

# Representation of Women: A literary and socio-psychological analysis of the Francophone Novels *Une si longue lettre* and *Le Voile de Draupadi*

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## Abstract

The nexus between Francophone literature and the role of women is strong and significant. Among Francophone women writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mariama Bâ of Senegal and Ananda Devi of Mauritius are recognized as feminist writers. This research conducts a detailed analysis of the two novels *Une Si Longue Lettre* by Mariama Bâ and *Le Voile de Draupadi* by Ananda Devi in search of the ways in which women are represented. As the role of females in society is considered crucial today, the research question of the study focuses on identifying how women are being represented in the face of gender-based challenges in the two novels. Accordingly, the main objectives of this paper are to identify the situation of women in the two respective societies – Senegalese and Mauritian - in general and to find out whether the two respective female protagonists succeed in overcoming the challenges posed by their societies. The research is based on a literary and socio-psychological analysis of the two novels, focusing on different themes the two writers have developed in their explorations of the woman's situation in society and the characteristics she has cultivated in the face of numerous gender-based challenges. The analysis of the literature survey reveals that the tragic situation of the woman in both societies is the same though, she remains strong and liberates herself with perseverance, supported by her education, conduct, friendships with others and understanding.

**Keywords:** francophone literature, stoicism, women.

## 1. Introduction

Francophone literature is an integral part of French literature today, while Francophone women's writings plays a crucial role in exposing the status of women in Francophone societies. Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi are recognized as two leading Francophone feminist writers who belong to this category. French feminist writer Hélène Cixous in her essay, "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), (revised and translated into English in 1976 by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen under the title *The Laugh of the Medusa*) which is considered a defence of women, states:

I shall speak about women's writings: about *what it will do*. Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons,

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by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself in the text - as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (Cixous *et al.*, 1976, pp. 875-893).

Responding to Cixous’s (1976) call for Francophone women writers, Mariama Bâ from Senegal and Ananda Devi from Mauritius embark on their mission as feminist writers. This is evidenced in the *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ (1979) and *Le Voile de Draupadi* by Ananda Devi (1993) which provide insights into the status of women in their respective societies.

The present research aims to study the representation of woman in the two novels focusing on the struggle of women against gender inequality, and the status of women in society. Of the two novels, the researcher selected *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ owing to its way of depicting female characters, and *Le Voile de Draupadi* by Ananda Devi because of the author’s affinity with Indian culture which is close to that of the researcher. Ananda Devi comes from Mauritius where the majority of the people are of Indian origin and their culture is therefore quite similar to that of India.

The research question elicits how women in the two novels are represented in the face of the gender-based challenges, with the main objective of understanding the situation of women in the two societies presented. The study basically focuses on the several themes developed in the two novels. Hence, the research is based on a textual analysis of the two novels and an analysis of the qualitative data collected from a variety of sources, including interviews.

## **2. Research methodology**

The present study is a library research supported by interviews with scholars of Feminism. It has gathered qualitative data on the depiction of women by means of a comparative analysis of two Francophone novels produced in two socially, culturally, and religiously different settings. Following the selection of the two novels, the researcher referred to articles and works on the two writers; their respective societies and, religions: Islam and Hinduism and the two novels to get a holistic idea of the context. A thematic analysis was done to study the representation of women in the Senegalese society and Mauritian society by focusing on the main characters in each of the novels: Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre* and Anjali in *Le Voile de Draupadi*. The thematic analysis was conducted by focusing on different themes tackled in the two novels that shape the image of women. In order to better analyse the two novels, the researcher has also referred to books on feminism and

the status of women in the face of religion and culture, magazines, documentaries, videos and other research related to the subject. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex*, is a key text used for this purpose. To get further insights, the researcher interviewed Maithree Wickramasinghe, a Professor in English Studies at the University of Kelaniya who has specialized in feminist research methodology. The analysis is based on a close reading of the two novels and other relevant information gathered.

### **3. Results and discussion**

The two writers use the sufferings of the female characters in the novels to reveal multiple types and layers of oppression of women in their societies. However, the writers show how the women in their novels survive despite all the obstacles presented. This struggle of a woman who finds her liberation demonstrates the stoicism of women in the face of suffering. To study the stoicism of women, the study is divided into several parts: the inner struggle of women, the dignity of women, friendship between women, education, and perseverance and liberation.

#### **3.1 Inner struggle of women**

In both novels, the writers depict women for whom social oppression is more or less the same. Female characters are portrayed as trapped in a patriarchal system. However, the women presented by the two writers in the two novels do not remain passive. They engage in an inner struggle where they try to find their lost identity in culture. This inner struggle is always sustained by their intelligence and perseverance. Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi highlight women's ability to think and remain stoic.

The two female protagonists in the two novels lead a permanent struggle not to lose themselves in traditional ideologies. In the novel *Une si longue lettre*, as its title indicates, the readers perceive a long letter that Ramatoulaye writes to her friend, Aïssatou. Ramatoulaye has recently become a widow, following the death of Modou Fall, her husband of thirty years. What is noteworthy is that Ramatoulaye uses the forty-day mourning period imposed by tradition to reflect on her life. Mariama Bâ shows the fact that it is a fight inside the woman to achieve her own freedom: "I survived. I got rid of my shyness to face the theatres alone; I sat in my place, with less and less embarrassment, over the months." (p.99). Ramatoulaye's statement about her experiences after her husband's abandonment emphasizes how she tries to become stronger by overcoming her shyness. Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi present women's struggle that goes on silently. In the novel *Une si longue lettre*,

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Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou engage in a long struggle of which the fundamental objective is the liberation of women oppressed by men. "We were true sisters destined for the same emancipatory mission [...] to cultivate our personality, to strengthen our qualities, to subdue our defects [...]" (p.38). The two best friends lead a permanent struggle refusing to get lost in traditional ideologies. In the journal article, "*Feminisms in an African context: Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter*", Rizwana Habib Latha (2001) states that: "Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* contains a strong message, not only about the disempowerment of women, but also about how women can empower themselves effectively". According to Latha (2001), the writer shows not only the marginalization of women, but also how women empower themselves. The inner struggle in this context enables women to become empowered.

This inner fight of the woman is conspicuous in the character of Anjali too. Through the novel *Le voile de Draupadi*, Ananda Devi shows the permanent struggle of the woman. Anjali gives herself courage and tries to face problems by saying to herself, "For the moment I must lead my own struggle, understand me" (p.55). Anjali's character is portrayed as a woman who embarks on an inner journey in order to distance herself from patriarchal society. At times she is not even aware of her own capacity to fight, "A thread of rebellion that no one will understand because it is more fragile than weapons or a smile. I don't understand it myself. Where does this fighting courage come from?" (p.7). Yet, she discovers her power as a fighter. Ananda Devi uses Anjali's thoughts to highlight the silent struggle that is going on inside her, "I want to be the rock and Dev can hammer me all he wants, I won't change" (p.84). By using the word "hammer," Ananda Devi demonstrates Anjali's distress and her struggle to safeguard her integrity and dignity, and portrays her as someone who does not want to be forced to do something against her will.

In this way, the two writers, Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi, have depicted the silent struggle of women to liberate themselves and fight oppression.

### **3.2 The dignity of women**

Dignity is the "attitude imbued with reserve, seriousness, inspired by the nobility of feelings or by the desire for respectability; feeling that someone has value" (Garnier & Vinciguerra, 2017). In both novels, *Une si longue lettre* and *Le Voile de Draupadi*, Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and Anjali embark on a strenuous journey. They face problems created by the patriarchal society which affect their sense of dignity.

In the novel *Une si longue lettre*, Mariama Bâ reveals two women who do not accept polygamy which they perceive as detrimental to their dignity. After the death of

Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, there are men who ask for Ramatoulaye's hand, "[...] after Tamsir then, Daouda Dieng candidate for my hand!" (p. 112). Even if there are candidates who are ready to have a polygamous life with Ramatoulaye, she does not opt for it, since she thinks that she will have no value in such a family. Ramatoulaye's words, "I will never be the complement of your collection" (p. 110) and "I do not have the elasticity of conscience necessary to accept being your wife [...]" (p. 127), addressed to Tamsir show her dignity and strength of character. Thus, these multiple refusals of Ramatoulaye explain the dignity of a woman who does not want to give in to materialism and polygamy.

Moreover, Ramatoulaye's firm ideas show the need for a status for women in society. The notion of women's dignity is further highlighted by the following words of Ramatoulaye, "I am not alone in insisting on changing the rules of the game and breathing new life into it. The woman must no longer be the accessory that adorns. The object that one moves, the companion that one flatters or calms with promises." (p. 116). She thus refuses to be treated as an object that has no importance.

Anjali, too, protects her dignity. She does not allow herself to be overwhelmed by the secondary role of woman imposed by society, "Maybe he thinks of me a little in his own way. But his blinders threw him on the path of his identity as a man, and force me to assume a secondary role that is not mine. I am your companion, Dev, do I want to tell him. Your accomplice, your companion" (p. 56). She does not want to be the submissive woman who plays the secondary role. Anjali wants equality and, dignity. Moreover, when it comes to decision making, she shows great dignity by making her own choices. She chooses to walk on fire after thinking a lot about herself. She makes the sacrifice not because Dev and the in-laws ask her, but because she wants to discover herself, "No one is forcing me to do anything, please listen to me. They haven't asked me for anything yet, absolutely nothing. I made this decision, made my own choice" (p. 126). Anjali's words to her parents show her dignity, her autonomy, and her sense of power.

Thus, the female protagonists in the two novels, *Une si longue lettre* and *Le Voile de Draupadi*, remain strong, autonomous, and stable due to several main reasons, among which dignity has a prominent place. Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi highlight that women's dignity makes them powerful by making them aware of their power to survive alone despite life's obstacles.

### **3.3 Friendship between women**

According to Marianne Prairie (2015), "Solidarity is not a feminine virtue. It is a feeling that binds all those who live the same tragedies and discriminations. And that is profoundly human" (p. 13). Reflecting the same thought, Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi reveal, in their novels, the solidarity between women that can be seen in the form of friendship. An in-depth study of this friendship in both novels shows how women are supported by it. It is through this solidarity that women support and help each other to overcome the obstacles in their patriarchal societies and to find their own identity. According to Hooks (1986), solidarity between women strengthens their struggle against oppression, and to change a patriarchal society, solidarity between women is necessary. The friends, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, and Anjali and Fatmah help each other as they advance in their path to freedom.

In the novel *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ, we see the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. Ramatoulaye writes her letter to Aïssatou. Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou remain friends from their childhood to old age. They share since childhood an unfailing friendship, which Ramatoulaye compares to "lifeblood", an ancestral symbol of energy, healing and magic. Despite the distance, the two women support each other in this ordeal of polygamy.

Simone de Beauvoir (1975) says in a television interview that the solidarity between women helps them in their struggle for emancipation. For example, after the divorce of Aïssatou, who refused to be a co-wife, Ramatoulaye says: "my presence, my encouragement, the books saved you" (p.66). With the support of her friend, Aïssatou managed to persevere by continuing her education and earning a living without her husband, Mawdo. This support is reciprocal because, when Ramatoulaye suffers from polygamy and her husband's debts, Aïssatou helps her, "I will never forget your reaction, you, my sister. I will never forget the joy and surprise that was mine, when, summoned to the Fiat dealership, I was told to choose a car that you would pay in full" (p.102). As Hooks (1986) points out, solidarity among women is strengthened because of their common oppression. Being lifelong friends, Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye understand their problems because they are common problems. This, in turn, strengthens their relationship.

Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye are thus connected by the knowledge and gift of friendship that unites them in the face of life's obstacles. According to Ramatoulaye, friendship is stronger than love, which becomes unstable in the face of constraints, "Friendship has unknown greatness of love. It is strengthened in the face of hardship, while constraints destroy love. It resists time, which wearies and disunites couples.

It has elevations unknown to love" (p. 103). Thus, friendship becomes an integral part of life of women who live in a patriarchal society and this makes women stoic.

Like Mariama Bâ, Ananda Devi also reveals the importance of friendship between women in her novel *Le Voile de Draupadi*, where the writer depicts the need for solidarity that brings women together. From Ananda Devi's perspective, this mutual aid is based on a good relationship. The last sentence of the novel by Anjali, "In the morning, I will meet Fatmah" (p.175), shows an opening; the promise of a new beginning by making one think of the developments in the friendship between the two women, Anjali and Fatmah. Explaining the feminist perspective on women helping each other, Professor Emeritus Diane Kravetz (2004) writes in her book *Tales from the trenches* that women helping women signals feminism's emphasis on women's helping one another as a means of counteracting their social powerlessness and vulnerability. Friends saw themselves as providing important models of what women could accomplish, thus challenging gender stereotypes that define women as passive, weak, and frivolous. In the novel, this is seen in the way two equally oppressed women help each other to become stronger in the face of adversities. Fatmah is Anjali's Muslim friend who helps her to become stronger when Dev leaves all the responsibility of the child in Anjali's hands.

Anjali is suffering mentally, and it is obvious that no one understands her situation. Therefore, she decides to go to her friend who understands and supports her better than others. As stated in the previous quote, solidarity among women strengthens them in vulnerable moments. Like Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre*, Anjali also finds friendship as a source of energy that helps her remain stoic, "Now I saw in her the element of balance that would put all my disordered thoughts back in place, give them back some semblance of reason." (p. 101). It is her friend, Fatmah, who supports her in vulnerable moments. Hence, Anjali values her friendship with Fatmah, and finds Fatmah as "the balancing element that would put all my disordered thoughts back in place". In fact, Fatmah becomes the embodiment of friendship for Anjali, "I have never been able to describe the face of friendship other than by calling it Fatmah" (p. 101).

Ramatoulaye and Anjali in the two novels, *Une si longue lettre* and *Le Voile de Draupadi*, thus find in women's solidarity the means to rise above discrimination and the means to survive. What should be noted here is that it is the friend, and not the husband, who supports the wife in both novels, which supports the claim that, the friends, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, Anjali and Fatmah help each other on their

journey to freedom. Thus, solidarity between women directly affects the stoicism of women.

### **3.4 The education of woman**

In the novel *Une si longue lettre*, Mariama Bâ tackles education as a main theme. According to her, education is a solution for the sufferings of women since education shapes the woman's mind by opening it to the world. It is this openness of the mind makes the woman more autonomous. Acquired autonomy includes economic, moral, and social power. Further, education is also seen as a key element that integrates modernity into women's ideas by directing them towards their emancipation.

Shireen J. Jejeebhoy (1998), in her book "Women's Education, Autonomy, and Reproductive Behavior" indicates that education enables women to assume more autonomy or power in both traditional gender-stratified family settings and in more egalitarian ones. According to the author, education is the key to transforming women's attitudes and values from traditional to more modern, and their behaviour from constrained to emancipated (Jejeebhoy, 1998, p.87). Education is seen as the driving force behind the feminist revolt in the psychology of the two characters, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. Both of them are influenced by the headmistress of their school, a white woman who is the model of Western feminism. How she conveys ideas that are based on the equality of human beings which align with the notion of Jejeebhoy. Mariama Bâ emphasizes the mission of this school which is to get women out of the bogging down of traditions, superstitions and morals; to make them appreciate multiple civilizations without denying our own; to raise their vision of the world, to cultivate their personality and to reinforce their qualities. These words from Ramatoulaye demonstrate the degree to which school education influences intellectual and cultural formation. The personal development of herself and her best friend is thus directly linked to their education.

The struggle of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou towards emancipation was thus born from this awareness of the universal values that guarantee human dignity. Their role is defined as follows, "we were true sisters destined for the same emancipatory mission" (p. 38). Owing to their education, the two heroines are able to distance themselves from polygamy, as evidenced by Ramatoulaye's refusal to marry polygamous men after the death of her husband, and Aïssatou's decision to leave her husband who accepted an arranged marriage. By sacrificing her love and marital life, Aïssatou refuses polygamy. Her strong words of protest, "I will not submit to it" (p. 65), in the separation letter addressed to her husband exemplify her rebellious stance.



The revolt is thus a means of emancipation for the heroines who demand egalitarian values, and it is evident that the basis of this feminist resistance is the education they have received.

### **3.5 The intelligence and perseverance of the woman**

A woman's inner struggle is always sustained by her intelligence and perseverance. Both Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi highlight women's ability to think and remain stoic.

Ramatoulaye continues her life and survives despite all the problems. Her intelligence allows her to persevere, "My reflections determine me on the problems of life. I analyse the decisions that guide our future. I broaden my opinion by penetrating the world news" (p. 164). She thinks and analyses her decisions and her life. Mariama Bâ thus portrays the woman as an intelligent person, and not merely a person who is incapable of reasoning, who knows how to direct her own life.

Ramatoulaye describes stoicism and how it helps women to stay strong, "Your stoicism makes you not violent, not worrying, but true heroes, unknown to great history, who never disturb the established order, despite your miserable situation" (p. 31). For her, stoicism is a key element of women's survival. Because of stoicism, she can become strong and escape from a "miserable situation". Perseverance and the ability to see the reality of life make a woman powerful. Ramatoulaye's words, "I'm already warning you; I'm not giving up on rebuilding my life. In spite of all disappointments and humiliations, I have hope. It is dirty and foul-smelling humus that gushes forth from the green plant and I feel new buds pointing out within me." (p. 165), at the end of the story reveals her persistence, hope and strength, and the fact that she is going to rebuild her life in spite of "all disappointments and humiliations". Mariama Bâ ends the story highlighting the intelligence and perseverance of the woman that survive in spite of all adversities.

In the novel *Le Voile de Draupadi*, Ananda Devi also shows the intelligence and perseverance of the woman, "I feel that I will succeed in clinging to this idea, me who no longer clings to anything. Because it is good, and it gives me the feeling [...] of a new beginning" (p. 174). As in Ramatoulaye, the idea of starting anew is present in the character of Anjali. Despite all the problems she is going through, she wants to continue her life, and so, perseverance is always there. The ability to reflect is also highlighted in the above quote. In the quote, "this idea" means "to continue life". She reflects and decides to hold on to this idea because it gives her a sense of starting over.

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Moreover, Anjali is presented as a woman who always seeks her deliverance. Anjali's statement, "And I want to be a rock, and above all I need to be freed from myself" (p. 82) reveals her deep desire to be liberated. She needs to become strong like 'a rock'. These thoughts bear witness to her courage and perseverance. Like Ramatoulaye, she is intelligent and not blinded by her husband and love, "I have become aware of many things." (p. 85). Here Anjali speaks of her husband who is obsessed with sacrifice and who is no longer the person she loved in the beginning, which exemplifies the fact that she is not blinded by love.

Thus, the two writers, Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi, highlight the hidden capacities of women that are linked to their psychology; and how intelligence and perseverance help women to lead their inner struggle towards their freedom without becoming blind to or getting lost in traditions.

### **3.6 The liberation of women**

At the end of the two novels, Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi portray liberated women. Even if the women presented in the two novels face problems that oppress them, they manage to fight the obstacles by finding their own release without a man. Maithree Wickramasinghe, a Professor in English Studies at the University of Kelaniya, says that awareness of oppression is important as it allows women to take steps to free themselves (M. Wickramasinghe, personal communication, November 16, 2018). Awareness of oppression is present in all three characters, Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and Anjali. Therefore, they strive for their deliverance. The emancipation of the woman is done at several stages, i.e., liberation without man, liberation by finding their identity, and liberation gained by being part of the culture. These three aspects are evident in both novels.

In the novels, *Une si longue lettre* and *Le voile de Draupadi*, Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi show women for whom the oppression of society is more or less the same. Female characters are trapped in a system dominated by men. However, the women presented in the two novels do not stand idly by. Instead, they engage in an inner struggle where they try to find their lost identity in culture, where psychology plays an important role in their struggle for emancipation. Although it seems that they are passive from the outside, from the inside they are very active and rebellious.

Ramatoulaye, for instance, begins to find ways to amuse herself after her husband's abandonment. When she was with her husband, she did not have time for fun. It is obvious that without a husband, she has become free and powerful, "Intellectual films, thesis films, sentimental films, detective films, funny films, suspense films

were my companions. I drew from them lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance" (p.99). Furthermore, Ramatoulaye ends her letter by saying: "I warn you already, I am not giving up on rebuilding my life [...] the word happiness covers something, doesn't it? I will go in search of it. Too bad for me, if I still have to write you such a long letter [...]" (p. 165). Here we see that as she writes her letter and reflects on her life, Ramatoulaye begins to metamorphose. These words that appear at the end of the novel suggest Ramatoulaye's will to discover the happiness that comes with freedom. These new ideas of Ramatoulaye about her future and her life underline her blossoming without a man.

This emancipation that the woman finds, is depicted by the writer Ananda Devi also in her novel *Le Voile de Draupadi*. Like Aïssatou, Anjali decides to leave her husband at the end of the story, "Dev has found his face as a man. He was not the solar God I imagined I married" (p. 8). She realizes her husband's true character and decides to leave him. It seems that she wants to continue her life without her husband. She rejects Dev from her life, because she needs her freedom, and it seems that she perceives her husband as an obstacle to this. A wife cannot exist as an object if she wants to emancipate herself, and so, Anjali does not want to remain submissive to her husband as evidenced by her words, "I can only keep my husband's love by being conformed to the image he wants to have of a wife" (p. 154). Here, Dev's image of an ideal woman is a submissive wife, which Anjali refuses to become. She wants autonomy and independence. In this way, both the writers portray women who take charge of their own destiny in the end.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this study, the representation of women in the face of gender-based challenges was analysed in relation to the two novels, *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ and *Le Voile de Draupadi* by Ananda Devi. It is found out that both writers put forward one main facet of woman's character: stoicism. As discussed in this study, the two writers reveal the elements that make woman stoic: inner struggle, dignity of women, friendship between women, education, and her intelligence and perseverance.

In the study, the researcher has analysed how the two writers represent women in the face of gender-based challenges. In order to study the representation of women in depth, the study was divided into sub-sections that focus on different themes: the inner struggle of women, the dignity of women, friendship among women, education, intelligence and perseverance, and woman's liberation. The key points put forward by the two writers highlight how women remain strong in spite of suffering. Hence, despite all the problems and suffering, the women depicted in the two novels,

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Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou in *Une si longue lettre*, and Anjali in *Le Voile de Draupadi*, manage to remain strong and self-reliant. Even though the two societies depicted in the two novels are religiously, culturally, and socially different, Mariama Bâ and Ananda Devi portray two female protagonists who survive in the face of similar gender-based challenges while remaining stoic.

Thus, it can be concluded that despite the differences between the two cultures depicted in the two novels, the Senegalese culture and the Mauritian culture and the challenges faced by women, stoicism of the female characters remains steady. Even though, the writers unveil two societies, women are portrayed as stoic characters in both novels.

However, the techniques employed by the two writers to show stoicism of women remain an aspect that is yet to be explored. Thus, this research can be a starting point for another research to address the techniques used to show the condition of women in both novels.

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