 'While Mawdo's mother planned her revenge, we lived' (20); 'Your mother-in-law thought more and more of her revenge' (25); 'She thought day and night of a way to get her revenge on you' (26); 'She swore that your existence, Aissatou, would never tarnish her noble descent' (28); and 'She was thinking of you, working out her vengeance, but she was very careful not to speak of you, of her hatred for you' (29).

The portrayal of Aunty Nabou as living in the past, unaware of the changing world, already referred to, serves to illuminate the fourth and final interrelated theme, that of education and liberation which Bâ has so skilfully interwoven in her novel: 'She clung to old beliefs' (26) and her old-fashioned opinion 'To tell the truth, a woman does not need too much education' (30); 'School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path' (17). Busia (1988: 26), accordingly, remarks that movement ought to be progressive, not retrogressive and Ramatoulaye, indeed, finds a meaning for the past with which to explain the present and sustain the future. However, the author's aim is not to romanticize Africa or the lot of the African woman, as if the way to cure all ills were to

re-create the societies of the past. In a similar fashion, Mernissi (1992: 10), too, points out that the past is not reclaimed for its own sake, but because, without a recognition of it, there can be no understanding of the present and no future. Only a liberated memory, rooted in the present, as well as in the future, can offer progress.

An appreciation of these points can be gained through a reading of *So Long a Letter*, the encompassing theme of which advocates nourishment by roots in a changing world without becoming 'withered' or 'bound' by them (Busia's terminology, 1988: 27). D'Almeida (1986: 165) claims that Ramatoulaye's choices are informed by her unrelenting desire for change but they are also mediated by a strong streak of conservatism. When Ramatoulaye discovers that her teenage daughters have been smoking, she ponders over the 'flow of progress':

Suddenly I became afraid of the flow of progress. Did they also drink? Who knows, one vice leads to another. Does it mean one can't have modernism without a lowering of moral standards? Was I to blame for having given my daughters a bit of liberty? (77)

This conflict between modernity and tradition stems from another troubling, and dominant, issue in Ramatoulaye's youth, when she recounts 'the horde of the jobless [which] swells the flood of delinquency' (18). The attempt to maintain a balance, between the 'elite of traditional manual workers' and 'booklearning', 'the dream is to become a clerk' (18), becomes an eternal question of an eternal debate, as already intimated in the Introduction. Notwithstanding the possible losses, Ramatoulaye, as a young pioneering woman, makes 'profound choices' for the 'promotion of the black woman in a New Africa' (16) and contributes to this New Africa. In her participation in 'dismantling' traditions (18)

in order to 'introduce modernity', Ramatoulaye is 'progressive', despite 'nostalgia' (19).

After thirty years of silence, and after Modou's death, Ramatoulaye resumes her position as 'outspoken champion of women's rights' (Flewellyn's phrase, 1985: 17) when she claims in her conversation with Daouda Dieng, a former suitor, that women have 'a right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities. The right to vote is an important weapon' (61). The complaint that 'constraints remain', that 'old beliefs are revived' and that 'egoism emerges and scepticism rears its head in the political field' (61) is an echo of Mernissi's central question, posed in the Introduction to this dissertation and restated here: 'Can a woman be a leader of Muslims?' and the shocked reply by the grocer: 'Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!' (1992: 1). Even after twenty years of independence in Senegal, and after the passing of the Family Code, restoring dignity to women is the question which troubles Ramatoulaye: 'When will we have the first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of our country?' (61) she muses. This predicament of contemporary women encapsulates Ramatoulaye's comment, 'Eternal questions of our eternal debates' (18, as noted earlier) and it touches on one of the aims premised at the outset of the Introduction, whether or not amid the various kinds of responses there is any one answer to this problematic question that can be called 'the Muslim answer'. However, irrespective of this answer, whether single or married, polygamous or monogamous, the modern Muslim African woman, especially the younger and more educated one, does believe in moving 'beyond the veil', in breaking the silence imposed on her by the patriarchal society and in asserting herself in the face of preconceived conflicting forces.

In addition to this self-affirmation, the education of women and 'the struggle over the "right" form of education are integral parts of the action in the novel' (Janos Riesz, 1991: 30). Nabou's status as Mawdo's wife is the reward (or acknowledgement) for having successfully completed a worthy and appropriate education in the traditional sense. Riesz therefore further remarks that the modern European system of education can produce mature, self-aware women who accept responsibilities for their own lives, but so can the traditional African system of education. Ramatoulaye is immensely grateful to the European woman and the director of the teacher training college she attended, as she widened the horizons of the students and gave them moral and intellectual training:

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 She knew how to discover and appreciate our qualities. (15-16)

Although Ramatoulaye, in no sense, however, rejects her own cultural background, she attaches great importance to formal education - in contrast to Aunty Nabou and Lady Mother-in-Law - and to the intellectual power of books as vehicles of knowledge. Ultimately, Ramatoulaye succeeds in combining both her professional career and housewife role successfully: 'The working woman has a dual task, of which both halves equally arduous, must be reconciled. How does one go about this? Therein lies the skill that makes all the difference to a home' (20). In Ramatoulaye's mind, as Riesz (1991: 32) points out, a suitable education for both sexes is a necessary prerequisite for the success of future marriages as she herself poses the key question: 'When will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex but of talent?' (61). This can also be seen in her

resolution that she remains convinced of the obligatory inescapable complementarity of man and woman.

Ramatoulaye ends her narrative with her account of learning, as a liberated woman, to speak to her daughters as a subject and not as an object. She speaks to her daughters about all matters concerning their education and lives as women in a modern and changing society. The act of communion and especially of communication with her children, her daughters in particular, typifies an act of speaking from 'beyond the veil'. Ramatoulaye shelters her daughters as women and she experiences 'rebirth' as her own daughter faces motherhood for the first time. The interrelated themes of marriage, motherhood, sisterhood, and education are modified and transposed as the 'locus of communion is found around the same centre' (Busia, 1988: 32), shared by the leading characters in a bonding within the females of the family, as well as in marriage, which finally is capable of transcending the veil. The hitherto silenced voice has indeed become a speaking voice, harmoniously blended in a letter, although not sent, and more specifically, in the concluding lines of Ramatoulaye's letter: 'The word "happiness" does indeed have meaning, doesn't it? I shall go out in search of it. Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter ...' (89).

CHAPTER 5

SCARLET SONG (1981; 1994)

more central Wolof proverb: '*Nit, nit, modi garabam!* Man, *man* [my emphasis] is his own remedy!' (165). The complexity of this second novel of Mariama Bâ inheres in these two Wolof proverbs. As already intimated, while the one Wolof proverb ('*kou wathie sa toundeu, tound'eu boo fêke mou tasse*') advocates purism in cultural relations and implies a disapproval of marriage across cultural boundaries, the other '*Nit, nit, modi garabam!*' implicitly reflects the redeeming message in this novel: reconciliation in bridging the cultural divide is possible and, in fact, required and demanded by the Islamic concept of humanity which is, in essence, a religious principle.

Culture, argues Leopold Senghor (Cham, 1987: 100) is the bedrock of development. Culture, says Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1987: 100) in explication, is much more than just folklore. It encapsulates the entire spectrum of relations and activities in any given society. Consequently, as Cham (1987: 100) points out, any movement in or of society must have its feet firmly rooted in a healthy culture if it is to be of any lasting and meaningful value to the welfare of individuals and society at large. And a healthy culture, in Ngugi's terms, is a culture of equality, a culture free of all forms of exploitation, and, above all, a culture rooted in the true traditions of the people. Leila Sebbar, the Algerian female writer, endorses this notion of a culture rooted in the true tradition. Though born and raised in Algeria, (she has a French mother and an Algerian father) she has moved to Paris where she lives today. As Charlotte Bruner (1993: 208) notes, Sebbar's research interests centre on the colonial concept of the '*bon negre*' in eighteenth-century colonial literature and on nineteenth-century education for girls. Her style transmits the 'uncertainties of the illiterate or semi-literate immigrants, caught between two cultures, two languages, two religions' (Bruner, 1993: 209). In the Muslim context and as already

noted in the previous chapters, Muhammad, the Prophet, promotes a culture of equality, in advocating the equality of women, an equality which stems from the true Islamic tradition, as it is ordained by the *Qur'an*.

In both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Mariama Bâ uses 'the strength, the maturity and finesse of her imagination and artistry to reinforce this fundamental notion of culture and society' (Cham, 1987: 100-101) and the entitlement to equality when she treats the clear conflict between the traditional role of women and the present-day aspirations of contemporary women as a fundamental precept in these novels. The lack of clarity about the status of women, as part of the general culture conflict in a Muslim patriarchal society - which still advocates polygamy: 'Mireille is a Muslim, ... She knows that Ousmane has a right to four wives' (127) - is at once exposed and explored by the author in *Scarlet Song*. Charity Waciuma, born in Kenya, is another African author who subscribes to Mariama Bâ's notion of change and the practice of monogamy. Waciuma writes frankly of woman's role in Kenya. Like Bâ, with 'philosophical acceptance' (Bruner's terms, 1994: 245) Waciuma advocates the necessity for change:

For myself, I have decided against polygamy, but its rights and wrongs are still being argued continually and furiously in our schools and colleges and debating clubs I hate it because it hurts the position and dignity of women and exaggerates the selfishness of men.

(Waciuma, 1969: 11-12)

In a similar fashion to Chapter Four, but with different emphasis Mariama Bâ 'writes back' once more from 'beyond the veil' in terms of the four interrelated themes: education, marriage, motherhood and sisterhood, this time embedded in the theme of cultural conflict. Therefore, as Dorothy S. Blair ponders in her 'In Memoriam' to *Scarlet Song*, the

novel 'is a crusade against social injustices, but the author also pleads the case for pride in individual identities, although the negative aspects of these do not escape her' (*Scarlet Song*, 1994: iii). In a similar fashion to Mariama Bâ, Rokhayatou Aminata Maiga-Ka, also born in Senegal, says of her own work: 'My main themes are polygamy, caste and education ... a criticism of our society African women are most of the time victims who do not react enough to their fates and are toys between the hands of men' (correspondence with C. H. Bruner, 1990, when Ka was a participant in the International Writing Programme at Iowa City. Quoted by Bruner, 1990: 190). Ifeoma Okeye, born in Nigeria, underscores the notion of social injustices. She addresses the trauma of battered women, as well as traditional economic practices that shackle women despite their education and career status. She declares that her work is aimed at upliftment: '... if I can, through my writing, bring about the upliftment of the oppressed, and those discriminated against, whether male or female, [I will]' (correspondence with C. H. Bruner: quoted by Bruner, 1993: 187).

In Francophone Africa, black women began to write in the mid-seventies. Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, also from Senegal, are recognized as the most important of these novelists, although in the last couple of years a number of works by young women has appeared which shows great promise. In a sense, Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall have different theoretical approaches to their own role as African women writers. In an article entitled 'The Political Functions of African Written Literatures' Bâ says that the woman writer has a duty to expose and contest women's position in African society. Sow Fall, on the other hand, in an interview for a French radio broadcast at the beginning of 1986, claims that her viewpoint is not strictly speaking that of a womanist, but rather that she

is interested in social issues in general (Stringer, 1988: 36). The difference in approach is apparent when one compares *So Long a Letter*, where the only viewpoint is that of a woman, with the novels of Sow Fall, which are written from a broader perspective. This distinction of viewpoint, however, is not so evident in Bâ's second novel, *Scarlet Song*; nor does it preclude it. Bâ's concern with social issues has been seen in the discussion of her deployment of the *journalisme-vérité* mode contiguous with the gender specific in *So Long a Letter*.

Scarlet Song differs from *So Long a Letter* in that it reveals a deliberate attempt to present a more general view of Senegalese society, illustrated by the fact that the protagonist, Ousmane, is male and that there is a multiplicity of viewpoints. Here, too, the main themes - although the same as those in *So Long a Letter* - concern both men and women. In other words, in this novel, Bâ, like Sow Fall, focuses on the predicament and dilemma of women and men within the broader context of cultural heritage and cultural conflict. For this reason, then, *Scarlet Song* is examined through the single lens of *journalisme-vérité*. This focus leads to a conscious awareness of the real conditions of daily life and reality (as has been pointed out in Chapter Four).

Rather than simply choosing the gender screen of interpretation, this study attempts to explore a series of more general issues, for instance, the socio-cultural domain. An attempt is thus made to move beyond gender issues, and to explore, among other things, the nature of man and woman. Ali, one of the male characters in the novel, remarks that, 'Man has a heart and reason, which are the basis of his undoubted superiority. Ousmane is no longer making use of either!' He asks the troubled question: 'Should one [then]

despair of mankind ...? There is such a thing as code and honour ...' (135-36). Ali's pondering upon this dilemma reinforces the notion that certain sources of cultural conflict, polygamy, for example, seem to have their roots in human nature, as Stringer (1988: 37) aptly remarks, and not merely in the Westernizing process.

As already articulated, one of the primary aims of this thesis is to determine whether or not amid various kinds of responses with regard to cultural and socio-political issues, there is any **one** answer that can be called the Muslim answer in dealing with the problematic issues of the cultural legacy, cultural diversity and conflict. (This has also been dealt with in Chapter Four though on a different level.) Therefore, the encompassing theme of the cultural domain in *Scarlet Song* is seen in the context of 'human and social detail' that 'capture[s] the soulbeat of a society' (Cham, 1987: 101). The Nigerian critic, Femi Ojo-Ade (1982: 71), once remarked that cultural conflict entails an identity crisis which concerns all Africans and that the cultural onslaught from the West poses a threat to the spiritual reality of human beings in general. Susan Stringer's argument (1988: 40) that 'the main problem for all of us is how to remain human in a world which is becoming daily more dehumanized' is an extension of the statement made by Ojo-Ade above. It is also in agreement with the viewpoint of Mariama Bâ who suggests that the answer to an increasingly dehumanized world may, in fact, lie in a fine balance between both perceived weaknesses and strengths in ensuring a healthier future. And Bâ indeed sets out to propose such a balance, when Ousmane (in Part one of the novel) declares :

I'm all for the general doctrine of Negritude. I'm for returning to your roots and keeping the way open Culture is universal. Culture is an instrument of development. How can you achieve this without self-knowledge which leads to self-respect, and without knowledge of and respect for others? (47)

Andrée Chedid, an Egyptian writer, and an expatriate by choice who lives in Paris, subscribes to Mariama Bâ's opinion that culture is an instrument of development. As Bruner (1993: 210) notes, Chedid builds bridges, not barriers, between the ancient African world and today's Western world, and like Lamine and Ali in *Scarlet Song*, Chedid's leading character, Kalya, finds her cross-cultural roots a source of joy and breadth. In a similar fashion to Ousmane's initial viewpoint in *Scarlet Song* that one should keep one's ways open, Chedid's characters insist 'on the positive aspects of hybridisation, affirming cosmopolitanism and the enrichment, tolerance, and openness it brings' (Bruner, 1993: 210).

Accordingly, Bruner comments that Chedid's works reflect affirmation, bridges between the past, the present, and a hoped-for future of common understanding (1993: 210). Fatima Mernissi, too, in *Women and Islam* (1992) underscores this notion, as has been noted earlier, that both the past and the present contribute to the time-mirror wherein the Muslim looks at himself to foresee the future (1992: 195). She therefore remarks: '...the present is always fabulous, because there everything is possible - even the end of always looking to the past and the beginning of confidence, of enjoying in harmony the moment that we have' (1992: 195).

Scarlet Song, seen through the lens of *journalisme-vérité* exemplifies (like *So Long a Letter*) this 'return to the real' (Houtondji, 1992: 362). Yet, paradoxically, the present does not always encapsulate moments of harmony and joy. So, too, is the common reality of disharmony, disillusionment, and the abandonment of human beings in Senegal, whether they be of male or female - rooted in the detail of everyday reality - exposed

when Mireille ponders:

Africa also assumes the loathsome face of those who sponge unashamedly on women in order to survive. I have heard so many heartrending stories, sobbed out by women with faces contorted with misery: women who have been the victims of promises deliberately broken; women who lost everything when their Black fiancés vanished into thin air with all their possessions (41)

And, when all's said and done, black men are not the only ones who are unfaithful to their wives! (162)

In both novels, thus, as Cham (1987: 99) argues, Mariama Bâ examines the issues of polygamy, intercaste, intercultural and interracial marriage and relationships, and she raises questions on whose satisfactory resolution will depend the stability and viability of much of the moral, political, social, economic and cultural fabric of her story.

Given this socio-cultural framework, Mariama Bâ's second (and final) novel needs to be read within the social and political-cultural context of the Negritude Movement which started in the 1930s. Black African literature began with this movement, which was primarily associated with poetry. It was not until the 1950s that the African novel came into its own as an influential means of literary expression, as Stringer (1988: 36) points out. From the outset then, the credo 'black is beautiful', with its injunctions to 'return to one's roots', has a clear social as well as political function dealing with the problems associated with colonialism.

The theme of cultural conflict is, of course, not a new one. During the period of open foreign domination, 'it was easy to castigate the West as the source of all Africa's ills and strife, but once independence was achieved, in theory at least, change was possible' (Stringer, 1988: 36). Unfortunately, cultural conflict did not disappear with the gaining

of independence but appeared in a more subtle confrontation between Africans and Europeans. The new ruling classes were called 'Black foreigners' or *Toubabs noirs* by their countrymen, and the *comprador bourgeoisie* by Frantz Fanon. This former is indeed what Ousmane calls Lamine when he says: 'You are betraying your true self. You live like a *Toubab* you think like a *Toubab*' (99) and 'What you are losing is enormous. It's your African soul, your essence as an African' (100). Lamine's response reinforces the notion of subtle conflict when he replies:

And if to respect my [white] wife and let her live happily in the way she chooses means that I've been colonised, well then, I've been colonised, and I admit it. I want peace. That doesn't mean I'm a traitor to myself. (100)

In *So Long a Letter*, Jacqueline from the Ivory Coast, marries a Senegalese, Samba Diack and returns with him to Senegal. Coming to Senegal, she finds herself in a new world, 'a world with different reactions, temperament and mentality from that in which she has grown up' (*So Long a Letter*: 42). In addition, her husband's relatives are cool towards her because she refuses to adopt the Muslim religion and goes to the Protestant church every Sunday. Finally, she finds herself abandoned. She suffers a breakdown and is admitted to the psychiatric ward of the hospital.

Scarlet Song, a narrative told from an omniscient point of view, elaborates on this story with the difference that the foreign woman, unlike Jacqueline, is white. The narrative revolves around two young students in philosophy who meet at school, fall in love and want to be married. Ousmane Gueye, son of Djibril Gueye, who is an important figure in the Muslim community, has a very close relationship with his mother, Yaye Khady. She is an ordinary woman, well grounded in the African traditions. His friend, Mireille de la

Vallée, is the daughter of a French diplomat, who works at the French Embassy in Dakar, Senegal. When Monsieur Jean learns of his daughter's relationship with a black man, all his beautiful speeches about the necessity for the recognition of the equality of all men and the need for fraternisation are put to the test. His true self is revealed and his reaction is instantaneous. Mireille is hustled out of the country and sent back to France; and Mireille's mother, a very submissive European wife, has no say in her husband's decision. Mireille and Ousmane are separated for five years, during which time they communicate by writing letters to each other. Each completes an M.A. in Philosophy. Their love is in no way diminished by distance, and so after five years of separation they get married in France, in both the Western and Muslim tradition.

Upon their return to Dakar they have to deal with serious cultural clashes. These clashes cause strain within the marriage, and the deterioration in their relationship leads to Ousmane seeking the fulfilment of his emotional and cultural needs (as he calls them) outside the home. Unknown to Mireille, he finally marries Ouleymatou, his adolescent love. Eventually Mireille learns his secret. After an inward struggle to accept the situation, she loses her sanity. She kills her son Gorgui, by giving him a fatal dose of sleeping tablets. She then attempts to kill Ousmane when he comes home in the early hours of the morning. Ousmane is wounded, but survives, and the deranged Mireille is sent to a lunatic asylum in France where she will be taken care of.

Of particular interest to the examination of this novel is Mariama Bâ's use of the letter which, according to Cham (1987: 100), is 'unparalleled in its method and system in African literature'. Whereas *So Long a Letter* is an entire epistle, *Scarlet Song* makes use

of intermittent letters as part of the narrative technique. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991: 567) makes the statement that '*So Long a Letter* meets us as a *fait accompli*, in the sense that we do not see the growth and change in the principal characters' of the story as we do in *Scarlet Song*. Nwachukwu-Agbada offers one possible solution to this difference in presentation of the narrative when he argues that the epistolary form adapted by Mariama Bâ, the quality of the emotional arousal, the probability of the 'truth' in the narrative content and the impact of the poetic quality of the author's diction confer the illusion with credibility. In *Scarlet Song*, however, we witness the 'foundations of the Ousmane - Mireille love from its faltering stage to the tension and sacrifices that nurtured it' (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991: 567).

In *Scarlet Song*, letters are used to continue the love affair between Ousmane and Mireille and at the same time to give an account of socio-political activities as well as other information: 'Mireille's handwriting! Handwriting free of flourishes that denoted the writer's determined character' (33) and, 'They all belonged to the generation of May 1968' (89). Although the motivation of the students in Paris differs from that of the Senegalese students, they all have the 'same dream of revolutionising and reforming the world' (89). The slogan 'All prohibitions are prohibited' is still the order of the day (44), as Mireille records in her letter to Ousmane. Letters announce the marriage of Ousmane and Mireille to their respective parents: 'Father, It is right that you should be first to be subjected to the shock of the news that I have to announce. I have got married here to my "film star"' (64) and, 'Ousmane Gueye came to Paris to marry me If you can forgive me, write to me at the address at the top of this letter' (76). It is the anonymous letter 'You have got a Senegalese co-wife' (155) that exposes Ousmane's deception to Mireille and, that finally,

precipitates Mireille's insanity. In *So Long a Letter*, the novelist even uses the technique of a letter within a letter, as in the case when Aissatou writes to Mawdo to inform him of her decision to leave him. So too, does Ramatoulaye write a short letter to Daouda, informing him that she cannot accept his proposal of marriage. As has been discussed in Chapter Four, the formula of the epistle allows the characters to convey their most intimate feelings on paper.

Structurally, and for the purpose of the analysis (in a similar fashion to *So Long a Letter*), the novel is presented in three distinctive parts. The encompassing theme of cultural heritage and cultural conflict - 'Africa can be cruel in her jealousy' (39) and, 'Cultural heritage was taking its pitiless revenge. It was reclaiming its due ...' (72) - informs the three parts in the novel. The foundations of the Ousmane-Mireille love from its secret courtship, the climax of love marked by a secret wedding in Paris, and finally, the growth from innocent youth and dreams to cruel, devastating reality is witnessed. Former ideals are shattered. Rationalizations are offered for newer base motives and canons of indigenous traditions serve to justify the misuse of privilege in a patriarchal socio-cultural milieu, all to the disadvantage of the hitherto hope-filled Mireille.

Given this framework, Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991: 567) comments that, like the Bildungsroman, the novel *Scarlet Song*, shares to a great extent the notion of growth and emancipation: 'However, the growth here is from innocence, honour, sense of duty, love, faith, civility, and reliability to villainy, disrespect, carelessness, wickedness, infidelity, and tragedy'. The very opening lines of the novel refer to 'the two parallel main roads that run through' the district of Usine Niara Talli (3). Symbolically, these two roads represent the

two lives of Ousmane and Mireille, which are rooted in two different cultural worlds. Due to their parallel nature, these two roads never meet and they never intersect. In fact, the narrator repeatedly points to the fact that though 'they [have been] enriched by their differences' (18), there is a 'world of difference' between them as well (72).

Through the recollection of Ousmane's past, education is constituted as a major theme in this novel. When the reader meets Ousmane in the first part of the novel, he is portrayed as a bright student who is about to embark upon his university career. Ousmane's childhood and early schooldays can be attributed to schoolmasters to whose teaching he owes his university career. Djibril Gueye's ambition to assure for his son the best possible character-training at a French school contributes to Ousmane's learning process at this school. The teachers instil in Ousmane a love of hard work. They have shown him how 'the key to success is forged by patience and perseverance' (5). So too, does his father inspire him with a taste for work. He teaches Ousmane humility and ambition: 'Work is the only path to self-achievement!' (5) he is never tired of repeating. Consequently, seven years of high school do not lessen Ousmane's enthusiasm for hard work. And it is with 'the same brisk step and the same thirst for knowledge' (11) that he now makes his way to university.

Concomitant with this new challenge of studying at the university, the narrator subtly introduces both the notion of a 'new term' (3), and Yaye Khady's innocent remark that, since Ousmane is 'starting a new school, [he] can just as well start a new habit!' (4). And this is exactly what Ousmane does when he as a young man, who used to take 'refuge behind an armour of coolness' always being 'on his guard' against women (11), makes

friends with Mireille, a white girl and courts her: 'He was [indeed] about to enter a new phase of his life' (40). Concurrent with the subtle references to this new life-style Ousmane is about to adopt is the description of the vibrant street; its 'rhythms and colours' (4). The street, viewed metaphorically, depicted as 'life and light' (4), with 'moods which varied with the season or time of the day' (4), charts the personal journey Ousmane is about to undertake:

Ousmane never slackened his pace. And the street unwound before him, its surface now even, now full of pot-holes. Imposing or vulgar, smart or dusty, busy or quiet, it stretched out, now straight, now winding, sometimes narrower, sometimes widening. (5)

This journey, set out in expectation, finally, ends up 'in [a] muddy road' (71), full of pot-holes. Exploring the metaphorical component of this novel, Bâ makes special reference to birds in flight, in a similar fashion to the street reference, 'the proud abode', 'shelter [of] domestic harmony; or symbol of 'discord and enmity' (14). And the riddle of the novel lies in the two prefigurative rhetorical questions: 'What was the destiny of those long skeins of birds ...?'; 'Would they die in captivity, or perish as victims of the elements?' (5). An awareness of the dangers and elements inherent in Ousmane's journey, ominously foreshadows the fatal road both Ousmane and Mireille eventually take: 'But fate was watching over them. The first landmark on the path of their destiny had been planned' (15). Ousmane's reason, which has been warning him against previous 'fancy', now fails him. Fancy suddenly poses the threat of shattering his vows of chastity and indifference: 'Ousmane let his dream have the upper hand. He was intoxicated by his own "folly"' (16). And, in conflation of the theme of education with that of marriage, Mireille is described as 'genuinely in love' (20). She has given her heart and also her body, 'The irrevocable had

been achieved' (27). An 'exhilarating madness' has taken complete possession of her (27). The source of her unfailing courtesy is 'her belief in the equality of all mankind ...' (20). Mireille, unable to resist love pleading its cause, takes 'a risk', 'like a person in a fire who throws herself out of a window' (21), when she allows Ousmane to court her.

Various other subtle references mark the winding path that is already beset with 'lurking dangers'. Ousmane's encounter with the 'madman' (4) whose unnatural brightness of eyes, and tormented gaze, disturb the onlooker, already foreshadows his encounter with the 'madwoman' (165) at the end of the novel. In a similar manner to Ousmane's fleeing from this spectre as a young student, he tries to flee from the madwoman who attacks and stabs him with a knife at the end of the novel. However, whereas Ousmane (as a young student) succeeds in fleeing from the 'madman' by simply turning his eyes upward to admire heaven, he is now handicapped by the deep wounds inflicted by his wife, and unable to flee. He only manages to stagger towards the front door and to open it. But he is unable to shut the door behind him, which implies that for the first time in his life, Ousmane is compelled to face the consequences of madness which he, because of his deceit, his meretricious words of love, and his abandoning of Mireille, has precipitated.

Given this context, it is important to trace the role of education in determining the destiny in both Ousmane and Mireille's lives. The narrator explicitly states that they have been drawn together by their mutual interest in philosophy and their similar critical attitudes (114). Both Ousmane and Mireille's choice to study in Dakar precipitates the courtship between them when they both enrol at the same university, and subsequently, fall in love. They share the same thirst for knowledge. At school they used to engage in critical

discussions on the pavement. Interrelated with the theme of education is the concept of choice. Once more, as in *So Long a Letter* (though in a different way), the characters have to make important choices. D'Almeida (1986: 168) comments that in *Scarlet Song*, 'choice is not perceived as a given but as a long, painful and conflictual process which ultimately has the potency to upset established rules and internalized conditioning'. In *Scarlet Song* all the characters are called upon to make choices and they are all affected by each other's choices. When Ousmane is offered a bursary by the Ministry of Education and Culture to study in France for the entrance examination to the Ecole Normale Supérieure, he chooses to remain in Dakar. He has no hesitation in putting his duty to his family before his ambition and curiosity: 'Djibril Gueye was ageing; Yaye Khady, in her overwhelming love for her son, would scarcely get over his absence; his brother and sisters were still young and needed his guidance' (15). So too does Mireille choose to study in Dakar so she can see Ousmane: 'Her registration at the university was no coincidence. She had to fight to get her way' (21).

In a heavily nuanced allusion to those other star-crossed lovers everything seems a miracle to this pair, illuminated by their love, and their desire for their happiness to be perfect. They often laugh, 'intoxicated by their youth, their illusions and the open stretch of the ocean. They could not swim but they would throw off their shoes and paddle in the shallow water' (19). Viewed metaphorically, the concept 'paddle' suggests that they are ill-equipped to cope with the hardships and cultural demands of life itself. 'Paddling' in the shallow water implies an attempt to do so, but paddling alone is not enough to ensure a successful encounter with cultural differences, the most devastating of all being (in an echo of the Shakespearean prototypes) the overwhelming weight of the family and

community: 'Her father was now making no secret of the disgust her friend inspired' (28). And as the narrator subtly points out: 'Between preaching the equality of all men and practising it there was an abyss fraught with peril, and they were not equipped to make this leap' (30).

In poignant contrast to the poet, Jean Sarmant's lines, 'They stand poised on the springboard and leap into the void; God gathers them in his hands, bears them through the air, softens their fall' (quoted from 'In Memoriam' to *Scarlet Song*, 1994: iii), the void in Ousmane and Mireille's case becomes an abyss. Finally, when Ousmane 'returns' to 'his roots' the last stirrings of his conscience sink 'for ever into the sea' (150). In Parts One and Two Ousmane is, figuratively speaking, the essential, connecting link with Mireille. However, in Part Three Ousmane sets Mireille sailing off on the dark, blue waters of the night when he abandons her: 'Towards what port? ... subject to what implacable hand of fate?' (150). And this time there is no one to soften Mireille's fall into the void of insanity.

In contrast to Ousmane, Mireille, in declaring her love for him, has no psychological trauma to counteract. She 'does not feel the need to fill any gap in her life; she has no grudge to satisfy; no physical or moral blemish to compensate for ...' (20). The narrator depicts her as a normal, healthy girl of her age, who is simply and naturally, in love. However, Ousmane, on the other hand, has reservations about their relationship, right from the start. He is concerned about his poverty, and he asks the following troubled questions: 'Could he be a possible partner for Mireille? Could he assume such mutation?' (21) Yet, Ousmane consoles himself that as far as intelligence and virtues typify a man's greatness, he is indeed worthy to be a 'Man', worthy of 'every manifestation of love' (21).

Mireille respects Ousmane's reserve. She never presses him. In fact, 'Ousmane's silence only added to the mystery of love' (20).

Yet, more lurking dangers are subtly implied by the narrator when she comments that the couple's childhoods have nothing in common. When Mireille is sent to Paris upon her parent's discovery of their relationship, Ousmane faces uncertainty in asserting his selfhood. He fears that he will be the loser, that he will be cast aside like 'a wisp of straw', that his illusions will be shattered as they have been with Ouleymatou. Following Mireille's first letter to Ousmane, he has to make a crucial decision with regard to their relationship. This decision evokes many conflicts and agony: cultural heritage seems to cast a shadow upon his happiness. Ousmane's reason fluctuates between 'a white girl' and his 'own people' (36). His cultural heritage has been a torch, lighting up the only path for him to follow, as religion, and teaching tolerance, remain the indestructible link between them all.

Ousmane is torn between two cultural worlds although, somewhat paradoxically, he seems to ally himself with Western education because of all that it offers. Reflecting the tenets of Negritude, alluded to earlier in the chapter, he ponders questions like 'Shred the thousand pages of his ancestral heritage?', 'Decry pride in one's birth?', 'Die for love and not for honour?' (37). Ousmane fully realizes that to choose a wife outside the community is an act of treason and he has been taught: 'God punishes traitors' (37). The warning axiom also serves to keep one on the 'Muslim road': 'the blood of the circumcision flows only onto one's own thigh' (38). Ousmane, in debating his various options, 'shiver[s] with foreboding': 'How could he escape without amputating a part of himself? How could he

escape without bleeding to death?' (38). Ousmane's troubled question, ironically, anticipates his final ordeal when Mireille tries to kill him. The 'scarlet song [which] well[s] up from Ousmane's wounds, the scarlet song of lost hopes' (166) parallels Ousmane's previous shivering with foreboding. And the figurative phrase, 'bleeding to death' now becomes a literal nightmare: Ousmane is about to bleed himself to death ...

Contributing to Ousmane's dilemma is the important role that both his father and mother play in ensuring domestic harmony and a solid Muslim African tradition. His father is portrayed as a devoted Muslim who, every morning, prays at the mosque. Djibril's philosophy - 'as children reach maturity, they can distinguish honesty from crookery' (6) - has pointed out the 'smart, straight' (3) Muslim road to Ousmane. As for his mother, Yaye Khady, she is well-trained in the traditional African education. She is portrayed as possessive, but she, too, loves Ousmane very dearly. Boly, the guitarist and Ousmane's friend, warns against his intention to marry Mireille, when he, in all the sincerity of the Negritude ethos asks what Ousmane and 'the white woman have in common' (39): 'You can't build a future without a shared past. So many mixed marriages are crushed by misunderstandings' (39).

Makward (1986: 275) notes that Mariama Bâ is not the first African writer to treat the subject of marriage, and mixed marriages in particular, as a central concern. Two outstanding predecessors, according to Makward, are the Tunisian Albert Memmi and the Senegalese Sembène Ousmane; and an even earlier precursor is René Maran with his *Un Homme Pareil Aux Autres*, published in 1947. Memmi shows in his 1955 novel, *Agar* (translated as *The Strangers*: 1958), how enticing the Western ideal of the couple can be,

a notion which Bâ subscribes to, when she claims that family success depends on the harmony of the founding couple, and in turn, it is the grouping of all these successful and happy families that will constitute the Nation. In the novel *Agar*, the young Tunisian medical student falls in love with a blonde Alsatian chemistry student. They marry and, at the completion of his medical studies, travel to Tunisia where the protagonist has no doubt that they will settle and raise a family. Like Ousmane and Mireille in *Scarlet Song*, they are confronted with a number of cultural difficulties, for instance, the overwhelming weight of the family and the community on the young couple. Even the nameless leading male character does not seem quite prepared for this clash of cultural world views:

Once more I was aware how much I meant to them, how closely I belonged. For my father I was not only his only son, but a link in the great chain. I realized all the responsibility that he felt was mine, saw that his thought was to save me from betraying the family.

(translated and quoted by Makward, 1986: 275)

As in Ousmane's case, the protagonist is torn between two cultural worlds, and his dilemma lies in his wish to preserve both of these worlds: his adopted world, Marie's world on the one hand, and his people's world on the other. Traditional customs, once more, play an important part in causing cultural conflict: tradition wants the son, born to the couple, to bear his grandfather's name, Abraham, for the sake of continuity. Like Mireille, Marie cannot always reconcile the cultural and personal conflicts. These wavering conflicts eventually lead to her decision to return to her native France. Unlike Mireille, who loses her sanity, and, who becomes a woman who 'has burnt her bridges behind her' (*Scarlet Song*: 162), Marie can go back; she has not been abandoned by and has not abandoned her own family.

The anonymous protagonist's words in the closing chapter of the novel that it has been Marie's folly to think that he would be entirely hers, are applicable to Mireille, too. Yet, paradoxically, and unlike the protagonist's case, Ousmane becomes both the symbol and source of Mireille's destruction. The protagonist's pondering: 'I had been her betrayer, she my destroyer' (as translated and quoted by Makward, 1986: 276) is also applicable to Mireille's case: but, here, ironically Ousmane has become both her betrayer and destroyer. Yet, in a similar fashion to the anonymous protagonist, Mireille cannot live without Ousmane: life is unbearable without him, for she, too, is without country, relatives or friends.

Makward (1986: 277) remarks that Memmi does not make a decidedly negative statement about the outcome of mixed marriages. Even though the novel ends with a painful failure, Memmi seems more involved here in describing the fascination of a young African - a Tunisian Jew - with the pursuit of happiness in marriage according to Western norms and the harrowing contrasts between these norms and those prevalent in the traditional North African context. Like Makward, I am of the opinion too, that the failure in the union between Marie and the protagonist in Memmi's novel and between Ousmane and Mireille in *Scarlet Song*, is meant to emphasize the difficulties inherent in such marriages and the painful dilemma of cultural alienation. Therefore, *Agar* and *Scarlet Song* should not be interpreted as an expression of Memmi's, or Bâ's verdict regarding cross-cultural marriages.

As already argued, the concept of choice (as in *So Long a Letter*) features very strongly. Once more, Jean-Paul Sartre's viewpoint, (as has been discussed in Chapter Four), that

human beings are nothing other than what they make of themselves is of vital importance in *Scarlet Song*. This viewpoint is endorsed by Makward (1986: 275), when she comments that the notion that marriage is above all based on the choice and initial attraction of the two principal partners. This idea - introduced by Mariama Bâ in both her novels - is relatively new in the African context. The concept of choice is clearly expressed by Genevieve, a French woman, who lives with her husband in the same block of flats where Ousmane and Mireille live: 'Everyone has to take responsibility for their own choice' (88). Ousmane exemplifies this concept of choice when he claims:

One must take risks. Progress demands changing the way people think. Life requires taking risks ... I must live my own life! I must build my own future instead of letting others choose for me. (39)

Ousmane's words also reinforce another dominant issue (as has been quoted) that 'culture is an instrument of development' and that one must keep 'one's ways open' (47). Mireille, too, shares Ousmane's viewpoint when she writes: 'All individuals are compelled to live by their own experience' (41-2) and, 'I am turning my back on a protected past to face the unknown' (76). This is a choice which Mireille deliberately makes when she discards all the 'old assumptions' and all 'the so-called truths' (28-9). When Mireille declares that she is determined to preserve her own identity, the values and the truths that light her path, she, in a sense, also chooses to remain faithful to her own culture. But, in her innocence, she clearly does not realize what her embracing of the Islamic faith entails, when she writes naïvely to her parents: 'Our love has survived the test of time and distance' (75). And she clearly cannot anticipate that her winding path is beset 'by lurking dangers' (23, as has been quoted before) that will not stand the test of time. Both Ousmane and

Mireille's choices will, consequently, become a leap into the void, into an abyss.

The lines,

They had paved the way for every step which they were taking. They had nourished with dreams their long and patient wait for the moments which were now reality ... (63)

mark the second part of the novel. Hence the mother's, rather than the mother-in-law's 'shadow hovers ominously' over their marriage for she has set out to destroy it just as Nabou's mother destroys Aissatou's marriage. For a short period, Ousmane and Mireille have to live with the Gueye family. Education, as in the case of Aissatou (*So Long a Letter*) leads to a degree of liberation. Ousmane's application for an official subsidised house has been granted; the Gueye family finally moves into a council house in the Gibraltar district of Dakar. Upon their arrival in Dakar, Mireille has to share with her in-laws. This sharing becomes a 'trial which has left its after effects on both sides' (82). Education as theme, again, features prominently: Mireille is offered a post by the Ministry of Education which makes her eligible for an official flat. Mireille cannot move fast enough out of Yaye Khady's home and escape from her continual and annoying surveillance.

Mireille decorates the flat with furniture and original paintings which she has brought with her from France. Ironically, all these furnishings set up a lifestyle to which Ousmane has not been accustomed. In one room Mireille installs a desk and her collection of books, a silent testimony to learning. But, whereas education, previously, guaranteed a mutual interest, this display of books now only calls for Ousmane's amusement. The narrator

twice emphasizes that Ousmane 'appreciates' his environment. Notwithstanding Mireille's efforts to 'hold on to' (82) her man, the narrator directly asks: 'But, however agreeable the environment, is it enough on its own to keep a man at home?' (82). Soon religious and cultural conflicts raise their heads. Ousmane and Mireille have their first quarrel when Mireille refuses to attend a religious ceremony held by Djibril Gueye, and she insists that they rather visit the cinema. This conflict results in Ousmane attending the ceremony alone, and Mireille's going to bed, sulking. Djibril praises Ousmane for his presence, which 'signifies that [he has] remained firm in [his] Islamic faith, in spite of [his] white wife' (84).

Hence, more religious conflicts are to follow. Yaye Khady reports that 'the *toubab*' does not kneel down to pray, 'Ousmane, uncompromising, relentlessly pursue[s] Mireille to see that she carries out her religious duties correctly' (84). During their courtship, Mireille has agreed to all Ousmane's 'uncompromising' demands. 'She was not disheartened by the difficulties of their venture, which he laid relentlessly before her' (41). She even declares that the Islamic religion invokes 'no sacrifice' and that there will be 'no wrench' (41). Notwithstanding Mireille's earlier optimism, she now starts to feel the difficulties of this 'venture'. Conflicts arise due to Ousmane's insistence on her adhering to her new religion, which she previously merely regarded as 'simply the logical climax of a process' (41). And so the first rift in their relationship appears, a rift which very soon is to become a breach, which is growing deeper every day.

Contributing to this breach, is Yaye Khady's irritating habit of intruding on their privacy and Ousmane's siding with his mother: 'She feels frustrated. You must forgive her' (81).

Yaye Khady revels in her Sunday visits which have become a ritual. Her lack of thorough breeding and good manners, in Mireille's opinion - she forever spits her toothpicks on the carpet - leads to another cultural clash. Mireille's suggestion that Ousmane should 'teach her how to behave' (85) sparks off Ousmane's thundering: 'In my country children don't teach their parents how to behave' (85). The theme of cultural conflict is carried forward to their conceptions of education and good manners. Although Ousmane has fully espoused the European educational system in which he has been highly successful, he does not want to reject his African roots, which for him are symbolized by the tam-tam music and African music. Mireille wants them to be isolated to some extent from the wider community of Ousmane's family. 'She had grown up, from earliest childhood, in a world where one did not ask of others more than they were prepared to give' (87). Ousmane, on the other hand, and in stark contrast, wants all the advantages of comfortable Western style living, 'while enjoying a collective existence with his family and friends, who constantly invade the apartment' (Stringer, 1988: 39).

Stringer (1988: 37) further points out that the conflict which underlies all others and which is seen as the most fundamental difference between the traditional way of living in Africa and modern Western life is that between the community and the individual. In *Scarlet Song* Ousmane, as an individual, finds it impossible to live between two worlds. The tension in this novel is not within a fictional character, as Charles Sarvan (1988: 462) suggests, but arises from 'conflicting sympathies for Ousmane as an *African* and Mireille as a *woman* who suffers greatly and undeservedly'. Ousmane's marriage to Mireille is received as a misfortune, a reaction which he, a student in philosophy, does not examine, but ironically, accepts. And it is perhaps this unequivocal 'acceptance' of his misfortune

which serves as departure point for his 'inhuman' behaviour when he abandons Mireille. Sarvan cites Wole Soyinka, who once said that in as much as a tiger does not need to prove its tigritude, there is no necessity for Africans to proclaim and assert their negritude. In reality, this is self-evident. 'But Ousmane feels his marriage will call his credentials - as a Moslem [*sic*], a male, an African, into question' (Sarvan, 1988: 462).

Concurrent with this tension of being torn between two worlds, perceived to be mutually exclusive, is the primary role that the community plays in educating its members in traditional African society. Stringer (1988: 37) emphasizes that to remain part of it, one must accept its norms without questioning them. And as has been pointed out earlier, to choose a wife outside of the community is an 'act of treason'. In exchange for accepting the norms of the community, the 'law of blood' (112), the community cares for and protects its members and gives them spiritual and cultural identity. Mireille's questioning of her mother-in-law's manners, is, in her husband's eyes, an act of treason which Ousmane will not tolerate.

Furthering the theme of marriage, intertwined as it is with that of cultural conflict, Ousmane is praised for his courage by his friends, for he has 'retained the reactions of a black man', and, what is more, is not 'letting himself to be dictated or assimilated' (86). They energetically express their approval that a 'black man who marries a *Toubab*, and keeps up with his father, mother, family and friends, is something of a miracle' (86). Ousmane's voice is the only one that counts, in a similar fashion to their courtship, when he reflects: 'I will never split myself apart for you. I will never lose my identity for you!' (39). Mireille, on the other hand, suffers from the attacks made on mixed marriages, as

if she has been the culprit responsible for it: 'A woman's only a woman, tall or short, black or white' (86). As no subject is taboo, Mireille feels that she is being treated with less consideration than a black woman. She feels reduced to an object, an object that has been othered. In addition, the Wolof dialect also contributes to the breach in their relationship. Wolof is not an easy language, and Mireille does not make much progress in her studying of it. The narrator, in explication of Mireille's marital dilemmas, points out that she is

undergoing two difficult apprenticeships: that of married life and that of a black man's wife in Africa ... She felt as though they wanted to bury her alive and resurrect her as another woman who would have nothing in common with her except her physical appearance. (99)

In making it clear that she sees things differently from the people around her, Mireille in fact contributes to the cultural conflict and breach between Ousmane and herself. Mireille's ability to engage in discussion - which once attracted Ousmane - 'is [now] seen as the Western urge to argue and dissect; her attempt to keep a clean and pleasing home seems obsessive and fastidious' (Sarvan, 1988: 463). This tug of war leads to more cultural clashes: 'Ousmane did not change. His habits, deeply rooted in his childhood, remained immovable For Ousmane, any compromise was synonymous with surrender' (99). Rejecting his cousin's maxim that 'married life is based on tolerance and a human approach' (99) Ousmane demands more and more from Mireille, without compromising himself: all she needs, according to him, is 'a little understanding and tolerance' and to 'show a bit of good will' (87). As for Mireille, she takes refuge in tears, and in her bedroom.

Language is 'ideologically and culturally bound', since 'it both expresses and conceals our

realities' (Busia, as has been quoted in Chapter Four). Whereas language in Ramatoulaye's case truly expresses and liberates, it enslaves Mireille and exposes her reality, which is one of abandonment. Her hitherto speaking voice, has now become a silenced voice, an 'obstinate silence' (86) which contributes to her being othered.

Mireille's 'watching from the sideline' (86) further contributes to the rift that separates her from her husband, the rift of cultural heritage. Ousmane wants Mireille to share the emotions that his memories bring back of his childhood. But, as has been pointed out earlier, 'their childhoods have nothing in common' (21). Mireille prefers to withdraw, to watch from the sideline, without following Ousmane. Ousmane 'bitterly survey[s] the lack of understanding that separated them: an ocean' (92). And as has been discussed, since neither Ousmane or Mireille can 'swim' - they can only 'paddle' - they are both ill-equipped and unable to cross this 'ocean' of cultural differences.

Ousmane is drawn by his past, by his nature and he is eager 'to assume with fervour his own cultural heritage, folktales ... Proverbs ... Legends ? ' (92). He starts wishing for 'an echo of [his] own voice' (93); to find 'a kindred soul, tormented by the same thirst', to find 'a partner, prepared to make the same fantastic journey through life' (93). Ousmane has been willing to study his wife's culture, her rich past, and he understands his own past and cultural heritage. Yet, Mireille does not make the same effort. Her lack of sympathy grows worse:

She was inflexible, indignantly, condemning behaviour which she qualified as "lack of breeding", "impertinence", "lack of consideration" or "vulgarity", according to the circumstances. (93)

And, 'her all-or-nothing attitude irritated him' (93).

When Mireille falls pregnant, she clings to the miracle 'a life within a life' to restore the harmony of their home. She makes another sincere and affectionate effort to reduce the many differences that now separate her from Ousmane. Following Rosalie's advice, she tries to modify her own behaviour with regard to her in-laws: 'But habit prevails' (97) and because 'Ousmane makes no attempt to hide his contempt for his wife's efforts at adaptation', her efforts are doomed (97). Mireille cannot accept the demands of a society that is 'completely orientated towards outward appearances, in search of status and in which her husband seems remarkably at ease' (98). In *So Long a Letter* Ramatoulaye is also troubled by the role materialism plays, particularly at her husband's funeral. Traditionally, people gave in kind. In *Scarlet Song*, money is shown to have the power to silence consciences. When Ousmane starts to neglect Mireille, he provides meals and distributes banknotes from Mireille's savings account to Ouleymatou's people to stifle any ill-will. 'Money silenced the voice of ... conscience' (120). As Mariama Bâ puts it, Mother Fatim, spokeswoman for Ouleymatou's family, has no wish to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs.

Sometimes, however, as Stringer (1988: 38) points out, 'the traditional giving which is honourable for both the giver and receiver is misunderstood by those who are not in touch with African ways'. Such is the case of Mireille, who, although she is right in her criticism of the 'empty ostentation often associated with the exchange of money' (Stringer, 1988: 38) does not understand that constant giving is a deeply rooted custom in African society and must be respected by those who wish to be integrated. Mireille, being a foreigner, does not understand this custom. This lack of understanding further contributes to the lack of harmony in her own home.

Part Three of the novel is nutshellled by the axioms: '[Marriage], like friendship rests on two feet. One foot doesn't hold out for long' (103) and the real concept of marriage, already quoted and as it is expressed by Lamine at the end of Part Two, is that, 'Married life is based on tolerance and a human approach' (99). Lamine argues:

Difficulties arise from dissimilarities in personality, from decisions that have to be made, from the different interpretations that each partner gives to the word "happiness". (99)

These maxims epitomize Mariama Bâ's viewpoint on marriage which, in turn, introduces the second interrelated theme of marriage and polygamy in *Scarlet Song*. Cham's argument that the social disease, abandonment - which stems from a polygamous marriage - is predominantly a female condition (as has been pointed out in Chapter Four), serves to illuminate Mireille's dilemma. Ousmane and Mireille's mutual understanding, prior to their marriage, used to be 'perfect'. Yet, as already seen, this mutual understanding has become weakened and is still further undermined by their cultural conflicts. Mireille complains: 'We saw everything through the same eyes before we were married But now we seem to be divided over everything' (91).

Mariama Bâ attempts to point out that the marriage between Ousmane and Mireille is a failure not only because of Ouleymatou's presence. However, when Ousmane marries Ouleymatou, the unity of the sacred marriage is distorted, just as is the case with Nabou and Binetou in *So Long a Letter*. This notion of unity echoes Cham's viewpoint when she argues (as has been discussed in Chapter Four) that the introduction of a third partner in marriage gradually opens or enlarges the emotional/sexual circle that originally binds two partners. Ironically, Ousmane, who opens the circle when he marries Ouleymatou and who once admired his father for having resisted the temptation to take more wives, is

unable to 'give equally of himself' (7) in his polygamous marriage.

Mireille's complaint of the lack of unity in their viewpoints reinforces Lamine's viewpoint on marriage as the above excerpt clearly illustrates: difficulties arise from the different interpretations each partner gives to the word happiness. As has been pointed out, Ousmane's concept of happiness changes drastically towards the end of the novel. His self-scrutiny recalls that he has been drawn to Mireille by the need to assert himself, to rise intellectually and socially, to assert his manhood: she is no longer the 'goal of his desire' (147). Once 'the European woman's qualities, her spellbinding beauty, the attraction of the unknown, a test for originality ... all these strengthened the links that bound us!' (123) attracted Ousmane. He admits to himself that one dreams of something: 'One fights to obtain it. One sacrifices everything for it, and once you possess it, it is no longer enough' (127). Ousmane has been excited by the difficulty of the enterprise of winning Mireille's love. But once he reaches his goal, he feels the 'immense void that separates him from Mireille' (136). In describing Mireille in terms of a goal, Ousmane reduces Mireille to a mere object, something that he desperately wanted to conquer and to possess in his youth. Having succeeded in doing that, his Islamic background asserts itself and he abandons her like an object, a thing. It is exactly this dilemma of women that Bâ indicts in *Scarlet Song* when she emphasizes the human approach of tolerance to marriage, just as she had highlighted the entitlement to equality in *So Long a Letter*.

Ironically and sadly, Ousmane seems to have lost his human approach. So too, is Ouleymatou depicted as a woman who shows no humanity when she deliberately sets out to destroy Mireille's happiness. When she ponders, 'Ousmane has become a real man'

(105) there is some poignant irony in her remark. Though Ousmane has become a man, he has, concurrently with this so-called manhood, lost his character traits of honesty, honour, innocence, sense of duty, love, reliability, and most important, his humanity. Ouleymatou, nevertheless, makes her first move in order to win Ousmane's love: she dismisses her numerous suitors. In her gambit her trump card entails her willingness to share in a polygamous marriage: 'She was not averse to sharing. Sharing a man was the common lot of women in her circle and the idea of finding a man for herself alone had never crossed her mind' (106).

Ouleymatou's traditional viewpoint that 'true love is the gift of oneself to the beloved, but it is also the gift of oneself to the beloved's parents and friends' (107) is integral in her appeal and is presented in stark contrast to Mireille's concept of sharing (as has been discussed). She believes that one does not ask of others more than they are prepared to give. Ouleymatou's brother perceives this different viewpoint when he remarks, 'A white woman doesn't share her man' (115). Yet Ouleymatou's trump card fits in well with the traditional African society which subscribes to the notion of a Muslim patriarchal structure. This structure entitles each Muslim man to marry four wives as pointed out in *Scarlet Song* (127): 'Mireille is a Muslim She knows that Ousmane has a right to four wives'. Somewhat ironically, material gain certainly plays no small part in Ouleymatou's choice, just as it did with Binetou in *So Long a Letter*.

Ouleymatou is able to use Yaye Khady as a means of getting Ousmane back. Ouleymatou also works out a detailed scheme to seduce Ousmane, without showing the slightest sympathy for Mireille's feelings. The 'powers of Eve's seduction' finally work (112) their

magic and Ousmane's resistance falls to pieces. The narrator's comment, 'What could Mireille do against the law of blood?' (112) serves to illustrate the impact of cultural heritage on the lives of Ousmane and Mireille. Mireille becomes the victim, and Ousmane the prey. Ousmane justifies his marriage to Ouleymatou by claiming that the 'force of beliefs' cannot be escaped: 'The weight of the past is a determining factor. I can't manage to find myself in Mireille. There's something I'm craving for that she can't give' (139), and, 'We have the same time-honoured terms of reference' (139) when he refers to Ouleymatou.

In addition, Ousmane Gueye, 'the uncompromising disciple' of 'Negritude', who used to advise his peers to 'open up', has now been turning on himself, with the excuse of not betraying 'his roots!' (135). When Ousmane returns to Usine Niari Talli - this poor district represents the village in terms of communal values - he feels he has rediscovered Africa: 'This is my return to my roots' (103). Henceforth Ousmane calls his cousin Lamine, who also married a white woman, Pierrette, a *Toubab* who has lost his African soul (as has been touched on earlier). So too, does Ousmane ponder the two types of 'cross-breeding' which either impoverish or enrich Africa, depending on whether the African man has asserted himself or not. Ousmane is one of those African men who asserts his Negritude when he asks: 'How is it possible to mingle values of different content and expression, that are often conflicting, contradictory, even, frequently at variance with each other?' (149). Ironically, Ousmane himself, advocated such 'an incompatible mixture' (149) when he married Mireille.

Given this cultural context, Ousmane calls himself one of Africa's 'enlightened sons' (149)

who revels in Ouleymatou. He calls her 'the symbol of [his] double life. Symbol of the black woman, whom he had to emancipate; symbol of Africa' (149). In his mind he confuses Ouleymatou with Africa, 'an African which has to be restored to its prerogatives, to be helped to evolve!' (150). Ousmane views himself as the prophet of the 'word made truth', the 'messiah, providing nourishment for body and soul' (150). As in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ indicts the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, whom man confuses with Mother Africa (as has been quoted in Chapter Four). And once more, she insists that 'room must be made for women', thus implying that Ousmane sees Ouleymatou as an object who does not assert herself, and who needs Ousmane as her saviour to provide this redemption. As for Mireille, who is being armed by centuries of civilization, she can survive, because of her iron will. As in the case where Ousmane simply assumed that Mireille has adopted his principles, he makes another fatal judgement error when he believes that she will 'survive' his abandonment: 'the white woman must go' (150).

Sarvan (1988: 463) comments that Ousmane, in marrying Ouleymatou, sees himself as a cultural prodigal returning home, going back to his roots. But as Sarvan further points out, this return to Africa is accompanied by deceit, cruelty, and selfishness. Mireille has brought her savings from France, and Ousmane lavishes them on Ouleymatou. Sarvan therefore observes that in Mireille we see a woman in one of the most vulnerable of situations: in a foreign country, having given up her roots, thrown into a culture that expresses considerable rejection and contempt; abandoned by her husband, by her parents and their society. There are no avenues of retreat, no paths of escape for her. As Sarvan (1988: 463) puts it: 'it is exploitation at its unkindest'.

This exploitation has not passed unnoticed by Lamine. His concern about Ousmane's morality is in pointed contrast to the inhabitants of Usine Niari Talli: 'A suitor's moral qualities carry little weight in people's judgements, money alone [is] at the heart of their raptures over Ouleymatou, merchandise that [has] gone to the highest bidder!' (134-35). Lamine argues that Ousmane cannot combine two conceptions of life. He feels that Ousmane has to make a choice; he wants happiness without making any sacrifices: 'You won't make any concessions while demanding concessions from others' (98-99). So too, does Lamine point out that Ousmane has made Mireille subject to suffering when he asks 'what are you doing to that girl?' (99). He subsequently suggests that Ousmane should change: 'You will see where you are in the wrong. That is what African wisdom advises' (99).

Yet Ousmane does not change. He prefers to believe that 'the profound differences which exist between the African and European ways of life endanger the survival of mixed marriages' (Stringer, 1988: 39). He attributes the failure of his own marriage to the cultural heritage which simply reclaims its due. He has finally realized that 'the one and only' is not up 'to the standard of her predecessors' (158). But Mariama Bâ, as has been pointed out earlier, does not approve of this viewpoint. She suggests that a fine balance is necessary between perceived weaknesses and strengths. This balance, in turn, ensures self-knowledge, which leads to self-respect and respect for others. As has been seen, she advocates the human approach in dealing with other human beings.

This notion of humanity is furthered by Ali when he asks if one should 'despair of mankind' (135). He ponders Ousmane's abuse of words and phrases which have no value

when put into practice. Ali further remarks with revulsion that Ousmane is no longer using his heart or reason, for he is isolating Mireille by refusing her his regular presence. He actually abuses her by making 'use of her property in the most despicable manner' and treating her as a 'slave' (136). Ali's accusation that Ousmane has lost sight of all humanity is expressed in his invocation of the wrath of Allah : 'You seem to have lost every virtue. You are beyond the pale of the religious morality that your father taught. Beware of the avenging hand of God' (136). These words are an echo of Boly's words when he warned: 'Africa can be cruel in her jealousy. So look out!' (39, as has already been quoted). Ali finally comes to the conclusion that his friend is 'lost to honour' (137). Mariama Bâ, in condemning this behaviour, touches on the perversion of polygamy when Ali points out to Ousmane that he abuses Mireille. This abuse is also one of the social injustices that Bâ indicts, because it leads to immense suffering and abandonment for Mireille.

Ousmane only cares about his own happiness when he debates his position. He knows that his conscience is 'strong enough to fight to the end, to win more victories' (112). But Ousmane no longer wants to walk the 'smart, straight road' (as pointed out by his father). He chooses to live, when he exclaims: 'Must I give up living ... ? Must I drag my days instead of living?' (136). Paradoxically, Ousmane, in his choice of living, denies Mireille the opportunity to live and confines her to dragging her days. She is depicted as crushed by loneliness, anxiety and jealousy. She sheds many tears and suffers immensely: 'She tried to keep her suffering in harness throughout her lonely days and nights. She drag[s] herself from one place to another, and she clings on with iron determination not to break down' (162). She decides to stay in Dakar for the sake of her child. At least 'she would be living, upheld by an ideal that did not sink to its knees' (162). Unlike Ousmane's conscience that

'sunk forever into the sea' (150), Mireille's ideal remains pure.

Notwithstanding Mireille and Ousmane's marital predicament, the marriage of two other cross-cultural couples, Lamine and Pierrette, and Ali and Rosalie, are used by the author to provide examples of a reconciliation between two different cultures. The uniting message in Bâ's novels seems to be 'that couples should stick to their partners in spite of the attractions outside the monogamous marriage' (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991: 572), and that they should use their hearts and reasons in exercising a human approach to marriage. This is exactly what these two couples succeed in doing. Lamine, for example, has an open mind. His negritude does 'not sit heavily on him' (98). Unlike Ousmane, he simplifies his love by dissociating himself from African circles and adopting Western values. He neither involves Pierrette in his obligatory family visits, nor does he make uncompromising demands. He has made a choice by making human concessions.

So too, do Ali and Rosalie share a happy relationship. Even Yaye Khady approves of Rosalie, in spite of the fact that she is a *Toubab*, when she comments that Rosalie shows 'refinement', 'adaptability' and respect for tradition and her in-laws (96). As if in acknowledgement, Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991: 571) remarks that 'in spite of the pathos Mariama Bâ is able to build around the failure of intercultural marriages, the redeeming streak is located in the success stories of the marriages of Ali-Rosalie and Lamine-Pierrette'. Ali and Rosalie, Lamine and Pierrette epitomize tolerance, love and mercy. They have indeed succeeded in bridging the cultural divide through cultural compromise, personal amelioration and a human approach to marriage, as the *Qur'an* ordains.

The Francophone writer Sembène Ousmane also portrays a successful mixed marriage, that of Oumar Faye and Isabelle in his second novel, *O Pays, Mon Beau Peuple* (1957). Oumar, who fought in World War II in Europe on the side of the French, returns home to his native Casamance, in southern Senegal, with his French wife, Isabelle. Makward (1986: 277) points out that, unlike Memmi's protagonist in *Agar*, Oumar Faye is a strong-willed young man who has set goals for himself and knows what to do to realize them. 'He wants to work with his people to end their economic exploitation by the white colonials who have taken advantage of their lack of organization and their experience' (Makward, 1986: 277). According to Makward, Oumar, (unlike the traditionalist Ousmane) is a pragmatist. As in the case of Lamine and Ali, Oumar, too, knows which practical choices to make, and what should be retained from one's traditions and what should be borrowed from European culture and technology. Oumar is not torn between two cultures, and his wife, Isabelle, as Makward (1986: 277) points out, seems well prepared to back him up and help him achieve his goals:

Naturally, there is at first a clash between the young couple and Oumar's family, but these difficulties are easily overcome, for Oumar and Isabelle agree totally in pursuing an independent course without necessarily cutting themselves off from Oumar's family and the community at large.

In pointed contrast to Bâ's character Ousmane, Oumar's alienation does not lie in cultural clashes. Oumar and Isabelle's marriage, like the marriages of Lamine-Pierrette and Ali-Rosalie expresses the notion that the cultural divide can be overcome through cultural and human compromise. However, Makward (1986: 277) emphasizes the fact that the major issue in Ousmane's novel is highlighted in the bigotry and fear of the white colonials who feel threatened by Oumar, the messenger who advocates a new order. Oumar is eliminated

by the colonials in the end, but the courage and spirit of resistance that he symbolizes will forever remain vividly in the hearts of those he loves, and of the community.

While both Albert Memmi and Sembène Ousmane treat 'the couple as a central and exalting entity' (Makward, 1986: 278), Mariama Bâ is, as has been noted earlier, one of the first female African writers who stresses the concept of choice in the younger generation's desire to break away from age-old marriage customs. Buchi Emecheta voices the same concerns in *Second-Class Citizen* (1974; 1982). This desire to adopt a more modern approach to marriage, based on 'free mutual choice and the equality of the two partners' (Makward, 1986: 278) is encapsulated in the treatment of the theme of marriage in both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*.

Concomitant with the theme of marriage are the combined themes of motherhood and sisterhood which feature very prominently in *Scarlet Song*. Unlike *So Long a Letter* which constitutes a break with the stereotyping of mothers (exemplified by Ramatoulaye), the mothers featured in *Scarlet Song* subscribe to the patriarchal Muslim society which regards the woman as inferior to the man. Yaye Khady, Mother Fatim and Mother Ngom (Ouleymatou's mother) are 'prisoners of canons of tradition', considered by Mariama Bâ 'to be anachronistic and inimical to socio-economic transformation' (Cham, 1987: 94). Reinforcing this notion, Mernissi (1977: 69) comments that 'the close link between mother and son is probably the key factor in the dynamics of Muslim marriage'. This close link is typified by the opening paragraphs in *Scarlet Song*: 'Their frequent intimate conversations had woven an understanding between mother and son that made both happy' (8).

When Yaye Khady learns of the secret marriage between Ousmane and the white girl, Mireille, in Paris, she decides to fight this marriage. Her attitude is antagonistic, and she becomes more intense and vicious as the material gains she anticipates from Ousmane's marriage elude her more and more. Mernissi's translated citation (1975: 71) of Westermarck's proverb with regard to the power of elderly women over the lives of young people is quite fitting in the social context of *Scarlet Song*:

What Satan takes a year to do
Is done by the old hag within the hour.

Yaye Khady's ominous words: 'I have work to do ... '(67) pose a dangerous threat to the marriage of Ousmane and Mireille because she will, by whatever means necessary, 'dislodge' Mireille (97).

Several character traits of Yaye Khady are described by the narrator even prior to Ousmane and Mireille's marriage. Ousmane remarks that Yaye Khady will fight such a marriage 'tenaciously', 'she will fight ... to her last breath' (38). She is depicted as 'possessive' in reflection of Mernissi's comment (1977: 69) that in the Muslim society, marriage is a ritual by which the mother's claim on the son is strengthened. When Ousmane remarks that he will build his own future, Boly replies: 'That 'll be difficult ... Difficult with a mother like yours!' (39). Upon seeing the photograph of Mireille, Yaye Khady teases, 'Put that she-devil ... in a frame, or I won't answer for her presence' (40). Viewed metaphorically, Mireille is in the end 'put in a frame' when she loses her sanity and, as already noted, is sent to a lunatic asylum in France.

Ousmane's mother never accepts Mireille as a human being, as another woman's loved and

cared for daughter: 'Not for one moment did Yaye Khady spare a thought for the other mother who, for all that she was white, had also given birth, loved and hoped She was racked with suffering too' (74). Though Yaye Khady declares that she has no dreams of crushing anyone else's daughter, this is exactly what she sets out to do. Yaye Khady, like Ousmane in the end, seems to be 'lost to honour' and Ali's 'despair of mankind' (135) is indeed applicable to Yaye Khady's inhuman behaviour. She calls Mireille 'the daughter of the devil' (66), and as quoted above, a 'she-devil'. To Yaye Khady, Mireille is not a human person, but a bewitching spirit. As Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991: 462) remarks: 'notions of honesty, justice and compassion do not enter into her treatment of Mireille. Foreigners, simply because they are foreigners, can be treated differently'.

Once more, the cultural framework serves as an informing factor with regard to the mother and daughter-in-law relationships. Mireille and her mother, though part of different patriarchal societies, are equally powerless and match the powerlessness of the African female within her own home and within her husband's family. Each suffers her own world of pain and loneliness. Mireille's mother never stands her ground:

Jean de la Vallée, who was of a domineering character, had doubtless ... noticed the principle of obedience His bullying instincts must have foreseen a docile victim in this shy girl (77)

As already intimated, Mrs de la Vallée is depicted as 'voiceless' when Mireille is sent back to France. She has to subscribe to her husband's decisions. Given this context, Mrs de la Vallée, unlike Ramatoulaye, is unable to assert and to transcend her motherhood and selfhood. Whenever she is confronted by a crisis, she merely resorts to tears or collapses. Being trapped in her own marriage, she accepts and echoes everything her husband says.

Although Mrs de la Vallée, as a mother, shares her child's despair and although she appreciates Mireille's dreadful dilemma: 'She was moved by the anxiety of her cry from afar' (78), her husband's furious outrage diminishes all reconciliation. In being the submissive, though isolated, wife, she denies Mireille the chance to turn to her in a period of crisis.

Mireille too, finds herself in an isolated situation. For Yaye Khady, she is:

a cultural outcast, an intruder and an usurper of what she considers her cultural privileges and material payoffs ... [Yaye Khady] is driven by a profit motive, so that the caste, racial or cultural rationalization of her antagonistic attitude becomes merely a mask

(Cham, 1987: 96)

Mireille deprives Yaye Khady of one of the supreme moments of life for her: 'one of the high points of a woman's life is the choice of her daughter-in-law' (73) and all that it entails on both a social and material level. Cham rightly remarks (1987: 96): 'For these reasons she decides to fight the marriage, ostensibly to save Ousmane from cultural insanity, but really to promote her own self-interest'. Ironically, Yaye Khady, in saving Ousmane from cultural insanity, contributes to Mireille's losing her sanity. Unlike Mireille's mother, Yaye Khady features as a strong, matriarchal figure in a patriarchal Muslim society, who knows exactly what she wants and what her rights as mother-in-law entail.

Mireille is not Yaye Khady's idea of a daughter-in-law and so Yaye Khady bears numerous grievances. An African daughter-in-law would act 'accordingly to unspoken and undisputed principles' (72). Within this cultural framework, as Mernissi (1975: 75) points out, the wife's submission to the mother-in-law is required. Yaye Khady reinforces this

notion when she complains that the mother-in-law should be in the position to 'give her orders, [to] supervise, [to] make her demands' (72). Yaye Khady believes that 'a white woman does not enrich a family Has anyone ever seen a white woman pounding millet or fetching buckets of water?' (73). In the traditional Muslim community, according to Memissi (1975: 76), it is the 'son's duty to give his mother whatever he gets for his wife'. Yaye Khady insists on these rights of the mother-in-law when she says: '[The mother-in-law] appropriates the greater part of her son's earnings' (72). Yaye Khady is not exposed to other cultures. 'She is sceptical of the desirability of the mixed marriage in her own family and works toward its downfall without perhaps envisaging the extent of the consequent tragic dimensions' (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991: 571) when she exclaims: 'This stranger won't easily eat up the fruit of my labours!' (74).

With the introduction of Ouleymatou, a new and more decisive dimension is added to Yaye Khady's scheme. Ouleymatou is much sought after by Yaye Khady. She is delighted to hear that her son 'has sown his seed in our daughter Ouleymatou' (126). Her reaction is: 'Any African woman would show respect and consideration for me ... the marriage will make reparation for the wrong done by [Ousmane]' (126). Whereas the baptism of Gorgui (Ousmane and Mireille's son) is a brief, static matter, that of Ousmane's son with Ouleymatou is a colourful, extravagant ceremony, marked by the exchange of gifts. Yaye Khady has gained in respect. She is the focal point of the gathering: 'She was returning to her old neighbourhood as one enters a conquered territory' (130). Yaye Khady exults. So too does Ouleymatou's mother, Mother Ngom. She has been encouraging Ouleymatou to help Yaye Khady by doing Djibril's washing: 'The mother's advice reinforced the daughter's attentions' (107).

Another daughter whose attentions are more sincere is Soukeyna, the elder of Yaye Khady's two daughters. She exemplifies humanity in her treatment of Mireille: she has adopted Mireille as a sister and a friend. Mireille and Soukeyna get on extremely well. In a similar fashion to *So Long a Letter* the virtues of friendship are extolled by the narrator:

Friendship has a more constant code of behaviour than that of love. Friendship can be stronger than the affection born of blood-ties. A brother and sister are not necessarily friends. Time does not leave its mark on friendship. Love can become exhausted by crossing stormy waters, and rarely emerges unscathed from such trials. (152)

In spite of Yaye Khady's disapproval, Soukeyna spends her weekends at Mireille's flat. She acts as translator for Mireille when she has difficulties with the Wolof language, and she enjoys teaching Mireille how to prepare African dishes. Soukeyna dares to confront her mother on behalf of the other mother:

By your selfishness you're drawing Ousmane to eventual disaster; and simultaneously, you're killing another woman's daughter You reject her without even knowing her. Why? Because she's white? (153)

Soukeyna's accusation that her mother is a racist is echoed by Ali when he calls Ousmane a racist who reproaches his wife because of 'her colour' (138). In a similar fashion to Aissatou supporting Ramatoulaye, Soukeyna's support helps Mireille to hold out. Ramatoulaye's words in *So Long a Letter* (15) also apply to Mireille and Soukeyna's friendship. Nothing differentiated them, apart from 'specific racial features': '[They] were true sisters', although not destined for the same mission of emancipation. Mariama Bâ's message is clear: despite racial differences, whatever women and men's roots and origins, the notion of unity within a cultural framework of diversity is possible. Soukeyna's heart is filled with compassion for Mireille. Though she knows the source of Mireille's misery, her lips remain sealed. Finally, Soukeyna feels an irresistible urge to come to her friend's

'rescue' (153). Yet the anonymous letter she writes to Mireille to inform her of her co-wife does not 'rescue' Mireille, nor does it liberate her.

Contrary to intention, Soukeyna's letter, coupled with Ousmane's old love-letters, precipitates Mireille's madness: 'Promises deliberately violated turned into hideous serpents that twined around her' (163). As noted earlier, she kills her son, her last hope and symbol of love by pouring poisonous liquid down his throat. At the sight of the letters, 'taunting her with betrayed hopes', the last traces of lucidity that hang 'by a slender thread from her consciousness' are destroyed (164). In poignant contrast to Ramatoulaye, who, finally makes a successful journey to selfhood through motherhood, and sisterhood, Mireille's journey is from an '*embraced wifehood*' to an estranged wife and '*motherhood*'. Unlike Ramatoulaye, who succeeds in regaining her voice, in writing herself back into the text, in writing her own story and 'herstory', Mireille's voice is silenced as sanity deserts her.

In Ousmane's final confrontation with Mireille as a 'madwoman', 'a light of humanity finally pierce[s] the thick darkness' (165). Paradoxically, when Mireille loses her senses, Ousmane comes to his senses. He experiences a feeling of nausea and self-disgust flooding over him:

It was he who had been mad and had contained Mireille. Only madness could explain his blindness and his actions. If carried to extremes, so that it tramples pity and compassion underfoot, then commitment goes beyond the bounds of reason. (165)

Ousmane finally recalls the character traits his father taught him, a generous heart, pity and charity. Ali's warning that Ousmane has travelled beyond the religious morality that

his father taught him is echoed and confirmed. In Ousmane's premonition of death there is no time to apologise to Mireille. His mother's prophetic words that he 'will make reparation for the wrong done' (126) will not be realized. He cannot undo what he has done to Mireille in having driven her to insanity. The prefacing Wolof proverb succinctly captures the essence of the tragedy of Ousmane and Mireille, whose slide toward mutual destruction is narrated in the novel and is ironically, prefigured in the maxim: 'Souls which today make decisive choices tomorrow will be repudiated' (151).

The oxymoron encapsulated in the title to this novel: 'A *scarlet song* welled up from Ousmane's wounds, the *scarlet song* of lost hopes' (166), is testimony to the dual perspective. The word *scarlet* signifies the colour red; red blood is literally welling up from Ousmane's wounds. But the colour *scarlet* also denotes a person's morality. Ousmane shows no conduct of honour. He has in fact, been 'lost to honour'. Although Ousmane finally shows growth towards maturity and humanity, the *song* becomes a dirge, a lamentation of passing life, an elegy. It is a *song* of lost hopes, of 'wounds' Ousmane has inflicted on Mireille, and she on him and he on himself. But the *song* also serves to define the epiphany achievable through cultural compromise coupled with humanity.

Although the narrative ends on a tragic, elegiac note, and although Mireille's silenced voice typifies her insanity, the reader is not subject to despair. The ideological nexus upon which the novel turns is signified by the Wolof proverb: '*Nit, nit, modi garabam!* Man, man is his own remedy!' (165). Mariama Bâ, in accordance with the Muslim theocracy, advocates this notion of redemption that is embedded in the spiritual humanity of men and women. Fatna Ait Sabbah (translated and quoted by Makward 1986: 280)

subscribes to this notion of humanity when she says:

I believe in human beings as capable of making and remaking their history, and I therefore, believe that it is possible for men and women living in Muslim societies to change the course of history, *to live better, to love better.*

Finally, in maintaining one's humanity, in achieving self-knowledge which leads to self-respect and respect for others, in living better and loving better, the problematic issues of how to overcome a dehumanized world and how to bridge the cultural divide come back to the proverb, quoted above: 'Man, man is his own remedy ...' (165).

CHAPTER 6

A THEMATIC APPROACH TO SELECTED TEXTS BY NAWAL EL-SAADAWI

In the preceding two chapters an analysis of the literature of Mariama Bâ, firmly rooted in an African context, has served to highlight the role of Muslim women in African societies. Bâ's attempt to move forward and to move 'beyond' the veil, through the speaking voice did, however, not last long. Too soon this 'female visionary', as Cham (1987: 101) aptly calls her, left this world 'after writing only one long letter and singing a beautiful song for all'. Nonetheless, the legacy she has left in terms of her concern for the status of Muslim women in Africa lives on in her deep concern for education, marriage and sisterhood.

Moreover, notwithstanding Bâ's early and untimely death, attempts to talk, and to write back continue most powerfully in the works of that more radical Muslim author Nawal El-Saadawi, Egyptian feminist writer, physician and social critic. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995: 1) claims that no Arab woman in the Middle East inspires as much emotion as Nawal El-Saadawi, and that no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of El-Saadawi. Although the focus of this study is not reader response (emotive or otherwise), El-Saadawi's violation of 'sacred enclosures' such as challenging patriarchal hegemony, interpreting religious texts from a feminist point of view and subverting traditional Muslim structures is of central concern to a thesis which examines the way in which Muslim women 'write back' - as will become more and more obvious in the ensuing discussion.

A survey of selected texts by El-Saadawi serves to demonstrate how the works of this other Muslim writer corroborate and expand on (albeit coincidentally) the trends voiced in the discussion of the two texts by Mariama Bâ. The texts chosen for discussion in

Chapter Six - *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1958; 1988), *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1983; 1986), *God dies by the Nile* (1974; 1985), *Woman at Point Zero* (1975; 1983) and *The Innocence of the Devil* (1992; 1994) - follow one another thematically, in an attempt to show how the themes, which are voiced by Bâ and which are explored in some depth in the discussion of the texts of Bâ in Chapters Four and Five, are extended or developed more fully in the hands of a fellow Muslim woman writer. In fact, the argument in this chapter attempts to situate El-Saadawi at the centre of the debate on Muslim women by showing how the Arabo-Islamic voice is seminal to an interpretation of the role of Muslim women in Africa.

Integral to the Arabo-Islamic voice is its strident appeal on behalf of Muslim women everywhere. This universal female cry, from beyond the veil (as already noted in the discussion of *So Long a Letter* in Chapter Four) and the predicament of the Muslim woman are issues which are very dear to Nawal El-Saadawi and therefore feature very prominently in her writings. Once again, the implications of this cry - personal, social, psychological, cultural, political, economic and religious - occur, in a similar fashion to Mariama Bâ, in the texts of Nawal El-Saadawi. It must be understood, however, that such concerns do not suggest a single 'universality' or truth in terms of content or approach. When El-Saadawi writes, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 18) points out, she does not speak for all Muslim women or even for all Arab women:

Hers is one voice. That does not mean that on a certain level of generality some of her fictional situations do not speak *about* all Arab women, indeed, potentially about all women. Yet El-Saadawi's texts are always firmly grounded and have as their first referents the realities of the condition of Arab women (and men, of course, in the process) in her own society.

This suggests a *journalisme vérité* approach comparable to Bâ.

But, by something of a contrast to Bâ's texts, those of El-Saadawi's seem to reveal a more concentrated concern for religion. For example, El-Saadawi's citations from the *Hadith* remind the reader that the Saadawian literary universe is Middle Eastern and that these references are inspired by the Arabo-Islamic tradition, rather than the Afro-Islamic one. In fact, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 202) points out, it is difficult to think of a woman writer on the contemporary Arabic literary scene who has exploited the revered Arabo-Islamic textual tradition as thoroughly as El-Saadawi has. El-Saadawi does not hesitate to criticize the predominantly male patriarchal system and tradition of the Arabo-Islamic theocratic universe and to turn it intertextually upside down. For this reason, the survey of El-Saadawi's selected texts is particularly useful in bringing the argument of this thesis to a closure in that these texts are more obviously embedded in the Islamic theocracy outlined in Chapters One and Two than those of Mariama Bâ.

Prior to 1970, El-Saadawi wrote Arabic novels and short stories. In 1972, her first work of non-fiction to be readily available, *Women and Sex*, appeared. This book is a study of problems related to girls and women and different aspects of sexual and moral relations in society. As 'physician-writer' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 21), El-Saadawi speaks out against sexual aggression towards female children and against female clitoridectomy. Her literary works - both fictional and non-fictional - testify to her speaking out on the emancipation of women, which means freedom from all forms of exploitation. As a result of her outspokenness, Dr El-Saadawi was dismissed from her post at the Ministry of Health and forbidden to continue publishing the magazine 'Health' of which she had been Editor-in-Chief. However, as El-Saadawi remarks (1980: 3): 'such events, however painful they might be, have not and will not dampen my enthusiasm or slow down my efforts. My pen

will continue to lay bare the facts, clarify the issues, and identify what I believe is the truth'. As already noted in Chapter Three (in the discussion of Third and Arab world feminisms: a perspective), El-Saadawi believes that the oppression of women is not unique to the Arab society. Nor is it to the Middle East, nor to the Third world. In *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980: i), for example, El-Saadawi asserts that the oppression of women 'constitutes an integral part of the political, economic and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world'. Being the first Arab woman, who publicly questioned and criticized institutions and attitudes prevalent in Arab society, El-Saadawi's outspokenness also resulted in her arrest during President Sadat's regime in September 1981, and her brief imprisonment from 6 September 1981 to 25 November 1981. Nevertheless, El-Saadawi continues to lay bare the facts, clarify the issues and identify what she believes is the truth, as will become apparent in the discussion of her works in this chapter. And, as has already been shown in Chapters Four and Five of this study these concerns are also those of fellow Muslim woman writer, Mariama Bâ.

Multi-Douglas (1995: 198) notes that readers willing to follow El-Saadawi as she leads them on the intense literary journey that is her textual corpus will watch as the multiple faces of patriarchy are uncovered and, because her oeuvre is so much larger than Bâ's, the indictment is that much more forceful. A complex feminist discourse is presented by El-Saadawi, which redefines some of the most sensitive issues in Arab society. The many facets of patriarchy are continually exposed and challenged. As already indicated, Nawal El-Saadawi depicts, in detail, the all-too-common reality of class structure, gender and poverty of everyday life in Muslim society in a similar fashion to Mariama Bâ. But this time, the referent is Egypt rather than Senegal.

What this demonstrates, of course, is that the dilemmas voiced by Muslim women are common ones whether the encounter with Islamic theocracy and its implementation is in West or North-East Africa as the discussion of Third world and Arab feminisms in this study seeks to show.

El-Saadawi displays an intense awareness of the real conditions of daily life, an awareness of the quotidian reality (*journalisme-vérité* approach) which must be read against the background of cultural, social, political, economic and religious events in Egypt and the Middle East, just as Bâ's parallel approach is situated in West African context in Chapters Four and Five. With regard to sexuality and the body, excision, for some of El-Saadawi's characters, is simply a part of the reality of being female, a fact of life. The aspect of excision, of cutting 'off a piece of flesh from between [the] thighs' (as Firdaus experiences it in *Woman at Point Zero*, 1983: 13) is not foregrounded in Bâ's two texts. For the prostitute Firdaus, for instance, this mutilation resembles a nostalgia for pleasure that is no longer possible: 'I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot ... [it] was gone and would never return' (*Woman at Point Zero*, 1983: 15).

The Arabo-Islamic cultural insistence on averting the gaze is, of course, also part of social and religious life. It is social, as already pointed out in Chapters One and Two, because it represents interaction between the male and the female. It is religious, because the injunction to avert one's gaze is Qur'anic (in order to prevent a state of *fitna* or chaos). And of course, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 205) comments, averting the gaze in the texts of El-Saadawi, is also about power, and the subversion of this powerful patriarchal

system, as will be seen later in this chapter.

Religion, too, deeply affects daily life activities. In line with Mernissi (1992), Malti-Douglas (1995: 204) points out that religion sanctions and perpetrates myriad injustices toward the female gender. Along with Firdaus (*Woman at Point Zero*: 1983, and contradictory to injunctions in the *Qur'an*, as already discussed in Chapters One and Two) the reader learns that wife beating (violence) is permissible in the religious and social Arabo-Islamic system. No Qur'anic citation is necessary to sanction this patriarchal act of violence. Not surprisingly, therefore, there are many examples of the nexus of violation and religion in the texts of El-Saadawi. Yet none is so effective as the ultimate violation in which the Deity rapes the gullible female (*The Innocence of the Devil*: 1994, to be discussed later). The nature of the monotheistic Deity in *The Innocence of the Devil* is intimately tied to the nature of the Arabic language. Malti-Douglas (1995: 206) refers to the grammatical gender categories, that had fascinated the narrator of *The Circling Song* (1989), and that are transmuted into the theological domain of *The Innocence of the Devil*. As Malti-Douglas points out, the detailed grammatical discussions remind the reader that Nawal El-Saadawi is, first and foremost, an Arabic writer:

Her literary vision and referential universe are not those of Western authors. Rather, her textual feet are firmly planted in the centuries-old Arabo-Islamic scriptorial tradition. Though many of the tensions that dominate her works may superficially resemble those addressed by other Arabic writers, [and one could add, other African writers] her vision is distinct [own interpretation].
(Malti-Douglas, 1995: 207)

Although the urban-rural dichotomy is present in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1988), it does not feature prominently in the lives of other female Saadawian protagonists. Women are exploited, no matter what their environment. Hamida (*The Circling Song*:

1989), for instance, is raped in the village. If the urban versus rural dichotomy and the binary opposition of modernity versus tradition are not privileged by El-Saadawi, the statement can be made, as Malti-Douglas indeed does, that 'her literary agenda revolves around something that transcends such dichotomies. This "something" is patriarchy in all its ramifications. Religion, society, gender, class - all these are categories deeply influenced by patriarchy' (1995: 207). The universality of the patriarchal system in the Saadawi corpus is such that many of the female protagonists who pit themselves against it are destroyed: 'The upper-class heroes cannot break the power of patriarchy, though they can put a dent in it. If they are courageous, strong, and a little lucky, they can make space for themselves' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 207). For the lower class protagonists (Zakeya in *God dies by the Nile*: 1985, and Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*: 1983) not even this is possible. One force, however, can oppose this universe of patriarchy: the powerful ties of female bonding (communal sisterhood), or what Malti-Douglas (1995: 207) calls 'female-female relationships'. Yet, notwithstanding the powerful display of this female force, the women characters in El-Saadawi's novels are unable to destroy patriarchy. They can put a dent into it, as already intimated, but they cannot destroy it.

This battle against the patriarchal system is articulated in the female Bildungsroman, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1988) that adopts the fiction of autobiography but which, nonetheless is, unlike *So Long a Letter* (see Chapter Four) not an autobiography (despite some similarities with El-Saadawi's life, and despite its title and first person narrator). In the author's own note *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* is depicted as a fair description of the moral and social position of women in that period (middle 1950s) which reveals the double exploitation of Egyptian women - both their general, social oppression and their

private oppression through the institution of marriage.

The tellingly nameless protagonist of the novel is introduced to the reader in the opening paragraph of her memoirs, which describes a continuing conflict between herself and her femininity. Zeidan (1995: 138) notes that this conflict that Arab women experience regarding their femininity is not uncommon. When they set out to establish their own identities, the first thing that they have to do is to confront their femaleness in a male-dominated culture. This confrontation, as Zeidan (1995: 140) notes,

took the form of a rejection of the female body. Although this body was the incarnation of womanhood, it was also a sex object for men. It therefore came to be seen as an obstacle to woman's self-fulfillment [*sic*].

As a result of having been top student in secondary school, the narrator - clearly the author as persona - pursues the career of medicine. Science initially appeals to her greatly. After her move to a country village, she adopts a more human approach to her patients. She has three relationships with men. Her third and last relationship with an artist-musician develops into love and serves as a vehicle which helps her to come to terms with her life, her career and with the equality and unity of a couple. The novel *Two Women in One* (1985) likewise emphasizes the notion that true love is the single factor responsible for the drastic change that the protagonist, Bahia, experiences. She is at last able to see herself as a unified person.

The two themes in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, namely education (science offers scientific knowledge and power and enables the protagonist to articulate female bonding) and marriage, run parallel in the text, and serve to underline the concerns expressed by Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, and discussed in the preceding

chapters. Already as a young girl, the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* learns to experience her femininity in a negative manner. The social and traditional role of a woman which lies in marriage does not appeal to her at all:

Marriage! Marriage! That loathsome word which my mother mentioned every day until I hated the sound of it In my mind the smell of kitchen was linked with the smell of a husband and I hated the word husband just as much as I hated the smell of the food we cooked. (14)

The values instilled by her mother cause her to rebel against her 'unfreedom' (Malti-Douglas's term) and are conceived not as 'an essence but as a difference - a difference grounded in and articulated through the body' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 23). References to 'awra are corporal, as Malti-Douglas points out: 'awra [is] one of the most central, provocative, and emotionally laden words in *Memoirs*. In literary Arabic, this word signifies something shameful, defective, and imperfect, the genitals, and something that must be covered ...' (1995: 27). The young girl believes that everything in her is 'awra, though she is only a child of nine years. In pointed contrast, man is portrayed as a 'god' whom the woman has to serve in the kitchen all her life: 'Why had society always tried to convince me that manhood was a distinction and an honour, and womanhood a weakness and disgrace?' (25).

In a similar manner to Aunty Nabou in *Scarlet Song*, the protagonist's mother is the upholder of patriarchal superiority and woman's perceived submissiveness and inferiority. The mother continually emphasizes woman's domestic role in society. Zeidan (1995: 140) remarks that in both Western and Arab novels, a phenomenon labelled the *bad mother* by Nina Bam is manifested. In many of these novels, mothers are obstacles to their daughters' self-actualization, discouraging them from nontraditional life-styles and condemning their

independence, and the daughters often feel disgust or pity toward them for their conformity to old ways. However, as Zeidan (1995: 142) points out, on the one hand, there is some awareness of, and resentment toward, being discriminated against by a sexist society. On the other, given the limited means of acquiring and exercising power for women in patriarchy (especially in the Arabo-Islamic universe) it is no surprise that these protagonists sometimes pay the price of conformity and enforcement of the status quo to gain the diluted but certain power that this buys them. And this is certainly true of the mother's position in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*.

In addition to the word 'awra and its provocative meaning, the fire of the kitchen by which young women are consumed in the text, according to Malti-Douglas (1995: 30-31) is also a word laden by meaning. The word fire (*nār*) as Malti-Douglas explains, is a word used for hellfire. More than polysemy is involved here, as the fire of the kitchen becomes the fire of hell: 'From the world of enforced domesticity, woman moves into the domain of religious punishment, from the world of onion and garlic into that of eternal damnation' (1995: 31). The metaphor of hellfire is extended to another all-too-common reality of the general young Muslim girl who, very often, is subject to physical violation of her body. In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* the protagonist has three such encounters. The door-keeper's attempt to explore her sexual parts with his hand is a clear trespass. The incident with the father's friend is apparently more complex, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 24) states. Normally, in the middle-class Egyptian society such an encounter would be viewed as socially licit, or at least free of violation. The narrator experiences his 'inquiring glances roaming all over before coming to rest on her chest' (16) as a covert violation of her body and runs away in terror. In the incident with her cousin, she likewise interprets his

advances as 'physical transgression' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 24), although she also experiences desire. The preoccupation in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* with the notion of 'awra, the gaze, and the dichotomy between the world of science and the traditional world of marriage are hotly debated topics in the Islamic Middle Eastern world.

In order to escape her family's designs for her marriage, the narrator decides to enter the faculty of medicine. Medicine and science permit her to gain social power and corporal consciousness which will enable her, as an upper-class educated woman, to subvert claims of patriarchal superiority and to attain a position of relative autonomy and liberation. So too does Aissatou (*So Long a Letter*) enjoy the liberating value of education. Education, indeed, serves as a vehicle to the claiming of public space. Paradoxically and ironically, it is the upper-class woman Mireille, in *Scarlet Song* who, despite her class position and education, is destined to lose the battle against the Muslim patriarchal system.

However, relative to her Western colleagues, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 21) observes, this Egyptian feminist doctor makes less of diseases and cures, focusing more on the social role of medicine and the physician. In fact, since the interaction between physician and patient is not the primary concern in this narrative, the most 'pervasive function of medicine (and the physician) in the Saadawian fictional corpus is that of a repository of power' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 21). This key to power first, and foremost, enables the narrator to break out of the literal and metaphorical confinement imposed upon her by traditional society. The power of medicine and education motivates the narrator not to be dragged into 'the ranks of illiterate women' (24). A career, centred on the body, allows the narrator to defeat any physical differences that still exist and provides the path to

superiority, and likewise shows that she is smarter than malekind: 'I had chartered my way in life, the way of the mind. I had carried out the death sentence on my body so that I no longer felt it existed' (24).

What the narrative suggests is that power, initially the attribute of the male in the Muslim patriarchal system, will be subverted and reappropriated, thereby becoming the property of the female through medical science:

I would become a doctor then, study medicine, wear shiny steel-rimmed spectacles, make my eyes move at an amazing speed behind them, and make my fingers strong and pointed to hold the dreadful long sharp needle. I'd make my mother tremble with fright and look at me reverently; I'd make my brother terrified and my father beg me for help. I'd prove to nature that I could overcome the disadvantages of the frail body she'd clothed me in, with its shameful part both inside and out. (23)

The primary vector of this power is the gaze, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 26) aptly points out. The eyes and the fingers are highly suggestive. With this delicate scopic game, Nawal El-Saadawi has entered a gender debate, one quite vigorous in the contemporary Islamic world, over the glance. The power of the glance, as already discussed in Chapters One and Two, has the potential power of destruction in creating *fitna* (chaos). Malti-Douglas states that El-Saadawi wittingly crystallizes this issue in a contemporary literary text and redefines it. By tying the penetrating activity of the physician's eyes with the physician's needle, the debate is extended to *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*.

The power of knowledge and education at the medical school is further elaborated when the female gaze exposes the vulnerability of the male corpse. The dissection table serves to subvert the power of the male in a patriarchal society:

Would society believe that I'd examined a man's body and taken it to pieces

without caring that it was a man? Who was this society anyway? Wasn't it men like my brother brought up from childhood to think of themselves as gods, and weak, ineffectual women like my mother? ... A man's body! The terror of mothers and little girls who sweltered in the heat of the kitchen to fill it with food Here was just such a body spread out before me naked, ugly and in pieces How ugly man was, both inside and out ... as ugly as could be! (25-6)

A study of medical science enables the narrator to realize the essential sameness of man and woman: 'women were like men and men were like animals. There were no essential differences between them!' (32). The body as physical entity, is 'the great equalizer' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 33), whether it be in the dissection room or in the toilet of the Women's Prison.

In this text, science, initially, becomes a substitute god to the narrator. Science 'seemed a mighty, just and omniscient god; so I placed my trust in it and embraced its teachings' (32). When a female pregnant woman, afflicted with rheumatism, dies during childbirth, leaving behind a healthy little baby, the narrator finally realizes that 'science was impotent. Nothing on earth had the power to raise this little closed eyelid even one more time' (37). For the first time the protagonist ponders over the gift of life and asks: 'Whence does man come and whither does he go?' (38). The focus of the struggle inside her widens out from the domain of masculinity and femininity to embrace humankind as a whole. The powerlessness of science, when confronted by death, leads to the narrator's disillusionment: 'Science toppled from its throne and fell at my feet naked and powerless, just as man had done before' (39). Science also destroys her former belief without leading her to a new faith.

It is only in a peaceful little village that the narrator is able to re-establish her faith in

humanity and that she experiences a feeling of freedom. For the first time in her life she feels that emotion is sharper-witted than reason. The female body that she had sacrificed at the feet of the god of science and reason 'was coming to life again' (43). The narrator laughs out loud so that she can hear herself laughing: 'My mother had always told me that a girl shouldn't laugh out loud enough for people to hear, so my laughter had always faded on my lips before it made a sound' (43). In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, the narrator successfully manages to write herself back in the text by the act of 'laughing back', and by reclaiming her body: 'I forgot my mother's instructions about how a girl should eat I drank cold water from an earthenware jug, making a loud noise and spilling water all down my clothes' (44) and she lets the breeze lift up her clothes: 'I felt that I had been reborn' (44).

The rebirth of emotion serves a multiple purpose: for the first time in her life the narrator sees the patient as a whole person, and not as 'a loose assemblage of discrete parts' (45). Her tears result in the sick old countryman's consoling words when he tells her not to cry: 'I felt that he was the doctor and I the patient' (47). The tears which she shed fulfil a very important function: they manage 'to dislodge the dark veil that was insulating [her] heart' (46). This role reversal has its function, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 33) remarks: 'The sick old man bears a gift for the hero: he helps her regain her faith in humanity'. Moreover, his smile serves to make her aware of the gift of love; love for life and the fulfilment of love.

The protagonist, in expressing her desire for love, touches on another interrelated theme in this novel, namely marriage. When she is lured into marriage she discovers that the theme of marriage as commerce features dominantly in the patriarchal world of Islam. The

engineer who, after the death of his mother, asks her to marry him, looks like a 'motherless child' (59). In a sense it is her motherliness that is stimulated and not egalitarian love. Right from the start her marriage is doomed when she is regarded as an object by the shaykh who marries them. When she challenges him about the custom of paying a dowry for the bride, he replies: 'the law tells us so' (60). Her response that he does not know the law invokes his anger when he angrily shouts: 'God have mercy! God have mercy!' (61). His reaction typifies the angry response of the grocer to Mernissi's question pertaining the political rights of women and whether they could become leaders of Muslims (see Introduction). The reassurance by the husband-to-be that signing away her human rights on the marriage contract is 'just a formality' (62) soon proves to be her 'death warrant' (62). Her husband becomes 'corrupted by the power granted him' (Zeidan, 1995: 128) and insists on her closing down her medical practice. The narrator objects to her husband's claim that he 'wanted to have her' (65) by stating that she is not a piece of land. Her objection echoes Ramatoulaye's claim to identity, dignity and selfhood as a subject and not as an object: 'You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand' (*So Long a Letter*, 1989: 57).

Yet, concurrent with the concept of marriage is the concept of choice. The protagonist is willing to divorce her husband despite the inevitable social stigma: 'I'd made a mistake ... Everybody does wrong. Life is made up of right and wrong. We only come to know what's right through our mistakes. It's not weak and stupid to do wrong, but to continue doing wrong' (66). Whereas the protagonist speaks out and manages to move beyond the veil of oppression, Mireille's voice (*Scarlet Song*) is tragically silenced as sanity deserts her. After her divorce, the protagonist experiences freedom. Yet solitude no longer seems

so attractive. She rebels against society that expects her to sit at home, 'waiting for some man to come and buy her like a cow' (71). She therefore asks: 'Wasn't it my natural right to choose my man?' (71). The narrator's rejection of a fellow physician's sexual attentions serves to endorse the concept of choice when the narrator speaks out: 'You're not the man I want' (77-8). Choosing is a powerful act which shapes and gives direction to human existence (as already discussed in Chapter Four: *So Long a Letter*). It is through choice that both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou (*So Long a Letter*) and so, too, the nameless narrator (*Memoirs from a Woman Doctor*) arrive at the ultimate affirmation of the self.

Ultimate affirmation for the narrator, however, does not lie in material success but in her relationship with an artist, who does not address 'her body' but who directs himself to her 'heart and mind' (95). When the narrator and artist participate equally in the act of giving life (through a blood transfusion) to a young man who suffers from pulmonary tuberculosis, they both experience personal fulfilment. With the help of her male companion, she is able to save the young man's life. As a couple, they both participate in the process of rebirth, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 36) points out, even though it is only on a metaphorical level. And, it is only when the narrator is able to transcend her focus on the male-female power struggle that she comes 'to terms with both her femininity and medicine. This last is now science *and* art, reason *and* compassion' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 37). In Malti-Douglas's viewpoint, Nawal El-Saadawi develops the sexual politics of medicine in two ways: first, by using it as a vehicle for women to regain their lost power; and second, by making it the focus of her own call for the integration of traditionally male and female qualities. This integration has already been discussed in depth in the analysis of *So Long a Letter* in Chapter Four.

In a similar fashion to Ramatoulaye, though on a different level, the narrator moves from estranged womanhood to embraced womanhood. She finally realizes that medicine is not a commodity and success is not to be measured in terms of money and fame. For the first time the narrator is able to perceive the importance of her career: health is to be given to all who need it, without 'restrictions or conditions, and success was to give what I had to others' (100). The dark veil that she previously experienced as insulating her heart is torn apart. The narrator has successfully managed to move beyond the veil and to make her voice heard when she, like Ramatoulaye (and after thirty years), speaks out about her 'blindness':

Thirty years of my life had gone by without my realizing the truth, understanding what life was about or realizing my own potential. How could I have done, when I'd only thought about taking? - although I couldn't have given something which I didn't have to give? (100)

Although both Ramatoulaye and the narrator's speaking out involves the concept of choice, choice in the case of the latter involves facing her own inability to act with compassion and humanity, and her conflict regarding her femininity. It is only when she experiences love that she is able to accommodate her femininity.

The virtue of love and compassion encapsulates another central interrelated theme, female bonding and solidarity. Concomitant with the concept of female bonding is the notion of honour, another hotly debated issue in the Arabo-Islamic universe. As previously noted in Chapter Four, Busia (1988: 3) calls for the case for unity, as all women seem fated to live and develop in bastions of paternalistic power in which both sacred and secular ideologies have worked to domesticate and disempower the female. The strategy to re-examine the role of women in society is highlighted by El-Saadawi in *Memoirs of a*

Woman Doctor. The narrator recalls the visit of a young girl (who appears to be pregnant) to her consultation room. Her visit pertains to protection from murderous male relatives who insist on the purity and virginity of the young girl.

With regard to the notion of honour, Fatima Mernissi (1982: 183) remarks that virginity is a matter between men, in which women merely play the role of silent intermediaries. Thus El-Saadawi reflects real life in the young girl of fourteen who is pregnant, and who in consequence, will be killed by her father for an act of dishonour. The silence is broken when she asks the doctor to save her by performing an abortion. Ironically, as Mernissi points out, honour and virginity are the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. Therefore, it is not by subjugating nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers (Mernissi, 1982: 183).

The narrator's response to the girl's request is one of anger towards society:

How could I punish her alone when I knew that the whole of society had participated in the act, or wonder at her when I knew that everybody did similar things? How could I not protect her when she was the victim and society protected the real offender, or disapprove of her error when I myself had already fallen? I who had lived twice as long as her How could I not absolve her when I had already absolved myself? (80)

The dilemma of women highlights the discrepancy of the logic of the law in theory, which establishes the responsibility of both the partners for the sexual act, and the logic of the

law in practice. The masculine mentality, as Mernissi (1982: 185) claims, selfishly pushes the responsibility for defloration onto the woman alone. Hence the young girl's predicament and her fragmented reproduction: 'He didn't do what he said ... cruel bastard ... Upper Egypt ... they'll kill me ... I haven't got anyone ... save me, doctor' (80).

Notwithstanding the role of religion in society that lays down that both the sexes should be virgins at marriage, Islam is flouted every day by men who claim to adhere to its principles:

Respect for religious law would therefore require a fundamental change in men's mentality and personality. A complete re-evaluation of their relations with the opposite sex, and the acquisition of sound and consistent principles upon which to build their life. (Mernissi, 1982: 187)

According to Mernissi, the great tragedy of the patriarchal male is that his status lies in irrational schizophrenic contradictions, and is vested in a being whom he has defined from the start as the enemy: woman and her subterranean and silence, woman who engulfs him in a sea of lies and in swamps of sordid manipulation. The result: 'The law of retaliation: an eye for an eye, a lie for a lie The vicious circle of an impossible dialogue between partners mutilated by an insane patriarchy' (Mernissi, 1982: 185).

Contradictory to the absence of a possible dialogue between partners in a patriarchal system, discourse between females stems from the bastions of paternalistic power, as previously noted, and culminates in solidarity and sisterhood. This solidarity manifests itself prominently in the response of the narrator (and physician) in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* when she performs an abortion and thereby establishes female bonding in rescuing the young girl from a violent death:

I tried to save the poor child from the talons of the law and tradition and from the fangs of the wild beasts and the snakes, rats and cockroaches. I'd save her and they would crucify me if the idea appealed to them, stone me to death, take me to the scaffold. I'd accept my fate and meet death with a satisfied soul and an easy conscience. (81)

Medicine, as a vehicle of empowerment for individual women, is set against the more general context of relative female powerlessness, as Malti-Douglas notes (1995: 40). The narrator's decision to perform an abortion, ironically, stems not from retaliation, namely an eye for an eye [a tooth for a tooth] and 'a lie for a lie' (Mernissi, 1992: 185). Rather, humanity, coupled with compassion serves as precipitant for the narrator's choice to put her medical career at stake by going against all Islamic prescriptions. In making her choice, the narrator exemplifies Ousmane who claimed: 'One must take risks. Progress demands changing the way people think. Life requires taking risks' (*Scarlet Song*: 39). In pointed contrast to the mother who dies in childbirth, but leaves behind a healthy little baby, the fetus has to die so that its mother may live, hence: a life for a life.

In one of El-Saadawi's short stories 'A story from a woman doctor's life' (introducing 'Dr S. writing in her diary') the physician is confronted by a similar situation pertaining to the honour of a young woman. The doctor declares the sister 'honourable' and explains why: 'Medicine can only distinguish between disease and non-disease. It cannot distinguish between honour and dishonour' (translated by Malti-Douglas, 1995: 41). In view of the connection between the S. and El-Saadawi, the oath written by the physician carries much more weight: 'I swear that my humanity and my conscience will be my rules in my work and my art. I put down my pen and felt an ease I had not felt for a long time' (translated by Malti-Douglas, 1995: 41).

The rewriting of the oath by the physician is, according to Malti-Douglas, suggestive of a subversive act, calling into question the authorial structure of professions like medicine. The question posed by Malti-Douglas: 'Is this a feminist redefinition of medicine?' and its subsequent answer, 'It could very well be!' (1995: 42) corroborate the potential of solidarity and female bonding in a dominating patriarchal system. The patriarchal system is subverted when the brother's desire to be re-assured of honour is defeated by the physician when she enables the young woman to reclaim her body. Medicine as social and body power, very often, comes to the rescue.

Through medicine the narrator (and physician) is able to move beyond the veil and to advocate a society in which humanity and compassion feature first and foremost, and which is in accordance with the Muslim theocracy. Moreover, the protagonist is neither eliminated nor recuperated by the patriarchal structure. On the contrary, the written word, as in the case of *Ramatoulaye*, becomes a creative tool of self-expression against patriarchy. So, too, is the selfhood of the narrator explored and established through female bonding. Bridges are built through medicine to create a unified community of whole women. And, in creating a unified body of whole women, the notion of humanity advocated in *Scarlet Song*: 'Man, man is his own remedy!' is extended to *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. In more feminist terms: the central Wolof proverb can be extended to 'Woman, woman is her own remedy!', as she redesigns her role in the past, present and future of humanity. When such a redefinition of woman's role has manifested itself in a patriarchal society, there is no need to despair of mankind, as Ali does, in *Scarlet Song*. Such a redefinition will indeed embody a fire that melts, but that does not destroy.

In *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986) it is, ironically, the power of medicine and writing which leads to the incarceration of Dr Nawal El-Saadawi in the Barrages Women's Prison in 1981. And it is the very environment of the women's prison which helps the narrator create an intimate universe in which women exist as a homosocial unit and where woman is her own remedy. The universe of men (which permits public space), and the *Umma* universe of religion and power are characteristic of the earliest Islamic-Arabo sexual order (as already discussed in Chapter Two). The latter's ubiquity is such, as Malti-Douglas points out (1995: 159), that it surfaces in texts of all kinds, ranging from the literary to the philosophical and mystical. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reinforces the notion of male homosociality when she argues for its importance in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

Typical of El-Saadawi's feminist vision, she does not adhere to this male homosocial domain. Instead, she simply reverses 'societal and literary expectations. The prison setting provides a textual opportunity for the creation of a female homosocial environment' as Malti-Douglas (1995: 160) notes. In a similar manner to *Woman at Point Zero*, two characteristic Saadawian female types manifest themselves in the text: the middle-class professional woman and her lower class counterparts. The inhabitants of the prison range from killers and prostitutes to political prisoners and religious conservatives. Notwithstanding the differences among these women, they share one communal experience, namely imprisonment rooted in a male patriarchal society.

In *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* identity between author, narrator and central character typifies the text as an autobiography. Yet the work does also contain an element

of fiction. Various names of characters have been changed. In fact, El-Saadawi herself once remarked that she had changed a lot of things in the text. Pivotal to the multiple layers of events in the text is the act of violence. Violence features prominently when El-Saadawi is arrested: her door is broken down by the officials. Malti-Douglas (1995: 164) comments that the reader is not simply dealing with the breaking down of a door, which is merely a literary device. The violation becomes 'a metaphorical rape of sorts' and the fact that the narrator is wearing a white dress accentuates the brutality of the act. As in the West, brides in the modern Arab world don white gowns, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 164) points out. The violation is extended to the confiscation of the novel that the narrator is writing, thereby taking on a momentum which, ironically, snowballs in every aspect for the patriarchal establishment.

Opposition and resistance to violence imply more violence. Yet the nature of the violence (as discussed in Chapter Three) lies in a violence that is non-physical and cerebral. A paradigm shift within the contextual framework of El-Saadawi's feminist writing in prison, which features as counterviolence, is constituted in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. The very act of writing becomes non-physical counterviolence, since it is forbidden by the prison system. Writing down her memoirs is not an easy task for the narrator. It is only at night, in the confined space of the toilet, that El-Saadawi is able to record the collective experiences of the women prisoners. The only available material is toilet paper and cigarette paper. The pencil is very short. The paper, of course, is far from the ideal and luxurious stationery she is used to: either it rips very easily, or the words are not at all clear.

This violation by El-Saadawi becomes even more significant when the official compares pen and paper to a pistol: 'Easier to give you a pistol than pen and paper' (49). The female prisoner guard reinforces this notion when she remarks: 'One written word in the political cell is a more serious matter than having a pistol. Writing is more dangerous than killing, doctor' (73). The pistol as a killing instrument and the pen as a writing instrument are both viewed by the Sadat regime as tools of destruction. Contrary to the woman prison guard's innocent remark that writing serves no purpose, it is 'just words on paper, and that's it, and all you get for it is an entrance to prison' (69), the narrator's transformation of her story into a permanent text (airing her political convictions) is, paradoxically, much more than mere words on a paper. By writing back, El-Saadawi constitutes the notion of protest, and she establishes her own identity as a subject, a subject who is able to survive incarceration and who will continue to lay bare the facts and to clarify central issues. The violations in El-Saadawi's textual corpus are more than literary and metaphorical, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 6) states. They can also be social. For El-Saadawi, for example, the issue is not merely travel in *My Travels around the World* (1990): 'it is also travel writing, the creation of a discourse of discovery that crosses not only geographical boundaries, but historical and social ones as well' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 6).

Given the social-historical framework of the woman who inhabits El-Saadawi's prison universe, it is not the pistol that is the most potent instrument of killing, but the hoe. Barbara Harlow (1992: 133) comments on the hoe 'as an agricultural implement, symbolic of the peasant's vital attachment to the Egyptian land'. For Zakeya (*God dies by the Nile*), in a similar fashion to Fathyia-the-Murderess in the Women's Prison, the hoe serves first and foremost as an agricultural implement: "'It's wonderful to work with a hoe in the

fields," Fathiyya breathed. "I can't live without a hoe. It's my life" (66). But it is also symbolic of domination and oppression for the general peasant woman who is the poorest of the poor.

Upon Fathiyya's discovery of her husband raping her nine-year-old daughter, she gave him a blow on the head, cut his body into little pieces which she gathered in a sack and threw it into the river so that the fishes could eat it. Zakeya, too, kills the Mayor with her hoe and buries the pieces on the banks of the Nile. In a civilized society these acts would evoke repugnance. Yet this procedure of killing, dismembering and throwing the body parts in the water is, according to Malti-Douglas (1995: 165), quite common in medieval texts where the victims were predominantly women. But less common is the overt reversal of this practice by El-Saadawi in her texts (*Memoirs from the Women's Prison* and *God dies by the Nile*), thereby subverting the patriarchal system.

Woman, as El-Saadawi points out, does not need a pistol to kill. The pen becomes a lethal weapon that links the narrator to Fathiyya when she remarks:

My hand, as it grips the pen, is like her hand when she took hold of the hoe and struck the blow.

It is just as if I were striking blows with the pen at a corrupt, black head which wanted to abduct my freedom and life, to deform my true self, and to force me to sell my mind and to say yes when I want to say no.

Whatever their social class, women, when confronted by a corrupt patriarchal universe are able to transcend all class boundaries in order to unite as a community of whole women. Fathiyya-the-Murderess, despite her incarceration, is indeed a strong and a whole woman. She is depicted as holding her head high, and as walking proudly. She has a clear and strong voice that comments that her life in prison is better than her life with her

husband: 'Prison ... is for men who are strong and plucky - and for the pluckiest and strongest women!' (116). The character, Fathiyya, is portrayed as a Muslim woman, who is able to break the silence and to make her voice heard, albeit in an enclosed space.

The homosocial unit in the prison universe is, as the reader discovers, presented as a positive, powerful force. Unlike protagonists like Hamida (*The Circling Song*) and Firdaus (*Woman at Point Zero*) who are abused by family members, the absence of male members in the prison facilitates the means to these women to bridge social abysses. Female bonding and solidarity enable them to voice their opinions when deemed necessary. Irrespective of their circumstances, they live a communal life. The locking up of the Muslim activist with the Christian, the 'left' with the 'right', does not destroy the women (as the authorities secretly hoped). In fact, the complete opposite happens. Within the group, harmony reigns: mutual understanding between all strands of the opposition is achieved. The narrator comments on the extremes she gets to know in prison:

I experienced the height of grief and joy, the peaks of pain and pleasure, the greatest beauty and the most intense ugliness. At certain moments I imagined that I was living in a new love story. In prison I found my heart opened to love - how I don't know

Even those faces hidden under the black veils ... when the *niqaabs* were lifted I could see faces that were shining, clear, overflowing with love, a co-operative spirit, and humanity. (39)

Humanity, as ordained by the *Qur'an*, features very strongly in the prison. Nabawiyya, the female prison guard, encapsulates it very succinctly when she remarks: 'God has requested us to show gentleness towards animals and human beings and all of God's creatures' (132). Both class and politico-religious boundaries are transcended in prison when Islamist Boduur and the leftist Fawqiyya, and their two systems of advocacy,

transform and unite upon the news of Sadat's death. Boduur, who is portrayed as never laughing and who has forever been very prim and proper, uncovers her hair and starts dancing. Fawqiyya, who only believed in the power of economy and for whom worship of God is alien, is joined in prayer.

Sadat's death, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 176) notes, closes a cycle. El-Saadawi's entry into the prison is, after all, 'a death', whereupon 'the physical assassination of the male ruler becomes a redemptive act that will save her' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 176). Death imagery has been present since the opening pages of this text. El-Saadawi's entry into the prison in her white dress, according to Malti-Douglas (1995: 174) alludes to the funeral shroud - white is the colour of the burial cloth in which a corpse is customarily wrapped in the Muslim Middle East. Furthermore, the hands of the officer helping her are like the hands of an undertaker. Prison, as El-Saadawi records, remains in her imagination 'like a nightmare, like death - the one who enters is lost forever, and the one who leaves is born anew' (39).

In a similar fashion to the female patient whose fetus has to be aborted so that she may live (*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*), Sadat's actual death enables El-Saadawi to live. His death is redemptive for El-Saadawi, hence a life for a life. And the one who receives this precious gift of life (in this case El-Saadawi) is, metaphorically, born anew. Moreover, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 176) aptly notes, 'the death for a death has also instigated a book for a book'. Through the 'birth' of a new book the contemporary feminist has indeed made an attempt to move forward and to move beyond the veil through her speaking voice and through writing back.

There is, however, another Saadawian female protagonist, Zakeya (*God dies by the Nile*: 1985) who is not in the privileged position of pitting herself against the Arabo-Muslim patriarchal universe through the concept of speaking or writing back. Rather, silence in all its multiple manifestations features dominantly in Zakeya's oppressed existence as a poor, illiterate peasant woman who lives in the village, Kafr El Teen, on the banks of the Nile. Yet, unlike Ramatoulaye's silence in *So Long a Letter*, Zakeya's silence is not the silence of acquiescence (which typifies the village and is extended to the hushed, silent open spaces), but that of angry defiance, expressed in her 'lips ... tightly closed' and in her 'large wide-open eyes' (1).

Zakeya's angry silence stems from the fact that her relatives have been exploited by the Mayor (depicted as equally as powerful as Allah). This tyrant blatantly exploits many of the peasants through rape, enslavement and murder. Zakeya's introspective explorations of the past recall her murdered mother, her brutal husband, her dead infant children, her son Galal taken away to fight in the Sinai war, her brother Kafrawi taken away to prison and, the mayor's illicit sexual lust for her two nieces Nefissa and Zeinab. Given the context, three ideological complexes determine social relations in Kafr El Teen: class, gender and religion. Madhuchhanda Mitra (1995: 147) writes that the novel locates the creative impulse not only in acts that bring about political transformation but also in everyday activities that engage the body in productive work. Creativity, as El-Saadawi defines it in her essay 'Creative Women in Changing Societies' (as cited by Madhuchhanda, 1995: 149) resides in the optimum use ... of bodily force to achieve a given objective'. The creativity of the peasants in this novel is etched in their bodies and in the way they work on the land, as Madhuchhanda (1995: 150) points out: a groove is

made in the middle of the palm by the hoe. Zakeya plies her hoe with vitality and power. Her muscles stand out and her long powerful legs show brown and naked in the morning light.

However, the creativity of the peasants and their adaptability to their social environment as lower class people is perceived as a threat by the feudal establishment that rules Kafr El Teen. In order to rule these people and to keep them submissive, this feudal rule manipulates and violates the sacred texts to maintain their power (as already discussed in the Introduction to this study). And since all power is legitimated by religion only, it 'uses all the ideological forces at its command to undermine the peasants' potency' (Madhuchhanda, 1995: 150). Elwau, for instance, prefers to plow his field on a Friday instead of praying at the mosque. His silent protest poses a threat to the Mayor. He thus puts an end to this practice by identifying Elwau as Nefissa's secret lover, accuses him of having impregnated Nefissa (Zakeya's niece and her brother, Kafrawi's daughter) and, concomitantly frames Kafrawi as having killed Elwau in revenge. Ironically, it is the Mayor himself who impregnated Nefissa, yet through manipulation and corruption he succeeds in suppressing all resistance, whether it be through murder or imprisonment.

It is not without reason that the villagers admit the superior power of the Mayor and their enslavement to him. He himself admits that he is above suspicion, 'above the law, even above the moral rules which govern ordinary people's behaviour. They could have doubts about Allah, but about him It was impossible' (98). Hence the comment made by one of the villagers: 'We are God's slaves when it is time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time' (53). He is not the Allah the villagers pray to, but, as the

novel suggests, he might as well be. Not only does he control the material lives of the villagers but also the religious institution. As Madhuchhanda (1995: 154) notes: 'this novel exposes the collusion of secular and religious patriarchy most clearly in the person of the Mayor'. For example, his emissaries trick Zeinab into accepting the Mayor's offer of employment by invoking Allah's commands. Men and women alike are 'the victims of the ruling power's appropriation of religion', comments Madhuchhanda (1995: 154). Although Bâ does treat these themes of exploitation and corruption, she does them in less depth because of the smaller corpus.

The exploitative system, embodied by the Mayor, affects poor peasant women in the extreme. Their labour and their bodies are exploited by both the Mayor and other men in the village. Class and gender are indeed inextricably interwoven. Although men are subject to exploitation too, women appear to have a double yoke: they suffer because they are poor and because they are female. Collective suffering plays an integral part in the lives of both peasant men and women. But unlike the establishment of female bonding, as discussed in the *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, communal ties are weakened by violent conflicts in the society. And very often the peasant men try to compensate for their powerlessness by subjugating their wives and daughters. Wife beating, as in the case of Zakeya, serves as an example of displaying patriarchal superiority, albeit in a lower class society.

The revolutionary force of Zakeya's act must be read within the context of the political and ideological horizons of the novel. A gradual unveiling of Zakeya's mind is starting to take place after having lost her son for the second time (against all expectations and after

many years Galal returns from the war, and marries Zeinab). Through the corruptive act of the Mayor, Galal is accused of theft and imprisoned. In Zakeya's mind 'something was happening very slowly, something like thinking, like a tiny point of light appearing in a dark sky' (134). The night after Galal has gone to jail, Zakeya wakes Zeinab and whispers: 'I was blind, but now my eyes have been opened It is Allah, Zeinab, it's Allah I am the one who knows' (135-6).

Having removed the veil, Zakeya speaks out for the first time. Her assassination of 'Allah' (the Mayor) is the logical next step, a gesture of rebellion which, as Madhuchhanda (1995: 154) remarks, 'cuts through all the intersecting structures of domination and oppression'. Ironically, she appears to be an isolated figure in her act of violent rebellion: it hardly touches the village. In fact, 'the sombre mud huts and the winding lanes seemed to sink into a silence as still and profound as the silence of death, as the end of all movement' (128). Zakeya's forceful act of resistance establishes her position as a subject who, although for a brief moment only, transcends all marginal boundaries. Her previous stillness has been mobilized into active resistance: stillness does not necessarily signal passivity and acquiescence. Yet Zakeya's rebellious act is soon stifled and effaced by the local village's lack of motion and emotion. Nor is there anyone in prison who has the ability to enact her feelings, or to interpret and appropriate her voice. In prison her lips are tightly closed 'as though she did not want to say anything, or could not remember words any longer She stared into the dark with open eyes but her lips were always tightly closed ...' (138).

Paradoxically, in the novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), it is precisely this question of

emotion, empathy and motion (after Firdaus's willingness to speak after her initial silence) that touches upon the major problem of silence on the part of the 'other woman' as object in Third world countries. In this biographical novel (*roman à clef*), by appropriating Firdaus's voice, El-Saadawi raises the hope 'that it is in fact possible to come to an acceptable compromise regarding the possibility of interpretation and the role of "intervention" in the local practices of certain African societies' (Francoise Lionnet, 1994: 32). If 'subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth' (as Spivak suggests, 1989: 420), then El-Saadawi's struggle to give universal appeal to the story of Firdaus certainly testifies to this supposition.

In her author's preface to *Woman at Point Zero*, El-Saadawi (1983: iii) states that Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends. (Firdaus was a woman prisoner El-Saadawi met in Qanatir Prison during her research on neurosis on Egyptian women in the early 70s. She told El-Saadawi the whole story of her life. This life story inspired El-Saadawi to write the novel which came to be known as *Woman at Point Zero*, first published in Arabic, in 1975). Firdaus's story is, according to Kenneth Payne (1992: 11) depicted as a picaresque novel which, in its loosest modern state, signifies the autobiography of a nobody and his/her adventures in a repressive society. Firdaus is convicted to die for killing a pimp. Through the external narrator, the reader is able to learn more about Firdaus's childhood and her marriage, prostitution and a short interlude of living respectably before she returns to prostitution. Death, to her, does not signify fear, because she 'has triumphed over both life and death' (101). Having lived at the margins of society, death becomes her only possible freedom. El-Saadawi (1983: iii-iv) notes that Firdaus evokes in those who witness the final moments of her life - despite her

misery and despair - 'a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom'. These rather unproblematic values take on special meaning if cognizance is taken of the circumstances in Egypt under Anwar Sadat. Both these women share a history of oppression in a patriarchal culture. Lionnet (1994: 32) therefore remarks that 'the text puts in motion ... a strategy of displacement and identification between two women who are "objectively" very different - from the point of view of their respective social classes, their education and profession - but whose intimate experiences as women are uncanny similar'. As Lionnet further points out, the narrative suggests that the universal can be known only through the particular or the personal. And it is the concrete subjective experience of this 'other' woman that allows the scholar and reader to relate to her as woman and sister. Putting Firdaus down 'in ink on paper', El-Saadawi gives her 'life after she had died' (1983: iii).

Therese Saliba (1995: 132) refers to the double protagonists within this novel comprising a collective subject that problematizes the role of the bourgeois postcolonial subject. The latter subject's economic and social privilege is critiqued indirectly through the class differences between women characters as detrimental to women's unified struggle against the patriarchal class system. In giving the lower class woman the dominating voice in the text, the hierarchy among these two women is disrupted. The doubling that occurs, according to Lionnet (1994: 34), 'functions as a metonymic displacement between author and narrator whose voices echo each other, thus making it hard for the reader to know who speaks'. The first and last parts of the novel blur the distinctions between 'subject' and 'object', psychiatrist and case study, author and prisoner, biography and autobiography,

fiction and documentary. The purpose of 'the embedding technique', for Malti-Douglas (1995: 40), lies in the second subjectivity that is added to the text. The 'physician as a figure of social power ... serves as a literary conduit that allows the other voices to speak out' (1995: 40).

In a similar manner to *God dies by the Nile*, the concerns and issues in *Woman at Point Zero* are gender and class oppression within Firdaus's society. Saliba (1995: 133) observes that indigenous women's bodies have come to signify, within indigenous male ideology, 'sites of cultural impurity, bodies polluted or sickened by "diseases" of Western influence'. The so-called disease of cultural impurity in *Woman at Point Zero* is manifest as prostitution, embedded in the conditions of lower class women. However, El-Saadawi reclaims Firdaus's body as a site of resistance to both this internal disease of the patriarchal class system and the external 'disease' of Western colonialism or imperialism. Saliba (1995: 133) claims that Firdaus is cured to some degree by women 'uniting across class lines to form a collective body'. Moreover, by giving Firdaus life after her death, El-Saadawi writes Firdaus back into history by giving universal appeal to her story. This association between educated researcher and the 'un-common criminal', as Lionnet (1994: 32) points out, changes the terms of equation between 'self' and 'other' or 'subjective' and 'objective', enacting 'a transfer of values and feelings, locating the practice of writing at the intersection of multiple forms of knowledge'.

Furthermore, when El-Saadawi braids her own identity with that of Firdaus, because of their shared experience of pain and betrayal, she gives a powerful example of feminine textuality as what Lionnet (1994: 41) calls *métissage*, as 'dialogical hybrid which fuses

together heterogeneous elements' (as already discussed in the chapter on African feminism). An ironic parallel is constituted with the braiding of identity: six years after the publication of *Woman at Point Zero* in Arabic, El-Saadawi herself became a political prisoner. As Lionnet (1994: 33) remarks: 'The telling of Firdaus's story thus becomes a rehearsal for Saadawi's own descent into the hell of an Egyptian prison. Saadawi is, and will become, Firdaus, the double that compels her'.

As already noted, El-Saadawi's use of the pen lands her in jail, just as surely as Firdaus's use of the knife to kill the pimp triggers her death sentence. Differences are effaced in order to point to an essential truth, as Lionnet notes: 'the presence of a mutual and reciprocal "naming"' is constituted (1994: 41). Beyond their social differences, the two women are united via the cultural signifier of femininity and excision. The sharing of femininity in a patriarchal Arabo-Islamic universe indeed enables these two women to braid identities and to unite in female bonding, a bonding which would not have materialized had the narrator of *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* not come to terms with her femininity and transcended it. In a similar fashion Ramatoulaye and Aissatou unite in female bonding in *So Long a Letter* (Chapter Four) as both women are confronted by the second marriages of their husbands. But unlike Aissatou, who chooses to reject such a polygamous institution, Ramatoulaye chooses to stay with her husband, Modou.

By inferring a parallel between the act of writing and the act of murder (*Memoirs from the Women's Prison*), both dissymmetry and symmetry are created, as Lionnet (1994: 39) points out. Dissymmetry lies in the irreconcilable act of creating (writing) with the act of destruction (killing). But there is symmetry, too, in the movement of the hands. To write

or to kill in the universe of Sadat is equally as dangerous (as already discussed in the analysis of *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*). In the novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, the hoe is substituted by the knife. Yet, like the hoe, both the pen and the knife are equally powerful instruments in the reappropriation of power. Firdaus becomes such a figure in the Saadawian literary corpus, who subverts traditional roles when she literally kills the patriarchal male, using a knife as her means of penetration. On a metaphorical level, El-Saadawi's 'inscription of a woman's text on the masculine fabric of Egyptian culture is a form of trespass which deserves punishment because it interferes with the culturally acceptable codes of femininity', as Lionnett (1994: 39) notes.

The reappropriation of power, for Firdaus, is manifested in her initial refusal to speak. The prison doctor's reference to her silence reinforces the notion of silence as an active resistance (discussed earlier in the context of *God dies by the Nile* - Zakeya, too, refused to speak) which does not necessarily signify passivity: 'You will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison. She refuses all visitors, and won't speak to anyone' (1). Like Frantz Fanon's native intellectual, she realizes that 'To speak is to exist absolutely for the other' (1967: 17). Before Firdaus will address the woman doctor, the doctor must first relinquish her position of authority. The power of Firdaus's silence and her rejection of the doctor causes the withering of the doctor's confidence: 'It looked to me as though this woman ... was a much better person than I' (3). When Firdaus finally agrees to talk to the doctor, her voice is authoritative and urgent: 'Let me speak. Do not interrupt me' (11). Saliba (1995: 135) points to the fact that Firdaus speaks from a zero point of subjectivity, which is devoid of desire or fear. She speaks from a total vanishing point, refusing to be subjected by the patriarchal society. 'In exposing the methods of patriarchal dominance -

including social, religious, economic, and political control - and returning to a zero point where all has been revealed and discarded, Firdaus constantly subverts the space into which she is forced' (Saliba, 1995: 135). As Saliba notes, Firdaus has turned the complete negation of women to the zero degree into a self-claimed space where she can no longer be subjected. Yet the intensity of this self-claimed space cannot be tolerated by a patriarchal class system that prefers all women positioned at a zero degree in domestic space. Reflecting the real life situation, therefore Firdaus will be hanged.

For Firdaus, the practice of prostitution becomes a method of liberation. Prostitution does not succeed in claiming her mind, her spirit and the act of choice. Her refusal to serve her country and its nationalist ideology - lower class women should be 'patriotic prostitutes' (98) - enables her to extend the control of her body to an act of rebellion against the state. Central to Firdaus's refusal is the repetition of the reference to the veil. Each reference to the veil serves to expose the varied tools of dominance and oppression in her life. Firdaus finally rediscovers the truth: 'right from the early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up like a prostitute' (99). Symbolically, she tears off the last veil of oppression when she, upon imprisonment admits:

I knew why they were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man ... but because they are afraid to let me live My life means their death. My death means their life. They want to live. And for them life means more crime, more plunder, unlimited booty. I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. Therefore I am free

Everybody has to die. I prefer to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of the crimes which you [the patriarchal establishment] have committed. (100-101)

Firdaus's representation of her empowerment (which is only possible once she has rid herself of the mask of oppression and has moved beyond the veil) is firmly rooted in the interplay of religious images by El-Saadawi. The name Firdaus means 'paradise' in Arabic, yet her life on earth seems the earthly antithesis of it, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 44) comments. Madam Sharifa, who introduces Firdaus to prostitution, means Honourable One. According to Malti-Douglas, these names are antiphrastic: 'Yet in the context of the narrative and on a deeper level, the names are not so antiphrastic. Sharifa is indeed a woman with honour: she listens to Firdaus and helps her escape some of the exploitative relationships she had endured' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 63). The same can be said for Firdaus: she may be a prostitute, but she shows more courage than many upper-class women do. She is unafraid of death. And she is indeed a life-giving force for the universal woman. Ironically, she is called an 'honourable woman' by the court that releases her from prison after her refusal to sell her body to a foreign ruler.

The meaning of the name Firdaus can be extended to the religious domain, according to Saliba (1995: 136): 'Firdaus ... is both martyr and mystic, both prostitute and holy woman, both heaven and hell, as the language of the novel suggests'. Saliba claims that El-Saadawi clearly accords the 'dishonourable prostitute a most honourable position within the symbolism of the text' (1995: 136). The application of traditionally male religious images, as Saliba points out, is an allusion to the oppositional mystic tradition of Islam found in Sufism to reclaim woman's spirituality as well as her body.

Various incidents are pointed out by Saliba (1995: 137) to highlight religious images: Firdaus is depicted as sitting on her cold cell floor, staring fixedly into the void for long

hours, like a prophet receiving a revelation. When she finally agrees to speak to the doctor, the doctor approaches Firdaus's cell door (literally in Arabic, 'the gate of Paradise'). So, too, does Firdaus's narrative carry the authority of a divine voice, irrespective of its incarceration, signifying that while patriarchy assumes control over a woman's body, it cannot exercise control over her mind and spirit, nor over the most significant part of her body, her voice. Malti-Douglas (1991: 136) states that Firdaus's voice is 'defined first and foremost through her body'. The authorship of the body can, of course, be extended to the authorship of language, as Saliba (1995: 137) notes. For Firdaus, the killing of the pimp (male representative of the patriarchal class system) becomes a 'cathartic moment which helps her to realize that anger sets her free to *reappropriate* language, to face "the savage, primitive truths"' (Lionnet, 1994: 40). In expressing her willingness to die for a crime that she committed she, as Lionnet comments, obtains the position of subject. The 'you' (in the earlier quotation above) names the 'other', the one who creates her hell (Lionnet, 1994: 40).

Annemarie Schimmel (1982: 145) mentions in her article on 'Women in Mystical Islam' that women play a positive role in Sufism. It was woman who introduced the concept of pure love into Islamic mysticism. Women were the most 'important depositories of mystical lore and the simple, unassuming faith in God and the Prophet' (Schimmel, 1982: 145). Leila Ahmed (1992: 97) endorses this notion when she claims that Sufism was the one branch of Islam that offered women equality with men, and sometimes stressed women's superior attributes. Firdaus's pondering over love, the sacrifices that she made and the insignificant value of her virtue as an 'honourable woman' (76) reinforces the desire by women to experience pure love:

In love I gave all: my capabilities, my efforts, my feelings, my deepest emotions. Like a saint, I gave everything that I had without ever counting the cost. I wanted nothing, nothing at all, except perhaps one thing. To be saved through love from it all. To find myself again, to recover the self I had lost. To become a human being who was ... respected, and cherished and made to feel whole. (86).

Perhaps it is not fortuitous that the woman doctor who enters Firdaus's cell, enters the Arabic gate of Paradise. Although Firdaus has been denied the experience of pure love in this world, she will - in accordance with Muslim belief, and as El-Saadawi's texts suggest - receive it in abundance in the world hereafter. Schimmel (1982: 151) states that Rabia, as an epitome of pure love, stands out as an early heroine of this mystical love in Sufism, but she has had many successors on a smaller scale. (Rabia was an exceptional woman who was considered to have reached the lofty stage of a 'Man of God'. She represented the longing soul which braved all difficulties on the path toward the Divine Beloved.) What has been remarked about her can be said of all of these: 'When a woman walks in the path of God she cannot be called a "woman"' (1982: 151). Neither could she be called a 'man'. Rather it points to 'the ideal human being who has reached proximity to God where there is no distinction of sexes; and Rabia is the prime model of this proximity' (Schimmel, 1982: 151).

Although Firdaus's life has been far from paradise on earth, her presentation by El-Saadawi as a life-giving force, as well as the subtle religious nuances interwoven in the text, allude to another world: Paradise. Paradise is no longer an 'early antithesis of that other world' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 44). After all, Firdaus is already at the 'gate of Paradise' in her prison cell, awaiting her entrance into Paradise.

Notwithstanding the verdict that the protagonist in the Saadawian literary corpus rarely wins her battle against patriarchy, it is El-Saadawi, as narrator, who raises Firdaus to the world of Sufism when she writes: 'I was seized by a feeling very close to certainty, yet difficult to explain, that she was, in fact, better than all the men and women that we normally hear about, or see, or know ...' (4). El-Saadawi implies that Firdaus may well be a successor to the prime model of proximity in Sufism, one of the ideal human beings, who has reached close proximity to God; a closer proximity than any of the other 'others' in society could ever hope for. El-Saadawi is distinctive in her treatment of the theme of pure love in the Sufi context, which suggests a more mystical love. In fellow Muslim Bâ's hands, the theme of pure love is embedded in the Wolof proverb which suggests a humanist context that transcends gender inscription.

This mystical dimension in *Woman at Point Zero* is also revealed in *The Innocence of the Devil* (1994). To live in close proximity to God is the desire of every pious and devout Muslim man and woman. To live in Paradise with God, even more so. *Jannât wa-Iblîs* (*The Innocence of the Devil*) with its range of religious characters, for instance, Adam and Eve, the Devil and the Deity, as well as the serpent, functions as such a Qur'anic intertext with its clear reference to the Garden of Eden. Yet this Garden of Eden is not a paradise. Here, the Garden of Eden (a mental asylum) is indeed the very antithesis of its name. And contrary to Firdaus's future prospect of entering the gate of Paradise, as discussed above, there is now an extension 'back in time, coupled with the subtext on the Garden of Eden, ... [that] creates [a] sense of the past, [a] feeling of the absence of a future ...' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 140). The characters in *The Innocence of the Devil* are doomed to destruction. There is no prospect of any future for them. Paradise will never

materialize.

Malti-Douglas (1995: 199) makes the statement that from *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* to *The Innocence of the Devil*, the Egyptian feminist has worked to recast and redefine centuries-old textual materials. Therefore, 'one may well sense that in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* she was merely dipping her toes in this intertextual water. No matter. She progressively placed the rest of her body into it, until, with *The Innocence of the Devil*, she was swimming in the *turâth*, that beloved Arabo-Islamic cultural tradition' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 199).

In El-Saadawi's writings, religion is a multifaceted and complex enterprise, much like patriarchy, of which it is a pivotal component. As Malti-Douglas (1995: 204) contends:

Islam, Christianity and Judaism - the three monotheistic religions sit alongside other religious constructs, like that of ancient Egypt or the multiple deities of Hamidu's universe, to help mould an overarching religious patriarchy whose dynamic is universal.

The asylum, also called The Yellow Palace or the House, in *The Innocence of the Devil* 'had been an old palace built in the days of the Pharaohs It was [also] said by the people that the Devil lived in it, and kept it from falling ...' (3-4.)

However, in *The Innocence of the Devil* both the incarcerated Deity and the Devil are destroyed. Eblis dies in his attempt to escape from the asylum, whereupon the Deity, whose remorse is beyond compare, is found dead, too, shortly thereafter: 'They found him lying on his back close to the fence, wearing his white robe' (233). Neither of the two is destined to have eternal life. And it is through their deaths that the patriarchal system from

which they emanate is destroyed too. (It is especially here that the interpretation and analyses of El-Saadawi's texts by Fedwa Malti-Douglas are invaluable. As an Arab woman, she is firmly rooted in this Arabo-Islamic universe and familiar with the Arabic language, elements which are quite unfamiliar to the Western reader and critic, but which are crucial to an understanding and interpretation of El-Saadawi's texts. Malti-Douglas's insights stem from a number of meetings with both Nawal El-Saadawi and her husband, Sherif Hetata, in Egypt and she acknowledges the fact that she, without their help, could not have written her book.) Given this Arabo-Islamic context, Malti-Douglas (1995: 139) states that El-Saadawi has redefined the struggle between God and The Devil considerably, adding a feminist twist to the encounter. The destruction of the patriarchy, for example, is evidence of a feminist angle. However, Malti-Douglas appears to have oversimplified the relation between the character of the Deity and the character Eblis.

In her attempt to address the Islamist movement which has planted itself firmly in the Egyptian region, El-Saadawi is responding with her own feminist interpretation of the centuries-long Arabo-Islamic textual tradition. (Secularized writers and intellectuals like El-Saadawi are well aware of the cultural impact of this religious movement, as already discussed in the Introduction.) As Malti-Douglas (1995: 119) remarks, El-Saadawi does not go into 'the verbal battle unarmed'. She acquainted herself thoroughly with the religious normative texts, like the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, commentaries, lives of the prophets, as well as the less religiously oriented materials.

Issues dear to the Egyptian's feminist heart feature prominently in the novel. For example, gender and its relation to the theology and language, history and patrimony are

inextricably interwoven in the text. The narration is presented by a third-person narrator. The events of the novel move in 'a dizzying fashion between past and present, fantasy and reality', as Malti-Douglas (1995: 119) notes. Different levels of the language add to this ambiguity of present and past: the dialogue is sometimes in literary Arabic, sometimes in Egyptian dialect, and in several cases it involves both of the levels of language at once (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 119). The different levels of the language is central to an understanding of the dialogue between Narguiss and the Director, as well as the implications of such a switch between the two dialects, as will be shown later in the discussion of this text.

Theology provides the subtext for the whole of *The Innocence of the Devil*:

It governs the names. It governs the relationships. It governs the gender dynamics. It governs the linguistic system. And by virtue of this enormous textual power, it also permits the creation of irony, bisociation, and so on. (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 122)

Names, in the context of the asylum, certainly have the ability to recast the entire concept of the Garden of Eden. The name of the newcomer to the asylum, Ganat, is the plural of *Gana*, meaning Heaven/Paradise, or, the Garden of Eden. The positive connotation of rivers of milk and honey (a reference to the pleasures awaiting the believer in the Garden of Eden) is, ironically, not relevant to this young woman: 'She did not like the taste of honey, nor that of milk, and preferred salted cheese or pickles' (19). Notwithstanding the fact that Ganat's name, 'her onomastic identity, has been defined intertextually in terms of the Muslim Holy Book' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 122) her life in the asylum will be permeated with the sharp sting of pickles when she is subjected to electroshock therapy ('leather belts' with 'long wires' and 'syringe' pricks, 27-28). Electroshock therapy, and its

equally unpleasant effects, are indeed depicted in pointed contrast to the sweet pleasures awaiting the believer in the Garden of Eden.

Yet it is not only Ganat's name that links her to the Garden (s) of Eden and the religious domain, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 123) notes. Ganat's innocent enquiry (as a child) from her grandmother (a Christian woman, who despite her Muslim husband's efforts to educate her in the Muslim ways, keeps a Bible hidden under her pillow), whether Allah is different from al-Lah, opens up a 'can of worms' and transports the reader from the 'domain of language' into the 'domain of theology' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 124-5): The word *Allâh*, as is well known in the Arabo-Islamic universe, is composed of two elements: the definite article, *al* (the), and the word for 'deity', *ilâh*, which are elided into al-Lâh or Allâh, the Deity par excellence. Since the pronunciation of the 'i' is very close to that of the 'a', it occasionally happens that the 'i' is expressed as an 'a'. From there it is an easy jump to the feminine al-Lât, a word in which orthographically the 'h' picks up the two famous dots, signifying the feminine, as Malti-Douglas explains (1995: 125).

On a most rudimentary level, Ganat and her grandmother transform a grammatically male deity into a grammatically female one. It should also be remembered, as Malti-Douglas points out, that although the word *Allâh* is grammatically masculine, Muslim theologians have always argued that human categories like gender do not apply to God. As already discussed in Chapter One, the female deity Al-Lat played an important role in pre-Islamic society, as the Arabs believed that such a goddess played an active role in war. (Al-Lat and Uzza were both goddesses of Abou Suffian's tribe, who brought victory over the Muslims in the battle of Uhud.) It is precisely the elimination of these pagan deities that

the Prophet Muhammad set out to accomplish in the seventh century. As Malti-Douglas comments, the gender games that Ganat and her grandmother play with male and female deities become sacrilegious indeed. Not only is doubt cast on the unity and transcendence of Allah, but in a carefully constructed manner the pre-Islamic deity is revived by the narrator of *The Innocence of the Devil*.

The innocent word games of the two women cause utter frustration and impatience for both the grandfather and the school teacher (similar word games are played at school by Ganat). The transposition of two letters turns their worlds upside down, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 125) remarks. The subversal of power by the narrator accentuates the tenuous relationship between women and the Muslim religious tradition (this relationship has already been discussed in detail in Chapter One, especially with regard to woman's contribution to the fall of man).

This tenuous relationship is highlighted by El-Saadawi when her male characters use derogatory names in addressing the females. Ganat is given a sound whipping for tearing a page from the Holy Book out of which she makes an aeroplane: 'It's the Book of God, you stupid little ass' (22). Narguiss is punished in a similar manner when she plays with her father's copy of the *Qur'an*: 'It's God's book, you little ass' (48). This verbal and physical abuse can be linked to the religious domain. As already referred to in Chapter One, the presence of women is an element that constituted pollution. The 'polluting essence' of femaleness is echoed in the treatment of women in the lives of El-Saadawi's characters in their childhood. Hence the derogatory names. And hence the ultimate form of violation against the female Nefissa when she is raped by the Deity in the asylum.

Multi-Douglas (1995: 133) points out that the verbal duel between man and woman on female homosexuality transcends the corporal and moves into the domain of religion, as the interchange between Narguiss (female chief director of the asylum) and the Director enters the religio-theological realm when he calls her 'You fallen woman' (174). Multi-Douglas (1995: 134) highlights the full import of the Director's closing statement when she explains the term fallen woman in Islamic context. The word 'falls' takes *saqata* (he fell) in the past tense, with *saqatat* (she fell) as the feminine. The word *sâqita*, a fallen woman, 'embraces a notion of falling that is gender specific' (Multi-Douglas, 1995: 134). The reader furthermore learns that the feminine has a plural, *sâqitat*, but that no masculine plural exists: 'She was a fallen woman like her mother Eve who fell into sin' (31). Paradoxically, Adam was not a fallen man. According to the teachings of Islam, man does not fall except in elections, or a military battle, or in the school examination while still a student. These ideas reappear throughout the narrative.

Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, as already pointed out in Chapter One, is central to all three monotheistic Abrahamic religions. And as already discussed, Islam does not blame Eve alone for the fall. Nevertheless, as Multi-Douglas (1995: 134) observes, 'in a certain misogynistic strand of the Islamic religio-cultural system, Eve is the chief culprit'. This misogynistic strand (as well as the dilemma it causes for women) is clearly emphasized by El-Saadawi when, in a Muslim context, Narguiss's father explains to her mother that the Lord forgave Adam only. Multi-Douglas states that the Saadawian narrator has tripped on - or walked deliberately into - a vigorously debated issue in Arabo-Islamic texts. Did God, after the fall, forgive Adam only, or did He forgive both Adam and Eve? The Qur'anic citation uttered by Narguiss's father, according to Multi-

Douglas (1995: 135), is from verse 37 of Surat al-Baqara and reads: 'Thereafter Adam received certain words from his Lord, and He turned towards him' - meaning that the Deity forgave Adam. There is also no grammatical ambiguity here: the pronominal suffixes in the original Arabic are in the masculine singular, as Malti-Douglas remarks (1995: 135). This is the message that the father is instilling in the mother (and the reader). His justification that Eve was not forgiven stems from his belief in the *Qur'an* as the unmediated word of God in the Arabic language: 'God had a deep knowledge of language and its rules. He would never use the singular or the dual except in the right context' (117).

The debate over who is forgiven and who is not forgiven by the Deity in the Muslim Holy Book is not simply the domain of the pre-modern commentators, as Malti-Douglas points out. So does Al-Tabari, one of the most popular Qur'anic commentators, make it clear that it is only Adam that is forgiven. Other commentators, however, rush to explain that Eve is clearly covered in the act of forgiveness (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 136).

By raising this central question of forgiveness, El-Saadawi has inserted her novel into yet another contemporary debate, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 137) notes. This time it is the relationship between Ganat and Eblis (and his claim that he is neither Satan nor an angel, he is merely a human being) that precipitates another Islamic debate on the nature of the Devil: Is he an angel? Is he a devil? Opinions have varied, as Malti-Douglas remarks: 'Nawal El-Saadawi's radical feminist vision is not only imbued with mainstream Arabo-Islamic religio-legal texts; it also comes close to a view of *Iblis* prevalent in Islamic mystical traditions. There he is excused, a misunderstood victim' (1995: 137). The Deity's

reaction upon the news of Eblis's death seems to endorse the notion of Eblis as an innocent victim in the context of the asylum: 'Forgive me, my son I am responsible for our defeat, my son! ... Forgive me You are innocent' (230). When Nefissa's brother Eblis dies, her mother is told that he is in 'the Garden of Eden'. When Nefissa goes looking for her brother in the streets of Cairo, she is told that she must look for him either in prison or in the insane asylum. In the asylum the reader indeed meets a character called Eblis, who is hiding near a tree. Is this, then, brother Eblis? He is after all in the asylum. Or, if the religious subtext is taken into cognizance: he is in the Garden of Eden. For, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 140) claims: it is, after all, the place where the serpent is present in the crack of a wall. It is the place where Eblis is hiding near a tree. And, it is the place where the Deity is walking around.

Yet the behaviour of the Deity in the asylum is paradoxical to one of reconciliation and forgiveness with regard to Adam and Eve's transgression and their subsequent fall from grace in the Holy Book. Rather, he is the person who resorts to ultimate violation when he, an epitome of superior male authority, rapes Nefissa. The rape of Nefissa is enacted through the Deity's interrogation of the woman and his manipulation of sacred texts with regard to the piety of women. As Malti-Douglas (1995: 128) remarks, Nefissa's molestation is embedded in an additional referential universe, this time that of theology. Nefissa falls prey to notions of obedience instilled in her by the traditional religious teacher. Therefore, 'once [Nefissa] has blindly ... accepted the Shaykh's teachings, she becomes the casualty of another male, this time the Deity' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 128).

The incarcerated Deity, as Malti-Douglas points out, places his finger on two major

cultural and civilizational forces when he interrogates the female. The first involves Nefissa's relationship with Eblis. The association of woman with the Devil is not innocent. In the Arabo-Islamic imagination, woman and the Devil are a lively pair, at times becoming synonymous with the other. There are numerous references to their intimate association in the *Hadith*, as well as in more secular commentaries.

The second question by the Deity involves the Deity personally, namely whether he is the first man in her life. His reference to *sharîk* (partner) transports him into the domain of theological debate in Islam over God's unity (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 129): To provide the Deity with a partner is to 'draw away from his unity, ... and lapse into idolatry'. Nefissa ascertains the unity of the Deity, whereupon he rapes her. Nefissa's violation is described in a 'theologically pregnant register' (and not surprisingly, given the theologically drenched context as Malti-Douglas, 1995: 129 notes). When Nefissa is raped: 'she ... suddenly felt something searing like a fire' (84). As previously pointed out in this chapter, the word 'fire' in Arabic is a word laden with meaning. For Nefissa, this fire is indeed a hellfire that casts her in the depths of hell as a fallen woman.

Malti-Douglas (1995: 129-30) makes the statement that the text, *The Innocence of the Devil*, is speaking to two readers. The Deity's concern with virtue expresses the male patriarchal establishment's obsession with the honour of woman (already discussed in the analysis of *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*). On a theological level, virtue and piety involve the three Abrahamic religions that co-exist in *The Innocence of the Devil*. The Muslim Deity is therefore not the only inhabitant of the gendered religious universe of *The Innocence of the Devil*, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 130) points out. Women as a collectivity

also address the other Deity of the Old Testament, Yahweh. Clearly, the preference is for Islam. Yet in the Islamic context of *The Innocence of the Devil* Allah is the exclusive property of the male patriarchal system. Nefissa is told that the Deity does not answer women. And when the corporal Deity finally answers Nefissa he abuses his male power to dishonour her. It is indeed a strange world that advocates piety and virtue on the one hand, yet on the other hand manipulates and disgraces this very same advocacy. But then, as the reader already has noticed, it is a strange world in which both reality and surreality diversify each other continually.

There is, however, a woman in this real-surreal world who is prepared to challenge the power relationship in which the male dominates the female. Ganat's entrance into the asylum is very dramatic:

The moment she stepped in through the gate everything came to a halt. Even the birds ceased their twittering Her body entered through the open gate with a movement which was unusual for a woman. She seemed to break in with her tall body, to throw herself through it, taut as an arrow, as though diving into the sea [Her eyes] were eyes wide open to the world, like windows She walked barefoot She charged through the black iron gate like a white arrow splitting the universe No one had ever witnessed a scene like this in the palace, either in the early days, or more recently. (4-5)

Ganat has been a rebel from the minute she was born with her eyes wide open. Yet notwithstanding her rebellious character traits, she 'embodies the eternal woman, doomed to destruction' (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 137). When her cure is declared 'successful', she leaves the asylum in an equally unusual manner, 'lying in a coffin which was being carried on people's shoulders, wearing a long robe the colour of a wedding dress ...' (199). Certain events in nature subtly allude to the Christian version of the Messiah's crucifixion. The clouds are described as black and heavy. The huge door that opens and creaks on its

hinges resembles the tearing of the shrine. The walls tremble. So too does a movement go through the human bodies lying in the ward, depicted in a more universal manner as 'sons of Adam and daughters of Eve' (198). 'Imprisoned tears' lie in their eyes which neither dry, nor fall out. And the air is 'loaded with defeat' (198). Ganat's death sentence: she is not 'a whore', and she is not 'a pure, virtuous woman'. But she is 'a human being and [her] heart is [her] God. Her crime was a poem' (199).

Narguiss, too, is a woman who (after thirty years of submission to the Director and his sexual whims) lifts her head for the first time and stares at the Director's eyes. (The number thirty indeed purports an important notion of 'seeing the light' in both Bâ and El-Saadawi's textual corpus.) As already pointed to, the gaze plays a central role in Islam. Woman is to avert the gaze. Yet Narguiss finally chooses to behold the powerful light of the male superior, and contrary to the notion of being blinded when a woman beholds such powerful light, she walks away unscathed. (After all, the Director is a Deity too. Like the Mayor in *God dies by the Nile* he alone decides over life and death in the asylum.)

Narguiss walks away, but not before she has established her identity as a subject and not as an object. The previous discourse of social power and male-female interaction now enters the religio-theological realm, as Malti-Douglas (1995: 132) points out. The mentioning of Hell and the People of Lot is the signal. This follows the Director's statement that Narguiss now loves women. He claims that she will go to Hell, whereupon Narguiss replies that it is not 'mentioned in God's Book' (173). The general assumption is, of course, that lesbianism will be punished in a similar manner to male homosexuality.

However, Narguiss proves to have the upper hand in this debate. As Malti-Douglas (1995: 133) notes, up to the point of the Director's condemnation of Narguiss and her 'illegal' practice, the interchange has been in the Egyptian dialect. Her last sentence, namely that it is not mentioned in the Holy Book, is uttered in literary Arabic. Her statement in the Arabic language is very meaningful. For did Nefissa's father not claim that God has a deep knowledge of the Arabic language and its rules? And who else, other than God, is in a better position to determine the fate of women in the Arabo-Islamic context?

Despite Ganat and Narguiss's courage and brave attempts to subvert the powerful patriarchal system, they are both killed by it. (Narguiss is shot in her attempt to free herself after 'thirty years of sadness', 174.) The narrative (right in the opening paragraphs) prefigures the notion of defeat. And, the reader has already been warned that Paradise will not materialize for these characters: at least not in this world.

Notwithstanding a sense of defeat Nawal El-Saadawi advocates, in a similar fashion to Mariama Bâ, the notion of redemption. And, as in Mariama Bâ's texts, redemption lies, first and foremost, in humanity, as already intimated. Ganat claims that she is a human being and that her heart is her God, implying that the notion of redemption lies in man/woman himself/herself. Her claim that she is a jewel, and that 'a jewel rarely comes out of the earth' (213) alludes to her relation with Paradise.

Given this statement, and as already pointed out, Ganat embodies the eternal woman. Firdaus, too, awaits eternal life at the gate of Paradise. These protagonists have managed to move beyond the veil to close proximity to God as whole human beings where gender

distinction has been transcended, signifying an all-embracing Islamic theocracy. Very often El-Saadawi's protagonists are doomed to destruction by a patriarchal system that denies them a meaningful existence as human beings in the Sufism context. (Symbolically and paradoxically, this patriarchal system has also been veiled by the *hijab*, hence its inability to address and pursue humanity with the complete truth.) In the Muslim theocracy, however, there is the promise of a Garden of Eden hereafter, where Paradise certainly will materialize.

EPILOGUE

As the threads of the argument of this study have already been drawn together in Chapter Six, a further synopsis is not deemed necessary. Instead of a conclusion, therefore, an epilogue is proffered. This includes a brief review of the Muslim women's position, and some speculative remarks on the way forward taking cognizance of the dangers of regression in a Fundamentalist frame of reference.

Changes in the Muslim woman's role and status in a Muslim patriarchal society have been viewed by male literature as 'being solely a religious problem' (Fatima Mernissi, 1975: 99). However, as Mernissi points out, changes in the condition of women which have taken place in the twentieth century, show that 'the liberation of women is predominantly an economic issue ... a question of the allocation of resources' (1975: 99).

In view of this context, a few speculative remarks on the likely future of Muslim women in the Arab and African world are made. Nawal El-Saadawi (1980: 131) writes that many Arab women of today have inherited the tradition of Aisha [one of the prominent wives of the Prophet] and of those who stood up for themselves and for their rights. However, most of these women have succumbed to the heavy load of the patriarchal class society and have ended up prisoners of the home, of the veil and of a system which prevents them from participating in the economic and social life of their society. In line with this argument, Mernissi (1975: 100) reasons that confusing sexual self-determination of woman with chaotic lawless anomalistic promiscuity is not exclusive to Muslim societies facing drastic changes in their family structure. Muslim marriage, according to Mernissi, is based on the premise that social order can only be maintained if the woman's dangerous potential for chaos is restrained by a dominating non-loving husband. This husband has,

besides his wife, other females available for his sexual pleasure under what Mernissi perceives as equally degrading conditions.

Mernissi's solution to this problem parallels that of Mariama Bâ, who promotes a new sexual order based on the absence of all dehumanizing limitations of the woman's potential. And had Bâ's life not been cut short so tragically, it is reasonable to suppose that she would have continued to advocate a healthy Muslim society, devoid of the exploitation of the patriarchal structure of polygamy, a society in which human treatment of women is the order of the day. El-Saadawi also subscribes to this notion of a new sexual order when she claims: 'Love is the greatest experience through which a human being can pass, since by way of love it is possible for the physical, mental and emotional potentialities of the man or woman to reach their highest point of intensity and to plunge deep down into the self or being' (1980: 74).

Although neither Bâ nor El-Saadawi condemns polygamous marriages too vociferously, they nevertheless advocate the uniting message of a 'one man, one wife' matrimony as opposed to a polygamous relationship which may lead to abandonment. Their argument seems to suggest that the unkind treatment of woman in such a relationship often contributes to a world becoming increasingly dehumanized. It appears that Mariama Bâ fully realizes that the position of women is an element in a total culture: How [asks Charles Sarvan seemingly on Bâ's behalf] 'can one alter an element and not affect the traditional African whole?' (Sarvan, 1988: 464) But there is also an awareness that change is not only inevitable, but necessary. Both writers, of course, subscribe to the notion that societies and cultures should not be static but dynamic. This is the message

Mariama Bâ sets out to advocate in *Scarlet Song* when she claims that 'culture is universal' and that it is 'an instrument of development' (*Scarlet Song*, 1994: 47).

So, too, are both Bâ and El-Saadawi aware of the impact of Westernization. El-Saadawi (1980: x) believes that the Arab's past experience has always shown that any strengthening of the links that bind the Arab peoples to Western interests inevitably leads to a retreat in all spheres of thought and action. Social progress, in El-Saadawi's viewpoint, 'is arrested and the most reactionary and traditionalist circles in society begin to clamour for a return to orthodoxy and dogma' (1980: x).

While Mariama Bâ is 'keen to retain those traditional values which enrich the life of the individual' (Stringer, 1988: 40), she is convinced that the whole society's happiness is built on monogamous marriage. In the modern context, the promotion of such a marriage in a Muslim society seems to be a new ideal in Africa. However, given the religious context of Islam, and the injunction in the *Qur'an* that it is better for a man to have one wife only (as has been discussed in Chapter Two), this ideal is perhaps not unattainable. It is arguable that this is the ideal that would probably have recurred in Mariama Bâ's future texts, had she been given the opportunity to express it. D'Almeida (1984: 171) furthers this notion of monogamy when she points out that this concept of choice has far-reaching effects on the 'human community'.

Following the concept of choice, Mernissi (1975: 102) comments that 'the future of male-female dynamics greatly depends on the way modern states handle the readjustment of sexual rights and the reassessment of sexual statuses'. Modern Muslim societies have to

face the fact that the traditional family 'mutilates' the woman by depriving her of her humanity. Mernissi (1975: 107) also declares that: 'what modern Muslim societies ought to strive toward is a family based on the unfragmented wholeness of the woman'. This wholeness of woman is highlighted by El-Saadawi in her novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1983). Given this context of wholeness, Firdaus [the protagonist of the latter novel] may well have attained unfragmented wholeness, as well as a close proximity to God that transcends all gender inscription. The problem Muslim societies face, in attaining such wholeness, is apparently not whether or not to change, but how fast to change. Mernissi therefore claims that the Muslim woman is a central element in any sovereign future.

Complete and real liberation of women, in El-Saadawi's opinion (1980: 180), whether in the Arab countries or the West or the Far East, can only become a fact when humanity does away with class society and exploitation; and when the patriarchal systems with its values, structures and concepts of laws of patriarchalism have been completely eradicated.

In terms of the title *Beyond the veil: Muslim women write back*, which functions as a recurring theme in this study, an attempt has been made to move forward and to move 'beyond' the veil, through the speaking voice, and through writing back. Vocal freedom, as El-Saadawi comments, has a price that is worth to be paid by every Muslim woman, as the price of slavery is even higher. 'For a woman to be able to regain her personality, her humanity, her intrinsic and real self is much more worthwhile than all the approbation of a male dominated society' (El-Saadawi, 1980: 209).

This study, and in particular the reading of *Scarlet Song* (1994), suggests that if Mariama

Bâ had had one more opportunity to speak, she certainly would have confirmed Nawal El-Saadawi and Fatna Ait Sabbah's vision of a new and better world, where women - as human beings - will enjoy freedom. The already cited injunction (as translated and quoted by Edris Makward, 1986: 280 in Chapter Five) that the course of history can be changed by '*liv[ing] better and lov[ing] better*' encapsulates this vision of a better world.

This better world, in Alya Baffoun's view, would render Muslim woman's new status in society as one where the 'second sex' has now also become 'the first' (Baffoun, 1982: 241). This newer - or arguably older in terms of matriarchy preceding patriarchy - hierarchical order reflects most nearly a now somewhat dated feminist world view ascertaining 'the superiority of a gender specific vision' (Dorothy Driver, 1982: 212). This could be perceived as a somewhat ingenuous attempt to find a way *out* rather than a way *on*. It is a womanist view that perhaps comes closer to anticipating the ideal towards which Mariama Bâ and Nawal El-Saadawi strove/strives. In this context, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's distinction (1985: 8) between the feminist and womanist approaches seems pertinent: 'womanism [supports] the freedom and independence of women like feminism', but unlike feminism 'it wants meaningful union between women and men and will wait patiently for men to change their sexist stance'.

Although this distinction is useful, it too falls short in that it fails to recognise the way in which feminism itself has come of age. Early feminist literary criticism, as well as feminist writing, tended to be 'a reactive discipline: it defines itself in relation to a male model, and works through a mode of negation (Driver, 1982: 210). This standpoint is unequivocally expressed, for example, by Josephine Donovan (1975: 76), who declares: 'we are saying

no to a whole series of oppressive ways, images and falsehoods that have been perpetrated against women both in literature and literary criticism'.

However, an arguably more 'mature' or eclectic view rejects this kind of extremism. In the carefully balanced perspective of Annette Kolodny (1980: 17) feminist literary discourse is broader-based, less reactive: it 'represents that locus in literary study where, in unceasing effort, female self-consciousness turns in upon itself, attempting to grasp the deepest conditions of its own unique and multiplicitous realities, in the hope, eventually, of altering the very forms through which a culture perceives, expresses and knows itself. Finally, and as already intimated, such a female self-consciousness will contribute to the vision, as well as the materialization, of a better world for all.

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