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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FEMINIST PROJECT IN BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND SAADAWI'S *GOD DIES BY THE NILE.*

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"A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts."

Abstract

This research report will a make a comparative critical analysis of the two African feminist texts namely *So Long A Letter* and *God Dies by the Nile*. Their humanist and essentialist assumptions which underpin the texts' critique of patriarchy will be challenged and interrogated. The project will attempt show how both texts respond to masculine myths about gender by replacing those myths with other constructions which define women or peasants in different yet nonetheless enclosed and stereotypical generalisations. In the process of this interrogative analysis ideology of each text as manifested through its stylistic devices such as plot, characterisation, setting and other formal features will be examined. Three important issues which will be central in this analysis namely question of identity, conceptions of power and projections of feminist liberation. The approach that will be adopted is the one which will assume the autonomy of the text over authorial claims or stated intentions. The fact that a text is written by a woman writer does not necessarily mean that it stands in antithetical terms to the dominant patriarchal values.

The first chapter begins the discussion with a theoretical introduction to the comparative analysis of the project. The second chapter will be based around the critical analysis of Mariama Ba' s *So Long A Letter*. The third chapter will focus on Nawal Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*. The fourth chapter concludes the discussion with an evaluative and comparative commentary on the two texts and by charting the way forward for African literary criticism.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

THABO TSEHLOANE
(Name of candidate)

1 day of December 1997

Dedication

To my mother Constance Lerato Tsehloane with sincere thanks for her love and encouragement during my studies especially during the writing of this thesis.

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I will also like to thank the CSD bursary for the financial assistance without which the project will never have seen the light of the day. However the opinions expressed in the project are entirely my responsibility and do not reflect the standpoint of the CSD.

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CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Nature of the Project

There is by now a well-established tradition of feminist literary scholarship in Africa, which has accreted around a range of women writers who have come to assume quasi-canonical status. Feminist literary scholarship has indeed come of age and it has achieved much by placing women writers and feminist concerns on the agenda. However it has also seldom been subject to any thoroughgoing critique and has instead been the object of much 'solidarity' criticism. This project is therefore an attempt to begin a more critical dialogue with this scholarship. It will be based around a comparative reading of two African feminist texts, namely *God Dies by the Nile* by Nawal el-Saadawi and *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba.

This project is based on the premise that a text is a partisan and discursive construct offering particular meanings and modes of understanding, susceptible to diverse and contradictory interpretations. The merits and demerits of each text will then be investigated reflecting in the process the dialectical relationship between ideology and narrative form. Terry Eagleton, captures brilliantly the dialectical relationship between the text and ideology. Terry Eagleton writes: **"The text establishes a relationship with ideology by means of its forms, but does so on the basis of the character of the ideology it works"** (7). It will also be important to note what and how each author chooses to foreground and erase certain aspects and not others in her narrative. According to Dan O'Jwang, **"Narrative implies choice, which entails either the deletion or foregrounding of certain information"** (99). A text is an ideologically partisan artistic intervention made by the author but it cannot be explained through authorship alone. It is with these insights in mind that the will be critically assessed paying attention specifically to how they complement each other the similarities and

dissimilarities in their narrative forms.

The project operates from a premise which prioritizes autonomy and paramountcy of the text over authorial claims or artistic intentions. For instance, fact that a text is written by a woman writer does not necessarily mean that it is counter-hegemonic or subversive of the established patriarchal ethos and values.

African Literary Feminist Criticism

It has now become commonplace to present African feminist texts as unimpeachable and faultless antitheses to the male literary canon[1]. Florence Stratton for example sees these feminist texts as writing back to the phallocentric literary canon in the same manner as the early African writers were writing against the narratives of the empire. Stratton says: **"Feminist literary tradition arose out of the African literary tradition whose nationalist sentiment elided the historical reality of male domination"** (134). Women writers are perceived as essentially opposed to male domination irrespective of their ideological inclinations. Stratton presents the male and female literary tradition in antithetical terms although she admits the existence of common ground. The texts by women writers are therefore interpreted as essentially subversive of the masculinist values while the texts by male writers on the other hand are seen as the embodiment of masculinist values *par excellence*. Consequently, Florence Stratton passes verdict in a very biologically determinist way, namely that male writers affirm and perpetuate gender stereotypes while women writers challenge these stereotypes. In a slightly different vein, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie urges women writers to correct the false images of a woman in Africa as projected in the male literary canon(11). Katherine Frank defines the African feminist literary texts in terms of their feminist separatism, which is conditioned by the intractable sexism prevailing in African societies. Frank like Stratton presents the African feminist literary texts as standing in an antithetical relationship to the discourses of patriarchal domination. Frank says: **"Given the historically established and culturally sanctioned sexism of African society, there is no possibility of a compromise or even**

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truce with the enemy" (15). A feminist text is often interpreted univocally as counter-hegemonic and nothing else. These views and perceptions of these three scholars are representative of a particular body of literary scholarship which had long dominated African feminist literary scholarship until only recently.[2]

It is because of the aforementione sumptions that feminist literary criticism has been largely adulatory and oblivious of the weaknesse evinced by many feminist literary texts. However, it must be admitted that critics like Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Brenda Cooper and Micere wa Mugo have questioned the class bias and sole focus on gender which characterises the majority of African feminist texts. They have decried the fact that the majority of these texts are pre-occupied with the plight of the middle class women to the exclusion of the experiences of peasant and working class women. However, this observation is unproblematic in so far as it implies that mere awareness of class divisions among wo[illegible]n and a shift of focus from middle class women to working class women would remedy the weaknesses, which characterize African feminist texts. Yet, these points notwithstanding, feminist literary scholarship has tended to be adulatory in its critical engagement with the feminist texts. The proponents of this scholarship have defined their main task as defending and nurturing a budding feminist literary tradition. And it has largely been through the efforts of this feminist scholarship whatever its weaknesses that feminism has became central to African literary discourses. The feminist literary tradition has also helped to diversify and enrich the African literature in many ways.

African Feminist Literary Texts

The main problem with the majority of African feminist texts irrespective of their ideological inclinations is that in the process of challenging patriarchal values, they have tended to reproduce, not subvert these patriarchal codes. They have at times embraced uncritically the normalising humanist and essentialist assumptions about gender identity, the rigid and repressive models of patriarchal power, and feminist liberation. The

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[2]

dominant patriarchal gender stereotypes have been inverted not challenged. The underlying grievance most of these texts have projected has been the non-participation of women in positions of power and status without questioning the legitimacy of such power and status in the first instance. Power has been conceived in totalistic and systematic terms in which all women and men occupy essentially the same position in relation to patriarchy as victims and beneficiaries respectively. The operations of this power are seen as obstructive, anti-energy, and forbidding. The critique of patriarchy and the feminist alternative that is proffered by most of these texts is predicated upon mono-causal explanations. Women's oppression for instance is located in the backwardness of African societies manifested by adherence to univocally retrogressive 'deceptive' religion and 'antiquated' customs. The unconscious assumption is that the domination of women will automatically be rescinded, as these societies become more modernised and Westernised. Thus, oppression of women is seen as an index of underdevelopment.

The main thrust of this scholarship has been to expose the stereotypical portraits of women in the phallocentric literary canon, and secondly to show how feminist texts have challenged and subverted these stereotypes. The assumption, which underlies this criticism, is that feminist texts are by virtue of their authorship subversive of dominant masculinist values. Artistic intention is thus unduly privileged in the process and any other view or interpretation, which contradicts the authorial ideology, is thus occluded. For example Alamin Mazrui and Judith Abala in their critical analysis of *God Dies by the Nile* they perceive the text purely as a reflection of authorial ideology and nothing else. They are at pains not to contradict the statements made by the author elsewhere in their interpretation of the text. They write: **"In analysing sex and urine as symbols of the relationships between politics and Islam in the oppression of women in *Mawt*, therefore, we shall endeavor to take into account el-Saadawi's own position on Islam, and as much as possible *to ensure that our interpretations are not in discord with her views"*** [Emphasis mine] (19). It is this assumption which has led to the preponderance of an uncritical and adulatory literary evaluation of feminist texts. Because of this fact, the criticism has been unable to transcend the ideological limitations of the texts it analyses and has degenerated into what can be called **"solidarity**

criticism". According to Terry Eagleton, the main task of literary criticism is to make vocal the silences of the text and to demonstrate how the text is made incomplete by its relation to ideology. Eagleton writes:

> **The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things; in trying to tell the truth in his own way, for example, the author finds himself forced to reveal the limits of the ideology within which he writes...The critic's task is not to fill the work in; it is to seek out the principle of its conflict of meanings, and to show how this conflict is produced by the work's relation to ideology.** (35 b).

But the majority of African feminist literary critics with the notable exception of the emergent post-structuralist literary theorists in South Africa[3] have become pre-occupied with discovering general laws and tendencies, which link the feminist texts in their common cause against an invariable and universal patriarchy. Self-reflexive, criticism has been particularly lacking in this respect. This project seeks to interrogate the common assumption among the majority of African feminist critics that a text by virtue of its authorship or stated authorial intention is contestatory of masculinist values or the phallocentric literary canon.

Choice of Texts

Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* epitomises the liberal feminist tradition, which is in turn the dominant form of feminism in African literature. In Ba's text the elements of this tradition of feminist literary scholarship are fully realised, a factor, this has made the novel a classic of African feminist literary discourse. The author tends to focus on gender as the primary factor for social and political marginalisation of women. It operates within the paradigm of universalist and humanist kind of feminism. Saadawi's *God Dies By the Nile* is representative of an emergent tendency in feminist literary tradition in Africa. This socialist feminist discourse fuses a concern with gender

discrimination and class oppression. Contrary to the first school of thought projected by Mariama Ba, Saadawi's socialist feminism does not conceive of gender as the primary factor in the social and political marginalisation of women. In fact, in most cases like in Saadawi's text, class is taken to be the main determinant of social relations over and above gender oppression. Yet, despite their differences the two texts are also similar to each other in a variety of ways.

The project will explore the ideology of each text through its stylistic devices such as plot, characterisation, narrative point of view, and setting. The project is premised on the understanding that a literary text or any text for that matter is based consciously or unconsciously on a particular understanding of reality conditioned by its ideology. Chris Weedon says: **"Whether acknowledged or not, every form of feminist politics ...implies a particular way of understanding patriarchy and possibilities of change."** (4)

Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* evinces its ideology in a manner that is less self-conscious and less coherent than Saadawi's *God Dies By the Nile* whose ideology is undisguised and forthright. The two novels articulate class biased kind of feminism in different ways. *So Long A Letter* privileges the urbanised and educated middle-class women with their individualist ethos as the repository of the novel's emancipatory feminism. *God Dies By the Nile* on the other hand privileges the rural peasant women with their romanticised class anger as the vanguard of the feminist liberation.

It is these different ideologies and positions of the authors in relation to their subject matter which dictate the aesthetic dimension of each text. This ideological difference also determines another dichotomy between the two texts. Whereas one text projects its feminist agenda as private and personal, the other evinces an agenda, which is public and political. The subtlety and complexity of treatment which characterises Ba's text contrasts sharply with the polemical, propagandistic and moralistic tone projected in Saadawi's text. This dichotomy however does not preclude a shared common ground.

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The two texts operate from the paradigm of the humanist and essentialist assumptions, which inform their critique of patriarchy and projection of feminist liberation. The two novels can therefore be considered as fairly representative of the feminist literary tradition in Africa broadly reflective of the different kinds of feminism prevailing in African literature. However it must be admitted that these texts are not exhaustive of all the trends and ideological inclinations, which characterise the *magna corpus* that, of African feminist literary tradition

Several issues will be of crucial importance in the process of interrogating the humanist and essentialist assumptions in both *So Long A Letter* and *God Dies by the Nile.* First is the issue of identity, secondly is the conception of power and lastly is the issue of the alignment of feminist liberation with the modernisation theory of development.

Identity is one of the most important aspects of the project. It will be discussed under the rubric of characterisation alongside the question of representation of the lower classes. The texts will be critically analysed in terms of how they portray gender identity. In both texts, identity is projected as an immutable and unchanging essence. Women or peasants are portrayed as essentially different from men and their upper class counterparts rather than being socially constructed and subjected to social relations in different ways. The project will also look in what ways these texts depart from or confirm the very gender stereotypes of the patriarchal system they condemn. In short, is gender identity perceived as an immutable essence or a constructed and variable form? What are the social and political implications of the assumptions of the novels in terms of contesting patriarchal norms of society? The idea of an innocent transcendental femininity violated by a rapacious masculine sexuality will be interrogated. It will be shown how these essentialised notions of gender which represent femininity and masculinity one-dimensionally unwittingly affirms, reinforce and sustain patriarchal values. The notion of an essential masculinity invariably serving the interests of all men and oppressing all women will be deconstructed. Jeff Hearns and David Morgan provide a critique of this essentialised masculinity by saying:

> **...certain forms of and practices of masculinity...are historically conditioned and open to change and challenge...This implies that men too within a society that may be characterised as patriarchal may experience subordinations, stigmatisations or marginalisations as a consequence of their sexuality ethnic identity, class position, religion or marital status.** (11)

While these forms of essentialisation are useful in contesting the patriarchy, they can also perpetuate the very structures of domination which feminism seeks to contest. It is bell hooks who points out that essentialised gender identity is hardly subversive of the established masculinist ethos and values. She says: **"Certainly the diverse inventive retelling of gender conflict between black women and men ... rarely suggests oppositional aesthetic directions and possibilities** (18 a). Furthermore, it is these narrow notions of identity, which easily slide into the imprisoning definitions of identity in which the truth about the individual is located in his or her sexuality. One becomes a deviant if he or she does not conform. This approach therefore fails challenge or subvert entrenched misogynist conceptions about women. It is this kind of essentialist identitarianism which Marcien Towa regards as a prison rather than as a site of resistance. Although Towa is more concerned with racial difference his comments seem apt and relevant Towa writes: **"In regard to all worship of difference and identity, we must cultivate a systematic scepticism, without which we run the risk of confirming our own servitude"** (Quoted by Miller, 23)

The critique of essentialised identities will not be restricted to gender only but will also extend to other forms of identity, which are retained as immutable and 'natural'. It is the contention of this project that identity formation is both strategically necessary and dangerous. The discourses of essentialism are trapped by their attempts to define human nature in unchanging and immutable terms. When the feminist texts deny and occlude the history and constructed nature of gender identity they also foreclose the possibil for future change as well. If men are by nature promiscuous and unfaithful there is nothing that can be done to remedy the plight of women victims beyond plaintive

lamentations since everything is explained in an immutable and biologically determinist way. Ruthven emphasises that it is necessary for feminism to discard essentialist paradigms if it is effect a real change in the social formation. Ruthven proffers this cautionary note: **"Before we set about changing the world you need to define it in such a way that changes are possible"** (36). The contradictory problematic of difference and equality is however not underestimated by this project. It is hooks who provides a viable way out of this dilemma which has been best captured by Luce Irigaray's rhetorical question: **"How can the double demand -for both equality and difference - be articulated?** (81). A critique of essentialism is according to hooks not necessarily debilitating but is empowering for the marginalised groups as long as its political usefulness is retained. hooks writes:

> **Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency . . .This critique should not be made synonymous with a dismissal of the struggle of the oppressed and exploited peoples to make ourselves subjects. Nor should it deny that in certain circumstances this experience affords us a privileged critical location from which to speak.** (28 a)

The question of representation as it manifests itself in the novels will be investigated. How are the lower class characters especially the peasants represented in the novels? Mariama Ba excludes these lower class women in her vision of feminist liberation by only portraying them univocally as the agents of patriarchal domination. She disparages them as captives of tradition and custom, intransigently opposed to the text's feminist agenda. Nawal El Saadawi represents them as the vehicle to articulate her feminist agenda. She idealises and romanticises them. The peasants are presented as having no other experience except that of oppression. They are also presented as inherently oppositional to the structures of domination and oppression. The lower classes in both

texts are normed from a middle class perspective as simple and naively innocent or ignorant.

The two texts provide an apt example of Foucault's point that the act of representation itself is part of an evolving process into which power relations always enter. The project will grant a certain amount of validity to Foucault's ultra-pessimistic position. An act of representation will not be disparaged and discredited per se but only a certain form of representation which norms the lower classes from the middle-class perspective will be interrogated and questioned. The act of representation is both necessary and inevitable in the construction of counter-hegemonic discourses. It is Chandra Mohanty in her criticism of Western feminism that also implicates third world middle-class women who write about their lower class sisters. Mohanty aptly describes this misrepresentation by saying:

> **Similar arguments can be made in terms of middle class urban African or Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working class sisters which assumes their own middle cultures as the norm and codifies working class histories and cultures as the "other"** (52).

Conception of patriarchal power in the texts will also be interrogated. In Ba's text, it is conceived as independent from other forms of domination while in Saadawi's text it is linked with class oppression. Both texts operate within a repressive and centred model of power. Power is seen in both novels only in terms of limitations and prohibitions. But this is a very limited way of understanding power since it is not only repressive but is also productive. Jana Sawicki says: **"If power were merely repressive then it would be difficult to explain how it has gotten such a grip on us. Why would we continue to obey a purely repressive and coercive form of power?..the most effective mechanisms of power are productive"** (21). In fact, power is most effective when it is not repressive but when it is productive. The perception of power as orchestrated from specific institutions and practices is equally culpable for texts weaknesses. Operations and techniques power are polymorphous and multivalent. It is the contention of this project that power can be effectively resisted not by simplifying its operations but by

understanding it as a complex system in which coercive and hegemonic strategies are simultaneously operative. Violence and coercion must be seen as one of the many ways in which power manifests and entrenches its authority in the social field. Jana Sawicki denies the centrality of coercion in the exercice of power. She says:

> **They [disciplinary practices] secure their hold not through the threat of violence or force, but by creating desires attaching individuals to specific identities and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviors and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves.** (68)

Alignment of feminism with a [illegible] theory of development , which informs the two novels in different ways [illegible] also [illegible] ated. This alignment results in their rigid and monolithic view of culture and religion as backward and regressive social forms, which inhibit feminist and class awareness among women and peasants respectively. It is the contention of this project that culture, tradition and religion are neither inherently reactionary nor progressive. The character they can take in a particular historical moment cannot be determined *a priori* but is a matter subject to investigation. What is important is not whether these monological perceptions of culture and religion are true or not. But what is significant is how these are deployed in a specific context and time. It is the specific form of their deployment which makes them serve either reactionary or progressive causes. Sembene Ousmane for instance in his novels such as *The Last of the Empire* reflects this complexity of culture as an agent of change or bulwark of the old order.

What is disconcerting about the two novels *So Long A Letter* and *God Dies By the Nile* is their monological conception of culture and religion as impervious and hostile to progress and liberation, although Ba's text is more ambivalent in its critique of culture and tradition as an agent of oppression than Saadawi's text. The texts' refusal to acknowledge the complexity, which surrounds culture and religion, leads to their positing a rigid

dichotomy between culture and religion on one hand and feminist liberation on the other. In *God Dies by the Nile,* liberation from class and gender oppression is predicated upon the disavowal of religion and adoption of a more secular outlook. In *So Long A Letter* feminist liberation, is predicated upon the acquisition of Western education and disavowal of culture and tradition. Saadawi's critique of religion is based on the supposition that a theocratic society is more oppressive than a secular society. Ba's rejection of tradition and critique of the extended family is premised on the preference for a nuclear family which is projected as a purely liberated space for a married woman.

It is the contention o project that these rigid and monological perceptions of culture and religion give rise to analytic closures evinced by the texts under discussion. Discourses cannot be defined as either reactionary or revolutionary out of context and time. They are often deflected and can be enlisted to support different even antithetical purposes. Discourses have no fixed referent values and system of morality. This paradigm within which Saadawi and Ba's texts operate attempts to formulate a global or systematic discourse of the historical or social totality in order to legitimate or discredit certain programs and practices as univocally emancipatory or oppressive.

Discourses according to Foucault are to be judged and evaluated dialogically not one-dimensionally. Discourses are sites of continual conflict and contestation, and their alignment cannot be determined *a priori* before the specific of their deployment is established. Against this monological view of discourses Foucault cautions: "**Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourses can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point for an opposing strategy ...There is not on one side a discourse of power and opposite it another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations...**" (100-101).

CHAPTER TWO

MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER*

Mariama Ba's reputation and renown as a literary figure in Africa and throughout the world rests solely on two novels namely *So Long A Letter* and *Scarlet Song* written within a five-year period. These texts originally written in French have since been translated into many languages including English. It is in their English version that the critical analysis of the texts especially *So Long A Letter* will be based.

This chapter will critically analyse Mariama Ba's feminist project as reflected in her first novel *So Long A Letter*. It will begin by locating the text under discussion in the writer's corpus as a whole. Thereafter we will turn to a detailed discussion of the novel itself. This takes the form of analysing the ideology of the text through an engagement with various stylistic devices like plot, characterisation and setting.

Scarlet Song unlike its predecessor *So Long A Letter* is told through a third person omniscient narrator. *Scarlet Song* is an account of a Senegalese man (Ousmane) who falls in love and finally marries a white French woman (Mireille). The heroine of the story is this white woman who marries Ousmane in defiance of her parents racial prejudice against her lover. The two lovers fully conscious of the prejudices existing in their respective racial backgrounds initially conduct their 'illicit' love affair in secrecy.

When Mireille is send back to France by her parents after discovering the affair the romance between the romance between the two lovers seem to be doomed. However the young lovers manage to overcome all obstacles and continue their relationship in spite of their separation. Their romance is sustained by communication through letters. Ousmane later marries Mireille in France and he informs his parents after the act. The newly wed couple comes back to Senegal to settle as husband and wife. It is just at this

moment of victory that the romance is confronted with formidable trials and tribulations. It is Ousmane's relatives especially his mother who begin to manifest her hostility towards Mireille. When Ouleymatou makes advances to attract Ousmane's attention, she gets instant support from Ousmane's mother Yaye Khady who sees Ouleymatou as a weapon to dislodge Mireille out of Ousmane's life. It is Ousmane however who betrays his wife and marries his black mistress without even informing Mireille. The latter recalling their youthful romance and her sacrifices feels rejected and betrayed. In frustration, she goes mad and she kills her child, attempts to kill Ousmane and herself. This text differs from its predecessor in that the heroine Mireille is not innocent and her husband's betrayal cannot be located entirely in his rapacious masculine sexuality or his inherent polygamic instincts alone. The marriage is broken by Ousmane's betrayal as much as it is wrecked by Mireille inability or unwillingness to adapt to African culture. Although at the end of the day the author puts the blame squarely on Ousmane's misguided nativism and his mother's meddlesome role in the marriage. The novel differs from the first one in that it ends on a very pessimistic note while *So Long A Letter* reflects the experiences of women who are strengthened not broken by adversity.

Scarlet Song is the author's second novel which replicates and reiterates the concerns initially raised in her first novel *So Long A Letter*. A continuity and similarity of themes characterises Ba's two novels. The theme of an unfaithful husband who abandons his wife for another woman is central to both novels. A second concern, which is characteristic of the author's feminist agenda is her location of patriarchal power relations in the matrimonial space. Matrimony for Ba then becomes a site from which the worst and the most degrading forms of patriarchy are operative and agile. Hence, both of her texts are primarily interested in the plight of a married woman. Other forms of masculism operative outside the institution of marriage are peripheral to the concerns of Ba's feminist project. The kind of marriage, which seems to be of particular interest to the author is the marriage consecrated upon the defiance of custom and parental authority. This defiance is linked to the characters' enlightenment, in turn due to their education. In fact, Ba's feminist project is accompanied by a very strong pedagogic message in which the virtues and values inculcated by Western formal education are

valourised. Thirdly, there is a familiar figure of the mother-in-law whose intrusive and meddlesome attitude threatens the stability of her son's marriage. Incidentally, the figure of father-in-law is absolved of any misdemeanour by the author in both texts. Lastly, a further feature, which connects the two texts is the protagonist who is a middle class urbanised woman. The consistent choice of this type of protagonist underlies the elitist nature and character of the author's feminist agenda. The plight of this middle class heroine is shown by the author to arise first from machinations orchestrated by the mean mother-in-law from a poor family who forces her daughter into a polygamous marriage in order to benefit materially from such a union and secondly from the lust and vanity of the husband. The only discernable development which the second novel makes, is the shift of focus from an African middle class woman protagonist to a European middle class woman protagonist. It is worth noting that even Mireille story is forecast in *So Long A Letter* by the briefly told story of Jacqueline, an Ivorian who is married to a Senegalese Samba Diack. Jacqueline like Mireille suffers and is ostracised partly because she is from a different cultural and religious background. Ba's emphasises the oppressive nature of custom and tradition on a woman.

It is *So Long A Letter* which encompasses the author's feminist agenda in all its vibrant diversity and scope. The epoch-making character of this text as a literary work is beyond doubt. Christopher Miller regards the text as one of the trailblazers and pioneers of African literary feminism. Miller says: **"Only in 1979, with the publication of Mariama Ba's *Une Si Longue Lettre* do we see an explicit, self-conscious meditation on gender difference written by a woman in francophone sub-Saharan Africa "** (250). *So Long A Letter* is an account of the narrator's life (Ramatoulaye) and her friend Aissatou to whom the letter is addressed. The story of the text is told in first person narrative and the text is written in an epistolary-diary form in which the narrator-protagonist communicates with her longtime friend about their marriages, which have been commonly wrecked by masculine infidelity.

The narrative can be broadly divided into three parts as told by the narrator. Firstly, there is an account of the mourning period and its attendant rituals, which follows the death of

Modou Fall (narrator's husband). In the second part the story moves backwards in form of a flashback to reflect on the betrayal and abandonment of the protagonist by her now late husband. This abandonment and its consequences occur outside the narrative line of the story but are recalled by the protagonist to her friend Aissatou. The last part is an account about how the narrator and her children survived and coped with the consequences of Modou's abandonment and death.

The narrator begins her letter by recalling golden childhood moments she has shared with her friend Aissatou to stress their closeness and the intimacy of their friendship which has sustained them throughout the trials and tribulations of adulthood especially of marriage. The news of Modou's death is then relayed to Aissatou. But the mournful tone and attitude with which the narrator relates the news compromises the verisimilitude in the story. It is difficult to believe that Rama's grief for the man who has so callously abandoned her five years before. Although the death of Modou is the obvious reason for writing the letter, the author uses this incident as an entry point from which to critique polygamy and the extended family which infringes on the individualist ethos of the middle-class. Modou's death is used as an occasion to reflect on his past misdemeanours. Following a three days account of the mourning proceedings the narrator says:

> **The mirasse commanded by the Holy Koran 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. With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family my children) and (myself was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account** (9).

Modou's death provides the narrator with an opportunity to portray the oppressive nature of tradition and custom on women especially in marriage. The well-nigh exclusive focus of the novel on the plight of married women is further particularised by its concentration on middle class and urban womenfolk. All the women whose plight under patriarchy is

depicted in the novel are married middle class women with the notable exception of the French expatriate patient who is a single woman. The latter is in any case unsympathetically portrayed. The French woman single status and her rejection of men's advances are viewed with undisguised disapproval. The narrator says: "**I observed her often. Old, for her unmarried status. Her studies must have been her only form of recreation during her youth. Sour-tempered, she must have put off any passionate advances**" (44). The underlying subtext of this portrait is that a woman's happiness is predicated upon the presence of a man in her life. The moral of the tale being that a woman who transgresses this phallocratic law will be condemned to a life of frustration devoid of any purpose and fulfillment. Furthermore, a crude and reductive kind of nativism is also evident in this instance.

During the account of the mourning period, the narrator comments sceptically about the traditional rites though her attitude to religion remains ambivalent. The sisters-in-law and the co-wife whom the author associates with the oppressive customs and tradition are created in an unfavourable way. The co-wife Binetou is first introduced to the reader as follows: "**The presence of my co-wife beside me irritates me. She has been installed in my house for the funeral, in accordance with tradition.**" (3). The sisters-in-law who undo their hair (as wives of Modou) are portrayed as mean and extortionate agents of patriarchal domination of married middle class women. The narrator describing the plight of the married woman says: "**Her behaviour is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable**" (4). The essentialist notion of gender identity which informs the text is also underlined by the narrator's attribution to the mourners behaviour and traits according to their gender. Male mourners are solemn and truly grieved while the womenfolk are merry and gay totally oblivious of the gravity of the occasion. Incidentally, it is the male voice, which continually but unsuccessfully calls them into order. The narrator says: "**From time to time an exasperated manly [sic] voice rings out a warning, recalls purpose of the gathering: a ceremony for the redemption of a soul. The voice is quickly forgotten and the brouhaha begins all over again, increasing in volume** (6). The funeral therefore provides an excellent opportunity for the author to establish the main thrust of

her feminist agenda.

The second part of the novel begins in chapter four and ends in chapter seventeen. It differs from the first and third parts of the narratives because it narrates events which happened outside the timeframe of the narrative, which is basically the mourning period to which the narrator as the deceased's wife is subjected. It is during the narrator's mourning period that she looks back at her life and that of her late husband whose death provides an occasion to reflect on his earthly sojourn. The betrayal and abandonment of the narrator-protagonist by her husband is narrated alongside a similar experience suffered by the friend to whom the letter is addressed. Aissatou is used as a foil to expose and accentuate Ramatoulaye's shortcomings as perceived by the novel's feminist agenda. The life experiences of the two friends run parallel to each other. To emphasise this comparison the author presents a narrative in which the readers are constantly reminded of the parallels between the two lives. The heroine and her friend have shared similar experiences since their childhood, they have been subjected to similar educational experiences both feudal and colonial, enjoyed romantic and marital experiences together as well as suffering betrayal and abandonment. However it is the betrayal and abandonment which sets the two heroines apart. Comparatively speaking Aissatou is subjected to a less humiliating betrayal than that which does the protagonist suffer. But it is Aissatou who divorces her husband who has not really abandoned her while the protagonist who is subjected to a far more humiliating betrayal and abandonment chooses to stay in the marriage.

The last part of the narrative starts from chapter eighteen until the end of the novel. It picks up the thread of the story from the first part after a lengthy interruption by the flashbacks and reminiscences of the second part. The two most important elements of the narrative which occurs in this last part are the narrator's rejection of marriage proposal from Daouda Dieng and other suitors including Modou's elder brother Tamsir and the narrator's successful bringing up of her children. Through Daba and young, Aissatou the author projects her conception of an ideal relationship devoid of domination and betrayal. Through Daba's husband Abou and young Aissatou's boyfriend Ibra Sall the author

projects an alternative masculinity which is not oppressive and misogynist as the one she has critiqued in the entire narrative. Thus, Ba's feminist vision is not only pessimistic a critique of the status quo but is also an optimistic gesture toward a non-gendered egalitarian future. The limited nature of Ba's feminist vision is also evident in this instance. The compassionate and caring husband is enough to annul patriarchal domination and liberate women.

The plot of *So Long a Letter* is centred around betrayal and abandonment of the protagonist by her husband Modou Fall after twenty-five years of marriage. The story of the novel is really a reflection on this betrayal and how the narrator-protagonist and her children coped with this betrayal and abandonment. While this betrayal is portrayed as the lot suffered by, most women Ramatoulaye's betrayal is made unique by the author as being particularly poignant and humiliating. She is not only deprived emotionally and physically but she also financially and materially. Modou buys Villa SICAP and its chic contents for the second wife by mortgaging Villa Fallene (where Ramatoulaye and her twelve children live) as a security. The narrator's dignity is also compromised when the husband falls in love not only with a girl from a poor family but someone who is her daughter's friend. The emphasis on the poor background of the family is part of the novel's ideology, which seeks to disparage Modou for 'entering such a poor family'. The narrator mournfully says: **"I don't understand. They did not understand either the entrance of Modou, a 'personality', into this extremely poor family"** (39). The author created Ramatoulaye's co-wife to be young and be from a poor family for a specific purpose to be able to magnify Modou's act of betrayal. This is motivated by the author's conception of marriage outside one's social class as a mism -h, which is devoid of genuine love. This perception is reflected in both of the author's novels. Modou's act of betrayal would have appeared less ignominious if the co-wife was financially independent and was from a well-off middle class family. The ignominy is further accentuated by the fact that the co-wife was the daughter's friend which makes it not only a crime against the narrator but her daughter a fact which makes Modou's misdemeanour a double betrayal.

The narrator's betrayal and abandonment is juxtaposed against a similar fate which has been suffered by her friend Aissatou and her Ivorian acquaintance Jacqueline. While the betrayal of the two friends by their husbands Mawdo Ba and Samba Diack respectively is rooted in specific factors, Modou's motive for betrayal is feebly explained. To emphasise the pain and puzzlement of the narrator to the reader the author makes the narrator to recall her resplendent marital experiences, which predate the betrayal. Furthermore, the narrator is the one who has compromised her social position by marrying Modou against the reservations of her mother, relatives, and community at large. The narrator says: "...I **preferred the man in the eternal khaki suit. Our marriage was celebrated without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of my father, before the painful indignation of my frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of my surprised sisters, in our town struck dumb with astonishment"** (16).

The narrator goes to great lengths to recall her good and obedient behaviour as a Modou's wife. In spite of all these indignities she has suffered the narrator surprisingly opts to stay in the marriage against the pressure exerted by her elderly children and her neighbour Farmata. This seems to be the narrator's favourite narrative technique in the novel. The narrative creates certain expectations which are then disappointed and the narrative takes a new unexpected turn. The extravagant description of the ignominy of Modou's act of betrayal creates the expectation in the reader that Ramatoulaye would definitely divorce her husband especially in the light of her close friend Aissatou's divorce of her husband who had committed a less grievous and ignominious act of betrayal. The pressure from the children and the neighbours serve to heighten the anticipated fulfillment of this expectation. The second instance of this pattern is Daouda Dieng's in Ramatoulaye's house an expectation is created that shproposal to the narrator. Throughout the comings and goings of Daouda Dieng as described by the narrator an expectation is created that she would finally accede to Daouda Dieng's proposal for marriage. Daouda is loved not only by the narrator's friend and neighbour Farmata but also but by her children. In an unexpected turn of events, the narrator rejects Daouda Dieng's proposal after all the flattering descriptions of Dieng's physical appearance, intelligence, and sensitivity to feminist oppression and his unselfish political

involvement.

The setting of the novel is located in the urban middle class world whose tranquility and peace is disturbed by the intrusion of the lower class personalities who come as husband's relatives or as husband snatchers of the middle class women. There is a strong implication in the novel that this middle class world untainted by any contact from low class traditional personalities is quintessentially good and stable.

The setting of the narrative is located against a social background which is strongly regulated by oppressive and misogynist customs and tradition. It is these customs and tradition which makes possible the disruption of the narrator's marital happiness. The narrator's objection to any integration between the two worlds is first evident during the funeral proceedings. The objection to the invasion of the narrator's middle class home by the mourners is expressed in the strongest terms. Chapter three begins as follows: **"On the third day, the same comings and goings of friends relatives, the poor, the unknown. The name of the deceased, who was popular, has mobilised *a buzzing crowd, welcomed in my house that has been stripped of all that could stolen, all that could be spoilt*** [Emphasis mine] (5). After the day's proceedings the narrator observing the interior of her middle class home following its invasion says: **"Gradually the house empties. The smell of sweat and food blend as trails in the air, unpleasant and nauseating. Cola nuts spat out here and there have left red stains: my tiles kept with such painstaking care are blackened. Oil stains on the walls, balls of crumpled paper. What a balance sheet for the day!"** (7).

Setting in the novel is used used an index for the character's situation and fortunes. A stark contrast is drawn between the character's moment of freedom and oppressed situation, which is engendered by her abandonment. The narrator evokes an atmosphere of merriment and bliss in the description of her life from childhood days through her education to her marital experiences before her abandonment. The narrator recalls her childhood moments in these nostalgic tones:

The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions. I close my eyes. Ebb and tide of feeling: heat and dazzlement, the woodfires, the sharp green mango, bitten into in turns, a delicacy in our greedy mouths. I close my eyes. Ebb and tide of images: drops of sweat beading your mother's ochre-coloured face as she emerges from the kitchen; procession of young wet girls chattering on their way back from the springs (1).

The school years under colonial rule are also remembered nostalgically by the narrator-protagonist. This fond remembrance is connected to the novel's thematic concern, which perceives education as an unproblematic liberatory tool for women. Chapter seven opens with these words:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an uncommon destiny. Together, let us recall our school, green, pink, blue, yellow, a veritable rainbow: green, blue and yellow, the colour of the flowers everywhere in the compound; pink the colour of the dormitories, with the beds impeccably made. Let us hear the walls of our school come to life with the intensity of our study. Let us relive its intoxicating atmosphere at night, while the evening song, our joint prayer, rang out, full of hope." (15).

Even the initial marital experiences are also recalled with a resplendent atmosphere and setting for the novel's heroine together with her friend though occasionally sullied by the intrusion of relatives especially the mother-in-law and the sisters-in-law. The atmosphere is one of merriment and affection. Ojo-Ade's interpretation of how marriage is depicted in the text seems inaccurate.[4] Ba portrays marriage in this way to indicate and highlight the enormity of masculine betrayal and abandonment. Before the disruption or the fall, marriage is a 'haven of content'. She conceives the institution of marriage as most seductive and appealing before it is dogged by betrayal and unfaithfulness. The narrator recalls:

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> .... we lived: Christmas Eve parties organised by several couples, with the costs shared equally, and held in turns in the different homes. Without self-consciousness, we would revive the dances of yester-year: the lively beguine, frenzied rumbas, languid tangos. We rediscovered the old beatings of the heart that strengthened our feelings. We would also leave the stifling city to breathe in the healthy air of seaside suburbs (20-21).

However, after Modou's betrayal and abandonment of the heroine the atmosphere and the setting change radically and are no longer resplendent and enchanting as before. The atmosphere, which surrounds the narrator, is sombre, and depressive. Suddenly the narrator realises her body, has been deprived of its charms by age and numerous childbirths. The setting therefore serves as an indicator of the radical rupture and change of fortune in the narrator's life. It also magnifies and accentuates this change of fortune.

Characterisation in the novel is intricately linked with the text's thematic concerns. It is linked with essentialised notion of gender identity which is strongly projected in *So Long A Letter.* It is also linked though not without contradiction to the valourisation of education as an unproblematic tool of enlightenment and psychological emancipation from the obscurantism and bigotry of tradition.

These features are projected in the text through characterization. There is a tendency to depict male and female characters according to the traits which are associated with their gender. Pseudo-biological determinism seems to inform the logic behind this form of characterization. The essential womanhood is also celebrated in the text. Following a declaration of love made Daouda Dieng to her the narrator observes: "I opened my eyes **wide not in astonishment- a woman can always predict a declaration of this kind- but in a kind of stupor"** (65). Valourisation of motherhood is made in the last part of the text. Justifying her pardoning young Aissatou after discovering her pregnancy appeals to the inherent traits of motherhood. She says: **"And also, one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One**

is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end" (83).

There is tendency to portray men as possessed with uncontrollable and insatiable 'polygamic instincts'. Mawdo the medical doctor, Modou the lawyer, Daouda Dieng the doctor-politician, Tamsir Modou's brother together with the young and old suitors who propose marriage to Ramatoulaye are all deceptive cheats devoid of genuine love. They are all motivated by lust, ficklemindedness, and vanity in their declarations. The condemnation of the male characters is however not total and it serves the specific ideological impulse of the novel. Femi Ojo-Ade's observation about the characterisation of male characters in the novel is therefore partially true. Ojo-Ade observes this jaundiced characterisation of the males in the novel without describing how this is deployed in the text and how it is dictated by authorial ideology. He writes: **"Man the unfaithful husband, Man, the womaniser, Man the victimiser- Ba's novel describes him in all his negative forms ... Man is the symbol of evil. There is no redemption for man, the monster..."** (73).

To underline the text's singularity of focus on gender the male characters are critiqued in their role as husbands and fathers but never as political figures especially Modou Fall and Daouda Dieng. Modou's betrayal of the workers is obliquely mentioned but it is an isolated statement in the entire narrative. The narrator says about Modou: **"His promotion to the rank of technical adviser in the Ministry of Public Works, in exchange for which, according to the spiteful, he checked the trade union revolt..."** (9). With Daouda Dieng one of the more sympathetically portrayed male characters only his "polygamic instincts" are displayed but his corrupt political practices are never interrogated. The narrator describes Daouda's motives for joining politics in these glowing terms: **"He was an upright man, and each time the situation demanded, he would fight for social justice. It was not love of show or money that had driven him towards politics, but his true love for his fellow man, the urge to redress wrongs and injustice"** (61). But a page thereafter he is quoted by the narrator without any sense of

irony implicating him in a corrupt political practice of buying the support of the voters. Daouda says: **"No one is well-off, not even those of us who are considered to be secure and financially sound, when in fact *all our savings go towards the maintenance of an avid clientele which believes itself to be our supporters* "** [Emphasis mine] (62). This admission on Daouda's part puts into question his supposedly altruistic motives. Instead of redressing the wrongs and injustices as the narrator has described him doing, we see him partaking in and perpetuating these wrongs and injustices. But this is perceived by the narrative neither as a fault nor a misdemeanour on Daouda Dieng's part. Even towards the end of the narrative the narrator is still enthralled by the public and political stance of Modou and Mawdo: **"Aissatou, no matter how unhappy the outcome of the outcome of our unions, our husbands were great men. They led the struggle of their lives, even if success eluded their grasp; one does not easily overcome the burdens of a thousand years"**(73). It is here that Stratton's interpretation of the text as **"revealing the betrayal of the hopes and aspirations...by this same privileged elite: the undermining of nationalists socialist ideals by bourgeois materialism..."** (Stratton 137) seems far-fetched and out of step with the novel's thematic concerns.

The female characters especially the middle-class women are portrayed as forever innocent victims of masculine betrayal and promiscuity sanctioned by custom and tradition. Women are created as naturally chaste and ascetic and as devoid of sexual desire. They are genuine lovers who never betray but are always rewarded with betrayal and abandonment. The author makes the narrator acknowledge that women are not always innocent victims but does not subvert the general essentialised gender identity in the text. For example, the narrator makes the following observation:

> **Whereas a woman draws from the passing years the force of her devotion, despite the ageing of her companion, a man, on the other hand, restricts his field of tenderness. His egoistic eye looks over his partner's shoulder. He compares what he had with he no longer has, what he has with what he could have** (41).

The essentialised masculine and feminine roles in the novel are undercut by the text's projection of formal Western education as the essential step towards the attainment of women's liberation. The major contradiction of the novel is located in this tension. The theme of valourisation of education exists uneasily with the essentialised notions of gender. The narrative thus depicts male characters as impervious to the liberatory values of the colonial education they have undergone. Education that is projected in the text liberates only the womenfolk, men are thus are portrayed as incorrigible traditionalists. Mawdo Ba and Modou Fall are ennobled only temporarily by this education but they later regress to the primitive state out of which the colonial education has helped them to evolve. The two male characters are initially portrayed as noble-minded but they degenerate immediately when they betray their wives.

Mawdo is initially portrayed as an excellent and committed doctor who has resisted family and community pressure not to marry Aissatou. But when he accedes to his mother's request to marry his cousin young Nabou the author begins to depict him as morally degenerate. However, a dramatic fall from being an angel to a villain is evident in the characterisation of Modou. He is not only extremely handsome but is a committed and self-sacrificing lawyer-cum-trade unionist. He remains faithful to the narrator during the tenure of his legal studies in France. He is unmoved by the beauty of the white French ladies in Paris (unlike Ousmane in *Scarlet Song*) and remains faithful to his black fiancée at home. This valourisation and exaltation of Modou's character and faithfulness is constructed not without recourse to a problematic and gendered kind of nativism. The narrator says: **"The milky complexion of the women had no hold on you...*You missed the swinging hips of black women walking along the pavements*, this gracious deliberate slowness [sic] characteristic of Africa which charmed your eyes."** [Emphasis mine] (14). But when he betrays his wife and takes a second wife he degenerates into a selfish and callous husband and father. He neglects his first wife and children to please the second wife. While his children are struggling to get transport to take them to school, he buys Binetou new Alfa Romeos, which are changed at the smallest dent. He also abandons his trade union career to become a technical adviser in

the Ministry of Public Works as a reward for having aborted imminent workers' strike. His meanness is displayed when he forces Binetou to terminate her studies in exchange for a monthly allowance. He mortgages the house in which his wife and children live in order to secure a new villa and its 'chic contents' imported from France. However, the narrative fails to criticise Modou and Daouda's politics in a systematic and consistent fashion.

The second way in which the narrative resolves the tension between its gender determinism and its thematic value of education is by portraying the uneducated women as agents not victims of patriarchal domination. In the character the tension is resolved in favour of the thematic value of education. A sharp distinction exists between educated and non-educated women while such distinction between male characters is occluded. Patriarchal domination as depicted in the novel seems to target and victimise only the educated middle class women. This blindness to the plight of the non-educated women is reflected during the narrator's account of the funeral proceedings. This oversight is also related to the novel's jaundiced view of traditionally minded in-laws. Describes the plight of Jacqueline the narrator implicates the relatives for her unhappiness. She says: **"In addition her husband's relatives-*always the relatives*- were cool towards her..."** [Emphasis mine] (42). The narrator tells her own story of harassment by the relatives in vivid and eloquent terms. It is significant to note that these relatives are low class and uneducated. The narrator says:

> **In different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom. I loved Modou. I compromised with his people. I tolerated his sisters who too often would desert own homes to encumber my own. They allowed themselves to be fed and petted . . . I knew how to smile at them all, and consented to wasting time in futile chatter. My sisters in law believed me to be spared of drudgery of housework** (19).

While she recognises the limits and duties imposed on her by tradition she ignores the

same plight which is suffered by her sisters-in-law. The customary obligation imposed upon them to take responsibility to dress up the wives of their late brother is merely noted without being interrogated. The narrator says: **"They [sisters-in-law] reappear after their deliberation. They have contributed the large sum of two hundred thousand francs to 'dress' us"** (7). The only oppression that is privileged is that of the educated middle class women -**"...true sisters destined for the same mission of emancipation"** (15). The narrator attributes her enlightenment and consciousness about gender oppression to the colonial education she received under the tutelage of her white mistress. Aunty Nabou and Binetou's mother are modern day female Iagos of the texts who scheme and conspire to destroy the stability of Ramatoulaye's and Mawdo's marriages. But the two are depicted in different degrees of meanness to stress the poignancy of the narrator's plight over that of her friend Aissatou. Aunty Nabou is shown to be motivated in her actions by the grand illusions of her nobility which she feels has been insulted by her son's marriage to a goldsmith's daughter. Binetou's mother is shown as literally selling her daughter in order to climb the social ladder. Her motives are crudely materialistic and there is nothing that seems capable of deflecting her from her aim. The daughter is shown to be against the marriage but is forced by the mother.

The other set of female characters, which are not flattered by the narrative are young Nabou and Binetou. Young Nabou from a royal family background is depicted as naively innocent and totally submissive to masculinist values while Binetou from the working class family background is portrayed as shallow minded, manipulative and selfish. Both of them are rivals to the middle class heroines of the novel.

Their lack of noble traits like their educated middle class rivals is attributable to their family backgrounds in which formal Western education was never priotised in their upbringing. The narrator describes young Nabou as follows: **"School had not left a strong mark on young Nabou, preceded and dominated as it was by the strength of character of Aunty Nabou who, in her rage for vengeance, had left nothing to chance..."** (46) Binetou on the other hand is described in this way: **"As for Binetou, she had grown up in complete liberty in an environment where survival was of the**

essence. Her mother was more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with education." (48) In both cases whatever the different backgrounds of their familial upbringing both Binetou and young Nabou are shown to lack what according to the text's thematic project is the vital and liberating influence of education. The perception of education as the primary emancipatory tool for women plays an important role in the novel's characterisation. The two are wever distinguished from each other. Young Nabou is shown to be a better personality than Binetou even though both are still inferior to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Young Nabou is redeemed by her royal background and her profession. Underlying the text's favourable depiction of Young Nabou is its reluctant and hesistant valourisation of the African feudal past despite its dominant theme on the value of Western education. Several critics have taken Ba to task for her derogative depiction of the lower class women without interrogating the ideological imperative, which makes necessary such biased characterisation. This is the reason that though Aissatou is from a working class family she is redeemed because of her educational achievements. The narrator paying tribute to Aisatou's educational achievement says:

> **The power of books, this marvellous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with the sound that forms the word. Juxtaposition of words from which springs an idea, Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving, and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted:..** (32).

The education is the only way, a universal strategy of liberation, the narrator advises not only the readers but her children as well. She counsels:

> **Life is an eternal compromise. What is important is the examination paper...Cultivate yourselves instead of protesting. When you are adults, if your opinions are to carry weight, they must be based on knowledge backed by diplomas. A diploma is not a myth...it crowns knowledge...** (73)

Reconsidering Ba's Feminist Project

Ba's text is located in the conception of a centred and repressive model of power in which the operations of patriarchal power relations are simplified and explained in a reductive fashion. The complexity of these relations is ignored by Ba's narrative. Patriarchal power relations are located in monolithic and fixed institutions and practices like polygamy, rapacious masculine sexuality and educational institutions. This power is also perceived in a monologic fashion as always exacting a restraining influence on the subject and nothing else. It is this conception of power as anti-energy imposing limits on its subjects which leads to analytic closures in the novel. The relationship between power and its subject is projected as one of univocal determination sanitised of its ambiguities and contradiction. Power is effective precisely because it is not univocally repressive but it operates by inciting desire and by attaching individuals to specific identities. It is also because of this reductive nature of her analysis of power that the narrative fails to connect, to make a link between gender oppression and other structures of domination prevailing in the society. It is the contention of this project that power is an ensemble of heterogeneous elements which are far from coherent and unilinear in their operation. Jana Sawicki provides a critique of the humanist discourse by saying:

> **Essentialist humanism obscures the irreducible plurality of habits, practices experiences and desires within.... Foucault wants to avoid the dominating features of the universalism implicit in such humanisms and elision of difference to which they lead** (69).

So Long A Letter projects male and female identities in a way that not only occludes their socially constructed and manufactured character but also precludes future changes. If men are essentially ficklemínded, unfaithful and promiscuous there is nothing that can be done to change the situation. If however such behaviour is shown to arise out of specific

social processes then a possibility for future change is created. Patriarchal power relations are defined in terms of immutable masculinist values which are immanent in all men. Women who are victims of the patriarchal domination are similarly defined in this very essentialised manner as naturally chaste and ascetic. However, Ba's characterisation of women in the novel is less rigid and more nuanced than her characterisation of men. But this nuanced depiction is marred by another form of essentialism -that is class prejudice- which is one of the major elements of Ba's feminist agenda. Ba could have broken out of the essentialist mode of her gender identity at least with female characters had it not been for the class prejudice for the lower class women who are portrayed as the only ones who are active agents in the perpetuation of patriarchal domination. This prejudice is also related to the novel's equation of tradition with masculinist values and Westernisation with feminist liberation. Gender identity therefore remains essentialised in the text despite this jaundiced depiction of the lower class women.

The narrative by accepting and taking for granted the patriarchal codes about gender identity reinscribes the masculinist values in a way that reinforces rather than subverts the ethos of the established order. Chastity is seen as the essential attribute of universal womanhood and sexual indulgence as the defining trait of universal manhood. This dichotomy supports the patriarchal double standards for men and women. According to Saadawi in her non-fictional work it is these double standards which are prohibitive of the woman's freedom. Saadawi writes: **"There are certain moral standards for females and others for males, and the whole society is permeated by such double standards. At the root this anomalous situation lies the fact that sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility; whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation"**(31). This essentialist view of male and female identity as located in sexuality explains patriarchy in a way that sustains and perpetuates the status quo of gender inequality. Ba's universalising impulse is clearly articulated in the narrative whereby the individual traits of one man epitomise the essential character of all men. The narrator describes Mawdo as follows: **"For Mawdo, through him all men, remained an enigma to me...Thus to justify himself, he reduced young Nabou to a**

plate of food'. Thus, for the sake of 'variety', men are faithful to their wives" (33-34). By construing this discrepancy as biologically determined the narrative affirms and reinforces the patriarchal notion which holds that female sexual desire is illicit and abnormal while the unrestrained male libido is natural. What is particularly dangerous about these essentialist notions of gender identity is their sheer normalising impulse and will to conform which arrogates to itself the power to demarcate between what is normal and what is aberrant in accordance with patriarchal values.

A centered model of power in which power is seen as located in specific and particular institutions and practices characterises the narrative. In the novel the author emphasises and locates patriarchal power relations in bad and mean character traits of individuals. It is these rather than structural features of a patriarchal society which are seen to be the driving force behind the masculinist domination of women in society. This is particularly evident in the author's projection of an alternative matrimonial space in the relationships of Daba and young Aissatou whereby the good intentions of a husband or a man are enough to rescind patriarchal relations. This results in the prescription of the universal strategy for emancipation of women. Hence the privileging of education as the univocal tool for the emancipation of women. It is this flawed analysis of power which results in the novel projecting false solutions to the masculinist oppression of women. The relations between middle-class women are idealised and romanticised over the heterosexist relationships and relations across the class divide. But that does not justify calling the novel a feminist separatist text as Katherine Frank does because the text is fraught with ambiguities and it defies one monologic label. Frank says: **"...book is a celebration of female bonding, of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's enduring friendship, of their shared world without men"** (18). Admittedly there are feminist separatist sentiments expressed in the text but they exist alongside other contradictory sentiments like idealisation of heterosexist romantic relationships like in Daba and young Aissatou's relationships. Even the narrator's and Aissatou's marriages before abandonment are similarly idealised. The text swings between the valourisation of feminist separatism and idealised romance as an alternative to the masculine betrayal and abandonment. Of course there is an assumed innocence in being a female. It is here that the novel's

reluctant separatist impulse can be located. The relationship between female and female is depicted as devoid of hierarchical relations and is non-exploitative in contrast to the relationship between male and female.

Jana Sawicki cautions the feminists against a reliance on humanist assumptions in their critique of patriarchal power relations. Sawicki contends that any reference to humanist assumptions should be suspended. She calls for innovation within the feminist movement in its critique of the ethos of the decadent patriarchal system. Sawicki writes:

> **Rather than generalise on the basis of the stereotypes provided by the dominant culture feminists must explore the meaning of the diversity of sexual practices to those who practice them; to resurrect the "subjugated knowledge" of sexuality elided within dominant culture.** (35)

The humanist assumptions which propel forward the narrative are its Achilles heel, a point of weakness as the narrator-protagonist's exhortation to her daughters to avoid premarital pregnancy aptly illustrates. Although the narrator attempts to project her self as a progressive and understanding modern mother her conservatism and sheer will to dictate what is, permissible and illicit to her daughters is brazenly displayed. She says: **"A profligate life for a woman is in incompatible with morality"** (87). Ambivalence is of course one of the central characteristic features of the text's narrative. This is epitomised by Ramatoulaye-a locus of contradictions, a fusion of a rebel, and conservative.

The novel's uncritical acceptance of the masculinist values as the norm, leaves the text's feminist agenda wanting. Ultimately, these masculinist values are affirmed not subverted. Chris Weedon cautions against this complacent attitude about discourses by saying:

> **... we need not take established meanings, values, and power relations for granted. It is possible to demonstrate where they come from, whose interests**

they support, how they maintain sovereignt nd where they are susceptible to specific pressures for change (174).

Alignment of feminist liberation with the theory of modernisation is one of the major weaknesses of the novel's feminist politics. A monolithic view of culture and popular traditions as inherently masculinist is simplistic and reductive. According to this view, feminist oppression just like underdevelopment is located in cultural factors or at times even in the psychic constitution of the African people. Development and women's liberation are then visualised as an indivisible whole forming part of the grand modernisation and Westernisation of the "natives". Ba presents her women characters as victims, not so much of patriarchal values but of "antiquated" customs and traditions. The assumption is that the more African societies becomes modernised the better will be the lot of African women. It is for this reason that the narrator's remembrance of the colonial period is nostalgic and full of fond memories. The colonial education whose obscurantism and bigotry has been demonstrated in several accounts of the colonial period is reconstructed by the narrator as benignly enlightened and purely altruistic devoid of self-interest in its method and intent.

Having outlined her views about the uplifting value of colonial education, the narrator's attitude to the indigenous traditions can only be predictable. Her critique of the tradition and custom is leveled against the extended family which is depicted in the novel as inherently misogynist and oppressive of women. The middle cl ss nuclear family is thus projected as not only desirable but as immune to patriarchal values. The reciprocal support system, which is entailed by the extended family, is construed in the narrative as parasitic and exploitative on the middle-class members of such family especially on women.

Gender along with age provides a major basis for the discrimination and marginalisation of women in the novel. The narrative thus fails to account for the different ways in which women are affected by patriarchy due to their class and race. It is this sole focus on gender which makes the novel oblivious of other forms of domination in society. The

neo-colonial situation with all its banalities and absurdities is eulogised without question especially through the characters of Modou and Daouda.

Stoicism and patience of the poor masses in the face of oppression and social inequalities is equally eulogised. This is reflective of the text's reformist impulse in effecting social change. The narrator says" **One does not fix appointments with fate. Fate grasps whom it wants, when it wants. When it moves in the direction of your desires, it brings you plenitude. But more often than not, it unsettles, crosses you. Then one has to endure**" (2). This valourisation of patient obedience and stoic endurance is very problematic. This position reflects the author's unquestioning reliance on the ethos of the dominating ideology which she takes for granted as given truths about society and life without interrogating them. This flows from the humanist assumptions which informs the novel's feminist agenda. Because its feminist politics operates from the paradigm that there is an essential and immutable human nature narrative readily embraces the discourses which profess to explain the essence of human nature and life these are then reinscribed in the very critique of the status quo. The glorification of apathy and servile patience is preferred to a rebellion whose purpose is to radically transform the status quo

A naive conception of feminist freedom which is characteristic of humanist discourses is very much evident in the assumptions which inform Ba's feminist agenda. Education is over-privileged (without being contextualised) as an agent of liberation for women under the patriarchal social order. According to Christopher Miller, for Ba education and literacy are unproblematic sources of empowerment for women. Miller writes:

> **Her vision of literacy thus conforms to Claire Robertson's linkage of literacy to self-confidence and self-assertion. But she does not recognise any of the negative consequences...Like others before her, Ba finds in francophone literacy the promise of selfhood, the assurance that writing redeems and uplifts...** (272).

In the novel, Ba's blanket view of education and books as univocal tool for women's

emancipation is constantly emphasised. It underlies the narrator-protagonist's prejudice against those women who have not been liberated by education, those who have not 'come out of the shadows'. The narrator's elegy to books though sentimental and moving remains suspect and unconvincing because of its totalistic approach. She does not bother to distinguish between different kinds of books. All books irrespective of the value of their contents are sources of empowerment for women. As Miller says **"Ba does not tells us what books Aissatou is supposed to have read; it does not seem to matter"**(275). The narrator seems to be oblivious of the fact that books can also serve reactionary causes and as effective tools of domination. Not all books have a liberatory message some are misogynist in a way that reinforces patriarchal and masculinist values.

The text's firm belief in the transformative and revolutionary potential of education leads to the disregarding of all other forms of change in the narrative. Against this eulogy and tribute to the emancipatory mission of education Miller gives this sobering appraisal:

> **Education, modernisation, and the supposed coming of egalitarian values have actually proved to be a mixed blessing to many African women...Rather than leading the way to equality and greater opportunity, then, education for most women in Africa functions as an instrument of oppression to reinforce subordinate roles...education empowers but also marginalises by subordinating women to new structures of confinement** (269).

Miller's assertion is also confirmed by Supriya Nair who in her critical analysis of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* recognises the ambiguous nature of education for the colonised subject. According to Nair the ambiguous nature of education is not a peculiarly colonial phenomenon. Nair writes:

> **The vexed issue of colonial education was made more complicated when entry into the system was presumed to win independence, a strategy that ran into problems when the colonial student was paralysed rather than energised by the close encounter with the wizardry... The pathology associated with**

> **education is by no means a colonial phenomenon. Both Althusser and Gramsci have discussed the class informed alienation and specularity induced by formal bourgeois education.** (130)

Foucault has critiqued a monological understanding of power and resistance as projected by Ba's text. He calls for a holistic understanding of both power and resistance in order to combat effectively the operations of domination. According to Foucault **'there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or a pure law of the revolutionary"** (102). No one can deny the liberatory impact of education but it is naive to propose it as the sole agent with which the patriarchal power relations can be subverted. It is Jana Sawicki, who cautions against this reductive, over-optimistic and naive view of freedom. Sawicki says:

> **What looks like a change for better may have undesirable consequences struggle is continual and idea of power free society is an abstraction, those who struggle must never grow complacent. Victories are often overturned; changes may take on difference faces overtime** (27).

Ironically Sawicki's words are also echoed by the narrator when she says: **"I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: the social constraints are ever-present..."** (88).

Chapter Three

Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies By The Nile*

This chapter will critically analyse Nawal El Saadawi's feminist project as reflected in *God Dies By the Nile.* The structure of this chapter broadly follows that of the previous one. We commence by considering *God Dies By the Nile* as part of Saadawi's corpus of texts and then proceed to examine the novel in more detail. This again takes the form of analysing various formal properties in the text with a view to uncovering aspects of the text's ideology. The chapter will then close with a theoretical critique.

Nawal El Saadawi's feminist project is both different and analogous to the one projected by Mariama Ba in her texts. Saadawi writes from a class-conscious feminist paradigm yet the essentialist assumptions which inform her narratives are no different from Ba's. The difference between the two *litterateurs* is mainly ideological and the similarities between them arise from the humanist assumptions embraced consciously or unconsciously by the two novelists. Saadawi's conception and critique of patriarchy is located in the class divisions, which characterise rural Egypt. The simultaneous awareness of class and gender oppression evident in her text makes it one of the rare breeds in the corpus of African literary feminism. Yet, her analysis and critique of class and gender domination is predicated on essentialisms in a way, which occludes and erases a complex reality. Saadawi's highly polemical narrative is based on moralistic premises in which the division between right and wrong is clearly spelled out. The tone of the narrative is confident and unequivocal about what it condemns or praises.

God Dies by the Nile written originally in Arabic is the author's second novel to be translated into English after her much acclaimed *Woman at Point Zero. Woman at Point Zero* depicts a woman protagonist whose dream of independence and freedom is frustrated by various patriarchal institutions from her own family to marriage, from

marriage to prostitution and work place. When everything seems to have changed for the better a new hurdle appears in the form of a male tyrant or exploiter. The protagonist is first taken out of school to be married off to an old rich man for a profitable bride prize. She flees from her battering and cruel husband to become a blue-collar worker for a commercial company. During her short tenure as a worker she falls in love with and is subsequently abused by her "revolutionary" but unfaithful boyfriend. She then becomes a prostitute. All the time she vainly searches for freedom and independence from masculine control and proscriptions. While at first prostitution seems to provide her with the freedom she has been yearning for, her hopes are dashed when she is approached by a male pimp who starts to harass and financially exploit her. Ultimately in a typical Saadawian rage, she murders the pimp. In another novel *Searching*, the setting is urban and the protagonist is a middle class woman. The author still evinces a feminist project, which is grounded on socialist-cum-feminist politics. In yet another text *Circling Song* the setting is also urban and protagonists are twins who leave their rural village home to go to the city to join the army and domestic service respectively.

Many of the concerns and themes in *God Dies by the Nile* have been anticipated in her first novel *Woman at Point Zero*. These include rapacious male sexuality, essentialised masculine propensity for violence especially by a father on his children or a husband on his wife, and a woman protagonist who resorts to killing a male tyrant/exploiter after long endurance and suffering of the injustices meted out to her.

An 'invisible' third person omniscient narrator narrates all Saadawi's texts. Given the polemical nature of the narratives the choice of the narrative voice is not strange or unusual. This voice allows the author to intervene directly in the story without having to rely on the limited view of the character to express her political convictions. The same method and treatment of themes raised in the text were to be developed in later novels like *Searching* and *Circling Song*.

But *God Dies by the Nile* as a literary text stands out as relatively unique in the writer's corpus with its rural and arcadian setting and its focus on the peasantry. It is also a rare

breed in African literary feminism. As Katherine Frank has somewhat sweepingly claimed: **"When we look at African feminist novels, however it is striking to note that all [sic] of them have educated, highly Westernised heroines and all set in urban environments"** 16). However its rural setting is typical trait of Egyptian literature. S . Mehrez observes this abiding fascination with the arcadian setting as follows:

> **Not surprisingly, rural Egypt has occupied a significant space in many writers works...In their works they resurrect the Egyptian village from the all-too-familiar 'romanticism' so characteristic of the earlier decades of the century. The small village becomes, in many ways, the protagonist in the narrative: its social structure, its relationship with the authorities, its frustrations, its dreams and mythologies.** (9)

The protagonist in Saadawi's text is a poor peasant woman known as Zakeya. Furthermore, the narrative is not based on charting the life of the protagonist like in *Woman at Point Zero* or the *Circling Song*. It focuses on the life of a peasant matriarch and her family at a particular moment with a few flashbacks to her past in order to validate her present situation as conceived by the narrative. The focus of the text is sharp and precise both in its setting and temporality. The only other novel by the same author which emulates *God Dies by the Nile* in its sharpness of focus is *Searching*. The ideological development of the author with *God Dies by the Nile* began to assume a more conscious alertness to class divisions in society in addition to the awareness about gender oppression. In this novel the plight of the wretched and exploited peasantry duped by religion is foregrounded alongside the com neme of gender oppression. The novel's critique and indictment is not aimed only at the patriarchal structures but against the specific socio-political system prevailing in rural Egypt.

The storyline is landmarked by a series of acts of injustice committed by the Mayor against the peasantry in order to gratify his insatiable and megalomaniac sexual appetite. The author is very extravagant in her display of these brutalities which are an index to the unjust nature of the patriarchal class system. The novel depicts a society in which a

decadent and corrupt reality is disguised by the apparently noble and puritanical values. The dichotomy exists between what society preaches and what it practices. This dichotomy is epitomised by the hypocritical Mayor and his son Tariq. It is this obscurantist veil and disguise, which makes it possible for injustices to prevail, unpunished and unchallenged in society. Once this veil is removed, once its psychological hold on the peasant's mind is erased the peasants will be able to resist exploitative and corrupt local representatives of the government or so the story suggests. Among the several acts of injustice which are replete in the story the most significant are the lusting after and impregnation of Nefissa by the Mayor which precedes the narrative, the framing and killing of Elwau, the framing and arrest of Kafrawi, the religious deception of Zakeya and Zeinab and their costly trip to the mosque of El Sayeda, the Mayor's sexual craving for Zeinab, and the false arrest and conviction of Zeinab's husband Galal. This series of unjust acts committed by the Mayor against the peasant's is terminated by an act of poetic justice when Aunt Zakeya murders Mayor-the veritable villain of the narrative.

The plot of *God Dies by the Nile* is essentially linear with the sketchy biographical flashbacks on Zakeya, the Mayor, Nefissa, and Haj Ismail. The action of the narrative is propelled forward first by the attempt to cover up the Mayor's previous impregnation of Nefissa and the repercussions of the Mayor's endeavours to seduce Nefissa's younger sister Zeinab. The Mayor's grim and resolute determination to overcome and circumvent all obstacles preventing him from getting Zeinab provides the basis on which the narrative is anchored. It is Mayor's brutal actions and schemes in collaboration with his aides, which provokes the protagonist's bloody act of vengeance against the Mayor.

At the centre of this whole drama is the novel's protagonist Aunt Zakeya. Zakeya is a hard-working peasant woman whose face is always marked by a defiant and angry look. Zakeya grows and develops psychologically from a religious and naive understanding of her situation into a secular and class conscious appraisal of her plight. The Mayor's attempts to cover up his impregnation of Nefissa and to seduce Zeinab are used by the author as the consciousness-raising agent for the protagonist about her oppressed state

sanctioned by a deceptive religion. In fact, the text can be regarded as a peasant woman's *bildungsroman* in which the heroine grows in awareness about the hidden complicity of religion (Islam) in the class and gender oppression prevailing in her society. She learns to appraise and understand her society not in the mystical terms of a deceptive religion but in terms of the motives and wishes of callous and rapacious human beings. She is made aware that the woes and sufferings which have befallen her family have been authored by the deliberate schemes of human beings not by a transcendental and inaccessible heavenly being. The dawning of this realisation on Zakeya is instant and immediat . She says: **"I was blind, but now my eyes have been opened...'**

'I know who it is. I know Zeinab. I know" (135). Zakeya then decides upon an immediate retributive action without telling anyone but herself. Somehow, this retributive action does not really come as a surprise to the reader who has been constantly reminded throughout the narrative about the angry and defiant look in Zakeya's face.

The ultimate political awareness of the novel's heroine is not easily attained or cheaply achieved. The narrative clearly shows that this is achieved after a long and grievous emotional experience. The protagonist looses her kith and kin one by one; her two nieces are pushed by the Mayor's sexual lust to disappear into the world of the unknown, (probably the world of prostitution) a brother and a son are falsely accused and convicted on trumped up charges. The protagonist reaches the zenith of her awareness with the framing, arrest and conviction of her son Galal orchestrated by Sheikh Zahran, one of the Mayor's vicious and callous aides.

The setting of the novel is a remote and isolated rural village known as Kafr El Teen ruled by a caricatured and snobbish Mayor and his obsequious aides Sheikh Zahran, Haj Ismail, and Sheikh Hamzawi. According to Alamin Mazrui and Judith Abala this triumvirate symbolises the three pillars on which the authority of the Mayor is based. They write: **"This god is propped up and fortified by the three interrelated forces. These are, first, religious ideology-represented by the Imam of the Mosque, Sheikh Hamzwi; second, local cultural traditions- symbolized by the barber and local healer, Haj Ismail; and third, coercive power of the political establishment-**

personified by the Head of the Village, Sheikh Zahran" (19-20).

The arcadian yet non-romanticised nature of the setting is hinted at by reference to nature and its elements as an index to the themes of the text. The rising and setting of the sun and the steady flow of the Nile river, are evoked throughout the novel. The wretched life of the peasants is overwhelmingly stressed fact in the narrative. Take for example the opening paragraph of the novel:

> ***Before*** **the crimson rays of dawn touched the treetops,** ***before*** **the cry of the cock, the bark of a dog, or the bray of a donkey pierced through the heavy darkness, or the voice of 'Sheikh Hamzawi' echoed in the silence with the first call to prayer, the big wooden door opened slowly, creaking with the rusty sound of an ancient water-wheel.** [Emphasis mine] (1).

The sun is used in the narrative to accentuate the portrait of human misery and suffering. The author later gives the following description of the sun while Kafrawi is working on his fields:

> **It was a Friday, the burning disc of the sun like a ball of fire in the centre of the sky, glared down on Kafrawi's head. His eyes seemed to be bathed in the red colour of the sun's rays, and the sweat poured out of him from every pore, streaming down his head, his neck, his chest, his belly and his thighs** (44).

The river Nile on the other hand is created by the author as an index to the sad and unchanging plight of the peasants under a patriarchal class system. In the first chapter of the novel, the author creates this portrait of the river Nile: **"The light of dawn glimmered on the river, revealing the minute waves, like tiny wrinkles in an old, sad, silent face. Deep underneath, its waters seemed immobile, their flow as imperceptible as a moment of passing of time, or the slow movement of the clouds in the dark sky"**(1).

The author as one of the strategies to evoke empathy for the peasants who are exploited by the lazy and indolent government functionaries uses this emphasis on the toil and drudgery of the peasants. For instance, almost the whole of the first chapter is devoted to Zakeya working in the fields. Zakeya's physical strength and iron determination for her work is portrayed as surpassing that of a buffalo or man. She works from dawn to dusk without resting even during midday when other peasants take a rest to eat and relax from the scorching heat of the sun. She works untiringly: **"...her hoe kept on falling and rising, rising and falling from sky to earth, and earth to sky"**(3). This dedication to work is linked with the bottled up anger evident in Zakeya's face. It is therefore evident that the protagonist labours by compulsion not out of love for her work. The work for her is a manifestation of her subordination not a site of empowerment. She exerts herself in order live and pay taxes to the government lest her land is confiscated.

Contrasted sharply with this wretched life of the peasants epitomised by Zakeya and her family is the Mayor and his corrupt aides who are first introduced in the second chapter in a deliberate juxtaposition to the drudgery of the peasants described in the first chapter. The narrative impelled by its class conscious, ideological imperative clearly delineates the dichotomy between the world lived by the peasants and the local government functionaries. The Mayor and his aides are portrayed as pre-occupied with trivialities because of their lazy and indolent lives. The Mayor is never shown working in his office or at his place of work. The peasants on the other hand are depicted most of the time working in their fields or tormented by extreme mental states like nightmarish visions, and mental traumas resulting from their miserable existence. The peasants are grim and sad throughout the novel weighed down by intolerable oppression and injustices. Suffering is their way of life and the main determinant of their daily lives. They are portrayed univocally as the victims of the exploitative government policies and its corrupt local functionaries. The government power intervenes and manifests its authority in the lives of the peasants in its coercive forms only when a peasant is to be arrested and when the taxes are to be paid. The relationship between the peasants and the power structures is purely antagonistic devoid of ambiguities and contradictions. The dichotomy,

established by the author is based on the moralistic premises and melodramatic literary method, which informs the text.

Characterisation as featured in the text is similarly based on th moralistic premises, which inform the narrative. Hence the characterisation is flat, crude and dichotomised into the virtuous, ascetic and honest peasants on one hand incarnated by Zakeya and her household members and the corrupt and scheming government functionaries on the other hand epitomised by the Mayor and his aides. Mazrui and Abala aptly establishes the text's dichotomous paradigm as follows:

> **Central to the development of the theme of gender exploitation as a product of the interaction of the forces of religion and class in *Mawt* are the two leading characters, the Chief of Kafr el-Teen and Zakeya. These two represent a conflict of opposites: one, the Chief, is male and powerful member of the upper class, while the other, Zakeya, is female and a relatively powerless member of the toiling class of the *fellaheen* (the peasantry). The Chief symbolizes not only men -supposedly with their sexually lustful and predatory predisposition-but the ruling class in general whose power and resources are ultimately under the basic control of men.** (19)

Another dichotomy presented in the novel though less essentialised is evident between the sexually ascetic and compassionate women on one hand and sexually indulgent, selfish and uncaring male characters. Saadawi's characters act and respond as mere archetypal constructions because according to the novel's ideological imperative they symbolise their gender and class. The characters in the novel are divided into villains and saints. Any complexity surrounding the character is in the dissonance between the 'official' and 'sacred' representation of the characters and their actual reality. For example, this is especially evident with the Mayor, Sheikh Hamzawi and Sheikh Metwalli who is officially represented as saintly while in reality they are immoral and corrupt. The official presentation of the peasants is equally fraught with this dissonance

masses. Zeinab wonder at the resplendence of the Mayor's house cannot be understood without taking into consideration the wretched existence of her peasant background. The author describes her as follows:

> **Zeinab gasped in wonder when she saw the white porcelain wash basins, the shining metal taps, the coloured walls, the curtains, and the stove that lit so easily. She lost herself in contemplation of the kettle, which blew a whistle when water boiled the cups with engravings and coloured paintings, the silver spoons. Everything around her was new, never seen before, as though she has been transported to another world. She felt that she was now in the kingdom of Allah, praised be His name and revered. Her fingers trembled every time she held something between them. Her heart was beating rapidly, her breast heaved up and down, and her legs kept shaking all the time** (23)

The peasants are presented as a silenced and muted community an index to their oppressed situation. They are not only silent in their relationship with power but are also silent even among themselves. Zakeya the protagonist of the novel is not loquacious and only speaks when it is necessary to do so. At the end of the first chapter the author shows how silence descends on Zakeya and her brother Kafrawi whilst they are still talking about the disappearance of Nefissa. The narrator says:

> **Their voices like the successive gasps of two people in pain ceased abruptly. Silences descended upon them, a silence heavier than the thick cloak of darkness around them. Their eyes continued to stare fixedly into the limitless night, and neither of them moved. They sat on side by side, as immobile as the mud huts buried in the dark** (7)

The same and unchanging mood of silence is hinted at by the narrator when she describes the relationship between Zakeya and Zeinab which is dominated by silence: **"But Zeinab never answered, so Zakeya would drop into silence again for a long while..."**(66).

between the ideal and the real. The narrative lampoons this dichotomy, at times through a direct authorial intervention. For example the narrator describes Haj Ismail's dilemma (he has made an inadvertent remark which he fears may be misconstrued as subve ive) in the following words:

> **This time the Mayor could take his last words to be an insinuation that peasants had a hard life, which of course was not at all true. This in its turn might lead directly or indirectly to an even more dangerous conclusion, namely that in the view of Haj Ismail the government was not telling the truth when it repeatedly expressed its concern for the welfare of the peasants, and the protection of their rights. Since the Mayor was the representative of government in Kafr El Teen, such a view could also be taken to mean that as the responsible official he was using his position to exploit the peasants, and to spend the money he squeezed out of them on his extravagant way of living, and his extravagant tastes in food, tobacco, wine and women** (13)

The author employs various literary tactics to evoke the sympathy of the reader for the peasants. One tactic as indicated earlier is to show these characters only in the state of toil and suffering. According to Bharati Mukherjee: "**...the allegorical intent here cannot be missed. The downtrodden *look* downtrodden**" (14). We never see Zakeya smiling, laughing, or joking. Zakeya's face become gay only when she remembers her mother but even then the moment of happiness is short-lived. The narrator says: "**Her face would soften and grow tender for a short moment, but an instant later it would become as harsh, and as resolute, as it had been throughout her life**" (5). She is presented as ever grim with the unchanging look of angry defiance in her face. The sympathy of the reader is further heightened with the juxtaposition of this grim reality of the peasant's life with the leisurely and luxurious life of the government functionaries. This is clearly displayed in the scene when Zeinab enters the Mayor's house. The acute class divisions prevalent in this village are shown to be legitimated by a deceptive religion, which is depicted in its classical Marxist version as the real opium of the

The pervasive and imposing presence of silence is also manifest as a form of self-censorship against uttering subversive statements. An unnamed man who is watching the expulsion of the Sheikh Hamzawi under the orders of the Mayor is described thus by the narrator: **"And yet the word devout itself had echoed inside him very much like the mysterious voice of devil, so that all of a sudden the word 'devout' started to sound more like the word 'dissolute'. He was seized with panic at the thought that he had insulted the Mayor even though he had spoken to himself"** (111). The anonymous man also silences his son from uttering statements which question the integrity of the Mayor. The narrator says: **"There was a profound silence...But a small boy who was standing somewhere in the throng piped in a shrill voice, "How can the Mayor know?" But before he could say anything more the hand of his father clapped down over his mouth... "** (110).

The grim and angry faces exhibited by the peasant women in the novel from Zakeya to Zeinab reflects the author's conviction that the peasants are inherently oppositional to the power structures which define and limit their lives. Zakeya as it has been hinted before is the classic embodiment of this peasant anger and defiance in the novel. Other characters also exhibit similar anger though not her defiance especially the members of her household. Zakeya and her niece are thus described **"Zakeya still sat on the dusty threshold with Zeinab by her side. Both of them were plunged in silence, and their eyes continued to watch the lane with an expression of angry defiance"** (65). Nefissa is described in the following manner **" Like her Aunt Zakeya she looked up with pride and with anger, "** (13). Kafrawi is also endowed with this seemingly inherent peasant anger. The narrator says: **"His features were carved like hers, his eyes large, black and also *full of anger*... "**[Emphasis added] (6)

This inherent oppositional attitude of the peasantry against authority becomes more evident in the narrative during the chase of Kafrawi by the police. The narrator says about the peasant spectators who are watching the spectacle:

> ***Instinctively*** **they felt Kafrawi was not a killer, or a criminal. They hated the policemen, all officers, all representatives of authority, and the government.** ***It was the hidden ancient hatred of peasants for their government.*** **They knew that in some way or another they had always been the victims, always been exploited, even if most of the time they could not understand how it was happening** (60). [Emphasis mine]

This anger of the peasants is contained by the most formidable legitimating tool in the hands of the ruling classes, which is religion. The ruling classes use religion to delude the peasants and mystify the source of their oppression. All discourses, which legitimate power and domination in the text, are based on religion. The narrative's derogative depiction of religion is reinforced by its characterisation. The author takes several swipes against religion in the novel. *God Dies by the Nile* is a , and an unequivocally anti- religious text, which advocates a secular society. According to this project Saadawi's nuanced depiction of religion in her non-fiction works is not replicated in the text. In this regard my interpretation is at odds with Mazrui's and Abala's whose interpretation of the text is that it is a faultless projection of the author's beliefs stated elsewhere outside the narrative. They say: **According to el-Saadawi, the doctrine of Islam itself accords a certain measure of equality that cuts across sexes, but the historical mediation by patriarchs increasingly led to the attentuation of the rights of women"** (19). This might be or not be Saadawi's conception of religion but a fact which is worth noting is that such a view is not even implicitly reflected in the narrative. A secular outlook on life and its realities devoid of religiosity is privileged as the way through which women and the peasantry are to be freed from exploitation and oppression by men and the rich in society. The rebels against authority -hence the heroes- are religious sceptics like Zakeya or outright atheists like Elwau. The custodians of religion and those who are held in high esteem through this religion are shown as despicable and morally degenerate characters. Zakeya expresses her constant doubt about the power of Allah to alleviate her situation. Elwau who is killed in order to cover up Mayor's impregnation of Nefissa was not only proud and self-confident but was also sceptical of religion as he did not go to the mosque on Friday like all villagers. He continued to work

on his field oblivious of everything else. His loneliness is symbolic of his alienation from the corrupt religious community. The narrator describes him thus: "...every day he could **be seen ploughing his field or digging the soil with his hoe. Even on Fridays, when everybody went to the mosque, to stand behind Sheikh Hamzawi while he led the village in prayer, he would be at work in the field"** (41). Zakeya in one of her several moments of doubt about God says to her niece **"Even God wants us to pay Him something. Yet He knows we own nothing my child"** (80).

A further critique of religion comes through the characterisation of the Mayor, Sheikh Hamzawi, Sheikh Zahran, Haj Ismail, and more significantly through Sheikh Metwalli dubbed Allah's chosen one by the religiously duped peasants yet he is shown to be corrupt, degenerate, wicked, bestial and greedy. Hamzawi the Imam of the mosque conspires with Ismail to manipulate Fatheya's father's to force her to marry Hamzawi against her will. However it is Sheikh Metwalli one of the most despicable characters in the narrative and a veteran practitioner of hetero- and homosexual necrophilia who personifies the author's sharpest critique of religion. Mazrui and Abala defines Metwalli's role in the narrative as follows: **"Symbolically, then he is the embodiment of the "idiocy" of the politically stultifying conception of religion held by the women and the poor in the face of oppression under patriarchy. It is a kind of idiocy that comes to bedevil, in life as well as in death...And the enigmatic figure of Metwalli is precisely that instrument of damnation unto death"** (29). He steals the shrouds, which cover the dead people, and feeds on the food left by the bereaved on the graves. In a crude mockery of religious piety, the devout Muslims regard the same character during daytime as Allah's chosen one. Even the bestowal of the title "Sheikh" on such a character extends and amplifies this mockery of Islam. The narrator says: **"He had been chosen by God, knew about sickness, and could penetrate the secrets of the future. Allah had bestowed his powers on him since Allah chose the weakest of His creatures for his His purposes. And so they called him Sheikh Metwalli"** (56).

Male characters in the novel are the only ones who are possessed of abnormal and megalomaniac sexual propensities. Miriam Cooke noted the author's extravagant

depiction of the rapacious male sexuality. Cooke observes: "**With almost clinical distance, she unfolds a panoply of indiscriminate sexuality: bestiality; homosexual incest; hetero- and homosexual necrophilia**" (117). This includes Kafrawi a male character that overall is sympathetically depicted in the narrative. He is depicted as having sexual intercourse with a buffalo just before he is framed for having killed Elwau. The narrator describes Kafrawi as follows:

> **He felt something fill up, become swollen and erect, like a strange organ which was not a part of his body. He pressed on it with his the palm of his hand, trying to push it back, but it refused to yield. He watched it get out, breaking through the limits of his body and his will, like a part of him over which he had lost control. Slowly it crept over the soft udder, breathing in the smell of female, lapping up the familiar wetness, slid up into the inner warmth and lost in a great stillness, like an eternity, like death** (47).

In fact, the intimate relationship between Kafrawi and the buffalo can be traced from his childhood days when he cried and refused to eat when his father had beaten the animal. The narrative is however mute and silent about the sexual propensities of its female characters. They are depicted as leading sexually ascetic lives except when violated by an essentialised rapacious male sexuality. This rapacious male sexuality is also linked with an apparently inherent masculine propensity for violence incapable of genuine parental love and love for the spouse. Kafrawi is also indicted under this blanket characterisation. The memories of most characters about their fathers or husbands are full of violence and callousness of the father or a husband. Zakeya recalls her husband who used to beat her whenever her male child dies or when she had given birth to a girl. Haj Ismail recalls his cousin Yuossef who had violently raped him. Haj Ismail's father in a typically uncompassionate "masculine" manner abandons Ismail as a young boy to his own devices and is never to be seen again. It is also Kafrawi who beats his unwilling daughter Nefissa to force her to work at the Mayor's house at the instigation of Sheikh Zahran. Fatheya's father beats her in order to force her to marry Hamzawi against her will.

Rethinking Saadawi's Feminist Project

Saadawi's recourse to melodramatic content and method in her narrative is partly understandable in terms of her activist politics and propagandistic intent. However the essentialisms projected by this approach are disturbing and disconcerting. According to Frederick Cooper such approaches tend to simplify the complexities which characterise hegemonic structures and they "**...end up constraining the search for the precise ways in which power is deployed and the ways in which power is engaged, contested deployed and appropriated**" (Cooper, 1517). A nuanced and balanced appraisal of both the oppressor and the oppressed is still a necessity even for propagandistic discourses whose purpose is presumably not only to sloganeer but also to effect a real transformation of society. A work does not necessarily have to be dismissive of politics in order to in order to capture the complexity of reality and society. Trinh Minh-ha calls for the fusion of political engagement and theoretical sophistication. She writes: "**A responsible work today seems to me above all to be one that shows, on one hand a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, and is on the other hand interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive.** (149 b).

The conception of religion as the opium of the masses, an obscurantist force blinding people to the revolutionary possibilities and options open to them struck me as ill conceived. Bharati Mukherjee notes this total condemnation without engaging its validity. He says: "**In Zakeya's final vision we learn that the enemy isn't just the Mayor. The true betrayer of the Egyptian peasantry is Allah, symbol of all blind religious faith**" (14). Saadawi construes a particular form of religious interpretation as exhaustive of what religion is. Mohanty interrogates a similarly unitary vision and interpretation of Islam evinced by Jeffrey: "**By taking a specific version of Islam as the Islam, Jeffrey attributes a singularity and coherence** " (62). Marnia Lazreg also critiques this essentialisation of religion by saying: "**A ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to religion as the cause of gender inequality...**" (Quoted by Mohanty 62). While it is undeniable that religion has often acted as a bulwark against change and

liberation of women in society but this is part, not the whole story about religion. Discourses whether secular or religious are sites of conflict and contestation. The text's perception of discourses is monologic and one-dimensional. Discourses are therefore seen as is inherently progressive or regressive. As already noted Foucault has said there is 'no single locus of great refusal or grand law of the revolutionary (102).

The text privileges the spontaneous and unorganised individual violence as the unproblematic solution to class and gender oppression in society. Saadawi has a Fanonist conception of violence as cathartic for the oppressed and she projects this both in the text under discussion as well as in *Woman at Point Zero.* She believes in the transcendental power of violence to liberate and cure an oppressed person of all disabilities engendered by an oppressive situation. According To Miriam Cooke, the novel's act of retribution compromises the text's verisimilitude and credibility. She observes: **"Aunt Zakeya's murder of the Mayor may be, as one critic puts it a "a favourite strategy of a politically aware author (to use) a politically naive protagonist to press a message" but it also suspends belief-the bug-bear of all good fiction"** (117). The [illegible]y act of revenge might be symbolic of an organised mass insurrection but there is no gesture that is made in the novel towards mass action. The unproblematic privileging of violence as the authentic agent of change can easily lend itself to authoritarian solutions. Especially when that violence is privileged after an essentialist analysis of gender and class domination which brooks no dialogue and negotiation. It is Mukherjee who connects the author's privileging of violence with her overt didacticism and authoritarian analysis of society. Mukherjee writes: **"She diagnoses: all religious, social and political authority in Egypt has become corrupt. And she prescribes: exterminate the tyrant"** (14).

Romanticisation and demonisation of the peasant women and government functionaries\ males respectively characterize the text's thematic project. The peasantry -especially women- are depicted as honest, compassionate and caring in their interaction with other people. The government functionaries are portrayed as mean, manipulative and callously selfish. The male characters irrespective of their class affiliation are created as naturally

endowed with insatiable sexual urges which provokes them at times to resort to unorthodox means of gratifying their urges. According to Sawicki, this approach is flawed because: **"...the process through which male desire is constructed remains unanalysed"** (64). This is also related to a supposed inherent masculine propensity for violence especially against the females. The females on the other hand are peaceful and long-suffering except when poked beyond endurance by masculinist oppression. Women are also sexually ascetic and chaste except when their innocence is violated by the rapacious male sexuality. It is interesting how these gender stereotypes tally so well with the dominant patriarchal notions of gender. Saadawi critique of patriarchal and class domination therefore still operates within the paradigm of the phallocratic order. According to Trinh Minh-ha **"Difference as uniqueness or special identity is both limiting and deceiving"** (95c).

The inherently oppositional and revolutionary outlook of the peasants is signified in the novel by their angry and grim faces. While this projection can be understood as a way of challenging the structures of oppression, it ignores the persuasive mechanisms of power, which enlists voluntary support of the oppressed without any recourse to coercion. The relationship between power and the subject is thus projected as univocally antagonistic. Any ambiguities and contradictions, which might be existent, are simply erased. But hegemony of the ruling class in society is not that simplistic and is also not reliant on religion alone. Hegemony of the ruling class is not that easily negated and undermined as the author shows us in the text. In dealing with this aspect of domination one cannot to be reductive if mechanisms of power are to be exposed and finally subverted. Indeed as Trinh Minh-ha has said: **"Hegemony is most difficult to deal with because it does not really spare any of us. Hegemony is established to the extent that the worldview of the rulers is also the worldview of the ruled"** (148).

The peasants' defiance and anger is not historicised but it is presented as something that is just there as if it has been biologically inherited. This romanticisation of the peasants goes against the documented historical evidence about the peasants worldwide. Jack Woddis a theoretician on revolution and revolutionary change contradicts the view of a

revolutionary peasantry by saying: **"Most peasants are illiterate, ignorant and a prey to religious dogma and superstition. They are dominated economically by the chiefs and feudal landlords who exercise considerable ideological influence over them"** [60].

Even Frantz Fanon who believed that the peasants constitute a revolutionary class did not idealise the peasants. Fanon writes: **"The mass of the peasantry is steeped, as we have seen, in a changeless ever-recurring life without incident; and they continue to revere their religious leaders who are descended from ancient families. The tribe follows, as one man, the way marked out for it by its traditional chief "** (109). Ndebele's cautionary note which was issued to fellow South African writers seems more applicable to Saadawi as well. Ndebele says: **"Intellectuals must begin from social fact of data rather than from a moralistic or radical idealism which wishes that people were better than they actually were without accepting the responsibility of beginning with and from what they actually are"** (94). This is also related to the binary conception of freedom and oppression as mutually exclusive categories whereby the presence or the absence of one category presupposes the absence or the presence of the other. The peasants will wear grim and angry faces until they are freed and then they will be happy and jolly after the advent of socialism. In order to live their lives fully the peasants have to wait for a socialist millenium and the collapse of the class society. It is Hama Tuma who satirises this view in his *Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and other Stories.* In a particular case in which the accused is tried for having smiled the author satirises the prosecutor's overtly prescriptive as follows: **"'Are the poor forbidden to smile?' 'They have no reason to. Their smile comes after socialism. Till then they are grim, a grimness of commitment and hatred for capital. A capital beautiful subject for artists' "** (60). The failure to recognise that even in situations of acute oppression that the oppressed do find ways to determine and control their lives outside the ambit of the oppressive structures characterises Saadawi's narrative. Indeed it is its prescriptiveness and authoritarianism which is the Achilles heel of Saadawi's literary endeavour in the novel under discussion. As always the prescriptive precludes the descriptive and the analytic.

The text denies the peasants and women any other experience other than that of oppression under a patriarchal class system. For Saadawi's peasant women live and breathe oppression. Experiences of acutely oppressed people show that people attempt to lead normal lives even under oppression. The analysis of power as only anti-energy and nothing else is extremely flawed. P'easure and power do reciprocate one another, they are not antagonistic Foucault says: **"Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement. "** (48). Adherence to religion among the peasants for instance cannot only be a delusion. It also provides them with an ideological support system with which they try to understand and endure their lives. Indeed as Trinh Minh-ha has advised by saying: **One cannot rely on essences...and do away with the dialectic and problematics of things"** (186a)

Chapter Four

Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the project by first examining some points of convergence and divergence between the two novels and secondly by charting the way forward for African literary feminism.

So Long A Letter unfolds its story through a first person narrator while God Dies by the Nile tells its story through a third person omniscient narrator. The two texts narrate the experiences of African women against the background of Islamic social formations. The two authors project their different views on religion through the attitude of the protagonists of their respective novels. Ramatoulaye, *So Long A Letter's* protagonist is critical of certain aspects of this religion when it relates to women her attitude overall is that of acquiescence and acceptance. According to CL Innes **"Ramatoulaye ...continues to find sustenance in her Islamic faith; she seeks to reform it rather than reject it"** (147). There are several instances in the text which illustrate the protagonist's attachment to religion. The narrator commenting about the physical confinement she has been subjected to in accordance with the precepts of Islam says: **"I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion"** (8). The disclosures and reflections she makes on Modou after his death is based on one of the tenets of Islam known as *Mirasse*. The stoicism, which the text advocates, is based on religious principle that God decides individual's destiny. The protagonist's attainment of feminist consciousness does not change the protagonist's religious piety. Zakeya on the other hand debunks her religion as a prerequisite for the attainment of her mental liberation. Zakeya moves from a sceptical attitude towards religion, which is then suspended after her trip to the Mosque of el-Sayeda. Ultimately she debunks her religious piety when she realises the complicity of religion in her social oppression and subjugation. It is only then that she attains her feminist and class-consciousness.

Both women protagonists are ritually confined. In *So Long A Letter* Ramatoulaye's confinement is dictated by her position as a woman in accordance with custom and religion. The confinement of Ramatoulaye has been authored by cultural factors which require a mandatory period of seclusion for a widow as part of the mourning rites. In *God Dies by the Nile* Zakeya's confinement to her work in the fields from dawn to dusk is dictated primarily by her social position as a peasant in an exploitative class society. Zakeya's confinement is authored by the socio-economic factors. This confinement is permanent and structural. By the end of the text, the protagonist merely changes the settings of her confinement from the daily drudgery of her fields to the darkness of prison. Confinement in both texts signifies a regimented life and a highly proscribed personal freedom.

Modernisation theory inherent in the two novels' feminist projects is visualised differently by the two novelists. Modernisation theory is reflected in the texts' univocal depiction of religion and culture as sources of gender and class oppression. The assumption, which underpins the novels, is that patriarchy and class oppression is made possible by these discourses. The covert assumption is that without these discourses patriarchal and class oppression would automatically be rescinded and rendered inoperative. This is also related to the way nationalism is projected in both novels. While Ba projects a static and at times even a gendered nationalism Saadawi projects a much more radical and subversive nationalism which is in harmony with the thematic concerns of the novel.

Ba's nationalism is an exotic Senghorian kind of nationalism based on the necessary complementarity of Europe and Africa. Nationalism is evoked to underline the uniqueness of Africa and Africans as compared to Europe and Europeans. The nationalist imperative of Ba's text is evinced in the description of Modou's sojourn in France where he was unimpressed by the 'milky' complexion of white women and was continually pining for the black women of his native Senegal. The unsympathetic and derogative portrayal of the French expatriate teacher is also a manifestation of the text's

problematic nationalism. Forms of nationalist retrieval in Ba's text are essentialist and problematic in a way that it is difficult to see them as subversive of the imperialist relations. But given the text's ambivalent nature, nationalism is not consistently endorsed throughout the novel. At times the text even deconstructs the idea of a monologic African identity which is accessible to all Africans. The narrator describing the plight of Jacqueline an Ivorian who is discriminated in Senegal she says: **"A black African, she should have beer ble to fit without difficulty into a black African society... But Africa is diverse, divided. The same country can change its character and outlook several times over, from north to south or from east to west"** (42).

Nationalism in *God Dies by the Nile* is reflected in the character portrait of the Mayor - the veritable villain of the novel - as half-English. This indicates a nationalist imperative in the text. The Mayor is proud of his English ancestry and he regards this as a licence to plunder and ravage young peasant girls. His contemptuous attitude towards his friends arises from his consciousness about his origins. This character portrait of the Mayor gestures towards the neo-colonial relationship prevailing between Egypt and metropolitan countries. It might also be suggestive of the abiding legacy of Egypt's colonial past as a former British colony.

Ramatoulaye finds solace in her family and her friendship with Aissatou symbolising the healing impact of female solidarity in the bitter aftermath of male betrayal. Zakeya on the other hand leads a solitary existence devoid of any supportive personalities and discourses, which might have assuaged her pain. Familial space in *So Long A Letter* is an insulated refuge from the oppressive patriarchal structures of society. The familial space in *God Dies by the Nile* is dominated by silence and is as paralysed as the protagonist herself.

Both Ba and Saadawi respond to masculine myths about gender by replacing those myths with other constructions which define women and peasants in different yet nonetheless enclosed and stereotypical generalisations. Carmela Garritano critiquing a similar tendency in Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me A Woman* which unconsciously reproduces

masculinist values observes: **"The paradigm remains the same. We are still locked into humanistic understanding of totalising identities that erases the multiple subject positions occupied by the women"** (62).

Characters in both novels especially in Saadawi's text are created in order to fit into predetermined roles according to the moralistic imperative of the narratives. In Ba's text, the character that is exempt from this shallow portrait is the narrator-protagonist herself. Other characters whatever changes they undergo during the course of the narrative are motivated by the text's ideological imperative. Characters are often created in such a way as to serve a particular ideological purpose. They are finished forms - we don't see them develop and grow. Ndebele provides an apt description of this kind of literary endeavour. Ndebele writes: **"The author is interested only in the outward, obvious signs of individual or social behaviour. Causality is a matter of making simple connections in order to produce the most startling and shocking. There is very little attempt to delve into intricacies of motive or social process. People and situations are either very good or very bad."** (39)

Both women protagonists are awakened into feminist and class-consciousness about their plight as women and peasants respectively by a rapacious masculine sexuality. In Rama's case it is the husband's lust for Binetou, her daughter's friend. While in Zakeya's case it is the seduction of her two nieces Nefissa and Zeinab by the Mayor and its aftermath.

The two feminist novelists however render different solutions to the situations of injustice they depict in their texts. While Ba privileges education as the emancipatory tool for women Saadawi privileges the liberatory value of violence. Ba's univocal perception of education as a tool of self-empowerment and liberation is related to the text's espousal and celebration of the ethos and values of the middle class. The foil character to the protagonist Aissatou who epitomises the text's feminist liberation attains her freedom and independence through studying. The magic power of books is lyrically expressed by the narrator protagonist in glowing terms. The novel's aversion for insurrectionary violence and the extolling of stoicism and forbearance in face of oppressive conditions are part of

its typically bourgeois worldview.

Saadawi on the other hand like Frantz Fanon sees violence as a way through which an oppressed person can recapture and recuperate her humanity diminished and distorted by the experience of domination. She attaches psychological, moral and redemptive value to violence. The protagonist of Saadawi's text Zakeya who is dehumanised and numbed by oppression recovers her humanity and agency by killing the Mayor-man who has authored her woes and miseries.

The two texts are however similar in one important respect in their projection of solutions to the situation of class and gender oppression they have portrayed. Each text projects its proffered solution as the one and only way out of the shadows or a situation of marginalisation. The ambiguous nature of each solution is occluded and what is reflected is the unproblematic tool of emancipation working one-dimensionally to perform and fulfill its liberatory function and nothing else. Education, even colonial education as projected in *So Long A Letter* is devoid of its hegemonic function. It only serves as a tool of self-empowerment for the socially marginalised sectors of society. Similarly in *God Dies by the Nile* violence by the oppressed especially by females is idealised and romanticised as univocally progressive and subversive of the status quo. The only exception in this regard is the masculine violence meted out against the female whether be she a daughter or a wife.

In the course of this discussion two kinds of feminism have been deconstructed, one universalist and liberal the other socialist and class-conscious. Both have been closely scrutinised and have been found wanting. In terms of this project Saadawi's text is more radically questioning of the established ethos and values and is more subversive than Ba's text which operates from the basic assumption that all is well with the system except for gender discrimination. Ba's text reflects authorial ideology in less obvious way than Saadawi's text whose ideology is undisguised and explicit. Saadawi's text by contrast reflects awareness about modes of social control and the power of internalised oppression although she unduly privileges religion in this regard. Artistically Ba's text surpasses

Saadawi's literary endeavour in its capturing of the complexity of the social situation of women through an ambivalent, non-prescriptive, and non-hectoring narrative. Its stylistic devices are less rigidly controlled by ideology than in Saadawi's text where everything is sacrificed to make clear and unequivocal political statements in a melodramatic fashion.

The project has attempted to provide an alternative method of reading and understanding African feminist texts in contradistinction to the established "**solidarity**" feminist literary criticism. The aim of this project has been to open new avenues for feminist literary criticism. Radical departure from phallocratic discourse must be effected. It is an attempt to move feminist literary criticism out of the phallocratic order. This work is by no means a trailblazer or a pioneer in this regard. It has its precedents in the recent critical work by Carmela Garritano, David Schalkwyk, Pamela Ryan, Sisi Maqagi, and others. It is a humble contribution to an emergent non-humanist and anti-essentialist feminist scholarship which has endeavoured to enrich and open up new avenues for feminist literary criticism in Africa.

The quest for relevance in African literature has often been posited as antithetical to a sophisticated and nuanced analysis about the operations of power. In other words, the authority of experience has been opposed to the tyranny of discourse. Cecily Lockett in her argument for a contextual and politically relevant feminism for South Africa exhibits this typical aversion to theory especially in her critique of French feminism. She says: "**The problem with a theorising...is that it tends to enclose itself within the world of ideas in which language and discourse may easily exclude the harsh and painful realities of suffering and oppression experienced by women**" (6). While Lockett's contention for a more contextualised and politicised feminism cannot be faulted her equation of theory with privilege and bourgeois values is suspect. To associate theoretical awareness -to covert, hidden and subtle ways to which women are consciously or unconsciously subjected to power relations- with reactionary and conservative politics is reductive and simplistic.

This project therefore calls for the alertness to the sophisticated and complex operations

of power, which is not to delegitimise, or depoliticises feminist criticism as a discourse. It is operates from the premise of a politicised theorisation. As hooks say: "...**we must continually claim theory as necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism**" (61 b). It is the contention of this project that the alignment of theory with a politically engaged feminist criticism is not only possible but is desirable if feminist scholarship is to take a leap forward in terms of understanding patriarchy and subverting it. The anti-theory attitude evoked by Lockett to disqualify the relevance of "French" and "American" feminism in South Africa is therefore problematic. It is more so because it is premised on intellectually condescending racism. It is not only a mere coincidence that Lockett's call for sensitivity to black women struggles in mainstream feminist discourse is coupled with a rejection of theory. Theory is thus seen as incompatible with black experience. Commenting on a similar attitude hooks has said: **...racism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived as either opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory**" (421 c).

The project has been underpinned by a conviction that feminism without a sophisticated theoretical analysis of the structures of power in society is in danger of unwittingly supporting reactionary agendas which seek to perpetuate the subjection and marginalisation of women in society. Without a constant alertness to the ways in which its agendas can be highjacked and redirected to different ends by the dominant discourses feminism is in danger of being in service to conservative rather than progressive causes. Luce Irigaray aptly notes this dilemma and provides a viable solution. Irigaray writes:

> **...when women's movements challenge the forms and nature of political life, the contemporary play of powers and power relations, they are in fact working toward a modification of women's status. On the other hand, when these same movements aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself then they are resubjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallocratic order** (81).

What the project has attempted to do is to inject a more sobering and critical dialogue within African feminist literary criticism - a process which I am well aware that it has been already been initiated by other scholars like Carmela Garritano especially her work on Kuzwayo. It seeks to redress a need for internal radical self-questioning now feminism is beginning to make manifest its hegemonic presence among other mainstream discourses and ideologies. This need justifies the critical intervention of this project. The aim therefore is not to delegitimise or depoliticise feminist discourse but to begin a dialogue which will take African feminist literary criticism to new heights and open up new horizons.

Two trends of feminist scholarship have been analysed in this project and both of them have been found to have their shortcomings. The project will therefore suggest that there is a need for an awareness and alertness to the heterogeneity and diversity in the field of discourses. Feminism like any emancipatory theory has shown the chameleon-like capability to be absorbed, recolonised, and recodified by mainstream discourses and ideology. This project has partly been an attempt to resist this recolonisation and appropriation and set out a new radical agenda for a feminist critical thought in African literature. The radical and subversive nature of the feminist project cannot be determined *a priori* but is a matter subject to investigation. Otherwise, the efforts of the pioneers would have been in vain.

What this project has made clear is that one cannot make facile and totalistic statements about feminist texts in Africa as Katherine Frank and others have endeavoured to do. While visible and palpable commonalities between feminist texts cannot be denied, they must not be projected by banal generalities. The complexities which characterise feminist discourse in African literature make obsolete any general and facile characterisations. The multiple voices within the feminist discourse must be given a platform and a hundred schools of thought must be allowed to contend without giving any particular form an opportunity to assume a hegemonic status at the expense of others. According to the South African feminist scholar Pamela Ryan: **"dialogue can only take**

place if we are receptive to feminism's multiplicity and fragmentation" (33). To recognise these different voices and the way in which they are hierarchised by the mainstream discourse is not to disrupt feminist solidarity but is to utilise difference as a resource. A totalising unity that the old style feminist literary criticism aimed for is found wanting precisely because it overlooked or stigmatised that which deviated from unity. Sisi Maqagi points out this hierarchisation of feminist discourse by indicating how the racial power structure privileges certain feminist voices while suppressing others. Maqagi writes: **"Privilege, with all its concomitant oppressive structures, widens the gap between the experiences of black and white women"** (28). But this contextual approach will be impoverished if it shuns and ignores theory. Indeed Maqagi shows this double awareness of contextualisation and theorisation as crucial to any feminist discourse. Assumptions which underpin feminist critiques of patriarchy must always be interrogated and their value must be constantly re-appraised on a regular basis.

Feminist texts are not necessarily subversive of the masculinist ethos in society despite the authorial claims to that effect. As Trinh Minh-ha has said **"...it is not always easy to draw the line between tracking the oppressive mechanisms and aiding their spread"** (183a). But when the feminist critics ignore this fact and portray the feminist texts as monologically and inherently oppositional then the African feminist literary tradition is impoverished not advanced. The texts' ambiguous relationship with the dominant patriarchal discourses has been acknowledged without suppressing their subversive role and character. A text cannot be explained by authorial claims alone because by virtue of it being a text it is independent from the declared intentions of the author. A text's meaning and import cannot be determined by authorial intentions alone. This awareness will include constant alertness and vigilance not only to overt and blatant forms of domination but to the covert and hidden ways through which women are often subjected. Feminist literary tradition therefore must be able to formulate a response which is complex and sophisticated enough to contest both blatant and covert forms of domination without privileging one form above the other. It is the internalised and covert forms of domination which are most dangerous. According to Audre Lorde: **"...the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to**

escape but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within us" (123). This awareness will entail a complex analysis of the structures of power and how they operate. This complex manner of analysing power must result in equally complex methods and ways of subversion and resistance. Luce Irigaray reflects this complexity of resistance and subversion by saying:

> **For what is, important is to disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively "masculine" parameters, that is according to a phallocratic order. It is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it - that amounts to the same thing in the end-but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an "outside" that is exempt, in part, from phallocratic law** (68).

Endnotes

1. Several but not all African feminist critics uphold this view although this perception has shown the signs of gradual change in recent times. Jean F. O'Barr in his critical analysis of Kenyan women writers says:

> **"The authors all write from a woman's point of view, sharply underscoring the idea that the female perspective on social life and women's part in it may be *different* from the male perspective on the same topic.** (58) [Emphasis mine]

O'Barr continues:

> **By looking at social life from points of view of women, these authors place women at the centre of their works and see them in their full complexity, dealing with multiple issues... It is useful at this point in the discussion to observe that the fiction written by African men takes a far less sophisticated view of women's lives and sees them as secondary figures in the environment of males.** (59)

Pauline Ada Uwakweh in his critical analysis of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* passes the following adulatory evaluation:

> **Dangarembga has indeed demonstrated a keen knowledge of the problems of her society in particular and Africa in general. Her vision as a writer stresses that awareness and courage are the blueprint to exploding its contradictions.** (83)

While one may not disagree per se with this assertion what is disconcerting is the assumption that a text is devoid of any analytic weaknesses simply because it is has a feminist agenda.

Brenda F. Berrian in her critical evaluation of Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* also presents this text univocally as a faultless affirmation of the African woman. Berrian says:

> **Nwapa reinvents the African woman in her third novel, *One Is Enough*... operating in a world of fuzzy standards and boundaries as a consequence of a rapidly changing social environment Nwapa nevertheless exhibits a firm understanding of the moral issues involved: the betrayal of trust; the insecurity of marriage and motherhood; the re-evaluation and recentering of motherhood; and the possibility that women can be economically and emotionally independent.** (56)

Although elsewhere in the dissertation I dubb this school of thought as an "old style solidarity feminist criticism" some of its perceptions can still be found in recent academic journals and publications. For example, Jeanette Treiber in her analysis of Ba's *Scarlet Song* evinces a similar critical method in a fairly recent journal (1996). Treiber defending Ba's problematic and unqualified valourisation of education she says:

> **Ba's insistence upon the importance of literacy, writing, and feminism...is first of all a realisation that literacy, writing and the construction of feminist discourse are tools for empowering women in postcolonial Africa...It is precisely the exclusion from education and discourse that has kept women in vulnerable and exploitative positions** (110).

2. Recently the complexion and character of African feminist literary criticism has begun to show a radical shift from the old style solidarity criticism. The best example in regard is the recent work by South African feminists who have began a much more

dialogical critical engagement with African feminist texts.

M.J. Daymond describes this shift in these telling words: **"In the early decades of the women's movement...female solidarity seemed an essential political weapon and so women ...were spoken of by feminists as a single, monolithic entity. These sweeping assumptions about identity are now being challenged from within feminism itself."** (xlvii)

It is these dissenting voices emanating "from within feminism itself" that I am referring to. It is voices like Carmela Garritano, Cecily Lockett, Pamela Ryan, and others who have projected a radical break with the old style feminist critical method.

3. Same critics mentioned above.

4. Femi Ojo-Ade interprets the text as if it is an anti-matrimonial text while in fact the author is critical of a particular facet of marriage which masculine betrayal and abandonment. He writes: **"The life of a couple far from being a haven of content and consideration, is a hell of conniving criminals and common cretins".** (Ojo-Ade 73).

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