

Introspection, female consciousness and the quiet revolution in the novels of Nawal El
Saadawi and Mariama Bâ

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DECLARATION

I declare that *Introspection, female consciousness and the quiet revolution in the novels of Nawal El Saadawi and Mariama Bâ* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

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Signed.....

Date: November 2012



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ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

This thesis considers introspection and female consciousness in the novels *Woman At Point Zero* and *Two Women In One* by Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer and *So Long A Letter* and *Scarlet Song* by Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese writer. This study looks at how narrative technique impacts on questions of self and identity, subjective experience, coherence and transformation. The form of the novel is also highly significant because it shows the connection between form, individualism and consciousness of experience and this is important in understanding these questions of self and identity, subjective experience, coherence and transformation. It allows insight into the internal workings of the individual. The form of the novel is therefore particularly relevant because of the focus on the individual, subject and the consciousness of the individual. Pertinent to the discussion in this thesis is how narrative provides a creative space to enable the reflexive process and also how narrative contributes to the construction and understanding of the self and identity. The dynamic between narratology and novel form, on the one hand, the modes of confession and letter writing, on the other are considered both of which use first person narration. Confession as a genre of personal narrative enables the subject to move inward as part of the self reflection process which allows knowledge of the self. Letter writing a form of personal narrative plays an important role in the exploration of the self and identity. The novel in letter form forces the introspective process through the act of writing and the character reaches a realisation about events and experiences which have shaped her present consciousness. By contrast third person narration in *Scarlet Song* and *Two Women In One* foregrounds the social context which shapes the characters' sense of self and identity and worldview. The narrative which is rebellious and resistant in form, although quietly so, enables a "revolution" in the character's self- and world view.

Keywords: introspection; subjectivity; novel; narrative; confession; epistolary; autobiography; self; identity; transformation

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract and Keywords	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Confession in <i>Woman At Point Zero</i>	38
Introduction	38
Confession and autobiography	39
Confession and liberation in <i>Woman At Point Zero</i>	50
Conclusion	69
Chapter 2: Letter writing in <i>So Long A Letter</i>	72
Introduction	72
The epistolary novel: letter writing and selfhood	74
“Friendship has splendours that love knows not”: self examination and friendship in <i>So Long a Letter</i>	90
Conclusion	103
Chapter 3: Self and community: The dynamics of third person narration in <i>Scarlet Song</i>	107
Introduction	107
Forms of narration: possibilities and constraints	110
Individual will versus the will of the collective	117
Conclusion	140
Chapter 4: <i>Two Women In One</i> : the quest for an authentic self	143
Introduction	143
Suturing the fragmented self through narrative	147

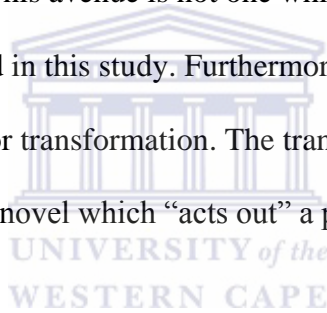
Third person narration and the representation of character	150
Conclusion	174
Conclusion	176
Works cited	182



Introduction

The key focus of this study will be to explore how postcolonial women writers such as Nawal El Saadawi and Mariama Bâ use narrative as a space in which they reclaim and rewrite the identity of the marginalised individual. The primary texts selected for this study are *Woman At Point Zero* (1973) and *Two Women in One* (1975) by El Saadawi and *So Long A Letter* (1981) and *Scarlet Song* (1986) by Bâ. The novels selected are particularly relevant to this thesis because the female protagonists in these novels reflect an inner strength and a psychological and emotional transformation after coming to terms with events that have had an impact in shaping their lives. However, these novels also provide insight into the constraints placed on the character, which may, but not necessarily, impede the character attaining a meaningful, coherent self. The form of the novel plays an equally influential role as well as the themes which the writers have chosen to explore in the relationships and daily experiences of the female protagonists. These texts will be analysed very closely to trace the centrality of the process of introspection or “looking inward” in the context of the general trend to record lived experience. These novels will be studied to determine how the process of introspection leads firstly to the discovery of the self and then finally brings about transformation in the female protagonist. I shall illustrate that not only is this process of introspection imperative in the self discovery of the female protagonist but also essential in bringing about transformation. The process of introspection is certainly not the only catalyst for transformation but rather, what I am arguing, is that the most significant trend in these narratives is for the protagonist to search within herself to find understanding. It is this self understanding through introspection which brings about personal transformation. El Saadawi, in many of her novels, often aims to include and raise consciousness of

themes and factors which may hinder the development of women. Her novels can therefore be read on two levels; firstly, as compelling stories and, secondly, as novels of social concern with issues highlighted through the themes they address. This technique of writing adds a very “real” element to El Saadawi’s novels. Similarly, Bâ focuses on themes which pertain to the female protagonist’s day-to-day experiences of living. The effects of living in the world on the individual are often only understood when self reflection takes place. The other process which also produces transformation is when the protagonist does not look inward but instead looks outward towards others in the journey towards self discovery. The character looks at the self as perceived by others to gain a perspective of the self. This avenue is not one which is foregrounded in the novels and will not be explored in this study. Furthermore it could be said that writing too in itself acts as a catalyst for transformation. The transformation in writer and reader occurs through the form of the novel which “acts out” a particular liberating world view.



The writers in context

Nawal El Saadawi was born in the Egyptian village of Kafr Tahla. She initially started out as a doctor which drew her into the daily lived experiences of women. Her later involvement extended further from mere medical concern to becoming actively and overtly involved in improving the lives of the women she worked among. El Saadawi began writing in 1957 and has written prolifically. Her works range from fiction to non-fiction and include autobiographies, memoirs, short stories, plays, novels and essays. El Saadawi writes in Arabic but a large number of her works have been translated into English and other languages. Her novels typically include a mixture of fictional and non-fictional elements often reflecting the social, political and cultural reality of her

characters, in many instances reflecting the reality of Egyptian society and its culture and traditions. This is evident in the novels *Woman At Point Zero* and *Two Women in One* selected to be analysed in this thesis.

El Saadawi began writing about the experiences of women whom she observed in society not only in her autobiographical work but also in her fiction. Many of her novels can be read as semi-autobiographical, her approach perhaps influenced by the work that she has done in prisons and reflecting the experience of her own imprisonment in September 1981 by the regime of Anwar Sadat ostensibly since her writing proved too controversial. During her imprisonment she recorded her experiences at Qanatir Women's Prison in her memoir, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. While it can be argued that El Saadawi merely records her experience of prison life and the experiences of others, there also appears to be a strong trend in her writing towards explaining the problems of the outside world which make prisons necessary and the conditions which make people inmates of these prisons.

Ioan Davies claims that individuals who are imprisoned often write to make sense of their situation to themselves and others; in this instance writing serves a self reflexive role (224). During this self reflexive process a number of concerns and questions are raised which can lead to the exploration of the connection between the prison experience and its relevance for understanding the world outside of prison (224). The link between the individual's present circumstances to the world outside of prison is pertinent when attempting to understand the impact of the system on the self. The system in question here refers to the complex structure of society made up of social, cultural, religious and sexual dimensions. All these dimensions as a whole influence and shape the self and the individual's identity. Davies further suggests that it is only once

this system is recognised and its far reaching effects are acknowledged, that a reclaiming of the self can take place. Writing while imprisoned proves to be a very powerful process because it is a means by which the individual, through being confined in an enclosed space, is able to trace the events which have led to imprisonment. In addition, it allows the prisoner the opportunity to rethink the “outside world” in relation to individual identity (231). It appears that when the individual is placed in a confined space whether it be physical confinement as in this instance or emotional or psychological confinement, there seems to be a connection between the individual being enclosed and the need to “make sense” of their present situation. This process of self reflection which the individual undergoes by means of writing or telling their story becomes the catalyst for the individual to gain clarity not only about themselves but also about themselves in relation to society. It is therefore looking inward which brings about clarity and this in turn allows for the individual to redefine and reclaim the self on their own terms, in this instance through the act of writing.

Mariama Bâ, a member of the Wolof ethnic and cultural group, was born in 1929 in Dakar, Senegal. She was one of the first African women to attend a French school during the period of colonisation by the French. Bâ attended a teacher training college and taught up until 1959 but later became an education inspector. In 1981, her first novel, *So Long A Letter*, won the Noma prize for publishing in Africa. Bâ, much like El Saadawi, explores the conditions of human beings, the relationship between men and women but more specifically women, by writing about issues around culture and tradition and the impact they have on individuals within Senegalese community.

In her novels *So Long A Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Bâ explores the institutions of marriage and polygyny and questions their effects on both women and men in a context

where traditional social structures are being transformed by modernity. Her writing often also contains semi-autobiographical elements reflecting her own experience of relationships, marriage, single parenting and the financial constraints which many women face. In the novel *So Long A Letter*, the character Ramatoulaye is a schoolteacher and is left to raise her twelve children on her own. Bâ initially a schoolteacher divorced her husband Obèye Diop a member of the Senegalese Parliament, and after the divorce was left to raise their nine children on her own. The approach of the novel can therefore be viewed as being partially personal and reveals the challenges faced by women in a similar position. *So Long A Letter* is written in epistolary form and explores the effects of postcolonialism, polygyny and a society that is gradually moving towards modernity. Her second novel *Scarlet Song*, explores similar issues to that in *So Long A Letter*. However, the focus is extended beyond the borders of Senegal since the protagonist travels to Europe where he marries a French woman and issues are considered on a more universal level. The tensions extend beyond the relationships between men and women and women and women to that of African and foreigner.

El Saadawi and Bâ's novels can be described as subversive and resistant forms of narrative. Both writers often incorporate aspects of their respective societies in their narratives, particularly in the texts selected. When examining the novels of both writers, there appears to be a focus not only on discussing social, cultural and political issues concerning their respective societies but also delving and exposing that which has the most destructive impact on the self, particularly the female self. These themes and issues also seem to be largely influenced by the historical factor of colonisation which research shows has a definite impact on individual and group identity. The narratives

written by El Saadawi and Bâ are thus relevant when exploring how the identity of the individual is reclaimed and rewritten. This exploration shows that a redefining of identity can only take place through an active process of questioning the self and thus gaining substantive knowledge of the self. This process of introspection is central to the writing process used by El Saadawi and Bâ. However, it is paramount that the texts of El Saadawi and Bâ selected for this study be interpreted within their social, political, cultural and historical contexts. This will allow the reader more fully to understand the experiences of the main characters but more importantly the contexts in which these experiences are shaped.

El Saadawi and the development of the novel in the Arabic literary tradition

There are diverse opinions concerning the growth of the Arabic novel. An overview of the area by Matti Moosa shows that some critics argue that these forms were adopted from western culture during the middle of the 19th century. Others claim that it was only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that many novels were translated into Arabic which introduced Arab writers to the techniques of the various modern genres. In particular, Arab writers were introduced to the modes by which more meaningful, life-like characters could be sketched (Moosa 91). By contrast, other critics have suggested that these views of the origins of the novel in Arabic are shallow and unconvincing. These critics suggest that ancient Arab writers were skilled in the art of story-telling and that it is these techniques upon which modern writers drew (Moosa 91). Moosa concludes, however, that the debate with regard to the local or foreign origin of the Arabic novel remains. It is a fact though that many Arab writers translated many short stories, novels, and dramas from western tongues (93).

During the 20th century many Egyptian writers began writing about a society influenced by western ideas. Some writers used fiction to show the relation between east and west, others based their fiction on western models but with domestic themes and settings. Others took a more conservative stance and showed the damaging influence of the west upon their own cultural traditions (Moosa 220). In the 20th century there was also a call for the liberation of Egyptian women so that they too could play a more meaningful role in the cultural life of Egypt (Moosa 281). In response a number of journals were established by women who wanted Egypt to find its own identity and national existence. This national response had a further effect on literature. Many young writers expressed the need to create a “genuine Egyptian literature with Egyptian characteristics” but were still largely influenced by western techniques (Moosa 281). The intention of creating a “genuine Egyptian literature” was to create literature that symbolised their identity (Moosa 282). Abdel Kabir Khatibi states that the search for an identity is coupled for a search for new formulas to build the world of tomorrow. Furthermore he states that it is usually women more than men who carry out these changes (in Mikhail 112). Mona M. Mikhail identifies the 20th century as the period when many Arab women writers began making their voices heard (132). During the 1950s through to the 1970s many women writers began speaking out about the financial challenges that many women faced and writers such as El Saadawi wrote about the unjust laws which served to oppress women (Mikhail135). Women writers were therefore responsible for drawing attention to the many contradictions which existed in society. Many of these Arab women writers not only highlighted the conditions which many women faced but their writing expressed the pain and humiliation which many of the characters endured. Literature by women thus created possibilities for shared experiences and created a context within which El Saadawi developed as a writer.

If one does an overview of the development of the novel in Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries and one focuses specifically on women's writing, the following trends emerge which foreground questions of subjectivity and identity formation. The period 1834 to 1914 in Egypt saw a growth in novel writing and of various other literary forms. Arab women's writing developed simultaneously with modern writing in Egypt. The writing forms and styles chosen by women writers drew on the Classical Arab heritage and simultaneously imitated European writings available at the time. Early works of female writers in Egypt show a steady increase of texts in which the woman writer puts herself at the centre of events and in so doing highlights external realities and her response to it. By so doing the writer gives the reader an internal perspective not only of herself but also of herself in relation to others and society as a whole. The form or style chosen would be determined by the purpose of the text. One of the earliest works by a woman in the modern period was that of A'isha Taymur who emphasised the importance of women expressing themselves. Radwa Ashour, Ferial Ghazoul and Hasna Reda-Mekdashy note that later in the 19th century Zaynab Fawwaz used the form and style of Arabic biography to write biographies of contemporary women writers starting the trend of women writing about other women (Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashy 105). Writers began exploring aspects of themselves and through their writing an intimate relationship between the protagonist and the writer started developing (Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashy 110). Once again, writers such as Zaynab Fawwaz began writing stories with a personal dimension based on experiences which were similar to biographical and autobiographical writing. This form of writing continued with later generations of writers. In a comparison of female writers' early modes of self expression to that of male Arabic writers it was found that male writers tended to highlight the hero's individuality and uniqueness. In contrast to this, female writers

tended to put themselves at the centre of events but only to highlight the external reality and public events (Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashi 113).

The 1950s saw the development of writing in which experiences and observations were recorded in the form of the novel. The focus of this writing was to impart lessons to others rather than on plot and character development (Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashi 116). This generation as well as later generations focussed on the social and political realities of the female character. The 1960s saw an increase in the more rebellious writer who, like El Saadawi, wished to expose and confront injustice and who was in search of a new identity (Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashi 122). The construction of a new identity is what Irvin Schick defines as a process rather than an object. He identifies crisis or transition as the catalyst for the most intensive identity construction (in Julian Wolfreys 98). Schick further claims that identity is its own construction and that narrative is the medium through which that construction is realised (98). Writers for whom questions of identity are a concern, are generally drawn to the form of narrative which best allows this process to take place. Narratives in the autobiographical or epistolary form seem to allow exploration of this self reflexive process. El Saadawi's novels, *Woman At Point Zero* and *Two Women In One* are semi-autobiographical in form since they blend fiction with reality. Prevalent in these texts is a blend of history and literature and public and private events which link with the conflict and contradictions which the characters experience. The autobiographical techniques employed by El Saadawi allow the reader to obtain first-hand experience of the character's perception of events and the anxieties and conflict which she may be experiencing.

The focus of Egyptian novels during the 20th century was mainly on women's relations with themselves, with men, the family and with the surrounding political and social environment. Written forms from the earlier period such as biographies and autobiographies differed in their view of the degree of self expression and self revelation allowed. Earlier written forms in Egypt enforced the idea that private lives were not to be made public. However, women writers continued writing autobiographies in various forms even when they were aware that these personal forms of narrative would be frowned upon by others. Similar to El Saadawi, women writers in Egypt during the latter half of the 20th century chose to capture their own experience through various forms. The autobiographical form has played a functional role in recording and highlighting the experiences of Arab women. Radwa Ashour, Ferial Ghazoul and Hasna Reda-Mekdashi state that Arab writers such as Su'ad Zuhayr and Asma Halim have intentionally used autobiographical techniques and styles in their novels deliberately flouting the classical western form of the autobiography. Roy Pascal identifies the classical European form of autobiography as the life narrative which focuses on a particular individual's profession or calling. The primary focus of this form is to write the individual's life with the intention of revealing the "truth" about that person. However, more modern forms of autobiographical writing focus on the individual's understanding of the world, and are more reflective in nature, focussing specifically on events to make sense of their personal circumstances (55). Women's autobiographical forms of writing in many instances have assumed this modern form and have become pivotal to the process of self exploration and the construction of a new self defined identity.

However, in the context of this thesis, specific features of the development of the novel need to be drawn into closer focus than the outline above provides. This will be explored in more detail later in this chapter. Furthermore, the relationship of the novel to the Egyptian oral tradition within which women played a significant role needs to be considered. During the 19th century the Arab world underwent a cultural transition which had a great impact on society and world view. Sabry Hafez notes that this transition included a shift from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete; from oral to written modes of presentation and from the collective to the individual author (106). Even though the oral tradition proved to be very popular, this form became less popular with the increasing interest in textual narratives, on the one hand, and the need for new forms of entertainment on the other (Hafez 106-107). This transition in society is relevant in locating the historical and social context from which El Saadawi's work originates. The oral tradition is highly significant to historical and cultural development in the Arab world but it is mainly the written form of the novel which will be the focus of this thesis. My argument is that writing itself rather than oralising acts as a catalyst for self reflection. For El Saadawi writing has proved to be the medium which better engages reality and which allows both questioning and suggests answers to questions. El Saadawi's view is that oral narration has continued through time and has been significant but that women in Egypt do not exist in history because they have not been allowed to write it. I shall illustrate through my analysis of El Saadawi's novels that it is both the *act* of writing as well as the *form* of the written text which plays a crucial role in the process of self reflection and allows the writer the space to rewrite and reclaim the self and identity.

Mariama Bâ: from orature to literature

Colonialism and modernity appear to be influential in the shift from orature to literature. This shift did not take place without affecting the broader society and the individuals living in that society. In a closer exploration of this shift I shall focus on how these changes in society have impacted on the role of the female oral performer who once was very respected and powerful. The role of the writer and the act of writing are emphasised by Mariama Bâ and are considered important to the reclaiming of identity and self as is portrayed in her novels. Bâ emphasises the fact that the oral performer plays a significant role in society, particularly in the novel *Scarlet Song*. Paradoxically, Bâ also illustrates in *So Long A Letter* the impact of a changing society on the performer, which minimises her importance. In the novel the female oral performer becomes an untrustworthy agent since financial constraints oblige her to act hypocritically and deceptively. The shifting and ambiguous position of the oral performer will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Maramé Gueye in a locally specific study examines the role of the female oral performer particularly among the Wolof people in Senegal. Her findings reveal that the oral performer is generally referred to as the *griot* (male) or *griotte* (female) but in the Wolof community the term *gewel* is used for both genders (65). In the study which Gueye undertakes there is a focus primarily on marriage songs in Senegal and she describes them as “literary sites that allow Wolof women to negotiate voice and power” (66). The songs which Gueye analyses in her study all reflect traditions found in Wolof culture and how the culture has migrated through different historical periods but more importantly how this movement has affected the position of women. The topics of the songs range from marriage, coming of age, negotiating bride wealth, choosing a spouse,

and so forth. The relevance of the songs is that they show the shift that will take place in marriage and how women view themselves within the institution of marriage. Many of the songs celebrate the woman's coming of age through marriage but also deal with the woman having to separate from her family to join her husband's. These songs also served to teach women resistance strategies within the culture to empower women. The purpose of looking at the *griotte* within this framework is that it illustrates how these women who are often considered to be illiterate have been theorising about gender for a long time. The voices of these women who were once considered the "professional keepers of oral tradition and history" have now been silenced or overlooked by the so-called intellectuals whose discourses are privileged because they are written (Gueye 66). Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, Ken Bugul and many others have been identified by Gueye as belonging within this category of intellectuals.

In an overview of the position of the woman writer in African literature, Obioma Nnaemeka has looked very specifically at the development of women's writing in relation to the past, present and future position of female writers in African literature. Nnaemeka notes the fact that with colonisation, as African cultural expression has shifted from primarily oral forms increasingly to textual forms, the number of female oral performers has dropped as the number of female writers has increased (345). This shift in medium simultaneously devalued the social importance of these female performers since colonial society placed a higher premium on written forms. Nnaemeka observes that "In oral literature the African woman had a very important role to play, both in the context of the songs, chants and poetry, [and] in the arts history and mythology where she reigned supreme" (345). Women were known to claim ownership of their songs and to play an important role in maintaining the morals of society.

However, the influential position held by the female oral performer waned with the onset of colonialism. The growing influence of colonial education further resulted in many traditional practices and value systems being replaced. The impact of these changes was experienced not only on a collective level but also on an individual level. The colonial transformation of African cultures had an impact also on conceptions of the self. Obioma Nnaemeka notes that with the shift from oral to written forms many female writers in the early 1970s such as Flora Nwapa and Grace Ogot were restricted to already present distorted representations of what a woman should be. However the newer generation of female writers such as Bâ have been more resistant in their methods of writing in order to regain the influential position held by African women in the oral tradition (347). El Saadawi can be included as one of these female writers who deploy the written form as a resistance strategy.

Both Gueye and Nnaemeka share a similar view that a shift in cultural traditions and practices had taken place in Senegal due to colonisation by the French. Clearly, the oral tradition has served a very important function within many societies since it has been used to address specific concerns, raise pertinent questions and share views with those to whom it may be relevant.

Refracting this argument slightly, Stephanie Newell suggests that the female oral performer may have lost her once powerful position but that the oral tradition is continued in the writing of many female authors. The attempt to reclaim the once powerful position of the African woman in oral tradition has produced a number of interesting trends. Often West African female authors continue the tradition of “oralising” to maintain an “African” atmosphere in their writing by: firstly, inserting untranslated words into their texts, secondly, by incorporating folktales into the

narrative and, thirdly, by adjusting the syntax to accommodate proverbs translated from the mother tongue (127). As a result of this, the themes and characters became “African” while the form and narrators remain European in style. The traditional oral narrative form has been viewed as the predecessor to the novel within African societies. Critics such as Onsucheka J. Chinweizu in an attempt to challenge the changes brought about by postcolonialism argues that writers should turn to the *griots* for models of African authorship. He suggests furthermore that it is the role and responsibility of the artist (writer) in Africa to maintain the traditions, represent a public voice and reflect on public concerns (in Newell). The role of the *griot* would therefore be carried on by the writer. Elleke Boehmer by contrast argues that drawing on written rather than oral forms can address the changes brought about by modernity and colonialism (228-229). Writers of postcolonial narratives, such as El Saadawi and Bâ, fulfil a very specific role in addressing this reconstruction of self and identity in a changing society. It can therefore be said that the written form, the novel in particular, is most suited to the task of female self realisation. It is the act of writing which forces the individual to look within.

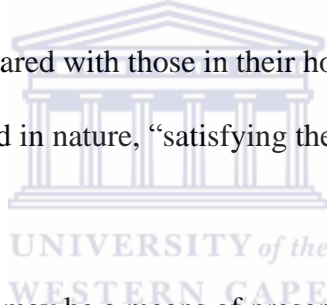
Many women writers such as Bâ use the novel as a way to introduce new perceptions of womanhood and to portray a self in the novels which appears strongly linked to the cultural, social, political and religious context of Senegalese society. These novels reflect on the individual’s cultural and social alienation and the impact that this alienation has on the identity of the individual. Newell, reflecting on the texts written by Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, suggests that women writers specifically in West African writing focus on individual fulfilment (141). In the novels written by Bâ and El Saadawi the female protagonist is initially shown to occupy a position of alienation whether physical, social or emotional, in the novels which later through the process of

self reflection results in self fulfilment. The shift in the position which takes place suggests that the individual's alienation is an important part of the introspective process. Newell further states that "the genre of the romantic novel has become a means in which to explore complex issues" (141). Therefore the romantic novel in West Africa written by female authors may present "subversive, transformative and revolutionary potential" even though traditionally it is considered to be one of the most conservative literary genres (144).

Historically the written form in Senegalese West Africa reflects Arabic, European, and more specifically French influences. Bâ's novels are written in French and were later translated into other languages. It is tempting to generalise about Francophone African novels which first began to be published in the 1950s and 1960s, although there are a few lesser known earlier examples. According to Françoise Lionnet the first Francophone novels by women writers were published during the 1970s and 1980s (199). Mariama Bâ was one of these writers. The focus of Bâ's writing is mainly on gender issues, but she also brings in a strong regional flavour in her novels. There are very distinct Senegalese cultural influences in the novels written by Bâ in which she interweaves aspects of Wolof culture.

One also needs to focus on the French colonial and literary context in which Bâ's works are located. According to Dorothy Blair it is important to consider the historical transitions in West Africa from the precolonial to the postcolonial in order to understand the sources of early creative writing (3). These transitions in the context of Senegal will be considered here. The colonial period brought a whole new way of life in Senegal. Forms of education were one of the most important areas in which change occurred. The education system in particular during the first part of the colonial period

was in the control of the missionaries who were determined to eliminate the traditional cultural values and institutions of the Senegalese. During the early 20th century Senegal obtained permission to adopt the same syllabus as taught in France. Teaching was mainly in French with the primary aim that all students would become fluent in the language. Students obviously also were introduced to canonical French literature. Before the various European nations extended their sphere of influence in West Africa there were a number of countries where Arabic script was already in use, however, this was mainly for religious purposes. The period of colonialism introduced writing at a more popular level into West Africa and also simultaneously allowed for preservation through translation (Blair 24). Blair states further that these works were collected and translated by the French and shared with those in their home country France, however, this translation was often biased in nature, “satisfying the taste for the picturesque and exotic in literature” (24).



Writing and translation may be a means of preserving oral forms but this was not without its own challenges. It was found that a limitation of translating African literature into French was that a lot of the original meaning became lost and genres such as poetry and plays that were close in form to the oral tradition lost most of their “spontaneous expressivity” (Blair 25). Various forms of writing were popular in various periods. There was a demand for folktales in the 1930s. This declined in the 1950s when folktales were considered backward and filled with superstition. Folktales were replaced in popularity in the 1950s and 60s by a form of writing that encouraged national solidarity. Many writers during this period, in particular, Sembène Ousmane, condemned the effects of colonialism and expressed solidarity with the people through his writing. The period 1958-1964 represented the period of political transition from

colonialism to independence and could be seen reflected in the writing of this time (245). The writing of this period, usually in autobiographical form, often depicted the experiences of African society of both the present and the past.

According to Irène D'Almeida it was only during the late 1960s that Francophone African women began writing (3). In her exploration of Francophone African women writers, she has discovered that the genre of autobiography has been very popular. In her study she makes specific reference to the works of Nafissatou Diallo, Ken Bugul and Andrée Blouin and explores how each using the same genre, has very different responses to similar historical, cultural and social changes wrought by colonialism. The conclusion which D'Almeida comes to is that each writer is from a different generation and this seems to be a crucial difference in their interpretation of the events that occur in society (36). Diallo was born in 1941 in Senegal and experienced first-hand the transition from colonialism to independence. The views which she expresses in her autobiography *A Dakar Childhood* are far more traditional. She uses the western form of autobiography meaning that she follows a natural chronology, beginning with childhood, progressing to her adolescent years and to her later years as career woman, mother and writer (37). Diallo's autobiography has been criticised for not being openly resistant to the oppressive conditions women experienced and that she seems uncritical of Senegalese traditions. However, what clearly has been missed is the subtle method by which she weaves into her everyday life accounts the many ways in which women were excluded from society (38). Each event which she includes becomes a way to uncover specific distorted ideologies and practices. Diallo's quiet subversion appears equally powerful in writing about the position of women in Senegal.

Mariétou M'Baye or better known by her pseudonym Ken Bugul was born in the village Gouye in Senegal. Her autobiography *The Abandoned Baobab* is written non-chronologically and functions as self-analysis. Her writing and the events which she uncovers are horrific and far more resistant than the views expressed by Diallo. Bugul reveals that with the openness of her disclosure, she has obtained "self discovery, self-affirmation and healing because she has the courage to put in writing what is usually not-expressed" (55). Her "truth" is discovered by shattering the many distorted concepts and ideologies which shape society's values and traditions. Another autobiography which D'Almeida focuses on is *My Country, Africa: Autobiography of the Black Pasionaria* written by Andrée Blouin. Her autobiography is written in English even though she is of French descent. From the analysis which D'Almeida undertakes of the three writers, it is apparent that the focus for African women in autobiography is not an attempt merely to tell the story of the writer's life. Each writer has identified a position where the self is prominent. In *The Abandoned Baobab* by Ken Bugul and in *A Dakar Childhood* by Diallo the emphasis is on the social order and how women's lives are affected by this. For Andrée Blouin the central focus is on the political dimension (D'Almeida 69). Blouin explores through her autobiography the complexity of selfhood in its interaction with race, class and gender. In her writing she illustrates that there is no separation from self and the group and that the individual forms part of the framework of the group. Mariama Bâ's novels are located during the 1970s and 1980s with a specific focus on gender issues and Wolof culture. D'Almeida finally suggests that autobiography can be seen as a means of knowing, knowing the self and also to gain knowledge of the social and political constructs and ideologies in which the self evolves (70). This confirms that the autobiographical form provides a technology for the discovery and recovery of the self.

Local challenges to self-writing

Writing within the Egyptian and Senegalese context provides a literary space where questions are posed, discussed and sometimes answered. Generally, the novels of El Saadawi and Bâ have faced much criticism from scholars who have suggested that these writers subscribe to westernised, women-centred ideologies in the portrayal of their female protagonists. More specifically I shall look at what has been said about their writing and how these writers have responded to criticism of their work.

Nawal El Saadawi is known for her criticism of political and social systems and traditions within Egypt and internationally. Her speaking out has led to political leaders and authorities banning many of her non-fiction and fiction texts in Egypt. Mary Jane Androme notes that in 1981 after writing *Woman Against Her Sex* the then president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, ordered the incarceration not only of El Saadawi but of all political dissidents (in Emenyonu and Eke 79). While imprisoned, El Saadawi wrote a memoir of her experiences which was focussed more on the experiences of the other prisoners. Androme suggests that El Saadawi's role as a writer changed to that of a witness and she acted as a scribe for many women imprisoned with her (80). Ironically, the intention of the political leaders to silence El Saadawi led to many women prisoners being heard. Her text reflected her observations and the voices not of the professional, political prisoner but instead focussed on the "common prisoner"- murderers, prostitutes, peasants, women who occupied the marginal positions in society (80). El Saadawi, assuming the position of witness and scribe, tacitly engages and challenges Giyatri Spivak's view that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read, the subaltern cannot speak" (80). In her memoir she records the songs, stories, writings and mad ravings of the women prisoners and so doing reveals the voices and experiences of the

poor and the marginalised. However, she does not speak for them but records their voices enabling them to tell their own stories (82). Nawar Al Hassan Golley from a critical viewpoint claims that in her memoirs, El Saadawi portrays an image of prison being a “utopian dream” in that the economic, political and social differences among women are suppressed (in Emenyonu and Eke 84). However this argument fails to see the view presented that women placed in this position often compromise in order to progress. The solidarity reflected in the text merely reflects the women’s resistance to prison authority and rules. El Saadawi’s story of imprisonment can be considered an important contribution because it suggests a possibility of women overcoming oppression wherever they are.

El Saadawi openly criticises the patriarchal influences within her own society and worldwide. She considers patriarchy influential in many ways to the oppressive conditions which women experience. However, even though she criticises patriarchal ideologies and views which still dominate, many critics tend to overlook the many positive portrayals of men in her writing (Androme 89). El Saadawi always speaks very highly of her father and his relationship with her mother in all her autobiographies. She explains in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that the idea of men being dominant over women is a product of class and race (1). She acknowledges that religion and culture are but a few of the factors contributing to the oppressive position of women but that economic and political factors also play a role. Capitalism and foreign exploitation of resources by the west is relevant to the exploitation of Arab women and the poor but is often ignored. This debunks the criticism by Georges Tarabishi that El Saadawi subscribes to western imperialist notions and portrays western ideas of Arab women (in El Saadawi 1). Leila Ahmed shares a similar argument to that of Tarabishi; that Arab cultural ideas of

women portrayed by El Saadawi are based on western ideas (in Saliba 137). El Saadawi in an interview with Elizabeth Bekers states quite clearly that she is not affected by western culture (in Emenyonu and Eke 263). Tarabishi argues further that El Saadawi creates a “battle between the sexes” and hence encourages women to act out violently towards men. He uses the example of Firdaus in *Woman At Point Zero* to emphasise this point. He questions how the narrator is able to empathise with a murderer and a prostitute but El Saadawi argues that the narrator empathises with Firdaus as a woman. She explains that a number of events have led the character Firdaus to these acts and once again ties Firdaus’ position to the link between economic, political, social and sexual oppression. Helen Chukwuma presents a similar argument to that of Tarabishi. She presents murder as the only option for severely abused and traumatised male and female characters. She too ignores the importance of the idea of independence which runs through El Saadawi’s texts. She emphasises in all her work the importance of knowledge and education for women and that writing has transformative powers.

The idea of the potential of education and writing is similarly shared by Mariama Bâ. She too believes that education allows women to be independent. Ada Azoda comments that Bâ often interrupts the narrative to get across her moral and philosophical views – she seeks to teach her reader. Obioma Nnaemeka states that Bâ’s writing often reflects intent to educate the masses (19). Bâ’s writing has been criticised for the reason that she tends to construct homogenous groups. But this argument is invalid when looking at the novels *So Long A Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. Her characters present very different political, cultural, moral and religious views. It can be argued that Bâ writes in order to understand these differences between individuals, between groups and within groups. Laura Dubek states that Bâ highlights two obstacles to building

female and national solidarity; first caste prejudice and second, class antagonism. These obstacles can be viewed in both novels as the cause of conflict and hence challenge any view that the characters are part of a homogenous group. In both novels Bâ reflects the difficulty for women to get along particularly between mother and daughters-in-law. The conflict she reflects in her novels avoids any stereotypes and generalisations. In *Scarlet Song* she debunks the myth that mixed marriages are not successful by giving two examples in the novel. Femi-Ojo Ade comments on Bâ's references to polygyny in the novels and describes them as a "function of Africanity" (in Nnaemeka). He argues further that she encourages solitude amongst women and provides false notions of freedom. What this thesis argues by contrast is that Bâ focuses on emphasising the role of writing in creating a space for the individual to reflect and to reclaim the self.

Theoretical frames

In this section I shall outline the two theoretical frames through which I consider the novels under focus. Employing the methodological tools of narratology, I shall try to illuminate how narrative forces a focus on the self and simultaneously enables transformation. I shall also look at the formal aspects of the novel as a genre and show how the novel foregrounds the subject as individual leading to transformation of the subject. The insights into narrative and the novel discussed in this section will be applied to the close analysis of the novels of El Saadawi and Bâ in subsequent chapters.

Approaches to texts derived from narratology provide a framework which defines the project of this thesis. Techniques of narratology will also be used to prise open the novels in some detail. According to Jens Brockmeier and Donal A. Carbaugh, narratology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a structuralist way of studying written narrative texts, primarily of fictional literature (4). From a more interdisciplinary

perspective, Mieke Bal suggests that semiotic and cultural theory of narrative texts and contexts all contribute to “telling a story” (in Brockmeier and Carbaugh 4). The study of narrative is therefore helpful for our understanding of identity as a construct and indicates that there is a deeper relation between narrative and identity. Brockmeier and Carbaugh claim that “narrative is an appropriate means for the exploration of the self or, more precisely, the construction of selves in cultural contexts of time and space” (15). The self as referred to in this study will be defined as being: “... a construct which is known as much through its fragmentation as its unity... a process of flux and splitting which underlies and constantly threatens any notion of attained subjecthood” (Woolf in Anderson 102). Hence, it could be argued that if narrative is seen as a means to explore subjectivity then the process of writing about the experiences of the individual is a subjective one because not only are the particular details of the experience explored but also the way in which the individual experiences it. In other words, with the focus on the *process* rather than substantive knowledge, of necessity, the subject takes a reflexive stance. This involves the subject questioning how knowledge is acquired, forcing a splitting of the self, in which the subject reflects on herself looking inward.

A critical review of the literature on how narrative is used as a creative space for the construction and reconstruction of the self and identity has revealed that much research has been done and indicates that narrative and identity are very closely linked. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps suggest that narrative and self are inseparable in that they both originate out of experience but that they also simultaneously shape experience (19). When referring to personal narratives I am placing the focus mainly on those genres written about personal experience. Nawal El Saadawi and Mariama Bâ’s novels are written within an African context, Egypt and Senegal respectively, and continual

reference is made throughout these texts to the individual's experiences in relation to her community and society. Through the novels the reader reaches an understanding that it is the individual's experiences which shape the self and identity and therefore these experiences should be taken into consideration when the subject reflects on her present and past events to gain self understanding.

Narrative provides a means of making sense of experience. Narrative allows the writer an opportunity to create a logical coherence of events and also to establish continuity between the present, past and the future (Ochs and Capps 19). According to Julian Wolfreys this movement through time in narratives, also referred to as temporality, is never a linear or progressive one and time as referred to in narrative often moves in different directions determined by the act of remembering and reflecting (163). Although in contrast to Wolfreys' claim, time is usually linear in the realist novel. However, the point which Wolfreys is making is that narrative can be understood as a product of a series of incidents, figures, motifs and characters which are arranged in a particular way. Meaning can therefore be inferred and interpreted from the way in which the events are arranged and told in the story. The sequence of events and the continual movement through time in remembering these events help not only the character to bring about order but also help the reader to make sense as the events are told. Wallace Martin refers to narrative temporality as the inclusion of chronology, narrated time and reading time (124). The chronological aspect provides the narrator with a means by which he/she is able to create order of the events and experiences. Martin explains that it is often difficult to order events when entering the memory of a character and that events or experiences are recorded through recalling the past (flashback) or thinking or imagining the future (flashforward) (125). This shifting back

and forth in time is relevant to the telling of the story, firstly, because it raises concerns that may be pertinent at that moment, secondly, it creates dramatic effect which holds the interest of the reader and, lastly, it highlights the fact that events may be so deeply buried that they may be uncovered at different time periods. Ochs and Capps in their explorative study suggest that narratives of personal experience are predominantly focussed on past events even though told from the temporal perspective of the present. This becomes apparent when applied to the texts *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter* in which both characters Firdaus and Ramatoulaye recount their stories of past events and experiences from the present. The explanation which Ochs and Capps provide in order to account for the use of present tense in narrating past events is that the events or experiences of the past have not been resolved and therefore continue to invade the narrator's current consciousness (25). This viewpoint then suggests that the past event even when recalled in the present still remains as traumatic as when first experienced. Recalling and narrating the past is therefore crucial to dealing with and understanding the present and future events.

The emphasis thus far has been on the structuring and sequencing of events in telling the story but another aspect which carries as much importance is the emotional response to these events. According to Aristotle it is the events and the related emotions which form a coherent narrative (in Ochs and Capps 26). Narrators often create a dual landscape which includes action and consciousness, meaning that it is not only what a character does in a specific situation which is relevant but also their beliefs and feelings towards the action. Self understanding is achieved by linking the past event and the emotional response in the present to the past emotional response to the same event. This introspective process represents the protagonist trying to make sense of pertinent

experiences and events which continue to cause conflict and crisis in the present. The problematic event in the past is usually linked to the protagonist's emotional distress in the present. Narrative therefore provides a conventional structure which enables the narrator to identify problems or concerns, to give possible causes, and to illustrate ways in which to deal with these problems. Narrative not only allows us to make sense of our experiences and the self but it also allows the opportunity to create and recreate the self and identity. Toni Morrison notes, "Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created. [...] narratives reach out to tap pre-existing identity, they construct a fluid, evolving identity-in-the-making" (Ochs and Capps 22). Toni Morrison reiterates what Ochs and Capps initially suggest that narratives cannot be separated from the self and that they play a crucial role in the recreation of the self and identity.

The other framework of analysis used in this thesis draws on the theory of the novel. The form of the novel appears to be a key factor in the introspective process and the individual's acquisition of self knowledge. Ian Watt identifies the rise of the English novel with the period of modernity, specifically, the 18th century. The novel arose out of a rejection of the previous classical models of literary tradition, with a specific focus on individual experience (13). The rise of the novel can be attributed to specific societal changes which proved influential. Firstly, capitalism played a significant role because it involved a more democratic political system and the social structure became less rigid. This allowed the individual freedom of choice. The individual could determine his/her own economic, social, political and religious roles (63). The second significant influence was the spread of Protestantism. The magnitude of these changes are only fully understood when Watt explains that the individual up until the end of the 17th century was not considered to be autonomous but rather dependent on the divine for

meaning (87). Etienne Balibar argues that the term “individualism” was invented at the beginning of the 19th century and replaced prevailing notions of self-love and selfishness (299). The idea therefore of the individual as an autonomous being influenced the novel’s subjective approach to character. J. Paul Hunter describes the most significant difference between individuals in previous literary forms and the novel is the different way in which individuals process their thoughts and emotions in response to their world and their experiences. The increased focus on individualism contributed to emphasis on private experience. Audiences became more interested in the processes which took place in the consciousness of the individual.

Watt identifies a number of elements which characterise the novel. Firstly Watt identifies realism or “formal realism” as a distinct element of the novel, an idea originating from the philosophers Descartes and Locke. These philosophers claim that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses (12). Descartes considered the quest for truth as an individual matter and independent of the tradition of past thought (13). The novel can thus be considered a form of literature that reflects this individualist thought presented by Descartes. Secondly the novel rejected the concept of traditional plots, a feature commonly associated with classical and renaissance epic. The emphasis in the novel was rather placed on originality (13). The novel rejected the idea of “universality” when portraying characters and their behaviour and rituals. In contrast to the previous literary traditions, the primary criterion of the novel was to reflect truth to individual experience, that was specifically unique and hence, new (13). J. Paul Hunter in a similar study of the development of the 18th century novel identifies the characteristic of believability as a distinguishing criterion of the novel. His study reveals that the individuals who exist in the novels are usually recognisable to the reader

because of their particular characteristics and behaviour which seems believable. A third criterion of the novel identified by Watt is that the plot also illustrates a connection between past experience as being the cause of present action. This is very different to previous forms of narrative which relied mainly on disguises and coincidences (23). The causal connection between past experience and present action in the novel embodies the arguments presented by the philosophers, John Locke and David Hume. Locke identifies the individual's identity as an identity of consciousness and that the individual remains in touch with this continuing identity through memory of past thoughts and actions (21). Hume asserts that without memory we have no notion of causation, nor consequently of this chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person (21). The views expressed by both scholars are characteristic of the novel.

According to Watt, space and time are two significant facets and define the individual in the novel. He makes particular reference to Samuel Coleridge in emphasising the inseparability of the two concepts. Coleridge's view is that the idea of time is always blended with the idea of space (26). In explaining this connection, Watt refers to the words "present" and "minute" and states that these words can refer to either dimension and that introspection shows that we cannot easily visualise any particular moment of existence without setting it in its spatial context also (27). The attention to place and time is what sets the novel apart from other genres and previous forms of fiction. Not only does the novel focus primarily on the characteristics of the individual but it also describes details about the individual character's environment. The emphasis is thus placed on the personality of the character, consciousness through the duration of time and the connection of present and past events and experiences through memory.

Michael McKeon criticises Watt's simplified claims regarding the origins and development of the novel and suggests that the establishment of the novel is far more complex. McKeon identifies two main problems with Watt's study of the rise of the novel (160). Firstly, he finds Watt's account of the historical context in which the novel arose questionable, particularly his finding that the rise of the novel represented a growing middle class. This finding is questioned not only by McKeon but other critics have also called for evidence in proving this claim (160). This representation of the historical and social context of the period leads to the second problem, namely, that of identifying specifically what has been left out. McKeon agrees with Watt with regards to the idea that this period reflected the most significant transformation in society. Furthermore this period also reflected instability of the labelling of social and literary categories (161). The first type of instability is that of generic categories, which McKeon refers to as an epistemological crisis. This encompassed a major cultural transition in attitudes to the way truth could be told in narrative, which he refers to as questions of truth (161). The second type of instability is the instability of social categories. This refers to a cultural transition in the attitudes towards how the external social order is related to the internal, moral state of its members, which McKeon refers to as questions of virtue (161).

McKeon in his exploration of questions of truth identifies the contributions of the institution of the new science as significant to a new form of literary theory. The new science was aimed at objective observation, experiment, and related principles of empirical method (164). The institution showed a deep interest in applying these principles in literary technique and form. This influenced the way in which narrative was composed. McKeon claims that this is one of the most important contributions to

the English novel. This new style and rhetoric shaped a new type of writer, one who was not focussed on knowledge as such, but more on recording what they observe through their senses. McKeon also focuses on the contributions of Protestantism and claims that Protestantism elevates the individual and the individual's observed experience over the claims of tradition. Furthermore, 17th and 18th century writers employ a number of authenticating devices – names of places, dates, events, eye- and ear- witness testimony, etc – in order to prove the reality of the invisible world (167). Protestantism therefore uses information gained from the senses to understand the spirit world.

McKeon in his exploration of the instability within the social category finds that a number of the major societal changes can be attributed to a shift from the traditional structuring of society to one where the lines of division are blurred. This he attributes to an increase in social mobility (170). This mobility could be linked to an attempt to classify individuals within society according to their annual incomes and expenditures rather than the traditional status stratification (170). This is a significant transition in society as it is seen as the first emergence of classifying society on the economic basis of class. This shift in society meant a shift in power, wealth and status and hence instability arose in a society which was traditionally dominated by the aristocracy (171). The culture of the aristocracy was not only associated with power, wealth and status but also honour which was tied closely with the idea of personal merit or virtue. According to this social classification system; the individual's position or rank within society is considered to be a measure of the individual's intrinsic moral order. However, the crisis presented by the 17th century arose when "ordinary" members of society were able to buy these 'honours' which were the privilege only of the aristocracy. This movement in

society led to a growth in progressive plots in narratives which attempted to create meaning out of the contemporary crisis of status inconsistency (178). These fictional plots not only outlined the inconsistencies but also ways of overcoming them (178). McKeon concludes that the emerging novel reflected not only the growth of the middle class which Watt identifies but more specifically the novel highlights the middle class's growing interest in virtue (180). Writers and narratives of this period therefore expressed their observations and concerns regarding virtue and truth and raised questions regarding these two concepts. McKeon states that the correlations of truth and virtue can be applied to the narrative form and content, in that the way a story is being told and what it is that is told, are implicitly understood to bear an integral relation to each other (24). These questions of truth and of virtue are the underlying foundations of the novel and the novel as a form and its content became a cultural means to confront crises within society.

Watt's study of the development of the form of the novel is relevant to the argument of this thesis because it shows the connection between form, individualism and consciousness of private experience. The discussion is also significant in showing how these literary techniques of the novel outlined by Watt and Hunter have contributed to placing the focus firstly on the individual and thus the form acting as a tool to gain insight into the "internal workings" of the individual. Secondly, these techniques also focus on the novel producing what may appear to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals. Michael McKeon's contribution to the emergence of the novel is relevant to this discussion because it provides a more detailed understanding of the historical and social contexts of the 17th and 18th centuries and also emphasises the important relationship between truth and virtue specifically reflected in the form and

content of the novel. Furthermore the views expressed by Locke and Hume are equally crucial in that they emphasise the significance of the past in understanding the present through the mechanism of memory. The kinds of transformation described by McKeon may be observed to a certain extent in the societies in which El Saadawi and Bâ write about in their novels; for example they refer to aspects of class, caste privilege and so forth.

One of the narrative forms out of which the novel developed and which subsequently became a common novel sub-genre, is the personal confession. Confessional narratives in the western tradition may be traced back to confession in the spiritual autobiography of St Augustine. Confession seems to be a very important mode in the thought of Nawaal El Saadawi. Even though El Saadawi's context is removed from the tradition of European novel writing, nevertheless, the "content" of the form of the novel makes an overview of the development of the confessional novel very relevant. The confessional form of the novel is considered to be a personal narrative because it focuses on the personal experiences of the individual. St Augustine's autobiography suggests that the process of confessing or disclosing requires the individual to move inward in order to find the "truth" which every person is in search of. Even though St Augustine writes about confession from a western Christian tradition and El Saadawi from an Arab Muslim background the ideas are still very pertinent. The process which St Augustine's narrative outlines is significant to the introspective experiences which El Saadawi writes about in *Woman At Point Zero* even though the contexts are vastly different. Ideas relating to confession and introspection will be discussed in detail in Chapter 1 where I will explore the form of the confessional novel and how the form contributes to the introspective process and the eventual

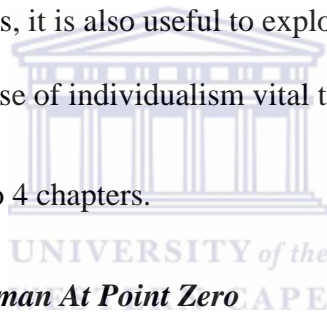
psychological transformation of the female protagonist. The central argument in this chapter will be that the confessional form of the novel creates and reinforces the personal experience of the main character.

The letter is another form of personal narrative which focuses on the personal experiences of the individual and is another narrative type out of which the novel may be seen to emerge. Again, even though the European tradition of the epistolary novel may be seen to be irrelevant to Mariama Bâ's twentieth century Senegalese epistolary novel, *So Long A Letter*, nevertheless, the way in which the form forces introspection makes a consideration of the tradition valuable. For example, the 18th century English writer, Samuel Richardson, claims that the letter allows the writer to write about her/his most subjective thoughts and emotions about an event or experience. Susan Whyman, drawing on the work of Richardson, among other epistolary writers, describes letter writing as a tool to create order and meaning out of events. Ochs and Capps suggest that the form of the letter is of great importance to the telling of the story (19). The claim that the structure or the form of the narrative bears as much relevance or even more importance than the content will form part of the discussion in chapter 2 and will include a detailed analysis of how Mariama Bâ employs the epistolary form in *So Long A Letter*. According to Ruth Perry the epistolary novel more recently has been used as a subversive and freeing agent in which the individual seeks to change her/his life (119). Ramatoulaye, the main character in Bâ's novel, through the act of writing assumes a reflexive stance which is central to her psychological transformation, meaning that through the process of reflecting on past and present events in her life, knowledge of the self is achieved. Central to the analysis of *So Long A Letter* is the question of whether

this self knowledge is achieved through the process of reflection and how the narrative form of letter writing contributes to the act of exploring the self.

Because of the focus on individualism, subjectivity and the consciousness of the individual in the analysis of the novels by El Saadawi and Bâ, narratology and theoretical approaches to the European confessional and epistolary novel, even though they appear culturally remote, are crucially important. The study of how narrative forms a creative space to enable the reflexive process is highly pertinent to this discussion. But even more important is the attempt to understand how narrative contributes to the construction and understanding of the self and identity. Since all of the personal narratives considered are novels, it is also useful to explore the ways in which the form of the novel has shaped the sense of individualism vital to introspection.

This dissertation is divided into 4 chapters.

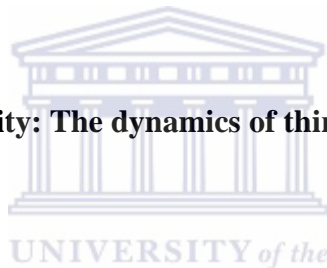


Chapter 1: Confession in *Woman At Point Zero*

The focus of this chapter will be to explore how personal forms of narrative such as confession initiate the reflexive journey which allows knowledge of the self. In determining the role of narrative in realising the self, I shall look at how narrative is defined and its development. The main argument here will be that narrative and self are inseparable. Furthermore the discussion will include how the genre of confession enables the subject to move inward and therefore encourages disclosure. This in turn is necessary for self realisation. The novel *Woman At Point Zero* will be analysed to look at how the female protagonist Firdaus through the process of introspection reaches self realisation.

Chapter 2: Letter writing in *So Long A Letter*

This chapter will explore how letter writing as a form of personal narrative creates an intimate space which allows the reader access to the character's innermost thoughts and emotions. The main argument presented will be to show how the novel in letter form forces the introspection process through the act of writing and thus encourages the subject to disclose. The novel *So Long A Letter*, written in letter form will be used for analysis. The aim will be look at how the central character Ramatoulaye uses the letter as a tool for self examination and reflection to deal with her internal conflict. The act of writing allows her to create coherence and meaning from events and ultimately to reach self understanding.



Chapter 3: Self and community: The dynamics of third person narration in *Scarlet Song*

The novel *Scarlet Song* is narrated in third person and therefore differs from the earlier novels discussed. The aim of this chapter will be to illustrate how this shift in narrative form brings about a shift in focus to the broader social context of the central characters. The discussion will include focussing on the role of the third person narrator in identifying external forces which may hinder the subject attaining self realisation causing the character to remain psychically fragmented.

Chapter 4: The quest for an authentic self in *Two Women in One*

The novel *Two Women in One* written by Nawal El Saadawi, explores the internal, psychological turmoil experienced by the character Bahia Shaheen who is unable to identify with her public self. The tension between her private self and public self arises because she feels stifled by the traditions and practices expected and prescribed for her

by her family, community, religion and society. The act of introspection which she undertakes involves actively asking and discussing questions and attempting to find answers. Furthermore, through the character's explorative journey, I will also discuss how this process of reflecting and questioning assists in reconstructing an identity which she is able to identify with, which will entail a suturing of her public self and private self. Here once again, the third person narrative form allows the reader a holistic view of the central character's experiences and thus the form of narrative enables the character to create meaning and coherence and finally self understanding.



Chapter 1: Confession in *Woman At Point Zero*

Introduction

The concern of this chapter is to explore how personal narrative, particularly the form of confession, initiates the reflexive journey to self knowledge and enables the psychological transformation and self understanding of the subject of the narrative.

Questions of confession and autobiography will be considered using Nawaal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. I shall analyse the novel from the perspective that the process of the subject looking inward is usually triggered by an event, which is often an external one and places the character in a position filled with conflict. The event can be described as the catalyst which precipitates the subject to a crisis point and so she turns inward in order to reflect not only on her present position, but past events and actions which may have contributed to her current state. By continually shifting from the present to past events through memory, it is suggested that this process of remembering and reflecting forms a logical coherence out of these events and, as a consequence, the subject is then able to understand the present self. The present self is actively defined by the subject's understanding of the events specifically through the process of confessing.

This study will focus on the self and how self knowledge is achieved through the process of introspection. More specifically it will investigate the role of narrative in the exploration of the self and self realisation. In order to do this I shall look at how narrative is defined and its development with regard to form and content. The relevance of tracing the development of the narrative and its focus on the self and the subjectivity of the character is a key element in my discussion of personal narrative and the

relationship to self and identity. In other words, the form of expression and the content are intimately connected. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps suggest that narrative and self are inseparable in that they both originate out of experience but that they also simultaneously shape experience (19). When referring to personal narratives I am placing the focus mainly on those genres written about personal experience.

Confession as a genre of personal narrative enables the subject to move inward as part of the self reflection process. In order to understand the narrative of confession, I shall explore the development of the confessional novel particularly from the perspective that the process of disclosing requires the act of moving inward, and it is then that the individual will find the “truth” which many scholars who have analysed this form believe every person who writes a personal narrative is in search of. The intention of the analysis is therefore more than merely looking at the text but also looking at the form in which the story is told. The confessional form of the novel creates and reinforces the personal experience of the main character.

Confession and Autobiography

A number of scholars have identified a close link between confession and autobiography. I shall explore how the two forms are related and how the act of confession plays a role in the introspective process which defines self realisation. I shall look at the convention of confession and shall closely analyse how it is used in *Woman At Point Zero*.

Studies reveal that the convention of confession within autobiographical writing was dominant during the mid to late 19th century in Europe. Susannah Radstone in a study of the culture of confession and literary confession observes that autobiography and confession are closely connected and this is revealed when tracing the development

of the two forms of writing (in Gill 170). Roy Pascal presents autobiography as a conscious genre which serves the purpose of self discovery and reconciliation of the self (51). Similarly, Paul de Man claims that every type of writing is some form of autobiography which can include memoirs, diaries, letters, autobiography, biography and auto-fiction (in Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashy). The form of narrative used is thus important in the exploration of the self. Autobiographical writing is one form popularly used as a means of self expression but more importantly autobiographies developed into being more than merely realistic, detailed reports of an individual's life. These autobiographies could be read as novels because they relate how the experience and the awareness of the individual's identity is absorbed by the self (Ashour, Ghazoul and Reda-Mekdashy). The novel and autobiography are intimately connected. Novels such as *Woman At Point Zero* can be seen to be autobiographical in form because in both texts the protagonist Firdaus delves into her past and focuses on events and experiences which shed light on her present circumstance of conflict. Rather than chronologically narrating her "life story", events are narrated which appear pertinent to the protagonist's future growth and development. The aim of remembering the past is not to relate an objective truth but instead to realise and understand the present; this then being a self realised truth. Roy Pascal notes that the traditional western form of autobiography presents events in chronological order. The self is usually described as a coherent self and the narrator and the writer are always the same person. This form enforces the idea of the autobiography as being a non-fictional account of the writer's life. However, more contemporary forms of autobiographical writing challenge and often subvert this form of writing to meet the needs and intentions of the writer. Roy Pascal defines autobiography as "an interplay, an intimate collusion" between the past and the present. The significance is placed more on the revelation of the present

situation than the uncovering of the past (10). Furthermore, autobiography is not an account of things done or known, an exploration of a personality, but a search for the “true” self and a means to come to terms with it (39). The truth which the individual is in search of is not an absolute as prescribed in the traditional form but rather a truth which is relative and is applicable to the late modern self and identity.

Identity as used in this study refers to the postmodern definition of the self as a construct which is “constantly shifting, ambiguous, fragmented and segmented” (Smith 130). In view of this definition writers such as El Saadawi “redefine the boundaries of autobiographical writing which allow for the re-examination of the relationship between gender, politics and narrative traditions” (Vinson 81). The techniques mainly associated with autobiography are therefore extended to meet the needs of the writer. Here particularly El Saadawi has the need for constructing resistant narratives to redefine the individual’s relationship with society.

Susan Friedman suggests that the concepts of self, self creation and self consciousness are different for women, minorities and non-western groups (in Benstock 34). She makes this statement in response to Georges Gusdorf identifying autobiographical writing as being individualistic, suggesting a self which is separate and unique. This self is an individual who is concerned about her/his own destiny, an “isolated being, a finite unit” (35). This idea of what autobiographical writing is tends to marginalise autobiographical texts written by women in local contexts because it tends to ignore culturally prescribed identities for women and minorities within their respective societies. Furthermore it overlooks the difference in which men and women are socialised and the construction of the male and female identity. Friedman challenges Gusdorf’s individualistic model of autobiographical writing stating that being an

isolated individual is merely an illusion. She claims further that autobiographical writing is possible in that the individual realises that she lives an interdependent existence with others in society (38). The identity which emerges from this form of writing is not purely individualistic or purely collective but instead a dual consciousness arises which is culturally defined but which simultaneously is different to what is culturally prescribed. The intention therefore of the autobiographical act of writing is to create an alternate self. In this new awareness women begin exploring this shared identity in relation to others particularly other women. It can be argued that the text by El Saadawi serves the purpose of self exploration and shows how the protagonist gains substantive knowledge of the self in order to reclaim identity. Autobiographical writing thus implicitly obliges an inward self reflexive focus on a subject which is revealed to be fluid and which has the potential to transform.

Confession which often forms a part of autobiography develops self-writing in ways specific to this mode. One of the most comprehensive overviews of the development of confessional literature is Peter Axthelm's *The Modern Confessional Novel*. Axthelm defines and explores this form in great detail. His study includes in-depth readings on the works by Dostoevsky, Sartre, Bellow, amongst many others and looks specifically at how the act of confession is part of the process of self examination and reaching the truth. Axthelm identifies the origins of confessional literature in the work of St Augustine (2). In his work the *Confessions*, St Augustine addresses the many paradoxes and conflicts which men and women struggle with on a daily basis. St Augustine's primary idea was that the truth lies within and therefore the search for this truth moves the subject inward. St Augustine's quest thus moves inward in search of God and the search for God is the search for knowledge and truth. He further reflects

that part of this process of self knowledge is to gather and collect our thoughts so that we may know what they are. In doing so we are able to discover and to impart order, meaning or justification to our lives. It is important to note that St Augustine is approaching the quest of self and existence from a Christian theological perspective which is limited in many ways.

Axthelm states that the element of moving inward is important to the study of the modern confessional novel. Previous forms of confessional writing, as with St Augustine, focussed on the need for absolution and salvation from an outside power, turning to a belief in salvation through introspection which differs greatly to the modern form (171). The modern form of the confessional novel requires the individual to ‘find the meaning of life within himself; this, in turn, demands a new modern form of self examination (5). The new form of self examination was motivated to explore the self in a quest for meaning rather than to get closer to God (6). The modern confessional novel according to Axthelm “presents a hero, at some point in his life, examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve some form of perception” (8). Furthermore the hero in the confessional novel is introduced as afflicted and unbalanced, disillusioned, struggling to find meaning. This is a position shared by many individuals; however it is the reaction to their struggle which differs (9). The reaction to their position is often one filled with deep internal pain caused not by the chaos in the world but by the chaos within the self. The only way order is restored is through self understanding. Axthelm further defines that the confession often takes place in a cell, an underground hole, or a dark city; at other times, he tells his story to another character in a setting reminiscent of the religious confession (9). The external circumstances are at the time of the confession inconsequential and are often suspended while the character

looks within and explores the past to understand his/her existence. Axthelm compares the method in which the character examines the self to being similar to the method used by Montaigne when writing his “personal essays” (9). Montaigne during the 16th century, while writing about himself, had no preconceived plan and merely adapted to the changes of his own being (10). The confession of the hero in the modern novel may therefore be relatively orderly, or it may be a hesitant, halting process. Temporal order no longer defines the way in which the confession unfolds as time is suspended while relating events from the past. The manner in which events are told are as important as which events are selected to be told. The principle of selection is identified as a defining quality of the confessional mode (10). Certain events are brought to the fore because they are important to the individual, other events may arise because they are brought about by external forces and some may arise without the character fully understanding why. Axthelm notes that the selective process is that of the hero and not the author (11). According to Axthelm the purpose of the confession is revealed as the search for perception which is similar to the initial religious idea of absolution at the end of confession. However, the hero of the modern confessional novel is not in search of forgiveness or absolution instead it is a search for the truth at the centre of his/her existence (11).

Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* in 1864 written in the form of the confessional novel, focusses on self analysis and is pertinent to Axthelm’s study on the confessional novel. For Dostoevsky’s main character the act of confessing provides more knowledge but also increases his suffering. However, he is forced to continue mainly for the purpose of seeking answers to the question of his identity. The character continues even when the experiences and events which arise are painful and humiliating

(15). Dostoevsky maintained several characteristics of the traditional confessional form; that of honesty and sincerity and the fact that pride should eventually lead to humility (51). The difference between Dostoevsky's form of confessional novel and earlier forms is that when the main character attains self knowledge, there is no absolution or saving but instead he finds meaning even when the truth is unbearable. It is this truth which creates meaning in an otherwise meaningless world (52).

Sabrey Hafez in his study of Modern Arabic literature highlights that Russian culture and literature impacted Arab culture and literature during the 19th century onwards. It played a major role in the growth of Arabic narrative discourse (91). Apart from a religious influence, Russia also contributed to the rise of nationalism. Hafez notes that "Russian sympathy with the nationalist aspirations of the Arabs, though motivated by Russian interest and discord with major powers of the time, endeared the country, and particularly its literature to the emerging intellectual elite in the Arab world" (94). By the end of the 20th century numerous novels and short stories written in Russian were translated into Arabic and published for local readers. These included works written by Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Gorky (96). The 19th century in Arabic narrative discourse saw the emergence and emphasis placed on nationhood and nationalism rather than on the community of Muslims (97). This comprised a new worldview and the rise of new forms of literary, social and political discourse. The concept of nationhood led to cultural transformation and brought about a change in artistic sensibility (98). The core of this idea was to establish citizenship not on an abstract or religious basis as previously done but on a geographic and historic foundation. Hafez relates these significant changes to Ian Watt's study of the rise of the English novel which states that the change in the concepts of time and space is essential

for the transformation of narrative discourse (Hafez 98). It is the particularisation of time which narrative discourse aims to achieve. Watt explains that space and time are inseparable and that time is always blended with the idea of space. The words “present” and “minute” can refer to either dimension; while introspection shows that we cannot easily visualise any particular moment of existence without setting it in its spatial context also (in Hafez 98). This is in contrast to previous Arabic literary forms where place and time were always vague and general. Importantly Hafez notes that previous literary forms were mainly in oral form but with the emergence of urban culture other written literary forms were used. Orality as a form did not enable solid forms of time and place (98). Changing the concepts of time and place in narrative requires that they be changed in reality. The new ideals of nationhood and political equality were reflected in the socio-political changes taking place at that time. The society was moving away from the idea of the individual belonging to a specific vocation or class and religion to the concept of the individual being part of the nation (99). This change in ideals had a further impact on the idea of the self and values. Watt views the “principle of individuation” as the main factor in the rise of the novel (in Hafez 101). He notes that time is an essential element to defining individuality. The characters of a novel can only be individualised if they are set in a particularised time and place (101).

The reading public came to expect to see these changes within narrative discourse. They came to expect that aspects of their reality would be dramatized in what they read. Ultimately they were searching for art to provide a more realistic picture of life (103). Hafez notes that even with all these changes, narratives still remained conservative in their view of morality but this was mainly due to the strong religious influence prevailing at the time. Even though the moral views of the reading public

remained greatly unchanged, the changes brought about by the printed word were significant. The development of the printed word meant that the reader was addressed as an individual rather than as a collective audience. The transition from the oral to written form entailed a change in tone and presentation (103). Individual readers could now form their own points of view rather than following the viewpoints of the collective. Hafez states that evidence suggests that the rise of fiction was encouraged by the growth of the reading public and their expectations and the growth in popularity of narrative discourse in both its traditional and modern form. Furthermore, the emergence of the idea of individualism and a national identity changed the way in which life was experienced and the individual's perception of it. This changing perception of lived experience gave rise to new forms of expression. The writer therefore became aware that stories needed to include everyday life but not by recording minute monotonous details. Instead the writer has to rely on temporal continuity and human experience in order to tell the story.

The early 20th century in Egypt was a time of revolt against colonial domination. This political atmosphere led to a need for an art form which reflected the consciousness of a new national identity (157). This period not only marked a direction towards nationalism but also a cultural renaissance. The changes in narrative discourse reflected the end of the storyteller and the rise of the creative writer of narrative fiction. This is what many writers attempted to achieve but, at the time, their work was still experimental in many ways. They continued to give detailed description and struggled to move from the position of storytelling to narrative writing (196). These writers have proved influential in creating and promoting a distinct national identity and shaping and developing thematic and techniques used in modern narratives.

The relevance of tracing the development of Arabic narrative discourse is firstly to look at the growth of the modern Arab novel and its influences. Here I have noted that there have been a number of influences not only locally but also internationally, in particular English and Russian influences. Sabrey Hafez and Matti Moosa in their individual studies on Arabic narrative discourse suggest that there remains controversy regarding the origin of the Arabic novel. However, my concern does not lie with the controversy and debate around the origin but rather how the novel has embodied the focus on individualism and the self. This is the question which is pertinent to the discussion in this thesis; namely, that the form of the novel is as important to the story being told. Personal narratives, such as the confession, draw the focus on the individual and the act of moving inward as a means of attaining self knowledge. This exploration reveals that confession is in many instances a painful and humiliating experience but often necessary and relies heavily on delving into the past to make sense of the present. This process of remembering is not necessarily a coherent one but experiences and events may arise or be selected that are relevant to the answers the individual is searching for. The forms of confession and autobiographical narrative are very closely linked especially in the ways in which these types of narrative negotiate time, in order to achieve transformation, as outlined in the introductory chapter.

In contrast to the analysis of confession above which shows how the form of confession enables the process of introspection and self realisation, other scholars have criticised confession because it is seen to be a paradoxical mode of narration. For these scholars, confession is an “impossible form” since the attempt to reveal the self simultaneously shows how the self is split. Radstone explains that through the act of confessing the character’s innermost thoughts and feelings are exposed but at the same

time this takes place through the splitting of the character's mind into the central protagonist and narrator. The narrator's confessions are the activities, thoughts and feelings of the central protagonist who is separated from the narrator by time, age and experience, also explained as the separation between the narrating and the narrating 'I' (171). This temporal distance is essential to maintaining the distance between the central protagonist and the narrator so that the narrator is able to confess past activities, thoughts and feelings. More importantly, if each confession contributes to self transformation then it should be understood that each confessional act alters the view of the central protagonist as well. It is therefore the act of confessing or telling which can be identified as the source of self transformation. This act of self transformation is then the essential feature of the confession. Radstone states that central to the process of confession is the subject who is moving towards "becoming" or transforming where the individual is moving towards becoming someone identical but yet different to their former self (171). What we see thus finally is not a paradoxical attempt to fix a self which is fragmented, but rather a constructive move which constructs a coherent but transformative self out of the fragments. The self therefore shifts and transforms from being fragmented to a logical, coherent self.

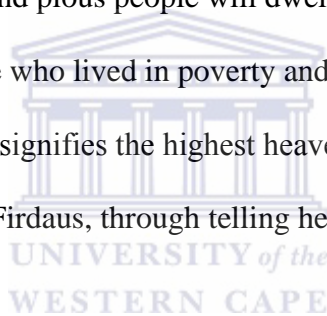
Narratives particularly personal forms of narratives act as a meaning-making tool to first expose the fragmented self and simultaneously to organise events and experiences which are pertinent to a coherent self. Deborah Schiffrin states that narrative language contributes a great deal to the construction and display of who we are and the self as an integrated whole (168-9). Narrative enables this transforming role because narrative language allows implicit meanings and different perspectives. We therefore define ourselves through not only what we say, how we say it and to whom we

say it. These stories thus play an important role not only in the development of the self but also in the presentation of the self as a psychological being. The narrative therefore acts as a bridge between the present and past self, the present self being located in reality whereas the past self being a remnant of the narrative and not of reality. Thus we see the ways in which autobiographical and confessional writing force introspection and how the mechanics of narrative suture time, space and the self.

Confession and liberation in *Woman at Point Zero*

The title *Woman At Point Zero* is relevant to understanding the process which the protagonist undergoes in the novel. When the novel was first published in 1973 it was originally titled *Firdaus* but was later changed to *Woman At Point Zero*. The term “point zero” is defined in a number of ways; the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term zero as constituting the starting point of the series of natural numbers; the total of absence of quantity considered as a quantity as intermediate between positive and negative quantities. Figuratively, the dictionary defines zero as a person or thing of no account; a ‘cipher’, a nonentity. The term zero is also defined as; the point of beginning or more specifically a single moment when where, what and who claims space in the universe, and therefore claims a definite position. The heroine in the novel is a woman called Firdaus, who all her life has been subjected to violence and abuse. In order to support herself financially she becomes a prostitute and finally ends up in jail for murdering her pimp, who attempts to abuse her as well. All the acts of violence and abuse have led Firdaus to finding herself at point zero, but this point also represents the beginning or a point of origin where she is able to find liberation. It can therefore be suggested that the concept point zero refers to a time or place where the individual is a nonentity or has no value but that zero also symbolises a borderline; between less than

nothing (zero) and more than nothing (zero). It represents a point or moment where the individual may go either way and has to make a choice. This is particularly relevant to the developmental journey of Firdaus who finds herself at the point of being a nonentity within her society, a marginalised being facing violence and abuse and finally the murder of the pimp becomes the catalyst to her liberation. She is able to move from point zero to where she is able to claim her space through the act of confessing. This is her story. The protagonist's name Firdaus is also significant to analysing the novel, the meaning of the name being "paradise" or "heaven". Paradise is often referred to in the Qur'an. The highest level of paradise is called *Firdaus*, which is where all the prophets, martyrs and the most truthful and pious people will dwell. This paradise will be entered first by Muhammed, then those who lived in poverty and then the most pious. The proper noun, "Firdaus", which signifies the highest heaven, self-reflexively suggests the way in which the protagonist, Firdaus, through telling her own story creates and becomes her own liberation.



Woman At Point Zero can be described as an exploration in which the protagonist, Firdaus, who is a prisoner narrates her personal story to the psychiatrist. The novel consists of two narrators one being the psychiatrist and the other Firdaus. In the novel, there is a shift in roles in that initially when meeting Firdaus, it becomes quite clear that the traditional role of the psychiatrist will not be relevant. Firdaus, in actively assuming the role of telling, brings about this shift in power. It therefore becomes Firdaus' story, her self examination and ultimately her self realisation. El Saadawi at the beginning introduces the reader to the circumstances which ultimately led to Firdaus's imprisonment. The novel begins from the perspective of the doctor who is doing research on female prisoners. The doctor hears about Firdaus and wishes to interview

her. Her request is initially rejected by Firdaus who distrusts her intentions believing that she may be from the media. However, this all changes when she decides to tell her life story to the doctor on the day before her death. In her narration of the events of her life she reveals the gruesome details of her experiences. She describes the distant relationship with her father and the nurturing relationship experienced with her mother which all changes when her parents pass away. She then goes to live with her uncle who provides her with the opportunity to become educated and obtains a secondary school certificate. Even though Firdaus is keen to study further, her uncle's wife believes that this would be an unnecessary expense to the family and arrangements are then made for her to be married off to Sheik Mahmoud, her aunt's uncle. The Sheikh spares no kindness towards her and eventually she escapes and finds herself on the streets believing that she would be able to find work with her secondary school certificate. The only way she is able to take care of herself is by becoming a prostitute which allows her some form of personal freedom. However, similar to the position in her childhood home to that in her uncle's home, as a prostitute for the most part she remains silenced, the turning point comes when she is confronted by the pimp and she is forced to find her voice. If the reader is to understand that Firdaus has lived a life filled with physical and emotional abuse it would then seem comprehensible that her violent attack and murder of her pimp could be seen as a consequence of her repressed anger and silence but also as an act of self defence. It is the murder of her pimp which leads to her imprisonment but simultaneously it is her imprisonment which leads to her speaking of her life experiences, and so also her liberation.

There appears to be a close link between her being enclosed (imprisoned) and her disclosure (telling her story). During this process of reflection she comes to realise

the impact of these events on her present circumstance. Firdaus' narration of her past life experiences in an enclosed space becomes her "prop" in order to make sense of her present self. Being isolated allows Firdaus to disclose events and experiences which have contributed to her current position of imprisonment. Her enclosure also initiates the disclosure of private experiences of her life. The crisis point or point zero which Firdaus finds herself at is symbolised by the murder of the pimp. This is a pivotal moment in her life because it represents the point where she is able to find her "paradise" which is ultimately death. If it is to be understood that *Firdaus* is the highest level of heaven as stated in the Qur'an, and that this is where the most truthful and pious people dwell, then Firdaus' confession before she dies is necessary to achieve this level of paradise or heaven. It is thus not her death which is her liberation but rather the act of telling her truth. The act of confessing requires that Firdaus reflect on her past through memory from her present position. She reflects on pertinent events in her past which will enable her to understand how these have shaped her present self. This splitting of the self into past and present represents a fragmented self and the fragmented pieces are symbolised by all the events and experiences which have been narrated. This is suggested earlier in the discussion by Radstone that the character's innermost thoughts and feelings are exposed through the splitting of the character's mind into character and narrator. This splitting or fragmented self is necessary for the process of transformation to take place. The act of confessing acts as a meaning making tool, as a means of making sense and to create a logical coherence of all the fragmented pieces. The fragmented self therefore becomes a coherent self through self examination. The narrative form of confession in this instance acts as a vehicle for the character to speak of her life's events. Radstone emphasises that central to the process of confession is the

individual moving inward but also transforming. This transformation represents a coherent self.

Radstone explains that the act of confessing or telling is the source of self transformation and that each confessional act alters the view of the central character. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the act of confessing as; to declare or disclose a thing previously kept secret, to acknowledge, admit a crime, charge or fault. A confession is defined as; a making known one's fault, crime or weakness, acknowledging sin or sinfulness. Firdaus' confession takes place in chapter 2 of the novel. Her act of confession is not directed towards finding absolution or forgiveness but rather to find meaning and to restore order in her life. Axthelm states that the aim of the main character in Dostoevsky's form of the confessional novel is to find truth even if it is unbearable. When they first meet, the doctor is immediately struck by Firdaus' cold stare and voice, which she describes both as being "cold as a knife" (6). At this instant the power relations change and it is Firdaus who assumes the role of the narrator, which is quite significant in that we are able immediately to realise the urgency of her need to tell her story. She says "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you" (11). The concept of time is very significant for a number of reasons. As discussed earlier, Montaigne speaks of time being suspended while the events from the past are told. Instead events are brought to the fore in order of relevance and significance to the individual telling them. Ultimately, it is the protagonist narrating her story who decides on the events to be told. Firdaus, a prisoner waiting to be led to her death only has a matter of hours. The urgency with which she speaks could also be because of the years of restraint and internal conflict which seem to forcefully propel her life experiences from her. Firdaus' emphasis on time running out could be the

reason why she is unable to write when she requests pen and paper. Alternatively another reason could be that when writing a letter it is usually addressed to someone as a means of wanting to communicate an event or experience. The answer to this can perhaps be found in that she finds herself alienated and really does not have anyone to reach out to. Firdaus appears to be abandoned by all who have been significant and insignificant in her life. In identifying the source of Firdaus' present feelings of hostility and hatred she relates past events and experiences which have impacted on her life. Firdaus' personal story is a confession of the murder of her pimp but also the cyclical nature of the novel reveals all the events which contribute to this violent act. In Firdaus assuming the role of narrator it immediately becomes her story rather than the doctor's which is important to her obtaining an understanding of herself. In relating these events she identifies primary individuals that have contributed to her present position. Firdaus' story is paradoxical because the experiences which she narrates may be viewed by others as her sins or crimes but it becomes a narrative of all the sins and crimes that significant others have committed against her. The act of confessing is a quest for truth about herself and in turn she reveals the truth about others.

The symbolism of the eyes is extremely important in the novel since it allows the protagonist access into the character of others. This allows her to intuit their moral virtues and failings. While narrating, Firdaus often introduces significant individuals by describing their eyes. The eyes allow Firdaus to penetrate and to see the "true" nature of others. It is the truth of others' abuse and exploitation of her to which she "confesses" and which allow her moment of truth and realisation about herself and others. Marita Am describes the eyes as the mediator between the world within and the world without and is therefore an important source of information. The eye has been associated with

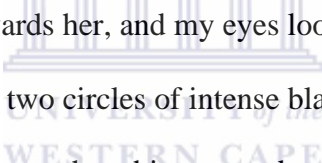
intelligence, light, vigilance, moral conscience and truth. The latter attributes of moral conscience and truth are particularly relevant to Firdaus' perception of people's eyes. The eyes are significant with every person she meets. The eyes in this context can be viewed as a point of origin; at birth a baby's first interaction with the world is through his/her eyes. The eyes become a means of communicating. One's eyes also symbolise a means of seeing as well as being seen. C. Emerson states that the eyes are significant because they are associated with seeing and are therefore associated with knowledge, freedom and expression (in Flanagan 137). In El Saadawi's novel *Two Women In One*, which will be analysed in a later chapter, this is most evident where the protagonist Bahia describes being seen. She describes, "When his eyes moved in front of hers, she felt as if he were seeing her. It was the first time she had ever been seen by any eyes other than her own" (36). Here she is speaking of the reflection of herself in the other's eyes. This reflection in the other's eyes or mirrors appears frequently in *Woman At Point Zero*. Firdaus uses the other's eyes as a means of gauging his/her moral compass. Similarly, confession can be viewed as a means of gauging the other's moral compass. Confession also allows that which is hidden to be revealed.

At the beginning of the novel the doctor (friend) speaks about Firdaus' eyes and the crime she has committed. He shares his opinion that he does not believe that Firdaus is capable of murder. He states "To be quite honest, I do not really feel she is a murderer. If you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder" (1-2). When speaking of her childhood Firdaus describes a father who was uncaring and often brutal and that he was no different to any other man in their community. She says "Sometimes I could not distinguish which one of them was my father. He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell" (13). The

similarity which she is referring to here is not only do they dress similarly but that they have the same aggressive, wary look in their eyes. Firdaus in her reflections tends to place great emphasis on people's eyes and the emotion which they reflect. Her father's eyes she describes as aggressive and wary, her mother's she initially describes as being, "... two rings of intense white around two circles of intense black. I only had to look into them for the white to become whiter and the black even blacker, as though sunlight was pouring into them from some magical source..." (17). The description given here of a mother who is protective and nurturing differs vastly to the one she later provides where she says that, "...No light seemed ever to touch the eyes of this woman even when the day was radiant and the sun at its very brightest" (18). In the first description Firdaus is still very young and unaware of the challenges which people are faced with. The latter description is a reflection of when she is much older, when she becomes aware of more than just the security which her mother provides of being there but also of her mother's relationship with her father. By contrasting the intensity of the eyes, Firdaus reflects on the differences in her relationship between her mother and father.

In another memory Firdaus describes the eyes of her teacher as being, "...two rings of pure white, surrounding two circles of intense black, that looked out at me. As I continued to gaze into them, the white seemed to turn even whiter, and the black even blacker, as though light flowed through them from some unknown magical source..." (29). The encounter with her teacher is a significant encounter in Firdaus' life. She was sent to live in the boarding school section of the school, a decision made by her uncle and his wife. On Thursdays and Fridays Firdaus remained at the school while the other parents collected their children. Even though her eyes followed the other girls as they left and felt like a prisoner she found a new sense of freedom inside the walls of the

school. It is ironic that she enjoys it despite of never being able to leave. In the event which Firdaus describes with her teacher the emotion is very similar to that which she had experienced with her mother. When she describes the teacher's eyes she describes them as; "I could see her eyes looking at me, observing me, despite the darkness. Every time I turned my head, they were after me, holding onto me, refusing to let me go. Even when I covered my face, they seemed to see through them into my eyes" (28). Firdaus describes that the teacher was looking at her with interest and concern. The teacher through the action of her eyes showed that she cared, a feeling which Firdaus had not felt in a while during the stay with her uncle and his wife. She bursts into tears which raises even more concern with her teacher. There is a moment where their eyes meet and a moment is shared which she describes as



My face was turned towards her, and my eyes looked into her eyes: two rings of pure white, surrounding two circles of intense black, that looked out at me. As I continued to gaze into them, the white seemed to turn even whiter, and the black even blacker, as though light flowed through them from some unknown magical source which was neither on the earth, nor in the heavens, for the earth was enveloped in the cloak of night, and the heavens had no sun nor moon to give them light (29).

There is sincerity and a pureness in the way in which Firdaus describes her teacher and when she speaks of the first time when she looked into her mother's eyes. This moment was so intense that she is unable to even share it with her best friend Wafeya. This moment is further intensified when on the night of the certificate ceremony Miss Iqbal comes to her rescue when her uncle and his wife do not attend the ceremony. Once again she speaks of "two eyes alone fastened themselves upon mine. No matter how far

I shifted my gaze, or how much I moved my head, they followed me closely, tightened their hold” (32). She describes that the intensity of her eyes following her brought her such immense pleasure, a feeling that she remembers from long ago but had forgotten as if it had never happened at all.

The encounter which Firdaus describes between her mother and her teacher occurs once again when she meets Ibrahim for the first time whilst employed. Firdaus falls in love with Ibrahim, a trade unionist who works for the same company. Similar to the encounter with her mother and teacher she describes the intensity she observes in his eyes:

My face was turned towards his face, and my eyes looked into his eyes. I could see two rings of pure white surrounding two circles of intense black looking out at me. I continued to gaze into them. The white seemed to grow even whiter, and the black to become even blacker, as though light flowed through them from some unknown mysterious source, neither on earth, nor in the heavens, for the earth was enveloped in the dark cloak of night, and the heavens had neither sun nor moon to light them up (78).

In this meeting between the eyes of Firdaus and Ibrahim there is an intensity of emotions which she feels towards him. Once again she describes it as a feeling that she had known before being born and had forgotten. She describes how she violently grasps his fingers frightened that it would be taken away from her. The encounters she describes with her mother, her teacher and now Ibrahim reveals firstly intense emotion and then of fear that she would lose that bond. The relationship between Firdaus and Ibrahim is a brief one. Love changes her perception of life and fills her with a sense of pride even when others try to caution her that she’s “living an illusion” (83). The

relationship with Ibrahim is a significant event in Firdaus' life as it reveals a number of truths which eventually leads to her finding her own truth. Firdaus' decision to abandon her life of prostitution and to seek employment is motivated by a particular event in her life. She reaches a turning point in her life when a client, one whom she respected, tells her that she is not respectable. After the client, Di'aa, utters these words she is unable to calm the chaos which arises within her. She describes it as "Before that moment my mind had been calm, tranquil and undisturbed. Every night I used to lay my head on the pillow and sleep deeply, right through the night until morning. But now my head vibrated with an incessant movement that kept on without respite, throughout the day, and throughout the night, like the ebb and flow of waves on a shore, seething and foaming like boiling water" (71). Firdaus experiences internal conflict when Di'aa defines her self-worth and value. In response to this new knowledge about herself, Firdaus decides to transform her life in search of becoming a respectable woman. There is urgency and desperation in this search, she says "Come what may, I had to become a respectable woman, even if the price were to be my life. I was prepared to do anything to put a stop to these insults that my ears had grown used to hearing, to keep the brazen eyes from running all over my body" (73). The shame and guilt that she feels is not due to a truth which she discovers about herself but rather the truth of others who have chosen to define her. She describes this moment as "The veil was torn from my eyes" (72). Part of the process of becoming a respectable woman, Firdaus finds a job and moves to a small room without her own bathroom or toilet. The veil which is torn from her eyes at this point is that she comes to realise that she has no value because the position which she occupies is determined by someone else. In telling her story, Firdaus is able to reflect on this moment and reach an understanding that the internal chaos which she experienced was as a result of someone else defining her self worth.

Firdaus' experience in this new world of employment and living as a "respectable woman" is a conflicted one but her experiences also prove integral in having to delve deeply within herself to understand the contrasts within society; between the rich and the poor, men and women and so forth. Her "new" life is described as being one of the masses. She has to queue to use the bathroom because her meagre salary does not allow her to live anywhere else. She has to queue once more while waiting for the bus to get to work and when the bus arrives she would join the other men and women in struggling to get on the bus and once on the bus she describes it as "though I had stepped into an oven, where the packed bodies had fused into a single mass" (74). She also describes the separate doors at the company; one for the more important higher level employees which remained unguarded and the other for the lower officials which was guarded by an employee. Her arrival and departure from work was recorded to the minute but the higher officials could come and go as they please. Firdaus interprets the look in the high officials' as "You're a poor miserable employee, unworthy of esteem, running after a bus to catch it. I'll take you in my car because your female body has aroused me. It is an honour for you to be desired by a respected official like myself... maybe some day in the future I can help you to get a rise before the others" (75). The realisation which Firdaus comes to is that a job, living in a small room, going by bus like everyone else does not grant you respect, instead she comes to the realisation that honour is achieved by the desirability of her body and who desires it. A further conclusion which she reaches is that as a prostitute she had been "looked upon with more respect and been valued more highly than all the females, myself included" (75). She comes to realise that as a prostitute she had more freedom and more money to afford a decent lifestyle in comparison to the female employee. So in becoming what has been generally defined as an honourable and respected woman, she discovers that

this idea of honour is merely an illusion, an idea which she similarly applies to being a wife. Many female employees fear losing their jobs and so agree to “favours” for the higher officials to keep their jobs. Firdaus on the other hand is seen as the most respected and honourable of all the female officials mainly because she “did not make any special effort to curry the favour of one or the other” (76).

Firdaus learns many lessons about the manner in which relationships are formed and maintained and that what may appear to be truth is often clouded in deception. She also learns that the divisions within society can be observed when looking at people. When she leaves her uncle’s home for the first time she ends up on the street unnoticed by the people walking by, she is merely one of the masses. She however notices that their faces are pale and their eyes are “dull, resigned, weighed down with a certain sadness and worry” (40). She draws a contrast between those walking the streets and those driving by in their cars; she describes their shoulders as broad and fleshy and their cheeks full and round. Their eyes she describes as “wary, doubting and stealthy”, “eyes preparing to pounce and full of aggression yet bordering on the strangely servile” (41). The contrast which is emphasised here is one of class and the value placed on money. This is a situation which she comes to experience first-hand, when she decides to leave her life of prostitution and access to money to a life of supposed respectability and honour but living in virtual poverty. Firdaus’ observation of the contrast in the people’s eyes is only clearly understood when she herself becomes an employee at a company. As an employee she comes to learn that it is the conditions which individuals from the working class have to endure, that weigh them down and contributes to the tiredness in the eyes. The tiredness is ultimately the disillusionment which she herself experiences.

The relationship with Ibrahim teaches Firdaus about truth and deception. Her sense of judgement is misguided firstly because she interprets what she sees in his eyes as truth as well as his words and because she believes that as a revolutionary, he has good intentions. In response to her colleague's warning she says, "But he's a revolutionary. He's fighting for us and for all those who are deprived of a decent life" (83). Firdaus expresses her belief in Ibrahim with much conviction and pride, possibly because she believes that this would finally set her apart from her life as a prostitute. She would be recognised as being a woman who deserved respect. Firdaus receives the news that Ibrahim is engaged to the chairman's daughter and sees the change in his eyes, "They looked different to me, like the eyes of another man, and I felt estranged" (83). This is once more a turning point in Firdaus' life and again the veil is lifted from her eyes. Thus far she had made a number of discoveries regarding the truth about honour and respect but also about love and deceit. The challenges which Firdaus describes as an employee is relevant to understanding the claim made by El Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that capitalism and economic exploitation are often linked to other forms of oppression. Firdaus narrates that many female employees are forced to oblige the higher officials with favours in order to retain their jobs. The conclusion which Firdaus comes to is that as respectable women many female employees are made to believe that loyalty requires them to have no or very little pride and dignity. She contrasts this insight with that of a prostitute where you are not living in a delusional awareness of self. The prostitute is aware that she is not respected but the female employee believes that she is. Falling in love with Ibrahim the trade unionist is important to Firdaus' quest for truth. She believes that as a revolutionary he is there to fight for all, but the truth of this delusion is revealed when he is engaged to the chairman's daughter. This is significant as El Saadawi emphasises the divisions of class

within society and that the individual's personal identity is strongly linked to the collective or national identity. Firdaus as a prostitute has been exposed on a number of occasions to police officials and heads of state who have requested her services as a form of obligation to her country. El Saadawi in making reference to interconnectedness between the individual's personal and national identity transforms this narrative into a resistant narrative. It becomes resistant because it reveals and challenges the double standards presented by the police officials, heads of state, company officials, the trade unionists and so forth. The economic exploitation by these individuals reveals their view of women as a commodity. Firdaus' initial turn to prostitution is one of survival but later she challenges societal norms by choosing prostitution on her terms.

Returning to prostitution is thus due to a culmination of events; the encounter with Di'aa, the failed relationship with Ibrahim and also his failed promise of hope, love and liberation. Firdaus finds it very difficult to deal with the pain and suffering associated with love. She contrasts it with her life as a prostitute and discovers that the pain she felt at that moment was intense because it was real. As a prostitute she was able to remain passive, the pain and humiliation she felt in the past was not real because they originated externally rather than from within. She describes her feelings as,

When I was selling my body to men the pain had been much less. It was imaginary, rather than real. As a prostitute I was not myself, my feelings did not arise from within me. They were not really mine. Nothing could really hurt me and make me suffer than the way I was suffering now. Never had I felt so humiliated as I felt this time. Perhaps as a prostitute I had known so deep humiliation that nothing really counted. (85)

The contrast drawn here reflects her vulnerability and that being in love meant having hope for the future and also opening oneself up to deeper emotion. As a prostitute, being passive is a resistance and protective strategy and a separation between the body and emotions. She explains, “I kept my heart and my soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role” (85). This protective strategy is described as a necessary tool as a prostitute but she is caught off guard when she falls in love and does not think it necessary to use the same protective mechanisms.

The pain, suffering and humiliation which Firdaus endures not only with Ibrahim but during her childhood with her teacher, her uncle, his wife, her husband, Bayoumi, the policeman who believes it is her civil duty to oblige him with sexual favours, Sharifa, the pimp and the many others who she speaks of during her confession are all crucial encounters in her self examination and uncovering her truth. The struggle is a necessary part of the introspective process as Axthelm finds in his study of Dostoevsky’s novel of confession. When Firdaus started her quest to becoming a “respectable” woman, she stated that she would do anything, which included making sacrifices and becoming insignificant among the masses. When she fell in love, she once again gave everything believing that she would be saved from her past self. Her intention was to “recover the self” she had lost and to “become a human being who was not looked upon with scorn, or despised, but respected, and cherished and made to feel whole” (86). The truth which she uncovers through this encounter is that she has become more aware of reality. She has finally come to realise what she wanted, to make her own decisions and to choose the life she wanted to lead. She came to the further realisation that society’s definition of a respected woman entailed having to live in a delusional and deceptive state. Hiding the injustices and contradictions faced by women

would constitute a respected woman's virtue. In her view, living in a delusional state meant denying one's position in society and this in turn meant being split between a self defined by others and a self defined by the individual. Her return to a life of prostitution was not out of force but a choice for independence, financial independence, and ultimately freedom. Firdaus has finally reached a position of self realisation, a position where she defines her self-worth and value, a position which she had unknowingly referred to as a child while at school where she speaks about her future, "For the future was still mine to paint in the colours I desired. Still mine to decide about freely, and change as I saw fit" (25). Reaching this point is certainly not an easy journey.

Firdaus has come to realise that her personal and national identity are interconnected and that the way she is defined in public will simultaneously have an impact on her personal life. However, this realisation also brings to the fore that the two identities are strongly linked but that the individual's national identity is not necessarily in many instances representative of the individual's personal identity. A national identity often implies that all individuals share the same interests and privileges but does not reflect individual struggles. Hence this implies that a national struggle for liberation may not include all groups, particularly those individuals occupying marginalised positions within society. By placing the focus on how Firdaus finds her own liberation and ultimately defines her own identity is relevant to her own story. Therefore narrating her own story is pertinent to the personal form of the narrative such as the confessional novel. Her confession remains focussed on the personal elements and relationships which have shaped her life and which eventually form part of how she "sees" herself. It is these experiences and events which she shares with other women but

it is the response to these experiences which sets her apart from them. This is what makes her introspective journey a personal one.

Firdaus experiences a number of major transitions throughout the novel and often the river Nile symbolically marks the transition she undergoes. The river Nile for ancient Egyptians is often viewed as being akin to the birth canal of their existence. In the novel the river Nile is first mentioned when Firdaus flees Bayoumi's flat after being held prisoner. After leaving her abusive husband, Bayoumi sees Firdaus on the street and takes her in; he unfortunately abuses her as well. After leaving Bayoumi she goes to the banks of the river Nile and after walking the entire day she meets Sharifa. The awakening which she experiences when Sharifa takes her in is both an emotional and a physical one. She takes care of and nurtures Firdaus like a mother, surrounding her with soft clothes, perfume, a bath to the point where her body feels like that of a "newborn baby, soft and smooth like everything else in the flat" (53). She looks into the mirror and describes it as being born again. The first time Firdaus looked at her reflection in the mirror was when she went to live with her uncle. This first experience led to a deep hatred for the mirror because she realised that she had her father's nose and her mother's lips. Firdaus' encounter with Sharifa was also an awakening of her physical self, where she discovered parts of her body and that they were attractive to the opposite sex. She also learned that her physical body had a monetary value which she could determine and this brought a sense of power. However, the beauty which she first saw when she arrived at Sharifa's flat no longer gave her the same pleasure and even the river Nile no longer seemed as beautiful. The river Nile is once again referred to when she comes to the realisation that as a prostitute she no longer lives a deluded life and is

aware of the truth. The river therefore symbolises progression but also movement; from its source to the next point.

Firdaus's reflections show a stark contrast in how men and women are perceived in her world. Women, apart from her uncle's wife have thus far been described as nurturing and protective and men as being aggressive. This is illustrated once again when she describes the relationship with her husband whom she is forced to marry and who even in her memories still fills her with fear. In speaking of his eyes she describes them as, "...those two eyes, which sent a cold shiver running through my spine whenever I remembered them" (42). Her fear of course is justified when she relates how he beat and belittled her. The moment when she eventually leaves him can be seen as the beginning of her journey in the search for meaning of herself. Leaving his home she comes to realise the importance of money as a means to becoming independent and that as a woman her education was worthless. It is a sequence of events which lead to her resorting to prostitution and to her disillusioned view of society. The fear which Firdaus experiences in each of the violent encounters she speaks of is eventually what she lets go of. She admits that without fear, it becomes easier to resist. Courage replaces fear and this only takes place after struggling through the pain of her experiences. Firdaus compares truth to death in that it kills but it also gives strength and it is this strength and courage which is reflected when the psychiatrist meets her at the beginning of the novel.

The realisation which Firdaus reaches is that her previous disillusionment stemmed from her looking for something that would fill her with pride but she was never able to achieve it. Her confession is therefore the vehicle which liberates her. It is the confrontation of past events and experiences which are pieced together to form a truth. A truth which she internalises and accepts as her own. Di'aa's judgement of her as

a prostitute and ultimately as a woman, is what sparks her initial anger and confusion. In searching for the self which Di'aa and many other men like him consider to be the ideal, she is merely filled with disillusionment. Firdaus comes to realise that the woman considered to be the contrast of the prostitute; the female employee, the wife, is frequently forced to occupy a marginalised and insignificant position, often for economic reasons. Throughout her confession Firdaus makes reference to the many financial challenges women, such as her mother and the female employees face on a daily basis. Her confession proves important on a personal level but also on a broader level she discovers the complex truths which define society and the relationship between society and individuals. Uncovering the truth is an important part of the introspective process but even more so is the response to the reality of this truth. She reaches the conclusion that events from the past have impacted and shaped her life and with this understanding she does not fear death. For Firdaus, her death symbolises the authentic self which she has attained, based on the truth through her own self examination. The purpose of her confession is not to search for forgiveness or absolution but instead it is necessary in the process of making sense of the internal conflict and chaos. However there is also the truth which is revealed about those who have contributed to her finding herself at point zero. Her confession is the source of her finding the truth about herself and others, and simultaneously she is able to attain meaning and fulfilment.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how the introspective journey is enabled by the personal narrative of confession. The genre shows the advantages of how the form encourages self expression and how through the subject's process of reflecting on past memories

she is able to create a logical coherent present self. My intention has been to explore the relationship between the form of the confessional narrative in achieving and making meaning of events and experiences. Personal narratives, particularly those narrated in the first person, serve as a psychological intervention tool in the transformation process which the protagonist undergoes. The reader is to understand that the protagonist finds herself in a state of crisis and hence a fragmented self exists. By gaining understanding as to how this fragmented self has come into being the subject embarks on an inward journey which can be seen in *Woman At Point Zero*. The reflective process which takes place in the novel being explored is initiated by Firdaus confessing the events which have led to her committing a crime. While narrating her story she remains split between her present and past selves and the resolution which ultimately takes place is found in the knowledge which she uncovers; a knowledge of the experiences and events which have shaped the present self. Of course this cannot take place without drawing on experiences and emotions which are linked to the past and the past self. Not all events of the past are relevant to understanding the present therefore only those which have contributed to the fragmented present self are selected and thus dealt with. This is where personal narrative such as the confessional form plays a role in bridging the divide between the past and present self. The self is thus transformed from a fragmented self to a logically, coherent self. The emphasis in this chapter is that narrative and the construction of the self are inseparable and furthermore that national identity does not necessarily reflect the struggles and goals of the individual. In the novel, national identity is often associated with having very little or no dignity and it is the novel form with its focus on individual experience which, in part, inclines the narrative to the personal liberation achieved by the protagonist. Firdaus' return to prostitution can be interpreted as her individual rebellion against having to sacrifice her dignity and rather

choosing individuality and self respect. Her empowerment stems from her not bowing to what society defines as respectability but rather her definition of it. The particular form in which the novel has been written enables the protagonist to delve and explore the self from her perspective and allows the reader an inside view of the emotions and turmoil which she experiences. The enclosed space of the prison cell focusses the reader's attention on Firdaus and one is thus able to follow closely the psychological transformation which the protagonist undergoes without feeling distanced from the entire process.



Chapter 2: Letter writing in *So Long A Letter*

Introduction

It has been established that narratives, particularly personal narratives, play an important role in the exploration of the self and identity. The form and content of narratives are particularly relevant to the exploration of the self. The form of expression and the content suggested are intimately connected. This chapter will attempt to illustrate how the process of introspection contributes to the sense of self and self knowledge. When referring to personal narratives I am placing the focus mainly on those genres written about personal experience, more specifically letter writing. Confession and letter writing are forms of personal narratives and specific differences and similarities can be noted. Firstly, the mode of the letter assists in maintaining and strengthening friendship and bonds between characters which is not pertinent to the confessional novel. Letter writing in contrast to confession appears to be a solitary process. And finally, in both forms the protagonist is able to give a personal account of her experiences and is able to reach self understanding either through writing or confessing.

Letter writing as a form of personal narrative creates an intimate space that allows the reader into the private world of the character's innermost thoughts and feelings. The exploration of personal narratives such as the epistolary form is pertinent to the discussion in this chapter. Mariama Bâ's novel *So Long A Letter* is written in letter form and brings to the fore as well as exposes the protagonist's feelings of conflict which may have remained masked if the novel had used a different form. The argument

presented here is that the novel in letter form forces the introspective process through the act of writing whereby the character consciously or unconsciously raises certain concerns, feelings and thoughts that were deeply embedded. Simultaneously the character reaches a realisation about how these events and experiences have shaped her present consciousness. The character assumes a self reflexive position; the subject moves within herself and this inward journey is often triggered by an external event causing the character a great deal of conflict and pain. This state of conflict forms part of the protagonist's psychological journey of self examination to becoming a coherent self; very similar to the journey which the character in the confessional form undergoes as discussed in chapter 1. This introspective process relies on memory and reaching into the character's past in order to creating a logical coherence of events that may either arise randomly or may be selected by the character to make sense of the present and eventually leads to self understanding. The novel in letter form highlights the split between the self in the present illustrated by the character writing and the self who is part of the past event or experience. There is continual tension between the two selves but a necessary tension because this is what leads to self transformation. The present self is actively defined by the subject's understanding of the events specifically through the process of writing.

In order to contextualise this connection between form and the realisation of the self I shall trace the historical development of the letter which was originally used as a means of communication to later being integrated into the novel form. In earlier novelistic use of the epistolary form the focus fell mainly on concerns regarding morality, whereas later writers of this form focussed on the subjectivity of the individual. More recently, contemporary women's writing has used the epistolary form

to illustrate the significance of the bonds of friendship between women. More importantly the recent examples of the epistolary novel have also foregrounded political themes and concerns which impact the lives of women. This chapter thus will show that the novel in epistolary form directs attention to how the individual, through struggle, reaches self realisation and is psychologically transformed. However, the epistolary novel also often acts as a resistance narrative in its attempt to raise political and social concerns that affect the individual.

The epistolary novel: letter writing and selfhood

Letter writing has been identified as a genre of personal narrative which is often used to present the personal experiences and emotions of the narrator/character in relation to the particular event. Frederick Karl outlines a broad transformation of which letter writing, and later the epistolary novel, formed a part. Karl explains that as the subject moved inward through a psychological process, the subject then became the origin of the plot and the primary focus became the character's response to the event rather than the event itself (320). The letter is considered an ancient form of writing and its origins have been traced back to the Greeks. In order to analyse closely Mariama Bâ's *So Long A Letter* which is written as a long letter from the main character to a friend, I shall trace the historical development of the epistolary literary form and the many influences which have shaped this genre. I shall look at relevant debates regarding the origin of this genre of writing and the influential contributions by writers in the 18th century such as Samuel Richardson in his novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. Although Bâ obviously does not directly draw on the English novel tradition, nevertheless the sorts of observations made about the development of the epistolary novel more generally are relevant to the use of the epistolary form in Bâ.

Tracing the origins of the letter as an early form of communication is relevant to the discussion of the development of the novel in letter form. It is relevant in determining how it has influenced and eventually became integrated into the novel form. Early Greek history reveals that letter writing was mainly confined to official or military communication and was only extended much later to being used by the general public. Patricia Rosenmeyer finds that the ancient definition of “letter” is closely linked to its original context, that being; a written message, usually private, sent to accompany or replace an oral injunction or private conversation between two persons geographically removed from one another (20). Furthermore the changing technologies through the centuries had a great impact on letter writing, firstly, in relation to the act of writing and, secondly, in the way that the letter reached its intended receiver.

Rosenmeyer’s research consistently shows that there was a definite growth in the use of the letter on a daily basis as a means of communication. The letter in the very early Hellenistic and Classical periods was often viewed with suspicion as the act of writing was associated with an act of power. It became a means of dividing people into those who could read and write and those who could not, often separating classes and genders too (27). It was generally implied that men could be trusted with their literacy and letter writing skills, whereas women would use their skills for more deceitful purposes.

Letters in general were regarded as suspicious since they were a means of carrying secret and harmful messages particularly in military and political correspondence (27).

By the mid-3rd century, letter writing shifted to being used more frequently for private use, by those occupying different class groups and by individuals with various writing skills. These letters conveyed messages to: console, express thanks, praise, to give orders, report events, to mediate a quarrel or lawsuit, to give or request advice and to maintain a friendship and so forth. Rosenmeyer notes that these epistolary habits

continued into the Roman and Christian periods as well (32). Even though the purpose of letter writing remains as a form of communication its popularity and form altered as technology and society changed over time.

The shift of the letter from being used in the public to the private domain, together with the increase in literacy levels, led to the epistolary form being introduced into many different genres, such as travel writing, magazines, and so forth. The letter used in epistolary fiction dates back to the ancient Roman period and became most popular in Europe, specifically Spain and Italy in the 16th century and later in Britain and France during the 17th and 18th century. During the 18th century, letters were a popular form of communication and were written to communicate about various topics such as literature, family concerns and love (Watt 196). In Europe the epistolary novel was made popular by writers such as Aphra Behn in Britain and Charles Louis de Montesquieu in France among many others. These writers created fictional work by using the letter form. The works produced by these writers in comparison to Samuel Richardson's novels were considered lacking in form and structure, although these writers had some influence on the works of Richardson. Richardson's novels also show some influence from the early 18th century French writers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Choderlos de Laclous, although their work was considered mainly romantic and emphasising moral concerns. Many scholars including Susan Whyman and Ian Watt acknowledge the important contributions made to the epistolary form by writers such as Samuel Richardson and his novel *Pamela* is often considered by many scholars to be the first epistolary novel. The epistolary form allowed Richardson to develop characters in a very different way compared with earlier literary techniques and the form allowed these characters to communicate with the reader through the use of the first person

narrative. The form allowed the reader to observe every detail of the character's life and their development over a period of time.

The letter, having assumed new functions with regard to it being used as a means to express personal views and thoughts and documenting the events of the individual's everyday life, was significant to Richardson's writing. He adopted this convention of writing and used it as a form of narrative when writing his novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. Richardson's use of this convention certainly does not seem unusual considering that it was a common trend at the time but it is important to ascertain why and how this particular form as narrative was used. The familiar letter which Richardson adopts maintains the structure of the common form of communication at the time and utilises it to provide a fictional account of minute by minute descriptions of events. In this fictional form the structure remains a letter but it is the letter which becomes the story that needs to be told. It is in this sense that the letter becomes a double process not only of form but also of content which are interrelated. This then suggests that the form, namely the letter, is of great importance to the telling of the story perhaps even more so than the story itself. Watt acknowledges that this form of narrative departs from the classical literary perspective in that it migrated from the world of objectivity, social and public orientation to the subjective, individualist and private orientation of a modern society as reflected in Richardson's narrative form (198).

Richardson concludes that a major advantage of writing letters is that letters are the most direct material evidence that exist of the writer's life (198). When writing a letter the writer is writing his/her most subjective thoughts and emotions about the event which has taken place. Joe Bray asserts that fiction in the late 18th century often presents

a continuous negotiation between “reason and feeling” and interaction with consciousness (92). He states that at no point does the one conquer the other. Bray, in his study of the epistolary novel, finds that characters in first person novels during the late 18th century often looked at the “irregular motion of their thoughts” often triggered by an “initial impression or emotions” (95). He explains that these earlier forms are significant in illustrating how the thoughts and emotions of the experiencing self are shaped and transformed by the narrating self. Thus the feelings and reason combine to calm the other (102). The process which Bray is referring to here can be explained as; the experiencing self speaks as the action is taking place while the narrating self talks back and reflects on the events. Bray is thus referring to a split or fragmented self that occurs in order to make sense of and to create order of events which come to the fore. This splitting of the self demonstrates the complexity of the subject’s consciousness. In Bray’s view the epistolary form has been successful in portraying the inner consciousness of the character. The epistolary form therefore presents a very realistic view of the character’s world and relies primarily on the individual’s subjective view and internal consciousness. Karin Barber proposes furthermore that with the expansion of genres such as the personal letter, diary, autobiography and sentimental novel a new form of consciousness surfaced. She states:

Writing about the self produces a separation between the self as object and the self as subject. Writing intimate letters launches one’s own private thoughts across time and space in a concrete, externalised form which both sender and recipient can scrutinise. This makes possible new forms of self examination but also new styles of self projection and self dramatisation (in Perry 8).

The letter may contain the event but it is the writer's reflection upon the event and the individual turning inward which encourages self examination and ultimately an understanding of the self. The contributions of writers such as Richardson to the epistolary genre thus are important when analysing *So Long A Letter*, firstly, because they provide a broad literary context for the use of the epistolary form as a personal narrative, and, secondly, since they show the development across time of the extent to which characters are able to find meaning while narrating events.

Although many scholars agree that the contribution made by Richardson has been significant to the epistolary genre, it has been noted that the contributions made by female writers to the genre have been omitted from the history, thus placing Richardson at the forefront. Susan Whyman notes this particular phenomenon in her study of the epistolary genre. In her view epistolary literacy provides a narrative template to convey random events and is a means which gives order and meaning to a writer's life (578). She, along with Watt in their exploration of epistolary writing, particularly in Britain, agree and attribute the growth of this genre to specific social, economic and cultural changes taking place at the time. These changes being: the expansion of publishing, libraries, readers and leisure; the emergence of women as authors; shifts in the commercial print marketplace; and the changing relationship between popular and elite culture (Whyman 580). Although Whyman agrees with Watt about the changes that contributed to the growth of the novel, she concurs with many other critics who claim that Watt's ideas are Anglocentric, that he is dismissive of writing by women and that he ignores earlier types of literature (577-578). Whyman's observation of the exclusion of women writers in this specific genre is extended by Katharine Ann Jensen who attributes women's exclusion to the prevailing notions of femininity. Looking

specifically at the history of the epistolary genre in France, Jensen notes that in 17th and 18th century France one of the ideals of femininity; which women were encouraged/compelled to realise, was what she termed “The Epistolary Woman”. This term is what Jensen uses to define the female figure in the letter novel at the time and was extended to describe the female mind. The female character is often portrayed by male literary theorists as overly emotional and having a natural talent for writing passionate love letters (10-11). The prevailing trends of thought created a division between men and women; men having the ability to study language and literature and women due to their emotional and physical make-up the ability to write love letters (10-11). Epistolary fiction therefore depicted “The Epistolary Woman” as being seduced, betrayed and suffering and as a means of dealing with her pain this woman would write letter after letter filled with her anguished and masochistic lament to the man who has left her behind (2). This element of suffering was a common theme in many male-authored epistolary texts of this period. Their writing often depicted women’s writing as being emotional. This term “Epistolary Woman”, Jensen argues is a male defined term to marginalise women (2). However, even though Jensen acknowledges that male writers of this period played an influential role in promoting the idea and image of the Epistolary Woman, she also states that many female authors of epistolary narratives further enforced the image of women suffering over the abandonment of men they were in love with, two such authors being; Madame de Lespinasse and Marie-Catherine Desjardins. However, Desjardins (using the nom de plume, Madame de Villedieu,) in her 1675 novel creates a character who has romantic power and uses her letters to seduce a man instead of creating a suffering female protagonist.

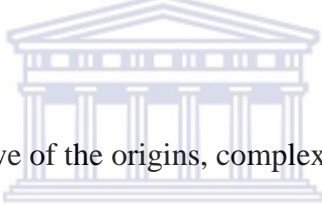
The theme of betrayal and abandonment continued to influence the writing of many epistolary narratives of the 18th century for both male and female writers and even more recent contemporary women writers. This theme again arises in the epistolary novel, *So Long A Letter*, by Mariama Bâ. In the novel the reader is introduced to the central character Ramatoulaye who is mourning the death of her husband who had abandoned her and their children. The letter which she addresses to her friend expresses the internal struggle she endures coming to terms with the more obvious death of her husband but also his earlier abandonment and then finally her acceptance of herself and her various roles which lead to redefining who she is. The letter she writes to her friend, Aissatou, helps her to express her feelings of pain and anguish, but rather than remaining the victim, through this process of writing and reflecting she reaches a position of understanding of her role as woman, mother and teacher. In contrast to the earlier form of the epistolary narrative of abandonment, the female protagonist does not remain in her position of suffering but instead comes out triumphant. This is what can be argued makes *So Long A Letter* a modern representation of the classic form of the epistolary novel. Rather than prolonging the painful experience as does the traditional form of the genre, Ramatoulaye stops writing when her focus shifts from the pain she feels to her future and that of her family. The letter novel therefore allows the central figure not only to record but also to reflect on these subjective thoughts and feelings. This act of self reflection forms part of the personal transformation process, but it also reflects the changing position of women in this particular society.

In *So Long A Letter* Bâ reveals the power of the letter in strengthening not only friendship but also female solidarity. The letter novel thus draws attention to the manner in which the mode of the letter assists in maintaining and cementing friendship and

bonds between characters which is not pertinent to the confessional form. Even though both forms provide intimate spaces for reflection, the purpose of self reflection and narration differs in some ways. The letter is often addressed to someone specific even when there is no guarantee that it will reach the intended person. The intention of writing ranges from wanting to reveal or to confide personal thoughts and feelings which the parameters of friendship allow. The letter thus becomes a means of revealing the self not only to others but also to the self. The letter could therefore be described as a mirror reflecting the inner self. Ramatoulaye, a character created by Bâ communicates her reflections to her friend and through this process of writing her letter reflects on events in her life, both present and past and draws her own conclusions based on these reflections. Ruth Perry's study on the epistolary form is particularly relevant here since she places the focus on the relationship between letter writing, women and friendship. Her study reveals that women most often write letters to explore and understand their ambivalent feelings. The character assumes a reflexive stance which is central to her psychological transformation, meaning that through the process of reflecting, knowledge of the self is achieved. Central to the analysis of *So Long A Letter* is the question of whether this self knowledge is achieved through the process of reflection and how the narrative form of letter writing contributes to the act of exploring the self but also in maintaining friendship and female solidarity.

Women writers in later periods have used the genre to depict women's often marginalised position in the public sphere and their struggle to rise above the challenges presented. It has been found that in the last 20 years women writers of the epistolary form have used a form similar to that used in England and France during the 18th and 19th centuries, but with some important differences. Earlier forms of the letter novel

have been described as sentimental in nature, whereas more recently the genre has been described as being more radical particularly in its depiction of women's lives and their experiences. The political theme noted above is often prevalent in those novels written by postcolonial writers who often experience both public and private forms of oppression. Bâ through the central character raises themes of marriage, polygamy, the entrenched caste system and various cultural and religious traditions which impact upon the characters in general and women in particular. These themes raise pertinent concerns from the first person perspective as to how women often navigate their way around each of these challenges presented. The process of writing therefore allows the character to share her experiences as a woman and as a friend and it also allows her to transcend her present position.



The brief overview above of the origins, complexity and potential of epistolary fiction does not, however, clarify the ways in which narration is used as part of self realisation in letters. Susan Whyman's description of letter writing as a vehicle to create order and meaning and how it came to assume such an important role in the expression of the self is pertinent to this discussion. Narrative not only allows us to make sense of our experiences and the self but it also allows the opportunity to create and recreate the self and identity. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps state that narrative provides those who tell stories with an opportunity to create a logical coherence of events and also to establish continuity between the present, past and the future (19). According to Julian Wolfreys meaning can be inferred and interpreted from the way in which the events are arranged and told in the story. The sequence of events and the continual movement through time in remembering these events help not only the character to bring about order but also help the reader to make sense as the events are told. Recalling and narrating the past is

therefore crucial to dealing with and understanding the present and future events. Time in the letter novel is most clearly shown by the split between the self in the present which is writing and the self which is connected to the past event or experience. These past thoughts are accessed through memory and the act of writing and reflecting helps to make sense of those memories which come to the fore. The present self therefore transitions between the two selves until some understanding is reached. Until this happens, the present self remains fragmented. This introspective process represents the protagonist trying to make sense of pertinent experiences and events which continue to cause conflict and crisis in the present. The problematic event in the past is usually linked to the protagonist's emotional distress in the present. This form of narrative differs from that of the confession as there is always the need for the presence of another individual to confess to. This individual may be known or unknown to the person confessing as is seen in the novel *Woman At Point Zero* but there is always the guarantee that the message has been delivered. With the letter however there is always the possibility that it may not be read by the individual it is intended for. Letter writing thus appears to be a solitary process forcing the individual to self reflect. However, even though it can be described as a solitary process, it could be argued that the letter also becomes an escape from solitude. Ramatoulaye during the period of mourning reaches out to her friend, Aissatou, with the intention to inform her about the news of her husband's death, also to confide about how she had loved him and the impact of his later abandonment when he married a second wife. She writes about her anger and bitterness and expresses fear that these thoughts will prevent her carrying out the religious duties of mourning with a pure mind. The letter to her friend thus becomes the "prop" to ensure that she is able to do so.

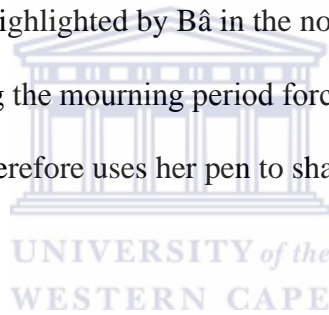
Narrative therefore provides a conventional structure which enables the narrator to identify problems or concerns, to give possible causes, and to illustrate ways in which to deal with these problems. Narrative forms part of the process of creating a unified self out of a fragmented self. Ochs and Capps explain that narrative is constructed out of the tension of the fragmented self which links the actions and feelings of the past self, the present self and the imagined future self (29). Narrative becomes a tool which allows the selves to be explored and a space in which order may be created. An important aspect to note is that even though narrative acts as an exploration tool it may not always offer a resolution to the problematic events and experiences uncovered. The emphasis is placed instead on creating a conscious awareness of what has contributed to the present state of the self. If events of the past continue to spill over into and affect the present self then narrative plays a crucial role in integrating the fragmented self. The coherent self develops from integrating present, past and possible future selves and experiences but more importantly acknowledging the relationship of the self in relation to others and to the world.

Not only does narrative allow a relatively coherent self to emerge but, as Irvin Schick emphasises, identity is also a product of narration. He states:

[...] identity is a permanent process of construction and reconstruction, this fluid or mutable nature does not mean that it never enjoys any stability. [A] person's identity does not vary significantly from day to day, so that there must be a slow varying envelope containing (and constraining) the vicissitudes of self-enactment. This envelope is narrative...narrative plays a central role in the constitution and preservation of identity. It is a carrier of meaning, the channel

through which an individual tells him/herself and others the tale of his/her place in the world (in Wolfreys 167).

Schick emphasises the idea of identity as a fluid construct which continually reconstructs itself without losing a relative stability at any moment in time. Narrative therefore becomes a means by which the subject is able to become consciously aware by reflecting on his/her experiences in the world from the perspective of the present self. This self is consciously aware of both the present and the past self and meaning is created through the significance of past and present events and experiences. The self is thus shaped by the individual's experiences and subjective involvement in the world (Ochs and Capps 21). This is highlighted by Bâ in the novel where she shows that Ramatoulaye's isolation during the mourning period forces her into solitude and the character to self reflect. She therefore uses her pen to share these memories with her friend.



The discussion of identity as a product of narrative is important when analysing the novel *So Long A Letter*. Bâ uses the novel to raise awareness of a changing society and how these changes impact on the individual, who is unable to remain unaffected by these external forces. The novel *So Long A Letter* looks at how the individual becomes aware of the changing society and how she makes sense of these changes. It looks at how Ramatoulaye navigates her way to fitting in without feeling that she has sacrificed herself or her identity and how she negotiates a transformed self which acknowledges these changes but also includes the values and traditions which she considers to be important. Bâ shows that reflecting on one's past is important in order to evaluate how the present position has been reached and then to decide on how to proceed. In this letter the reader comes to know Ramatoulaye's story as well as Aissatou's Moudou,

Mawdo Bâ and Binetou. The reader learns about the character's society which is still very traditional in many ways even though there is mention about the effects of modernity, as well as the caste system and polygamy. These all contribute to shaping her identity and concept of self. The significance of the novel written in first person narrative is that the reader gets to view Ramatoulaye's world through her eyes and the observations she makes not only about herself but also about others. The reader therefore comes to learn about her various roles from her perspective. This is particularly relevant in view of the claim that the self is shaped by the interactions with others and society and has to be taken into account when searching for self understanding. If this is to be taken into consideration then it is important to acknowledge the individual within the context of her experiences and how this influences the creation and re-creation of the self. In the novel the reader is made aware of the restrictive influence of the social constructs of family, religion, culture and marriage on the female protagonist. However Mariama Bâ makes a connection between the constructed self and society and shows how these are mediated by political concerns. This is evident in *So Long A Letter* in particular, where the protagonist is often unable to come to terms with changes and challenges introduced by living in a modern, postcolonial society. The challenge becomes one in which she tries to hold onto her traditional values but simultaneously wants to embrace the freedom to challenge political ideologies which enforce the exclusion of women in the public realm. This challenge brings continuous internal tension which forms part of the protagonist's introspective journey. The epistolary form of this novel therefore serves a dual purpose; first the protagonist is able to give a personal account of her experiences and her response to those experiences and second, she is able to reach self understanding through her writing.

Along with Nafissatou Diallo and Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ was one of the first female Senegalese writers. Her first novel in many ways laid the foundation for later Senegalese Francophone writers. Ann McElaney Johnson and Kenneth Harrow share the view that by choosing the epistolary genre, Bâ set herself apart from her other contemporaries (111). Harrow describes the epistolary form in which the novel is written as a rare form in African literature and a unique form of writing in contemporary African women's literature (i). Using this narrative form allows Bâ's main character to give her own personal account of the challenges which women face, particularly in this instance, Muslim Senegalese women. The central character writes her letter from her present moment of crisis and delves into past events which may have contributed to her conflicting feelings. As the writer, Bâ creates a private space for the reader in the character's world of letter writing. The central character which Bâ presents is significant because previously in narratives women were portrayed as victims. This was not only in the works written by men but by women writers as well, who often depicted the female character as abused and abandoned. *So Long A Letter* in Harrow's view paved the way for novels written by Ken Bugul, Nafissatou Diallo and Catherine N'Diaye (ii). These women writers reveal a new vision of woman's experience and their novels reflect a definition of the "New African Woman" particularly within a modern society (ii). McElaney-Johnson supports the claim in her study on women's writing that novels written in epistolary form are a rare find in African literature. However, she notes that first person narratives are commonly found, specifically in the forms of autobiography and journal writing (111). In the Francophone African literary tradition, it was found that only five letter novels had been published at about the same time as *So Long A Letter* and these were mainly written by men.

The central argument presented in this chapter is that the structure or the form of the narrative bears as much relevance or even more importance than the content and is relevant in understanding why and how Mariama Bâ employs the epistolary form in *So Long A Letter*. In some ways, Bâ may be regarded as the Richardson of Senegalese literature. Bâ's use of the epistolary form is significant in the historical development of novel writing in Senegalese literature. Bâ's use of this specific genre can be attributed to her perceiving that the letter in itself draws the reader into the character's space and so doing into her internal consciousness. Ramatoulaye is forced into exclusion during the period of mourning and thus her personal contact and communication is limited. The letter represents her confidant and friend Aissatou who is far away at a time when she is most overwhelmed by her emotions and memories. The reader is also given an insight into Ramatoulaye's most intimate thoughts which often remain masked and are not spoken of in public. The letter becomes a liberating tool not only in revealing those thoughts but also the themes which she addresses in the content. The letter form allows Ramatoulaye to question aspects of her life which appear contradictory and to make sense of these without being judged and eventually re-positions herself within her society. This introspective process becomes an essential part of Ramatoulaye's realisation of herself and her identity.

Bâ's novel seems to have played an important role in the liberation of women in Senegal by raising concerns and awareness around the impact of modernisation and the individual's identity. Siga Fatima Jagne observes that "Bâ's theoretical and practical concerns lie in the subjectivity of the Senegalese woman under multiple layers of oppression" (4-5). She further states that Mariama herself believed that "the mission of the writer in Senegalese society was to write against the archaic practices, traditions and

customs that are not a real part of our precious heritage” (5). The view which she presents through her writing is that identity is neither fixed nor stagnant but continually adapting and transforming to the changing world around it. Sidonie Smith defines identity as constantly shifting, ambiguous, fragmented and segmented. This transformation is however not without questioning and reflecting and becomes an active process of introspection, the purpose being not so much to find answers but rather to make sense of the individual’s position in the world. It could therefore be suggested that Bâ employs autobiographical techniques in the novel, *So Long A Letter*, when Ramatoulaye goes through the process of questioning and remembering to reach a point of self realisation. More specifically, she uses the epistolary form when engaging in this process of knowledge acquisition.

“Friendship has splendours that love knows not”: self examination and friendship in *So Long A Letter*

The opening of the novel as well as the way in which it is structured immediately introduces the strong bond between the central character and the addressee. Ruth Perry, referred to earlier, in a detailed study on the epistolary form examines the relationship between letter writing, women and friendship. In her study she reveals that historically women wrote letters as an art of pleasing since it was possible to create a self on paper to suit the expectations of the audience (69). This trend later changed to one where women used letters to write about their ambivalent feelings or confusion about an experience. Perry states that epistolary fiction generally follows a formula in which two or more people are separated by an obstruction which can take on a number of forms and then are forced to maintain their relationship through letters (93). The act of writing and confiding to her friend, in this instance does not only serve as a tool of

communication but also becomes a process of healing for Ramatoulaye. The act of writing becomes the key to her liberation and ultimately becoming a coherent self.

So Long A Letter is a story about friendship and the complexity of marriage. The view reflected about marriage is that the focus is not on the union of two individuals but rather the union of two families and this is often the origin of the internal conflict which the characters experiences. Mariama Bâ introduces to the reader two friends, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou through the letter which Ramtoulaye writes to her best friend. They each marry men whom they love very much even though it means defying their families. Ramatoulaye defies her parents when she marries Modou, from a poorer family. In a show of disapproval of their marriage, her parents refuse any dowry from Modou. Many years later in their marriage Modou abandons Ramtoulaye and marries their young daughter's best friend. In writing about her own experiences we find that Aissatou's life becomes intertwined in these experiences. Very similar to Ramatoulaye, Aissatou too marries a man whom she loves dearly but faces the disapproval of her mother-in-law who is enraged by the idea that her son is marrying a goldsmith's daughter. The anger displayed by the mother-in-law is a result of the society being divided into a very traditional caste system. Mariama Bâ in particular is drawing attention to the caste system which affords those occupying positions in the upper caste privileges and status and often causes great conflict between individuals from different castes. The way in which this system is structured is to order groups within society; this often sparks tension and conflict. Penda Mbow in her research on the caste system in Senegal finds that "The caste is particularly rigid in matrimonial relations" (11). She furthermore finds that when considering marriage, "one must avoid, above all, mixing one's blood" (11). The fundamental idea of the caste system is that those of a lower

caste are not to marry those of a higher caste. In the instance described by Bâ, a goldsmith would belong to a lower caste. The caste system in Senegal is a formalised system and the individual is born into a particular caste. Belonging to a certain caste does not involve choice, and is neither optional, instead it is hereditary and individuals may not marry outside of their caste. Mbow has found that the reaction of most caste people to this system is that of “acceptance of their ‘state’, non-refusal, the proclamation of themselves as they are” (13). The caste system is divided along lines of the individual’s ability and skill that he/she was born into. The main castes after the nobles are identified as: the griots, the blacksmiths and the jewellers, the leather workers, the woodcutters and the captives. The *griot* (oral performer) is considered very important as they pass down history about families. Aissatou’s mother-in-law’s discontent stems from her son marrying a woman who is not part of their caste. She manages to end Aissatou’s marriage by encouraging her son to take his first cousin as a second wife. Bâ’s novel reveals a possible consequence that may take place when individuals choose to challenge the cultural traditions of their families. The caste system in Senegal is very rigid and mixing is generally not encouraged. It is often found that marriages across castes end in divorce or a split in the family. Hence the institution of marriage concerns families and not individuals. Bâ uses the novel to challenge the rigidity of the caste system when the character Mawdo Bâ, a Toucouleur, marries a goldsmith’s daughter and shows that he is in awe of her father’s trade, proclaiming him to be a “creative artist”(18). The Toucouleur is an ethnic group found in West Africa. The character’s commitment to his marriage shows that it is possible to move across boundaries but unfortunately his family, specifically his mother, imposes her will. Her mother-in-law’s anger is directly linked to Aissatou’s background as a goldsmith’s daughter whom she describes as being “worse than a *griot* woman”. The *griot* is slightly

elevated in her view in that she brings happiness whereas Aissatou “burns everything in her path, like the fire in a forge” (27). This statement expressed by the mother-in-law reflects the many changes that came about with modernisation. The female oral performer even though she still performs certain roles at traditional ceremonies, she is no longer as respected as traditions start changing. One of these changes was the transition from the oral tradition to the written form.

Ramatoulaye’s letter reveals that the two friends react very differently to the events which transform their lives completely. Aissatou divorces her husband and moves away with her four sons. Ramatoulaye however decides to stay in her marriage even when her husband completely abandons her and the family until his death. This angers her daughter Daba who begs her mother to break from her father and to choose the same path as Aissatou. Her anger is not only that she feels betrayed by her friend and her father but that her mother has been humiliated by them as well. She says “Do what Aunty Aissatou did; break with him. I can’t see you fighting over a man with a girl my age” (41). Ramatoulaye refuses this alternative for a number of reasons, her belief in marriage, that she had spent the best years with him, that they had been together for twenty-five years and that they had twelve children together. The most significant would be that she was afraid and felt hopeless, “Start again at zero ... Did I have enough energy to bear alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both moral and material?” (41) The theme of polygamy is central to the novel as it appears to be the origin of the conflict which both women experience. Modou’s death therefore seems to be the event which initiates the resolution of the conflict caused by his abandonment of Ramatoulaye and their children but also strengthens the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou.

The two opening lines of the novel are written by Ramatoulaye and it becomes apparent that the convention of writing letters has been maintained between Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye says, “I have received your letter. By way of reply” (1). More importantly the opening paragraph immediately tells us that there is a very strong bond and one built on trust between these two friends. Perry suggests that letter writing plays an important role in friendship. She states:

We write letters to our friends to let them know how things are with us, and especially if they in any way relate to them, and we write everything we could say in case we happened to meet them. The perfection of these sorts of letters consists then in their resembling common discourse; that they be familiar and natural, and that they be not only free from the umbrage of the composition, but that they surpass it, and that the language of the heart be felt in them (77).

Perry emphasises that the letter becomes more credible not because of what is written but because of the way in which these thoughts are expressed. The language used therefore plays an important role in that in order to seem plausible it has to appear as natural as when used every day. At times in the text Ramatoulaye addresses her friend in a familiar way her writing often bordering on oralising when she calls to her friend “My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times” (1). By the way in which this is written we are able to determine the nature of the closeness of their friendship but also the level of seriousness of the matter which is to be discussed. In the next line she informs Aissatou of her becoming a widow and earlier in the letter she explains that the diary which she begins is her “prop in her distress” but that she has chosen to confide in Aissatou because of their “long association” (1). Perry explains that the need to write a letter is often to cope with a situation in which action is desired but not possible. The act

of writing is a means by which the writer becomes calm and collects his/her thoughts and once this state is reached there is no longer a need to write (116). When Ramatoulaye begins writing her letter the catalyst for her disclosure is her husband's death and she shows an awareness of how her writing will alleviate the pain she feels. She writes, "Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain" (1). Her letter not only becomes a way of writing her most intimate thoughts but also a means to express the way she feels about certain events. The self at this point is thus split into the experiencing self and the narrating self as asserted by Bray. Ramatoulaye's experiencing self forms part of the event or experience which she remembers whilst her narrating self reflects on the feelings and emotions. In this context the direct action of writing permits Ramatoulaye a literary space to express herself. However, this literary space is determined by the physical space which has been religiously determined during the mourning period. Perry identifies isolation as being a central element to the epistolary paradigm (116). The separation from others magnifies the character's reactions. They appear more vulnerable and are more suggestible and provide a steady flow of responses to record (117). Ramoutalaye writes the following to Aissatou about this period of mourning:

Alone, I live in monotony broken only by purifying baths, the changing of my mourning clothes every Monday and Friday. I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness. May their evocation not soil the state of purity in which I must live (9).

The above excerpt reveals the traditional views which Ramoutalaye holds and her strong beliefs and loyalty towards her religion. These beliefs have been ingrained in her since childhood and she fulfils the expectations and demands without questioning or doubt. The fear which she describes does not stem from her being isolated nor her religion but rather it stems from the memories and the bitterness tied to those memories which she fears will surface during this period. In the last line of this quote Ramatoulaye expresses a sense of doubt as to whether she will be able to control the nature and impact of these thoughts. The bitterness which she speaks of is towards her husband Modou who is now dead. Ramatoulaye appears ambivalent towards her husband whom she at one point loved dearly as she says, “[...] to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. And yet, what didn’t he do to make me his wife!” (13) Here it becomes apparent that the event which may be causing the bitterness is that her husband chose to love someone else. At this point the letter could go in two different directions; Ramatoulaye laments not only the death of her husband but also that he had abandoned her and their nine children. She could delve into his past and identify the many times that he had caused her pain and suffering becoming the “Epistolary Woman” which Jensen describes in earlier letter novels. The novel however takes a different direction in which the female character chooses not to be a victim, instead it becomes a novel of self realisation and transformation. *So Long A Letter* can therefore be viewed as a resistance novel due to the character’s psychological liberation which takes place. The character embraces her traditions and values but at the same time becomes aware of the contradictions which lie

embedded in these. The introspective process brings about clarity as to her present position in society and the challenges it presents.

Ramatoulaye continues to piece together how she and Modou met and fell in love. The transition which takes place in the letter is that Ramatoulaye is no longer addressing Aissatou; instead she relates her memories to her husband. This is a significant stage in the introspective process because it allows her to bring to the fore thoughts and feelings which are still unresolved. At this point her letter opens with “Do you remember the morning train...”, and the reader assumes that the recipient she is addressing is still Aissatou. However in the next few lines she speaks of their meeting, “Modou Fall, the very moment you bowed before me, asking me to dance, I knew you were the one I was waiting for” (13). Apart from his physical appearance it was also their finely tuned understanding which strengthened their bond. During this reflection on the past Ramatoulaye speaks of a different time in her relationship with Modou, of a time in which there was trust and certainty. The source of her bitterness is therefore the longing for what she has lost. In this instance she does not long for the husband who has left her but the one whom she first met and had loved her. Later in the letter she describes in great detail the day on which the Imam, Tamsir (Modou’s brother) and Mawdo come to inform her that Modou has taken a second wife. She writes:

All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place. [...] Modou sends his thanks. He says it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it. He praises you for the quarter of a century of marriage in which you gave him all the happiness a wife owes

her husband. His family especially myself, his elder brother, thank you. You have always held us in respect. You know that we are Modou's blood (38).

The quote reveals firstly the callous way in which Modou treats Ramatoulaye but also simultaneously we are given a glimpse into the tradition of polygyny practiced in Senegal. Patrick Oloko in a discussion on polygyny explains that "Transformations in society and social behaviour, including liberal divorce laws" have led to a weakening of the economy but that in spite of these changes, "the institution persists, and in some instances, it appears to be the rule rather than the exception" (2). Oloko draws on the work of the sociologist Margaret Peil who explores and attempts to explain the connection between economic prosperity and the choice of practising polygyny, particularly in Africa (2). Peil claims that Africans view polygyny as a status symbol and that "supporting many wives several wives still demonstrate that a man has been successful and reinforces his status in society" (2). Peil's findings of research conducted in the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana and some Arab Muslim countries reveal that although polygyny is declining due to economic reasons, it still appears to be prevalent in these societies for its social value (2). Earlier in the novel we read of Ramatoulaye's commitment to her faith and religion and her deep, unquestioning faith in God. Here we see that Modou understands his faith in God as a faith which is not to be questioned and particularly when God decides one's fate. Traditional practice in this instance appears to be rooted in the will of God and is not to be defied. In the words of the Imam "there is nothing he can do about it" which implies in the context of the novel that Modou's fate of choosing a second wife is not to be questioned.

Ramatoulaye describes the internal pain experienced at the news of her husband marrying a second wife as "drops of poison that were burning me" (38-39). But these

remain her private thoughts which she conceals while outwardly she appears unaffected. As expected by others, she accepts it as a natural part of daily life. This we come to know is a deliberate, purposeful action on her part when she writes “I forced myself to check my inner agitation. Above all, I must not give my visitors the pleasure of relating my distress. Smile, take the matter lightly, just as they announced it” (39). At this point Ramatoulaye not only reveals an inner strength but also the magnitude of the pain she feels. In her interpretation of the event, Ramatoulaye realises the consequences of both her public and private actions and is unable to act on her private thoughts.

Through this reflexive process of writing the character comes to understand and discovers her views on many aspects which form part of the life cycle such as marriage, love, forgiveness and even death. Her reflections raise many contradictions which she is forced to confront. Ramatoulaye’s view on love and marriage are very different to that of Modou. We learn that even though Modou has hurt her deeply she remains faithful both as a lover and as a wife. She admits to still crying for him despite everything that has happened; it is something beyond her control. Ramatoulaye considers her commitment and loyalty as the basis of her marriage to Modou and is offended when his brother Tamsir proposes marriage to her. Ramatoulaye rejects Tamsir’s offer of marriage because it is her view that it transgresses the sanctity of her marriage. She says: “You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don’t know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you” (60).

This view of marriage differs greatly to the view portrayed by the Imam who is acting on behalf of Modou. Ramatoulaye speaks of marriage as being based on faith and

love and not merely an act without choice. She describes it as being a selfless act of giving and sharing rather than one giving and receiving nothing in return. In Ramatoulaye's view of love she speaks of marriage as a personal choice rather than one which is prescribed by God. Ramatoulaye firmly believes in the goodness of love and sees it as a "natural link between these two beings" (93). Through her reflections the reader is able to trace Ramatoulaye's growth and development even more so when she admits to Aissatou that she has forgiven Modou. She writes, "Yesterday I celebrated, as is custom, the fortieth day of Modou's death. I have forgiven him" (59). This is a significant realisation considering Ramatoulaye's anxiety at the beginning of this introspective process where she feared the effect of the memories that would haunt her. Also it can be suggested that Ramatoulaye's forgiveness of her husband can be seen as a psychological turning point in that she begins to embrace the events of the past and her reaction to them no longer seem to cause her as much pain.

As Ramatoulaye continues to reflect and write about past events and the feelings associated with those events she also speaks of the changing society in which she presently finds herself. Ramatoulaye's letter reveals the many pressures of modernisation and as a single mother she is forced to cope with these changes. She speaks of her daughters wearing trousers because they want to be "with it" (80). She accepts this in way that it would be more difficult to fight it. She is angry and disappointed when she finds them smoking and this then raises pertinent questions regarding her role as a mother. She is shocked that they have granted themselves the right to smoke (80). This leads to other questions relating to the impact of modernisation and morality and religion. Bâ illustrates the contrast between tradition and the nostalgic notion of values and morality and modernity that carries the notion of

progress and change. This is the dilemma with which Ramatoulaye is faced. In her letter to Aissatou the reader discovers that Ramatoulaye's values and beliefs are deeply traditional and in maintaining these traditions there is often a struggle between that which is expected from her publicly to that which she experiences internally. For example at the start of her letter the fear which she expresses is not about fulfilling the tradition of mourning but rather that she should be able to maintain a pure mind while reflecting on the memories of her husband. Later we witness her rejecting her husband's brother mainly because she sees it as disrespectful to the marriage she shares with her husband. In each event which Ramatoulaye chooses to share there is a personal struggle which she comes to terms with and this is made possible through the act of writing. Ramatoulaye makes reference in her letter to the changes in her society which are causing her deep anxiety. The challenge she faces is that she is a deeply traditional individual and she struggles to come to terms with the shift in society from being traditional and familiar, to a modern world which she describes as "up-side down" (92). The internal conflict arises from Ramatoulaye wanting to ignore the societal changes but not being able to do so because this would entail her having to forego many of the values which she firmly believes. She comes to realise that tradition which she has come to value no longer has the same hold that it once had. The turning point comes when Ramatoulaye comes to understand that by ignoring these societal changes she will not only alienate her children but also her community. Therefore she would have to find a means to maintain the self which she respects and values and adapt to accommodate the values of those around her.

The end of Ramtoulaye's introspective journey is also the end of the letter. Reaching the end of her letter means that she no longer needs to write. The letter has

been her device by which she was able to reach the stage of hope in her life rather than bitterness. Ramatoulaye views this reflexive process positively when she says, “Despite everything- disappointments and humiliations – hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me” (94-5). Ramatoulaye’s journey to self discovery can be seen as a cycle firstly from the present to the past and back to the present; second the catalyst of death becomes the source of life for her and finally her enclosure or physical isolation during the period of mourning leads to her psychological and emotional freedom. The act of writing the letter together with being isolated is crucial to her shifting from a self that is filled with pain (fragmented) to a stage of healing. The letter has become a means by which she was able to externalise many of her thoughts and feelings which she was unable to voice aloud. Also by reflecting on her memories she was able to piece together and identify those which caused her pain and was able to reach an understanding of the source of her bitterness. However more importantly, Ramatoulaye has come to understand herself not only through her past experiences but also through her perspective on love, marriage, relationships, friendship and death.

The analysis of *So Long A Letter* thus clearly illustrates the fundamental value of letter writing to the introspective journey. This has been a journey of reflection towards not only uncovering and discovering but also a journey where growth has come from questioning, interpreting and re-interpreting events. The value of the letter is further reinforced when it is seen as a vehicle of communication, as strengthening the bond of friendship and a means of realising the letter writer’s inner strength and value.

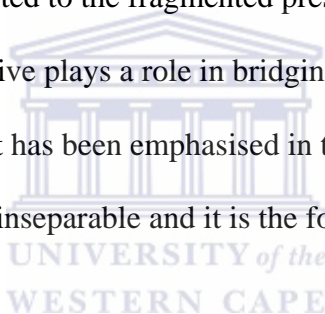
Ramtaoulaye understands her role as a woman and gains courage to reject certain traditions which undermine this role. Therefore the letter does not only relate events, it

is also a means by which the protagonist defines, externalises and reaffirms her views on love, marriage and family. The understanding which Ramatoulaye reaches is that her newly defined self and identity is a culmination of her religion, her traditions, being a “New African” woman and being a mother. The letter as a means of communication is significant to both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou because the narration of the events brings about coherence. For both characters the act of writing is triggered by a painful event, for Aissatou it is her husband giving in to his mother and marrying a second wife and for Ramatoulaye it is Modou’s death. Writing therefore becomes their source of liberation.

Conclusion

Personal narratives such as the letter novel enable the introspective journey. The genre illustrates how the form encourages self expression but more specifically it draws attention to the process involved in the subject reflecting on past memories and thus being able to create a logical and coherent present self. My intention has been to explore the relationship between the form of the narrative in achieving and making meaning of events and experiences. First person narratives such as the epistolary genre as well as the confessional form serve as a psychological intervention tool in the transformation process which the protagonist undergoes. The reader is to understand that the protagonist finds herself in a state of crisis and hence a fragmented self exists. The subject in the first person narrative embarks on an inward journey to obtain knowledge and understanding as to how this fragmented self has come into being as can be observed in the novels *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter*. The reflective process which takes place in *So Long A Letter* is initiated by the death of Ramatoulaye’s husband and having to observe the duties of the mourning process which involves being

separated from the outside world for four months and ten days. When she begins writing the letter to her friend, the initial intention is to inform Aissatou about her husband's death, but later, as the letter progresses, it becomes a means to confide and to temper the bitter thoughts which arise from the memories she has of him. The letter in the midst of her solitude becomes an intimate space of sharing and bonding. The resolution which ultimately takes place is found in the knowledge which she uncovers; knowledge of the experiences and events which have shaped the present self. Of course this cannot take place without drawing on experiences and emotions which are linked to the past and the past self. Not all events of the past are relevant to understanding the present therefore only those which have contributed to the fragmented present self are selected and thus dealt with. This is where narrative plays a role in bridging the divide between the past and present self. However what has been emphasised in this chapter is that narrative and the construction of the self are inseparable and it is the form of the narrative which plays a far more important role.



With regard to this argument I have focussed much attention on the epistolary form as this has been the form used by the respective writer. What has been uncovered has been that this particular form of writing has enabled the protagonist to delve and explore the self from her perspective and has allowed the reader an inside view of the emotions and turmoil which she experiences. The character transcends her position of conflict and suffering by narrating and reflecting on her past events. The reader is thus able closely to follow the psychological transformation which the protagonist undergoes without feeling distanced from the entire process. Although the focus here has been on the ways in which the epistolary form of the novel forces introspection and thus later leads to the subject's liberation, this process similarly occurs in the confessional form.

The two forms of first person narrative can be considered as influential in providing intimate spaces for the subject to reflect on private thoughts and feelings and making these public. Memory in both instances performs a very important role in bringing to the surface only those significant events which are relevant to making meaning of present thoughts and feelings. As revealed here, letter writing offers the subject an opportunity to bond and strengthen relationships with significant others by sharing important events but the confessional form, even though personal, appears driven by the intent to reveal a secret, to unburden or to admit to a crime or sin. The female protagonist Firdaus in *Woman At Point Zero* on the last day of being imprisoned reveals significant events of her life which led to her committing a murder to the psychiatrist. By narrating her own story Firdaus rids herself of any guilt or shame that was caused by her abusers and oppressors and is therefore able to confront and to deal with the pain which leads to her liberation. The solitude brought about by being enclosed encourages introspection and finally disclosure for both characters. The subject's access to time appears to play a crucial role in the choice of personal narrative. Firdaus who has a limited time before being led to her death perhaps does not consider writing a letter as a viable option. Also it needs to be taken into consideration that she is completely alienated from her society and so has no significant person to address her letter to. Ramatoulaye's choice of writing a letter appears influenced by the period of mourning but also a natural choice as she regularly corresponds with her friend Aissatou.

Mariama Bâ subverts the earlier forms of the epistolary genre by depicting a transformed and liberated rather than unchanged female character. The first person narrative also provides the reader insight into how the character views her world and her relationship with others. The first person narrative allows the reader to view the

character's understanding of her different roles as wife, mother, teacher, sister, friend and being a member of a higher caste and ultimately how she negotiates these roles in the face of a changing society. The themes which are relevant to the women in the novel raise certain concerns and questions which are addressed in a number of different ways. The themes which are raised by Bâ of polygamy, the division created by the caste system and solidarity between women translates the novel into a resistance narrative particularly because it shows how these elements impact on the position of women. The novel illustrates the influence that social pressures place on individuals but that it becomes a matter of individual choice. As presented in the novel, not everyone is able to resist this social pressure exerted by family, community, culture and religion and eventually sway to the will of the collective.



Chapter 3: Self and community: The dynamics of third person narration in *Scarlet Song*

Introduction

The discussion presented in the previous chapters has illustrated how some forms of first person narratives, namely the confessional and epistolary narrative, place a focus on the central female character and invite the reader into the personal, intimate space of her consciousness. These novel forms appear to force the protagonist into a self reflexive position. The position which the character assumes not only allows for self examination, but also allows the character to interrogate significant experiences which have contributed to the present consciousness of self. A temporal gap is therefore created allowing the character to narrate events located in the past and to reflect on these in the present. This introspective process is aimed at understanding events of the past and determining how they contribute to the present, past and the possible future self. The reader therefore witnesses the central character's negotiation of the present and past selves in attempting to attain a transformed or ideal future self. The reader thus assumes the privileged position of being able to gain insight into the dialogue which takes place. The act of confessing and letter writing has proved influential in enabling the character to draw out events from the past and to create meaning from that which has surfaced. Psychological transformation takes place once the individual has made sense of the significant memories and the effect on the present self. The process is aimed at restoring order in a previously disordered internal world. This process can be observed in the first person narratives, *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter*.

Scarlet Song, the novel to be discussed in greater detail in this chapter, differs from the previous novels in many respects but mainly because of its third person

narrative form. As stated earlier, the first person narrative is an important form in relation to questions of the introspective process which the individual undertakes in attempting to obtain self realisation. This chapter illustrates how the dynamic changes when the third person narrative form is used within the context of the insights of this thesis into the ways in which narrative and novel form broadly encourage introspection. The discussion in this chapter will thus highlight that the shift from first person to third person narrative form foregrounds issues which first person narration may have dealt with in lesser detail. With third person narrative the focus is placed on the broader social context of the character. This shift from character to context leads to a shift in focus for the reader. However, this does not imply that the development of the character is not important or does not take place. Rather, the third person narrative assists in identifying the external forces which contribute to the character's struggle in achieving self realisation. The third person narrative form used in *Scarlet Song* privileges the reader in a number of ways. Firstly, the reader is given a global view of the character's social context and his/her relationship with others. Secondly, this form offers the reader the opportunity to be able to make connections between the causal event and the outcome or effect thereof on the individual. Thirdly, this form offers the reader insight into the consciousness of more than one character and, finally, the narrator draws attention to the social pressures brought about by others in society. These pressures originate from the demands placed on individuals by family, culture, religion and so forth. These social structures often create and dictate expectations of the individual's role as a man/ husband/ son or a woman/ wife/ daughter. The individual either buckles under or completely rejects the roles prescribed. Whatever the outcome, the consequence of either of these responses has a devastating effect on the individual. External social

pressure is often the cause, as seen in *Scarlet Song*, of the individual becoming a self split between personal and public spheres.

The omniscient third person narrator enables the reader a holistic view of the characters, rather than only one perspective as observed in first person narrative. The former narrative form allows the reader to formulate an opinion of the information made available. The two main characters depicted in *Scarlet Song* are relevant to understanding the final outcome of events. The relationship of duality between these two characters is important to understanding their roles in the novel. The central male character, Ousmane, and the central female character, Mireille, represent the two poles of a binary opposition which are brought into dialectical engagement in the novel. Ousmane is the male principle to Mireille's female principle. Ousmane is African and Mireille French. Ousmane is working class and Mireille middle class, and so forth. The third person narrator draws attention to these binaries and illustrates how despite these differences the two are brought together but later the tension arising from these differences force them apart. The third person narrator also presents their relationship from a cause and effect perspective, meaning that events experienced by the male character have a direct effect on the female character. The position of the female character is thus determined by the male character's attempt to negotiate a fully realised self but also society's view of her expected role in that community. The tension arises when this expected role does not form part of her idea of personal self and identity. The reader, rather than despising the influential role which the male character plays in further marginalising the woman, instead empathises with both main characters. The reader comes to understand the external forces at work. However unlike with first

person narrative, the woman's position in *Scarlet Song* is not dealt with personally, leaving the extent of her suffering open-ended and not fully explained.

The focus of this chapter will therefore be to look at how the characters and their experiences are portrayed by using third person narration rather than first person narration. Here I shall draw specific attention to the relationship between narrative and the development of self and identity and explore the effects, if any, when using a different form in narrating the individual's experience of self. Part of this discussion will be concerned to explore how this form of narration allows the social structure to be outlined and hence determines the position and experiences of the individual. Furthermore, the aim will be to examine how these social structures are informed by contradictions which often become obstacles to the individual's development of self. In negotiating these obstacles, the individual may experience a split in the self between the personal self and public self. This discussion will be extended to include not only the difficulties individuals in general experience but more specifically the difficulty women face in achieving self fulfilment. Women often remain marginalised and fragmented because of the external pressures placed on them from significant others and the community. These contradictions and obstacles and the effects thereof will come to the fore through the analysis of the novel.

Forms of narration: possibilities and constraints

The central idea of this study is that narrative and self are inseparable. As stated elsewhere, Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps argue that narrative and self are inseparable, originating out of experience and also shaping a person. It is therefore the individual's experiences which shape the self and identity and it is important that these be taken into consideration when the subject reflects on past events to gain self understanding.

Brockmeier and Carbaugh agree with the claim presented by Ochs and Capps and find that narrative and identity are closely connected. In their view narrative is an appropriate mechanism in exploring the self as well as for the construction of the self in the cultural contexts of space and time. Julian Wolfreys suggests that narrative should be understood as a product of a series of incidents, figures, motifs and characters which are arranged in a particular way. The way in which these events are arranged and told in the story conveys a particular meaning to the reader. The idea which is presented by Wolfreys can be observed in the earlier discussion and analysis of the novels *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter*. The view presented by the above scholars is important to understanding how the third person omniscient narrator creates self (selves) of the characters, particularly when this form of narrator provides a global view but also does so selectively. The narrator provides a broad view and is able to present both internal and external aspects related to the character and the reader is thus able to form an opinion of the character based on the focus portrayed by the narrator. In first person narrative it is the central character who invites the reader in to gain insight to the character's consciousness. Alternatively, in third person narrative it is the narrator who plays an influential role in the insight which the reader obtains.

The most important convention of realism is the assumption that life has meaning and that meaning is derived from human points of view and in third person narrative there is more than one point of view expressed. Wallace Martin in Robert F. Berkhofer states that the most important convention of realism is that "We assume that life has meaning while admitting that meaning is produced from human points of view. The choice in life and literature is not between conventional practices and a truth and a reality lying outside them, but between different conventional practices that make

meaning possible” (68). Narratives concern the past and therefore the earliest event which is told takes on meaning and acts as the cause only because of the later events which surface. Martin explains that it is the outcome (how things turn out) that determines which event began it. It becomes easy to trace the initial event because of the end result (74). This means that the character is aware of the effect of the event in their present consciousness but has to go back in time to find its causes, the effect “causes” us to find “causes” (74). This process of reflection helps to make sense of all the causes and effects and brings the character to a position of understanding. This understanding or truth is therefore time dependent.

Martin refers to Paul Ricoeur who argues that there are three temporal periods which are necessary to create a story. The first period is the beginning; this is when human beings find themselves in a situation that they want to change or simply to understand. The second period is; action or “figuration”, when individuals try to do, or understand, as events unfold. The third period is the period of “refiguration”; this is when the individual looks back at what had happened, tracing the lines that led to the outcome, discovering why plans did not succeed, how extraneous forces intervened, or how successful actions led to unexpected results (in Martin 76). These temporal periods, considered necessary for the creation of narrative, present the idea that the significance of events when looked at in retrospect may change. Martin suggests that a change may take place within the individual when knowledge about an event or experience is obtained at a later stage and this could radically alter the way in which the individual’s life develops. The “facts” which come to the surface during self reflection may be meaningless at one point, but as knowledge is gained the same event may later be considered painful. Therefore at times, the individual may put off looking into the past

until it is triggered by an experience in the present and hence the past then becomes relevant.

The idea that past and present events are related and that this relationship can be described by a chain of events which eventually leads to an uncertain future was introduced by the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Martin states that “At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, autobiography, the autobiographical novel, realism, and modern history all emerged together. The relationship between the past and present is no longer explained by cyclical repetition and eternal laws, but by particular chains of events that lead toward an uncertain future” (77). The omniscient narrator also dominated during this period. The 19th century omniscient narrator had free reign with regard to commenting upon story and the characters. The narrator often closed in and withdrew throughout the novel whilst offering judgements throughout, predominantly in the formal language of the more privileged class. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines omniscience as being “all knowing” or “having great knowledge”. The dictionary also offers a definition related to literary theory which defines this term as “an attribute of the author, or a third person narrator; a full and complete knowledge concerning all the events of a narrative and the private motives, thoughts and so forth of all the characters”. The idea underlying this definition is that the omniscient narrator is all seeing and is able to look into the past, present and the future.

Jenny Dunning in her article “Reconsidering Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction” presents an alternative view to the omniscient narrator as being “all knowing”. Dunning cautions against the view of the omniscient narrator knowing more than the characters. Rather, she describes the contemporary omniscient narrator as “all seeking”,

as a narrator who attempts to discover something about human existence in the telling of a particular story (22). The idea suggested here is that omniscience not be viewed from the perspective of being all knowing but from the view of seeking to want to know more. The omniscient third person narrator is able to access the consciousness of more than one character and is thus able to give a broader view as to how they are affected by their experiences and their relations with others. This form of narration is significant because the views conveyed can either reveal or conceal by shifting in time, place and from one character to another. This movement traces the development of the characters and also helps to create meaning in understanding how events come about and the effects thereof on the characters and the development of self.

Third person omniscient narration as presented in *Scarlet Song* proves a useful form of narration because it provides the reader with a panoramic view of the social and political contexts of the two main characters' worlds. Ousmane's context is Senegalese, a nation which was once colonised by the French; and ironically Mireille is French and thus because of her heritage is viewed by Ousmane's family and friends as a former colonial oppressor. The narrator also provides a view of each character's consciousness and how each character responds to the outside world. This is a contrast to the central character in the first person narrative where he/she narrates his/her own "truth" in determining the cause of the present outcome. In *Scarlet Song*, however, it is the omniscient narrator who accesses the consciousness of the two main characters, Ousmane and Mireille, and observes their reactions to the events which take place. Martin states that the omniscient or "all knowing" narrator makes it possible to enter many minds (131). This form of narration combines closer inspection of the internal consciousness of the characters in a manner which is similar to that of first person with

regard to the intimate space of the character's thoughts whilst simultaneously providing the social and political context of the turmoil which they experience. In contrasting the two types of narration, Martin states that first person narrators who witness or participate in the action they describe often do not have access to the minds of others, a characteristic which is found in third person narrative. The third person narrator is therefore able to look into a character's mind or look through it (143). The audience is able to gain insight into the mind of the character through the narrator as well as have access to the internal monologue of the characters.

It is clear from the analysis of the relation between narrative and the subject that subjectivity is never fixed and unchanging. Rather, the self or identity is made up of a continually changing collection of perceptions, thoughts and intentions that either had no identifiable centre or attained one through a process of self formation in and through narrative. This concept of self is pertinent to the novel *Scarlet Song* where Bâ illustrates the difficulties which the main characters experience when the self is shaped and pressured by external social forces of culture, religion, family and community. In the previous novels *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter* the reader observes the struggle of the protagonists in attaining a liberated self. This is particularly relevant to the novel *Scarlet Song* where the third person omniscient narrator traces the development of events which contributed to the final outcome at the end of the novel. Ousmane and Mireille are both central characters however, the greater focus is placed on Ousmane's development and the experiences which have shaped his worldview. This contributes to the reader understanding the personal conflict which he later experiences in attempting to assert his personal views as opposed to those of his family and community. In striving to alleviate the tension between himself, family and community

he bends to their will which then causes a rift between himself and Mireille. The novel reveals that it may not always be possible to attain an ideal self and thus the self remains fragmented. The novel also emphasises the importance of self fulfilment for the individual and the consequence of not being able to attain it.

It is interesting to note the effect of the shift in narrative form from *So Long A Letter* to *Scarlet Song*. The first person narrative in the former novel provides a subjective view into the character's journey to self affirmation, whereas the third person narrative in the latter draws attention to the characters' struggles with others and the environment in attaining a coherent self which does not realise. In *So Long A Letter*, the female protagonist gives a personal account which is triggered by her husband's death, whereas in *Scarlet Song* the narrator draws attention to the ever present force of society on individuals. The third person narrator presents alternative views which are often difficult to illustrate in first person narrative. In *So Long A Letter* the reader is made aware of the cause of Ramatoulaye's bitterness when reflecting on her memories of her husband. In this first person narrative, Ramatoulaye narrates her own experiences and her own feelings attached to these experiences. By contrast, in *Scarlet Song* the third person narrative gives different points of view from various characters regarding the themes raised and these alternate responses often challenge the views of the main characters. The form of the narrative allows the characters to portray views which are present in society and illustrate how these are either reinforced or challenged and the effect thereof on the individual, thus presenting a more balanced view to the reader. From this viewpoint many contradictions come to the surface. The characters, however, do not question the specific societal constructs; instead they raise concerns around the contradictions which underlie the interpretations of these social constructs. The

narratives written by Bâ are therefore important in contributing to the understanding of selfhood and in challenging earlier notions of self as being abstract and desituated.

The third person narrative form of *Scarlet Song* provides the reader with the opportunity to trace the development of the events which lead to the fragmentation of the two main characters. Unlike first person narrative, the focus is placed here on the events and experiences which have shaped each individual and how these contribute to the individual's worldview. The third person narrative form makes it possible for the reader to observe the individual struggle for personal identity which is often stunted by the expectations of society. The narrative form also draws attention to how differently the male character relates to this external pressure to the female character and how this in turn creates tension in their relationship. The male character succumbs to the pressure placed on him and this leads the female character's eventual mental break down. Bâ's use of third person narration in this novel allows one to see the obstacles to individual fulfilment as first person narration in *So Long a Letter* allowed one to see negotiation and tribulation.

Individual will versus the will of the collective

The focus of this analysis is to look at how the third person narrator depicts the two central characters, Ousmane and Mireille. This will include looking at the significance of the events and experiences which are foregrounded by the narrator's lens and determining how these have played a role in shaping the individual character's self and identity. Furthermore, I shall explore how the third person narrator outlines the structure of the respective society which is relevant to the reader's understanding as to how the characters are positioned and their experiences. The third person narrator illustrates the complex interaction between the often restrictive structures of marriage, polygamy,

culture, the caste system, female solidarity, family relations, and so forth, with which the characters are confronted. The way in which a society or community is organised is often not without any contradictions, I shall therefore explore the contradictions made evident by the narrator and how these act as obstacles to the characters' development of individuality. I shall attempt to illustrate how these contradictory ideologies and practices not only hinder the development of self and identity in general, but more specifically hinder the development of women and contribute to their marginalisation and a fragmented self.

The title *Scarlet Song* makes reference to an event which takes place at the end of the novel. Mireille finds out about a number of events which have been kept secret from her. After following Ousmane and witnessing the intimacy between him, Ouleymatou and their child she breaks down and waits for his return. Mireille's feelings of anger, bitterness and resentment lead to her stabbing Ousmane. The event is the bloodshed that occurs and which could have been avoided, if the main characters had dealt with their situations differently. The bloodshed thus symbolises the hopes and dreams which have been lost. The narrator describes the bloodshed which takes place as, "A scarlet song welled up from Ousmane's wounds, the scarlet song of lost hopes" (166).

The third person narrator's portrayal of Ousmane allows the reader to view this character both internally as well as how he relates to and is viewed by others which would not have been possible from a first person's viewpoint. Ousmane is depicted as a good son, he respects his father for being a religious man and because he practices monogamy. The narrator describes his father as being responsible for Ousmane's success "inspiring him with a taste for work, teaching him humility, while firing him

with ambition” (5). He respects his mother because she is nurturing and hardworking, particularly because there are no co-wives to help her. The narrator places the focus on Ousmane and the strong bond that he shares with his mother. The reader’s attention is drawn to the mother being the central figure in Ousmane’s life, even more so than his father and that their relationship plays a monumental role in the shaping of his world view and life experiences. The mother, Yaye Khady wakes her son in the morning with the diminutive of his name; “Oussou”, revealing the deep affection she has for her son (3). She prepares warm water for his morning bath and breakfast all revealing her concern for his welfare. The narrator presents Ousmane as a young boy helping his mother with the household chores and as a good son he continues to do even when this behaviour is found unacceptable to the point of rejection. Firstly, the narrator conveys the dissatisfaction of Djibril Gueye, Ousmane’s father when seeing his son performing household chores and being a constant companion to his mother. The narrator contrasts the varying views of the mother and father in raising their son to the reader. With regard to the father, “Djibril Gueye was not happy to see his son constantly at Yaye Khady’s side. He never missed an opportunity of lecturing his wife when he came upon Ousmane fanning the fire or sweeping up the rubbish. You’ll turn the lad into a sissy!’ he thundered” (9). The father was concerned about the son learning those things which were traditionally considered as part of the female role and tried to think of ways of “rescuing” his son. The second effect of the traditional lines being blurred is when Ousmane is rejected by Ouleymatou, a girl whom he admires and loves. Ousmane finds out Ouleymatou’s true feelings through his friend Ousseynou, who is Ouleymatou’s brother. He informs Ousmane that his sister Ouleymatou “doesn't want a boy who sweeps the house, fetches buckets of water and smells of dried fish” (10). The rejection of Ouleymatou leaves him with the idea of that all girls were as “selfish, disdainful,

pretentious and hard” like her (11). However, even though Ousmane’s father expresses dissatisfaction and Ouleymatou rejects him, Ousmane continues to assist his mother with the household chores. These initial characters introduced by the narrator are significant figures who have shaped Ousmane’s early experiences but also provides the reader with insight in understanding the value placed on traditional roles as prescribed by this community. Importantly the narrator also highlights how these prescribed roles can and are interpreted differently by members of the community, a view which would be limited to the central character’s interpretation in a first person narrative.

Ousmane’s mother views the role of the son, particularly Ousmane as being a helper and her companion, the father however, views this role as being representative of one’s manhood. This then explains why the father fears that his son may not become a true man but rather a “sissy” if he does not find some way to intervene. Even the young girl Ouleymatou is presented as having the opinion that Ousmane’s behaviour is not acceptable and disassociates herself from him. These experiences are significant in the development of Ousmane’s views and perceptions of himself and others. Ousmane’s respect for his parents continues to grow and the influence which his mother wields over him continues through the novel to the point where he is unable to resist her guidance. These viewpoints also allow the reader to observe the different understanding which the parents have of their respective roles. The mother is very stubborn and dominant and believes she has to control her son’s life and the decisions he makes. The father however perceives his parental role from the viewpoint of what would be best for his son in building his character and allows his son to make his own decisions. Ouleymatou’s rejection of Ousmane’s love is probably the most significant early childhood event. The narrator describes Ousmane’s later experiences with girls as;

“Even when he was attracted by a girl, he took refuge behind an armour of coolness which protected him from her meaningful glances. His attitude was not an escape. He was on his guard. He would talk politely to girls in his class and sometimes he would help them in his class and sometimes he would help them with their work, but he never showed any particular interest. He never looked a girl in the eye when he talked to her, for fear of being ensnared by that little seductive glimmer which would demolish his good resolutions” (11-12). Ousmane thus formed the opinion that all women were “flighty and irresponsible, ready to lie and deceive” (12). He was so determined in his rejection of all women that he gained the nickname “The Priest”. These experiences during his childhood and young adulthood are significant to understanding Ousmane’s later responses firstly to Mireille in allowing himself to fall in love with her but also Yaye Khady’s response to Ousmane not seeking her guidance when choosing a wife. The third person narrator provides the reader with information which may not have been granted in a first person narrative.

Apart from these characters who each play a significant role in Ousmane’s life, the narrator also describes his external circumstances which contribute to his identity. The narrator provides a sweeping view of the physical, financial and social conditions which Ousmane is exposed to during his childhood and which he later keeps a secret from Mireille. The narrator describes the shower hut, enclosed by rusty sheets of galvanised iron and paved with black stones where his mother provides warm water for his morning wash to help with the icy wind which beats against the galvanised iron (3). Ousmane walks to school to save on fares which his family would be able to use for something else. The father figure appears to be a religious man who goes for early morning prayers at the mosque. Ousmane’s idea of self is shaped by the relationships

with his mother and father and the idea of family, cultural and religious duties which he is expected to fulfil. He learns about the institution of marriage from his parents and is filled with pride that his father has resisted the temptation to marry more wives (7). He learns from his friends about the difficulties that women and children face in polygamous marriages and families. The third person narrator allows the contrasting views of monogamous marriage to that of polygamous marriage which Ousmane held as a child to be voiced. For Ousmane a polygamous marriage is associated with rivalry among the wives, children being dragged into quarrels when supporting their mothers, lack of money and very little food which had to be shared by all in the compound (7). A monogamous marriage however offers the wife and children certain privileges, a view which is based on Ousmane's own experience of it. Ousmane describes the monogamous marriage as being filled with understanding and affection, allowing the wife to be her own mistress, even though she has to do all the chores, a viewpoint based on observing his own mother. The third person narrator's focus on Ousmane's childhood is important in understanding the complex interactions and relationships which take place between the individual and his family and the community. The view presented of the character Ousmane is that he is deeply influenced by his mother's worldview, even when her expectations of him cause him to be rejected by Ouleymatou. Ousmane also deeply respects his father who symbolises faithfulness and his religion. The view which the reader gains about Ousmane is that he respects his father's decision to not take more than one wife because he values the wife which he has. Ousmane's view of the world and his sense of self is thus strongly influenced and connected to his family, culture and religion. This idea of self is later challenged when Ousmane falls in love with Mireille, who to some in his society represents the other.

Throughout the novel the third person narrator portrays the importance of culture and its varying interpretations to the members of the respective community. The narrator draws attention to Ousmane's allegiance to his family, culture, religion and community and possible difficulties which lie ahead. The challenge which the reader observes later is Ousmane attempting to negotiate the roles prescribed to him whilst married to Mireille, an outsider to his social and cultural context. The tension which the two main characters experience during their marriage arises from the fact that in this society marriage is not an individual contract, but rather that it is connected to family and community. Ousmane views his community and culture with loyalty and commitment and this comes to the fore when he receives a letter from Mireille expressing her deep commitment and love for him and requests that they wait to marry when she is legally of age to do so. The letter ends where she writes, "Just tell me what to do and nothing else but you will matter. Write to me. I shall be waiting" (36). At this point Mireille is asking Ousmane to decide on their future whether they will be together or if they will separate. The narrator presents Ousmane's confusion in attempting to respond to Mireille. Ousmane is torn between two worlds; that of his family and community and the other includes Mireille. The narrator describes Ousmane's dilemma; "The letter meant that he now had to give serious thought to his position, that he had to make a choice between two irreconcilable decisions, which either would bring heartache. [...] On the one side, my heart draws me to a white girl ... on the other, my own people. My reason fluctuates between the two, like the arm of balance on which two objects of equal value are weighed" (36). The narrator conveys Ousmane's internal conflict in having to choose, the one representing the collective the other representing his individual identity. The community is described as holding him and crushing him with its tentacles. The community is described as; "The more he strove to break free the

tighter the coils enfold him” (36). Ousmane questions whether it would be possible to break free from this grip without amputating a part of him, without bleeding to death.

The third person narrator provides a number of reasons as to why Ousmane believes he should remain committed to his community. These reasons include the fact that: his community represents the values, traditions and customs which he has been instilled with and since women are an important part of the community. Ousmane views the women in his community as being mother figures;

Yaye Khady’s love was echoed in the hearts of all the women of the neighbourhood, all mothers by proxy, ready to wipe his chronically running nose, surrogate mothers, always watching over him, never hesitating to punish him when he rummaged in rubbish heaps for junk, bits of salvage, empty cans, cardboard boxes that his child’s imagination transformed into matchless toys.

(37)

The narrator illustrates that women in this society play an important role and are respected. Ousmane further views his community as enriching, filled with memories and with people who respect each other and their differences. It also reflected his faith and his honour which has been instilled by his father. The reasons which Ousmane provides are torn between honour which he associates with his community and family and his love for Mireille. The narrator presents further underlying perceptions of the close connectedness of this community and their expectations in maintaining these close ties. Ousmane’s conflicted thoughts are bound to his strong views of community which are embedded within him. In his view, choosing a wife outside of his community would be considered to be “an act of treason” and the individual would be punished by God (37).

Ousmane pre-empts the reaction of his family and community to him marrying not only an outsider but also a white woman. The narrator presents the arguments floating in Ousmane's mind of his parents' rejection of Mireille and his community, viewing him as a traitor and thus most likely losing his revered position within his family and community. Ousmane is further affected by the disapproval expressed by his friends who believe that mixed marriages should be avoided and that they are not necessary. In their view, interracial marriages served a purpose during the colonial period of advancing the black man financially and socially. They express the view that "a man should look for a wife among his own people" and that "whites are racists" (38). His friends provide evidence to support their viewpoint and emphasise that black and white people do not share a common history, interests or goals and should thus remain separate. Ousmane tries to convince himself that a possible solution would be to put his love for Mireille and being her husband in one compartment and being Yaye Khady's son in another. In this way, he would be able to hold onto his black identity and satisfy the collective on one hand and on the other he would be able to have love and satisfy his own individual interest. The reason which Ousmane attempts to use to find a solution may have been possible if all individuals interpreted culture and identity in the same way. The third person narrator allows the reader to view the varying perceptions of the members of the community and brings to the fore that many of their interpretations are driven by self interest and self gain. Ousmane's view of his black identity as returning to his roots but also keeping the way open, changes dramatically as events unfold and the pressure from his family, particularly his mother increases. Ousmane initially views culture as being a source of self knowledge and self respect. This view is later adapted when he forms a relationship with Ouleymatou. The narrator emphasises that social constructs and ideologies are often determined and defined by underlying

contradictions, this is useful in understanding the effect these have on the characters. This is often not possible in a first person narrative.

The third person narrator enables the reader to observe how perceptions are formed about others and how these often unsubstantiated views become obstacles in the development and positioning of individuals in a society. Ousmane's mother, Yaye Khady, finds it difficult to come to terms with the union of her Senegalese son and the French-born Mireille. Her mind is flooded by preconceived ideas of her white daughter-in-law failing to fulfil the duties expected of her. Yaye Khady's reaction to her new daughter-in-law is never generalised to the rest of the women in the community and can therefore only be read as a response to the specific situation. The women in the novel are not depicted as a homogenous group. Even though instances of female solidarity and friendship are depicted, women are also portrayed as being responsible for the victimisation of others. There could be a number of reasons for this type of relationship developing. In an attempt to understand Yaye Khady's dislike of her daughter-in-law; one reason could be that Mireille is an outsider and would remain so because of the close connectedness of the group along lines of traditions, customs and values. Secondly, that she represents the coloniser and the experiences which the mother experienced with white people during this period. Another reason could be that Mireille represents the loss of the ideal which Yaye Khady had of what her daughter-in-law would be; that is she would be able to mentor her and her daughter-in-law would help in the house. Finally, Mireille also represents the loss of her son who she views as a central figure in her life. The third person narrative allows the reader to view all these perceptions which the mother expresses which would not have been possible had this been narrated by Ousmane or Mireille. Yaye Khady's continuous interference between

Ousmane and Mireille forces him even further to satisfy the will of his mother and his community and thus he responds by rejecting and alienating Mireille.

The narrative form illustrates the extensive influence which parents have over their children and often how parents act as obstacles to their children's development of self. Yaye Khady hinders Ousmane's development of an individual self not because of the interests of the collective but because of her own interests and goals, and also her racist views towards Mireille and their son Gorgui. Shifting the focus to Mireille's parents and their response to the marriage, the narrator shows that this is not only a concern which is found in one community but that there are similarities between the two societies. The narrator conveys Mireille's father's anger when he finds Ousmane's photograph and realises with whom she is having a relationship. He refers to Ousmane as an "object" and a "nigger" terms which serve to dehumanise Ousmane as an individual. The father who is portrayed as the dominant figure bans Mireille from attending university not because of what others will think of Mireille but because he is concerned about how her relationship will affect his position in society. The father's racist remarks open Mireille's eyes to what her father represents. She discovers at that point that her father has a public persona and a private persona. The public self spoke about interacting with the local people and avoided engaging with others who have made snide remarks about black people. What she had not realised was that "Her father, always restrained in voice and attitude, had been making every effort to keep a firm hold on the violence that risked being aroused by his aversion to the Black" (28). She therefore came to witness his uncontrolled violence. Her response to her father is one filled with horror and disgust and she describes him as still being "the coloniser", just disguised as a "humanitarian" (28). The hurt and anger which Mireille feels stems from

her feeling that she was deceived by her father and the confusion about how it is possible to present one self in public, and another self in private. Once again, the contradictions which underlie people's actions are not always visible to others and as shown here, are not always honourable.

The role of women and the position which they hold in society often influences their relationships with others and the decisions which they make. This in turn could possibly influence the way in which other women are positioned in society and could even serve to marginalise women. The women in *Scarlet Song* are not a homogenous group and are divided along lines of caste, class, race and generational differences. Instances of friendship are formed but are also contrasted by women victimising other women along these lines. The primary focus of discussion will be to illustrate the conflict which arises between race, caste and gender particularly in a society which disapproves of the mixing of individuals across race, castes and culture. The interracial marriage between Ousmane and Mireille is a departure from the norm and hence the consequence of disapproval from family members and the community. Mireille in many ways represents the outsider figure in her husband's community. She is not of Senegalese descent and is considered by many as being not of "pure blood". She remains marginalised because she is unable to speak and understand Wolof and the traditions and practices of the Wolof people. She remains alienated even though she has adopted Islam and is further ridiculed by some when she is unable to practice it correctly. Mireille remains the outsider because others struggle to place her within the familiar structures of their society. The motive driving the behaviour is different for each character, for some it is historically derived, who perceive Mireille as being a representative of the French coloniser. To others such as Yaye Khady, she symbolises a

threat to the traditional foundation of her respected position in her caste and her community which she values greatly.

The narrative form allows different viewpoints to be presented regarding interracial marriage and the dilemma which often arises; does one completely assimilate to the western culture? Should western culture be relinquished in favour of African culture? Or is it possible to live in both worlds? Each of these questions demands that the individual make a choice which in turn has implications for those involved. The choice made carries a responsibility not only for the individual but also for the family and community. The direction which the individual takes often has far reaching consequences. The consequences range from conflict between individuals to conflict within the individual. These are questions which Ousmane and Mireille are confronted with but also which the respective communities grapple with. However, this is not only evident in the Senegalese community but also Mireille's parents struggle to accept their daughter marrying Ousmane because of his race and religion. Culturally in Senegal she remains an outcast which is fuelled by her mother-in-law's rejection of her. It can be argued that Yaye Khady's rejection of Mireille is not necessarily personal, but rather a rejection of what she represents. Her disapproval of white women is expressed long before she meets Mireille, when she warns Ousmane before leaving for Paris to be on guard for "white women on the lookout for black men" (59). Her rejection of white women can therefore be attributed to her ingrained beliefs and assumptions. She states angrily; "A Toubab can't be a proper daughter-in-law. She'll only have eyes for her man. We'll mean nothing to her" (66). Firstly here the view which the mother-in-law expresses shows that the European woman's cultural background and experience differ from that of her Senegalese equivalents. The difference in backgrounds thus brings

about different interpretations of marriage and other societal and cultural obligations which Yaye Khady values. Jeanette Treiber presents an observation made by Lauretta Ngcobo on African family structures in an attempt to understand the relationship between the three women, Yaye Khady, Mireille and Ouleymatou in the novel. Treiber cautions that this is a general observation and does not necessarily apply to all African families, but it is relevant to this novel (120). She provides a general understanding of the relationship between the mother-in-law, son and Mireille which offers a possible explanation for the tension between the two women. She explains that there are strong ties between mother and son and that the daughter-in-law adds tension to this relationship. The two women are often in constant conflict competing for his love and income. The mother relies on her son to provide for her financially but simultaneously the mother-in-law is seen as a tutor or mentor to the young woman. Fathers-in-law appear to be uninvolved and remain outside the conflict arising from this relationship (Ngcobo in Treiber 119). In relation to the novel, Yaye Khady assumes that Mireille's view of marriage will exclude family and community. Her immediate reaction is that Mireille will be the cause of her losing her son. Yaye Khady's plan to replace Mireille is indirectly put into place when Ouleymatou captures the attention of Ousmane. Yaye Khady celebrates Ouleymatou's union with her son because she fulfils her idea of what a daughter-in-law represents.

Yaye Khady is further angered that her white daughter-in-law will deny her the status granted to her by her caste. Being of a higher caste, her biggest fear is that she will lose her high position in society. A brief overview of the role of caste in Wolof society is necessary to understand the issues presented in the novel. According to Siga Fatima Jagne, the Wolof is a society structured along caste systems which place great

value on the privilege which caste allows (2). The caste that an individual is born into determines the expectations, privileges and traditions of that person but also the status which the individual will be granted (3). Traditionally, marriage between members of different castes was seen as impossible, and even in instances where it does happen it is still found to be unacceptable (3). These prejudices between castes play a crucial role in dividing families as seen with Aissatou and her husband in *So Long A Letter*. They create division within communities and eventually division on a larger societal scale. The reference to the caste system and the concern expressed by Mireille's mother-in-law is similarly seen in *So Long A Letter*. Ramatoulaye writes about Aissatou's mother-in-law, a Princess of the Sine, who refuses to accept her son's marriage because she is the daughter of a goldsmith. The mother-in-law steps in and in her rejection of Aissatou chooses another wife for him. Mawdo Bâ her son, in his attempt to main his individualism, asserts that "marriage is a personal thing" and remained firm in his commitment but unfortunately loses the battle against his mother and finally submits to the pressure. His determination was not enough to resist the will of his family and his caste. The third person narrator emphasises the strong bond between mother and son and the mother as a powerful figure. Her rejection of Mireille is based on race and not caste distinctions, her disapproval originates from the realisation that a daughter-in-law who is a foreigner is probably even worse than someone from a lower caste.

The mother not only disapproves of their interracial marriage but also of Ousmane and Mireille's son, Gorgui. Not only does she deny her daughter-in-law the right to belong but she also rejects her grandson. The birth of Gorgui, her grandson, reinforces her disapproval of interracial marriage. Yaye Khady's rejection of Mireille denies her legitimacy as a wife and her rejection of Gorgui further denies Mireille as a

mother. Yaye Khady describes the baptism or naming ceremony as being without the “usual ostentatious display” (124). Even though the baptism followed the religious traditions associated with such ceremonies, Yaye Khady was upset that there were no feasts which often accompanied such family ceremonies. She believes that once again the white woman has cheated her of her privileges; firstly, when there was no wedding ceremony and secondly, because of the absence of festivities at the baptism. It is therefore not the lack of cultural tradition which she grieves but rather the power and control which is her privilege in the necessary “obligations” of exchanging of gifts and preparing feasts. She describes the day as being “sadder than a day of mourning” (125). Yaye Khady experiences suffering because of the birth of Gorgui; she sees him as a blemish on her race. Ousmane, on the other hand, expresses concern about his son always living “on the fringes of two worlds” (124). Ousmane foresees that his son will have to endure continual conflict because of the clash between these two worlds. Ousmane’s decision to have a quiet baptism can be viewed as an act of denying his son the right of a legitimate son. This could be interpreted as a possible reason particularly when contrasted with the ostentatious display at the ceremony to announce the birth of his child with Ouleymatou. However, this contrast is far more complex in that the first choice was made based on individual interest rather than in the interest of his family and the second one enforced by his mother to fulfil her self interest. The act of following the traditions and practices prescribed by his culture during the second baptism appears as an overt acknowledgement of his second son to those watching from the outside. These obvious displays of traditions and practices by individuals are interpreted by the community as an acknowledgement of one’s obligations and serve as an instrument of legitimacy. Yaye Khady is concerned about the repercussions of the lack of open display of these traditions and that it will be used to ridicule and bring her shame.

The view of the community as a provider of traditions, values and culture for some is also contrasted as a source of marginalisation and pain for others. A number of women in this community play a very important role in achieving or striving to achieve what they believe to be the common interest of the group often to the detriment of some. It is with the help and support of many women in the community that Yaye Khady and similarly Ouleymatou manage to destroy the marriage between Ousmane and Mireille. Yaye Khady gains the sympathy of the women in her community when she expresses her unhappiness at acquiring a white daughter-in-law who would be unable to help her with her everyday chores. Ouleymatou manipulates the already tense relationship between Yaye Khady and Mireille and offers to do the ironing. This open display of fulfilling the daughter-in-law's role immediately wins favour with Yaye Khady. This overt display of cultural tradition is covertly disguising the manipulative intentions of Ouleymatou. Ouleymatou who recognises the financial stability which Ousmane will afford her sets her sights on seducing him. Apart from the financial gain, she is also aware of the status that she will obtain by marrying Ousmane.

Mireille's marginalisation can be attributed to a number of interconnected events. Mireille is marginalised when Ousmane is driven by his interest to conform to his own interpretation of what his culture expects from him and uses this argument to justify his actions. Mireille is further marginalised when Yaye Khady believes that her notion of who she is and what she represents in the community is minimised by her white daughter-in-law. Finally Mireille is marginalised when Ouleymatou is driven by her interest in becoming financially secure and pursues Ousmane. Ouleymatou understands the financial difficulties that women are often faced with when part of a polygamous marriage. She lived in a compound where her mother was one of many

wives. However, she understands that her marriage to Ousmane would be different to her mother's because Mireille was a foreigner and that Ousmane was successful. Even though there is concern shown by Yaye Khady that Ouleymatou will not accept the terms of her relationship with Ousmane, at no point is Mireille consulted before Ousmane takes a second wife. Djibril Gueye, Ousmane's father justifies this lack of concern with religion. He states "Mireille is a Muslim, [...] she knows that Ousmane has a right to four wives" (127). These views are not shared by all in the community, Ousmane's sister, Soukeyna goes against her traditional upbringing and reprimands her mother for her destructive behaviour. She sees through her mother's supposed concern for her son and the encouragement of his second marriage as "selfishness" and "self interest" (152). The mother accuses her of being disrespectful towards her elders and attributes her behaviour to the transition in society from a traditional to a modern society. Soukeyna strikes a chord of truth when she accuses her mother of merely disapproving of her daughter-in-law because of her skin colour. Soukeyna's anger stems from the fact that she has developed a very close friendship with Mireille and finds it difficult to hide her brother's secret marriage from his own wife. Yaye Khady was overjoyed at hearing that Ousmane will be marrying Ouleymatou and having a child, she looked forward to "occupying a place of honour at a ceremony which she would organise, of which she would be the prime mover and, what is most important, from which she would derive material benefits" (128).

Culture is transmitted to the young by the older generation and there is the expectation that these traditions will be followed. Conflict takes place when these traditional practices clash with those of western practices causing the self to split to fulfil the expectations of both worlds. These tensions usually have an impact on the

balance of the community in the novel. C. Cooley defines community as “[A] fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one’s very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group” (in Obiechina 202). This definition is similar to the attributes which Robert Redfield lists; “physical proximity of the members, smallness of the group, the enduring character of its social relationships, the relative similarity of activities and states of mind of the members, the relative self sufficiency of the community and the self perpetuating propensity of the groups forming the community” (in Obiechina 202). Ousmane’s community certainly shares the attributes which are described here, especially the similarity in states of mind and activities. The attribute of physical proximity explains why Mireille a foreigner to this specific community will never gain acceptance and will thus remain an outsider. The individual within this community is bound by the parameters of fulfilling that which is common to the group. This is visible in the metamorphosis which Ousmane undergoes in the novel. The reader is initially introduced to young Ousmane who follows the duties as expected by his parents, especially his mother. He is raised within a family which values tradition and their religion. His parents are proud of his educational achievements which reflect his ability to work hard. Ousmane’s departure from these norms creates a great sense of confusion causing his parents, more specifically his mother, to question his behaviour but also to reflect on how his choice would affect their positioning within the community. Yaye Khady is not prepared to negotiate this traditional role and also refuses to be questioned even when her actions and judgments appear contradictory. This contradiction is what her daughter highlights and which leads to the reprimand.

The third person narrative allows more than one view and interpretation of the cultural and traditional practices and the reader does not only side with or empathise

with one character. Soukeyna is not the only one who expresses her disapproval of the way in which Mireille has been treated. Ali, Ousmane's friend, accuses him of "creating factors for her isolation" (136). Ali is referring to the way in which Ousmane has neglected to assist Mireille in integrating with her new environment and then betrays her by spending all his time with Ouleymatou. Ali is aware that Mireille has abandoned her family, her past to form part of Ousmane's life. Ali reminds Ousmane of the obligation a husband has to his wife in any culture which he refers to as a "code of honour" (136). Rather than respecting his wife Ousmane appears to be more concerned about the shame it would cause Ouleymatou and her family; being from the same culture and community but he also fears that he would further anger his mother by not fulfilling his obligation to an individual of his own race. Ousmane's argument is filled with many contradictions; firstly that it is acceptable to abandon one's family for the dignity and reputation of another, secondly, that he has to fulfil his cultural obligations to Ouleymatou but admits that he is afraid of his mother's disapproval. He admits to loving Ouleymatou and that he had been drawn to Mireille out of a need to 'assert himself, to rise intellectually and socially' and that it was merely a quest to explore the "unknown" (123). Ousmane has fallen out of love with what Mireille had come to represent namely, "the other", and has fallen in love with what he believes Ouleymatou has come to represent, namely, "Africa". He maintains that Ouleymatou is: "Symbol of the black woman, whom he had to emancipate; symbol of Africa, one of whose 'enlightened sons' he was". In his mind he has confused Ouleymatou with Africa, "an African which has to be restored to its prerogatives, to be helped to evolve" (149-50). Ousmane believes that Ouleymatou is essential to the future where he sees himself immersed in his cultural heritage. His perception of being African has become one which involves rejecting all that is western including his wife Mireille and his "mixed-

blood” son Gorgui. In this idealistic state of consciousness he believes that only Ouleymatou will be able to ensure the continuity of his cultural heritage.

The narrator allows the reader to see that the same perception expressed by Ousmane is reinforced by his mother. She believes that Ouleymatou will produce the “pure blood” to carry on the black race and not Mireille whose offspring she believes will stain the purity of their race and history. Ousmane believes that Ouleymatou needs him to be her protector and provider whereas Mireille “armed by centuries of civilisation” will be able to be self sufficient. Ousmane becomes selfish in his need to protect his African self and identity and comes to view Mireille as a threat to the development of this self causing the self to remain fragmented. Ousmane justifies his abandonment of Mireille as a “necessary evil” to save himself and his race. Ousmane’s continuous justification of his actions reflects his struggle to assert himself as an individual and attempting to fulfil the will of others. The justifications which he provides become contradictions creating a conflicted self. Lamine, Ousmane’s friend, similarly to his friend Ali challenges Ousmane’s view on interracial marriage and his frame of thinking. He questions Ousmane’s view of completely immersing oneself in a particular culture in order to remain culturally connected. Their place them on opposite ends of interracial marriage and the impact on the self. Lamine is able to live completely westernised with his foreign wife and yet still embrace aspects of his culture which are aligned with how he defines himself. Lamine is critical of traditions which are often used to rationalise certain unacceptable behaviour and justified through culture. He strives for a harmonious marriage which he believes is achieved by respecting their individual differences. He respects that his wife Pierrette has entered the marriage as an individual with her own past and this is who he has married. Ousmane

on the other hand argues that the self and self knowledge can only be attained when the individual is completely connected to a cultural system. Lamine makes Ousmane aware of the difficulties faced by Mireille in not only having to adapt to the transition of marriage but also having to adapt to another culture and country.

The debate which arises between Ousmane and Lamine is pertinent to the discussion of interracial marriage and the individual's identity. Lamine expresses comfort in knowing that he follows those traditions which he identifies with and abandons those which are in conflict with who he is. Ousmane on the other hand accuses Lamine of being completely assimilated because this challenges the traditionalist view of culture which he believes. This form of traditionalism is when "the individual self interest is always subordinated to the overall interest of the group. This is further contrasted with the value of individual self interest associated with modernity" (Obiechina 202). Ousmane idealistically believes that he will have a "true" African identity when he rejects all that represents being westernised including his wife and child. This view prescribes the belief that the self and cultural identity can never be separated.

These perceptions remain fictionalised within *Scarlet Song*, meaning that Bâ does not prescribe how these social phenomena should be dealt with. The characters and their discussion of interracial marriage raise three different alternatives as to how this can be negotiated. The first alternative is that the African husband rejects all western ways and the expectation of the white wife and children to adopt the African way of living. Also the African husband could choose to live a completely western lifestyle, and finally a blending of the two worlds and an acknowledgment and respect of the differences between the two. The anxiety which arises for many of the characters

when faced with interracial marriage is the fear of the individual abandoning the respective culture. Not only is this visible with Ousmane and his family but also with Mireille's family who fear her abandoning the western way of living but more so her adopting a new culture and religion. The conflict which many of the characters experience is often derived from others' response to the choices they have made. These responses are often made under the pretence of wanting to preserve the traditional values of culture, but when delving deeper it becomes apparent that culture is sometimes used to justify personal interests and expectations and not necessarily of the group. The continual shift between two worlds means that the self and identity remain undefined. Ousmane through an act of internal processing comes to the conclusion that Mireille and their marriage is the source of his conflict and that Ouleymatou provides the link to his racial and cultural roots. The contrast which Ousmane draws is that Ouleymatou is symbolic of Africa and freedom, and Mireille a symbol of Europe, and represents "rules and regulations" which he describes as a "robot existence" (149-150).

The third person narrator makes the reader aware that the community in this fictional world has been structured not only to fulfil the cultural traditions as prescribed by the group but that it becomes far more complex when race, caste, class, gender and culture intersect. Many of these structures are aligned with obligations and privileges which serve to strengthen communities. These structures also contribute to the division within many communities and finally impacts on the development of a personal identity. These societal structures often create artificial constructs which the individual is forced to adhere to. Mireille is thus an example of being an outsider because she does not fit into the constructs as defined by the group. Mireille's state of madness can be attributed to being overwhelmed by the realisation of the events which have remained hidden from her; her husband rejecting western forms of eating and dressing and

expecting her to fulfil her duties as an African wife when they had both agreed that they would not relinquish their personal identities. Of course this is problematic when taking into consideration that Ousmane had never really been completely honest about who he was at the beginning of their relationship. Ousmane withdrawing from their relationship and their son and then finally finding out that he has a second family all prove too much for Mireille. The way in which these events are arranged enables Mireille to realise the painful truth; that she does not belong and that she would always remain a marginalised figure not only in Ousmane's community but also in her own.

Conclusion

The third person narrative form illustrates the difficulty in attaining individuality, particularly when social constructs based on race, gender, class, caste and so forth prescribe a different will to that of the individual. These constructs play a major role and often impede the development of the individual self. It is often not the constructs themselves nor the roles prescribed which hinder the development of self and identity but in some instances it is the underlying contradictory ideologies and practices which serve as obstacles. The third person narrator exposes these contradictions by shifting the focus to different characters and thus obtaining varying viewpoints and perceptions. This shift from the central characters' present to past experiences allows the reader access to information which may not have been availed in a first person narrative. This shifting from present to past events and experiences, serves as a process of reflection for each central character and is able to gain insight into Ousmane's present responses and actions by reflecting on his past and understand his relationship with his mother and what she represents to him. He has a need to fulfil her wish of remaining true to his culture, a worldview which does not include Mireille, a white woman. Finally his

attraction to Ouleymatou is explained by an earlier event where she rejects him but later she comes to represent a “true African woman”, an illusion because her intentions are filled with self interest. Mireille and her son Gorgui are viewed as the victims in this complex web of deceit. Unfortunately, they are never given a chance truly to find a position within this society and are constantly viewed as outsiders. Mireille, because of her white skin and Gorgui, because he is not black enough. The son’s murder represents not only Mireille’s extreme anger and sadness at being rejected by Ousmane and his community, but also his rejection of his own son. Mireille believes that from her own experience one is not able to straddle two worlds and death would be the son’s liberation from the pain she has experienced.

The outcome where we see Mireille as a fragmented individual at the end of the novel could be understood in contrast to the experiences of the female characters in the previous chapters. In chapter 1 the character Firdaus in *Woman At Point Zero*, through her confession, is able to narrate her story to someone else. In *So Long A Letter* Ramatoulaye, through her letter, is able to reach out to Aissatou and tell her story. Both women are able to reach out and connect with others, but also they have been able to link the events which have surfaced during this personal narration to the present self and have come to understand the impact of these events. At some point these female characters have been marginalised but have transformed from this position by finding meaning in these experiences. Mireille is denied this opportunity because she remains an outsider to her husband, his family, her family and the community and is unable to make sense of the events in her life. It appears that the development of the characters takes place parallel to one another and in different directions. Ousmane initially believes that he would be able to compartmentalise his life between Mireille and being her

husband on one side and his mother on the other. This may have been possible at one point but he soon comes to realise that the interests of others and that of the collective are far more powerful than that of the individual.

The third person narrative form of the novel *Scarlet Song* allows the reader to follow the events which lead to the final tragic moment at the end of the novel and how each of the main characters is affected. This story could perhaps have had a very different outcome if narrated in the first person. First person narration would have allowed the reader a far more detailed account of Mireille's emotional state and the emotional effect of her experiences of being an outsider to her new community and eventually her husband. If the novel had been written using first person narration, it could possibly have used the outcome of the novel; that is Mireille's breakdown, the murder of her son and the stabbing of her husband as the crisis point which triggers the self examination process. This process would allow Mireille to reflect on her own past and trace the events which led to her own destruction. Thus the first person narrative proves important when exploring the introspective process which takes place whilst examining the self. However, the third person narrative allows the reader to see the impact on the development of the self and identity by external influences and skewed ideologies and practices. The experiences of the central characters and the outcome for each individual emphasises that this is something that could happen to anyone and that the way in which society is structured and people's interpretations of these traditions and practices often leads to pain and suffering. This novel has proved pertinent in exploring the theme of fragmentation which will be explored further in the next novel to be analysed in chapter 4. However, the resolution in chapter 4 sees coherence developing out of fragmentation for the young female central character.

Chapter 4: *Two Women In One*: the quest for an authentic self

Introduction

This thesis has consistently argued that narrative plays an important role in the construction and reconstruction of the self and identity. Furthermore narrative provides the opportunity to identify and express the experiences and lived conditions of human beings. El Saadawi's novel *Two Women In One* explores and reveals the complex nature of the relationship between the individual and society but even more so the complexities which emerge between the female individual and her society. As discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, the narrative in third person places emphasis on the impact which the family, community and society have on the individual. The earlier discussion also brought to light the fact that the individual's quest for a liberated self is often confronted with a number of challenges and is rendered impossible or nearly impossible to achieve. It is made impossible, firstly, by restrictive social structures which serve to organise societies and communities. And, secondly, individuals are often expected to fulfil the roles attached to these social structures. Thus the way in which a society is organised and the allegiance expected from the individual place a strain on the individual's achievement of a self defined personal identity. In some instances individuals find themselves split between the individual self and that of the collective self and eventually they succumb to the external pressure placed on them to conform.

In contrast to the first person narrative of *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter*, where the female protagonist narrated her own story, the reader of *Two Women In One* relies on the third person narrator to present the perceptions, observations and events which the central character experiences. The reader is a witness to the

protagonist's feelings of alienation and the origin of these feelings. The narrator, by focussing on the character's consciousness reveals her growing determination as the story unfolds, to the point where the character is unable to contain her internal need for independence. Bahiah's attainment of her authentic self is an outcome of the questioning and observation which she undertakes, a process which can be considered as a form of reflection. The narrator illustrates that this process is not passive but involves actively evaluating others and herself in relation to others and thus drawing conclusions.

The third person narrator has access to the internal consciousness of the protagonist and provides the reader a privileged position of the character's perceptions of random events which come to the surface, whether it be related to the present or the past or even to the future. These events and experiences are significant to the protagonist in terms of understanding how they have shaped her sense of self and identity, but are also significant for the reader to follow the character's quest for self discovery and the consolidation of the various selves. There are significant people tied to these events and experiences that arise which have shaped her life as well. These individual characters are important to understanding how they influence the central character's life but are also important for the contrast they allow with the life of the central character. Continual reference is made to her mother, father, female and male students all playing a major role as part of the reflection process of how she views others and herself in contrast to them. Her views of others, that is, of her mother, father, other girls and boys are what contribute to her understanding of how the current self and identity have been shaped and informs the present and the future self imagined. The realisation of who she is and who others think she is and expect her to be lead her to

feeling marginalised and alienated. This creates a split between the self she is, which entails having to conform to expectations of others, and the self imagined. The perspective provided by the third person narrator will help to piece together the perceptions and experiences which inform these feelings of disconnectedness and finally how meaning is created from these fragments as she becomes a coherent self.

The central character's process of observing and questioning creates a distance between her and others. This distance is further increased by the knowledge gained from her perceptions of her present and past experiences which the narrator brings to the attention of the reader. The narrator reveals that the character's imagined future self is thus taking shape by her actions and responses to events which are taking place in her life. Bahiah meets Saleem at an art exhibition at the university where her art work is being displayed. He introduces himself and there is an immediate connection between the two. The events which follow their meeting are significant to her understanding of her feelings of disconnectedness to her family and community but also allow one to see what she has been longing for but has been unable to describe. Bahiah's relationship with Saleem is an important part of her development of her personal identity and can be seen as the beginning of her psychological transformation. The narrator informs the reader about the chain of events which results in the character's realisation of her authentic self. Part of her transformation includes cutting ties with her family and her community and finally her society and the values which they represent. This is similarly observed in *Scarlet Song* when the female central character Mireille leaves her family and her country to marry Ousmane, and in *So Long A Letter* when Aissatou leaves her family and country when her husband marries a second wife urged on by the pressure placed on him by his mother. For Bahiah and Aissatou this has the positive outcome of

liberation but Mireille unfortunately is caught between two worlds and realises that she does not belong to either. Bahiah's imprisonment, similar to the female character Firdaus in *Woman At Point Zero*, represents her true liberation from a society which she is unable to identify with. Even though there may be similarities regarding whether the female characters reach self realisation or not, the focus remains that each of these instances is an individual journey with individual outcomes.

The aim of this discussion will be to explore how the third person narrative form portrays the social context of the novel. In *Two Women In One* the third person narrator acknowledges the influence of social roles and constructs and places more of an individual focus on the protagonist's development of self which may be influential in the character's liberation at the end. The narrator appears more focussed on the character's internal consciousness and therefore foregrounds the character's introspective journey. The intention of this analysis is to explore the underlying cause/s of the character's feelings of alienation, whether internal or external, and the need for suturing of the self. The narrator reveals the protagonist's process of development; from a point of fragmentation to a position of self knowledge. This then informs her determination to become a self she is able to relate to. The turning point and perhaps the point of origin for Bahiah putting into action what she has always felt is when she meets Saleem. This relationship is represented as allowing her to recognise her individualism and allowing her to acknowledge her authentic self, but it also represents the integration of her personal and public identities. Most importantly, here I shall attempt to identify the events which contribute not only to the formation of a coherent self, but also an integrated identity.

Suturing the fragmented self through narrative

The emphasis throughout this thesis has been on how narrative constructs and reconstructs the self. Narrative acts as a means of expressing the self and creating meaning out of events. H. Anderson defines narrative as;

[...] a form of discourse, the discursive way in which we organise, account for, give meaning to, and understand, giving structure and coherence to, the circumstances and events in our lives, to the fragments of our experiences, and to our self identities, for and with ourselves and others (212).

The narrative and the form thus provide the structure for the events and experiences which come to the fore and through this meaning is created for the character. This meaning contributes to a renewed self or alternatively explains why the self remains fragmented. The structuring of events can be seen as a form of suturing and that narrative can be used as a tool for suturing. Thus the coherence of a fragmented self is able to take place through narrative. Suturing, in medical terms, refers to the stitching of wounds. Psychic wounding occurs according to psychoanalytic theory as an inevitable and necessary condition for individuals who enter into society; that is interacting with others accepting or relying on social forms of communication and so forth. Suturing therefore refers to how the story-world stitches together an imaginary reality, but even more importantly creates a sense of coherence and wholeness. When individuals are successfully sutured, they do not reflect on the seams which mark the fragments but rather on the whole.

Anderson further explains that narrative is a dynamic process involving not only how events and experiences are organised but also the individual's involvement in that which arises and eventually how this influences the meaning making process. This process is crucial to the individual gaining knowledge about the present, past and future. Narrative therefore forms, informs and reforms the individual's foundation of knowledge and brings about a change in how s/he views the world and the self in relation to the world and others. Narrative therefore acts as a two-way discursive process; it is used initially to construct the experiences of the individual but also to understand these experiences (213). The narrative as a reflexive tool allows for the imagining of alternative possibilities and creates a space to put these possibilities into action. Paul Ricoeur explains that meaning cannot be obtained from single aspects of a story but rather meaning is created when these single aspects are placed in relation to each other and the story as a whole (in Kühler and Jelinek 8). The relevance of each event and the manner in which these are interpreted will only make sense in relation to each other. The knowledge gained from this process of reflection leads to the individual understanding the way the world is and why, and the way it should be and why. This is what drives the female protagonist's quest in *Two Women In One*; her need to understand who she is leads her to finding out what past events have influenced and shaped her and how these contribute to her present self and finally how the various selves become consolidated. Furthermore she questions how these act as obstacles to the self, forcing her to conform to norms and values which do not reflect her notion of selfhood, leaving her fragmented and in need of suturing. Bahiah is aware that this realisation has far reaching consequences and through the narrator the reader witnesses the character's uncertainty in acting on this realisation. The narrator conveys the character's determination by emphasising that once she has arrived at this conclusion

she is unable not to act on it. The character's feelings of uncertainty and possibly even fear are derived from her having to perform what Ricoeur describes as the individual having to negotiate her way between an exaggerated conformity to social norms and values, on the one hand, and her becoming excluded from society because of her individualistic needs, on the other (in Kühler and Jelinek 15). The conclusion which Bahiah reaches is that the self connected to her social context will remain feeling alienated, and this realisation further fuels her need for an individualised self. The knowledge which is gained throughout this process serves to change the individual's views about her world continually.

Bahiah comes to understand that her society does not value individuality and responds by acting contrary to the norm. Her past experiences and the perceptions which she attaches to them are significant in understanding why she feels alienated. Bahiah observes how young girls dress and how this restricts their movement while walking. She questions how these practices are imparted and why so many would choose to conform to a society which does not acknowledge individuality. This is what informs her perceptions of sameness and difference and the third person narrator illustrates the shift which takes between Bahiah and the contrast she draws between herself and others. She seeks answers as to how she is similar and why and how she is different. There are a number of events which contribute to the central character's final conclusion which is; that as part of her family and community she is not acknowledged as an individual with individual interests and goals. Rather she forms part of the collective which means that she is a mere extension of her father and mother and therefore have to fulfil their norms and values. Similarly she has to do the same as a member of her community. Her personal identity would therefore be determined by that

of the collective. This becomes problematic when she discovers that the identity of the collective carries no meaning for her and this leads to her position of questioning and reflecting.

The omniscient third person narrator looks into the consciousness of the individual and is able to access the character's perceptions and experiences of her present, past and imagined future. This takes place whilst the character is attempting to make sense of events which may have had some effect in the present and thus traces the cause to something that may have occurred in the past to find an explanation. Linking the effects of the present to past events is a means of creating structure and coherence and thus understanding is attained and a transformed self emerges. Firstly this illustrates that notions of self and identity are not fixed but continue to change as perceptions and experiences alter. Secondly it reinforces the idea that narrative is pertinent to the construction and reconstruction of the self. Narrative can thus be identified as the source of transformation.

Third person narration and the representation of character

The object of this analysis is to attempt to explore why the character finds herself split between the world which is determined by the collective and the individual. The third person narrator presents the broader social context of the character and how this context defines the self. Furthermore the narrator depicts the central character with regard to how she perceives herself in relation to her society and how this contrasts to the self which she imagines. These perceptions of society and others brought to the fore by the narrator are obstacles the female protagonist identifies as preventing her self development and how she responds to each of these obstacles.

The narrator is able to make visible the internal consciousness of the central character and thus is able to access the character's mind. The particular third person narrative form used in the novel is free indirect discourse. The third person narrator provides the reader a broad social as well as internal context for the character but here the narrator is able to weave in and out of the character's thoughts in such a way that the distance between character and narrator is minimised. Hence we find that in *Two Women In One*, the attention is more focussed on the individual whilst the social context remains in the background. This form of third person narration is defined by Dorrit Cohn as "Moments of representation of a character's thoughts 'from within,' through a profusion of narrated monologues" (in Gunn 36). It is therefore the merging of narration with the distinct voice of the character. Daniel P. Gunn identifies two main theoretical underpinnings of free indirect discourse; firstly the narrator at times allows the character/s to speak and represent their own thoughts and secondly, this form of narration allows other voices to come through. This form of narration allows Bahiah's voice to be heard as means of emphasising thoughts and perceptions reported by the narrator. The narrator points out that Bahiah has an internal awareness that she is not living the life that she wishes and describes these feelings as;

Some hidden insistent feeling told her that her future did not lie in those long, boring lectures, nor in getting a medical degree and hanging a shingle in the square saying 'Dr Bahiah Shaheen', nor in settling her ass in a comfortable seat behind the wheel of a car. Something told her that all this was meaningless, like a blank sheet of paper or a dark night without a single star, as if the whole world had become black or white, it really didn't matter which, so long as it was all in one colour (24).

The narrator makes the reader aware of the extent to which Bahiah feels disconnected from the others with whom she has identified. She even finds it difficult to relate to Bahiah Shaheen, the self who has to relate to others in the public sphere. By allowing Bahiah's own voice to emerge, her own thoughts and perceptions are emphasised. This is important to the suturing of the character's private and public self. The narrator depicts Bahiah as a character who is always searching for information, for the "truth" about who she is and how she relates to others. She is described as curious, inquisitive, questioning, as someone who watches, actively seeking, longing for and waiting for something different to happen to her. She is described as having an intense need for others to get to know her. For Bahiah knowing someone's name does not mean that you truly know that person, and she was therefore waiting for someone to penetrate her true essence (8). This is finally realised when she meets Saleem, who shows an interest in her as an individual. The narrator begins narrating the story by telling the reader, "It is the fourth of September", this appears to be a significant day for Bahiah firstly because it is her birthday but also because of the emphasis that she believed that "something big would happen to her", she had the same feeling every year on her birthday (9).

Describing the feeling as insistent implies that the character is haunted by this feeling and that she is at the point where she is finding it very difficult to ignore these internal thoughts. The process of introspection allows her to determine what she does not want and why she does not want this for herself. She is not interested in aspiring to become a doctor nor in wealth and these carry no meaning for her. This is perhaps because it is what others imagine her future self to be. The third person narrator tells the reader that Bahiah felt that everything could be attributed to someone else and not because she played any part in obtaining it. Her mother gave birth to her, her father was responsible for enrolling her at medical college. Her aunt who has a lung disease wanted her to

study this type of medicine and her uncle wanted her to be a successful, highly paid doctor and to marry his business graduate son (72). The narrator therefore gives a number of reasons why Bahiah would feel that her studying medicine has no meaning for her and that she does not feel personally connected to the choices which are made for her. Primarily the character's feelings of frustration are derived from others making decisions for her and thus having control over who she is and what she will become. Comparing the two female protagonists, Bahiah and Mireille, we discover that Bahiah is able to evaluate her experiences and these evaluations in turn inform her about where these fit in with the individual and the collective. She is able to evaluate these along her notion of self and whether these define her or whether these are representative of the collective. Mireille on the other hand, is not given the chance to truly experience being a member of the Senegalese society because she is continuously marginalised. She is unable to evaluate these on her own terms rather than through the perceptions of others. Mireille remains tied to her personal identity which continues to clash with Ousmane's society and this becomes a source of conflict and pain. This conflict arises because Mireille's conceptualisation of being a mother/ wife/ woman differs to that of the Senegalese community and thus integration is unable to take place.

As the central character becomes more aware of what and who informs social roles and expectations and how these affect the individual within not only society but in all private spheres as well, she begins to understand firstly her feelings of disconnectedness and secondly the action required in order to change this position. The narrator traces the chain of events and the thought processes which lead firstly to the coherence of present and past events and finally creates a sense of understanding for the character as well as the reader. The character not only discovers a renewed sense of self

but also a renewed political identity as well. Thus it appears that her personal and public identity have become integrated when she shifts away from the norms and values of society, and calls for an awakening of others to become more informed. The form of narration enables the coherent self but also a suturing of public and private identities. In *Scarlet Song* the reader observes the repression of Ousmane's full identity and the fragmentation of Mireille, in *Two Women In One* however, we observe the protagonist's development from fragmentation to a suturing of the self with regard to individual and social context.

The novel tells the story of a young female protagonist who finds herself on an introspective quest to discover her role in her society which she feels completely alienated from. She appears driven by an internal force into a self reflexive process of questioning and understanding of her current and past position of self and the role which she has fulfilled thus far and is no longer able to relate to. Bahiah, falls in love with Saleem but is unable to fulfil this relationship when they are both arrested for their political involvement. Throughout the novel, the character questions and examines what it means to be female and what this role entails by looking at other women in her life and outside of it. This observation allows the perspective on how the self is perceived by society and contrasts how the character wishes to be perceived differently. The internal conflict and tension arise from what she sees portrayed by others in relation to that which she imagines for herself. Resisting the traditional roles and values of her society is not easy but it seems crucial in her attempt for the preservation of the self she has become. This looking back which the third person narrator often depicts as stifling and suffocating in the narrative, compels the character to assume a reflective position in an attempt to discover her own individual desires in contrast to that which is prescribed

by her family, community and society (the collective). More specifically, the narrator conveys the development of the main character from the point of alienation to where she gains understanding and finds resolution by resisting the traditional roles which confine her and embraces her authentic self.

The third person narrator explores Bahiah's complex relationship with her society. She remains split between, the self representative of others, and the "authentic" self she strives to become. The title of the novel *Two Women in One* can be interpreted as referring to the split which takes place between the self related to the collective and the "authentic" self which she imagines which can be seen as related to the individual. Maureen Eke identifies "interstitial spaces" which characters occupy meaning belonging and not belonging to their societies, insiders and outsiders simultaneously (in Emenyonu and Eke 62). Eke uses this term to identify the position of those characters struggling between their desire for individuality and the need to belong to their communities. This interstitial identity grants the character agency to move in and out of their societies. In this instance Bahiah is able to move from a position where she feels alienated even though she belongs to a particular group, but she does not feel a sense of connectedness with her collective group. She eventually shifts to a position where she is able to determine her own norms and values of selfhood even though she may be considered as an outsider to the group. This is made possible through narrative which enables the suturing of Bahiah's two worlds, one where she feels alienated and the other where she feels she belongs. Therefore the act of suturing creates a sense of unity.

The third person narrator immediately introduces to the reader at the beginning of the novel that the social context of the central character as being traditional. By contrasting the posture and dress of Bahiah to the other girls, the reader is able to gain

insight as to what is expected of women. Bahiah struggles to understand why other young girls would place themselves in a position of discomfort. This form of questioning indicates to the reader that Bahiah through the process of introspection attempts to find out how and what informs these social roles and that others may not reach this position of understanding. The form of narration allows the reader access to the main character's observations of what is considered becoming of a young girl is that; "Their skirts wound tightly round the thighs and narrowed at the knees, so that their legs remained bound together whether they were sitting, standing, or walking, producing an unnatural movement" (7). These skirts allowed the young girls very little movement which is described as a "strange mechanical gait, their feet shuffling along while legs and knees remained clamped, as if they were pressing their thighs together to protect something they were afraid might fall" (7). Young boys however are portrayed quite differently, "lifting one leg and balancing it on the edge of a low wooden stand. It was normal and permissible - but only for boys" (8). Boys in this regard are granted more freedom of movement and have to be less conscious of their sense of how they behave. Bahiah's observations continue in perceiving the differences between the male and female students and the third person narrator emphasises this when focussing on the behaviour of male students in the classroom. Bahiah "watches them push through the door, treading on each other's feet, their bags under their arms bulging with anatomy books. Left hands clutching their precarious spectacles and right hands stretched out to push other bodies out of the ways. They raced to the front seats in the lecture hall. Panting and out of breath, they grabbed their seats and opened their notebooks with fingers red and swollen from the fight to clamber onto the tram" (22-23). The third person narrator continues to show Bahiah's awareness of the differences in the expectations of what is considered "female" behaviour which entailed shuffling, knees

and thighs pressed together and mainly restricted movement. This contrast emphasises how the protagonist views herself as separate from the group and contributes to her being fragmented. Boys are depicted as being able to “move around freely, to push and clamber, to tread on others” feet without having to consider the space of others. The focus on how boys behave in comparison to the girls emphasises the contrast in the way they are socialised and how this behaviour is firstly instilled and then later reinforced. The contrast is made possible through the third person narrative form and offers an explanation of how these gendered roles are formed which is often not provided in a first person narrative. Furthermore, this contrast also contributes to the character’s understanding of how self and identity is influenced and formed and is important to her understanding of her sense of self.

These norms which govern the behaviour of what is acceptable for male as being different for females is further entrenched in the home. Mothers discourage their daughters from developing and becoming sexually aware; when Bahiah tells her mother as a young child that she has discovered that she is a girl and not a boy and then undresses to prove it, the mother slaps her and tells her to never do it again. The mother wields power over the daughter by emphasising the role which mothers play in suppressing the sexuality and sexual desire in their daughters. The effect of the practice of cliterodectomy is that it instils fear in the young girl but also other young girls and it creates the impression that sexual desire is abnormal. Bahiah who witnesses her sister’s cliterodectomy is filled with fear waiting her turn which never comes but the emotional effect is equally frightening. The narrator reinforces that these practices take place without informing the girls of what they signify. Bahiah does not undergo the operation herself but the effect of this event is quite significant. She is unable to determine what

constitutes “normal” sexual desire. This is significant to the protagonist’s development of her sexual identity because the reader is made aware that it is the mother/ parent who determines what constitutes “normal” sexual behaviour, which is supposedly to remain dormant until marriage. The form of narration allows the reader to gauge Bahiah’s own thoughts on sexuality and to confirm how these thoughts are instilled and informs the formation of the self. It could thus be said that the individual’s response to sex and sexuality is shaped by the external and thus internalised. The narrator describes the effect of this event in the following way: “She was disgusted when she saw men’s sexual organs bulging under their trousers; she wanted to throw up when a man dug his elbow into her chest as she waited for the tram. She hated men with their trousers, their ugly protruding organs, their greedy, shifty eyes, their smell of onions and tobacco, and their thick moustaches which looked like black, dead insects flapping over their lips” (98). The fear of witnessing her sister’s cliterodectomy has the desired effect of suppressing her sexual desire towards men but it also prevents her from developing her own perceptions of men. Her perception of men is therefore generalised to all men including her father. It could be argued that the individual self is determined by the perceptions of others. The third person narrator explores Bahiah’s frustration derived from her realisation that young girls are placed under immense pressure to act in a particular way but these roles are never explained. As Bahiah gains knowledge and understands how society is constructed she also begins to realise the contradictions within these norms and values and how these have come to play a role in shaping her notion of self and identity. Mothers encourage their daughters to display behaviour which is becoming of a young girl however; Bahiah’s perceptions reveal that often this behaviour is to ensure that the young girl protects her virginity until her wedding night. The young girl’s virginity is further connected to the honour of the family and this is the

actual reason for the young girls wearing tight skirts which clamp their knees and thighs together and that they should shuffle rather than run and jump. The third person narrator reveals the intricate thought processes involved in Bahiah drawing certain conclusions and often highlights contradictions underlying these observations. These contradictions become evident through Bahiah's evaluation of how gender and social roles are constructed.

Another contradiction which Bahiah observes is that before marriage the young girl is a "non-sexual" being until she is married and then when married the girl is expected to transform from a "non-sexual being with no sexual organs to a sexual creature who sleeps, wakes eats and drinks sex" (101). El Saadawi in the *Hidden Face of Eve* finds that young Arab girls are raised along very rigid and orthodox teachings aimed at "moulding her into an asexual being" (46). The young girl's sexuality and development of sexual awareness is thus determined by the collective and not the individual. Yet, she is trained from childhood to be preoccupied with the grooming of her body in preparing herself for her role and function as a wife (46). The role of a wife and mother is therefore seen as a primary concern and education and a career as secondary. This further undermines the individual's expectation of forming a coherent self, and who is rather expected to fulfil the goals and expectations of others. Bahiah observes that during marriage the women's tools are all sexual. Apart from emphasising the contradictions which inform these social roles, the individual particularly the young female individual is not a separate entity she is the extension of her father and mother, but more so her father. The narrator illustrates that the father as well as the society is patriarchal in nature. This is not by choice but rather how it is prescribed in the broader social context and thus in the home. There is continuous reference made by the narrator

to the daughter being the extension of her father. This is an important reference point because it presents a society that is organised along patriarchal lines which has further implications for members of this particular society. Daughters in particular are portrayed as having no input and their fathers wielding power over them and making decisions for them. This relationship appears influential in the shaping of her present self and perhaps even more so in her determination to free herself from what this relationship represents. Elleke Boehmer explains that the relationship in the patriarchal home can be described as the father being represented as a powerful figure and the daughter as a non-presence or as non-assertive. The daughter obtains benefit and protection by deferring to the father (109-110). The patriarchal relationship between father and daughter is constructed with the intent that it is in the best interest of the daughter and her well-being. However, the implication which arises is that this remains a beneficial relationship only as long as the daughter relinquishes any sense of individual power. The lack of individual power is what leads to the fragmentation and internal conflict which the character experiences in the novel. The narrator portrays the father as a patriarchal figure within the home. Bahiah comes to experience the patriarchal dominance of not only her father but other male figures as well, experiences which contribute to further diminishing her sense of self. The views portrayed by the narrator in the novel vary; women/mothers generally consider it as a form of security and a necessary part of being a woman and also proving their sexuality. Men or rather fathers firstly consider marriage to be a business transaction, where the father is the broker. The narrator focuses on a particular event where the father marries Bahiah to a young Egyptian man for 300 Egyptian pounds. This event adds to her growing understanding of the fate which lies ahead for other young females like her. Accessing the central character's internal thoughts and reactions reveals that she is appalled at her

father marrying her off to someone for a sum of money and also that she is angered that she is unable to prevent this from happening in her own life. The narrator describes the futility linked to the character's realisation that she is unable to change this situation and describes it as; "Iron fingers held her relentlessly. The bars were so close together that she could not even poke her head out. Fate was her father, who owned her just as he owned his underwear. He could marry her off or not marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she had never authorised him" (96). The third person narrator is presenting Bahiah's thoughts and showing that she feels trapped but also that she is of no value to her father as a person.

Bahiah comes to the realisation that in her community and within her family her sense of self is situated within the collective and thus others particularly, significant male figures in her life, are able to wield control over her. These varying perceptions are the cause of her fragmented self. The reader is privileged to information that Bahiah's notion of self is different to that of the collective and that self which is considered individual in nature is often formed to benefit the interests of the collective. The conclusion which is drawn is that this takes place because it is permissible. Husbands too generally consider women as their property and expect women to readily perform their wifely duties. Bahiah's uncles view marriage as the "strongest protection for girls' morals" (94). Thus the general perception which is emphasised by the narrator is that firstly women need to be controlled and secondly that marriage is a powerful means of controlling women and ensuring that their morals remain intact. From the perceptions outlined above the narrator creates a view that the society is divided along very specific roles defined for women and men. These social roles are a given and often without any explanation. Often it is indirectly implied that these explanations are deeply embedded

within the respective culture and religion as observed in *Scarlet Song*. Furthermore it has been made clear that the individual, particularly the female is dominated by the male figure in almost all spheres and has very few or no means of escaping. This means the daughter experiences the patriarchal dominance of her father and uncles and other male figures in the home and when married she is placed under the dominance of her husband without her consent. The purpose of male dominance in this instance is to ensure that the female conforms to her role as daughter/ niece/ wife and therefore it can be implied that these social roles are often structured in such a way to benefit men.

The emphasis placed on conformity and the effect it has on the individual is a central concern which is presented in the novel. Bahiah perceives the unquestioning conformity of others as stifling and often beyond comprehension. The way in which society is structured reveals that conformity is the norm and individuality is therefore not permissible and the consequences as is observed with Bahiah are dire. This emphasises the struggle which she is confronted with in forming a meaningful self at the end of the novel which Mireille is denied in *Scarlet Song*. Bahiah feels stifled by the sameness of people in their appearances, their actions and behaviour. The narrator describes one particular instance which takes place in public;

But the faces on the tram were not those of fathers and mothers; instead they were those stunningly similar faces stamped out by government like coins, sitting shoulder to shoulder in silence, their lower bodies immobile and fixed to their seats, their upper parts shaking slowly and rhythmically with the motion of the tram. Their huge skulls swung back and forth like pendulums. Their broad, padded shoulders were stuck to each other, their ties wound around their necks like hangmen's ropes. When the tram stopped, their heads jerked back violently.

They leapt from their seats, holding their heads and staring around them, their yellow eyes wide and fearful (31).

Others are portrayed as mechanical in their conformity, almost robot-like and unthinking. Emphasis is placed on the disconnectedness which Bahiah identifies and that she is unable to ignore. The narrator focuses on the questions which arise through these observations which Bahiah makes. The character questions whether her feelings of alienation are “normal” and in contrast whether sameness should automatically be interpreted as connectedness. The character questions whether the notion of sameness implies a bond between individuals and she therefore seeks understanding as to why her idea of connectedness differs to that of others. They appear beyond human form when they are depicted as not representing individual roles as mothers and fathers. This gives the effect that they are identical rather than having individual personalities, characteristics, abilities or values which would set them apart. Even their movement appears to be connected to the movement of the tram which creates the effect that they are not individual entities but rather part of a whole. The fear which is described when the tram stops could be attributed to them awakening out of their slumber and coming face to face with reality.

In another instance the narrator shares Bahiah’s frustration when she perceives herself as a part of this sameness. The narrator describes her perceptions as;

[B]ut the faces were all the same, both in the dissecting room and out on the street. In the spacious but crowded college grounds, she felt as if she were drowning alone in a sea of people, unseen and unrecognised, and that her face

had become like those of her fellow students. Bahiah, Aliah, Suad and Yvonne- it was all the same (51).

Bahiah's perception of conformity is that it renders people invisible. In societies where conformity is the norm individuals are not recognised even when they have different names. In these societies it is the role which is prescribed which is acknowledged. In this particular social context the norms and values are defined by the collective and are filtered down to shape the community, family, culture, religion and so forth. Often these social constructs are entrenched and adhered to without any understanding or explanation of why these have been enforced. What is apparent from this discussion is that the narrator has been able to determine the source of Bahiah's hatred of men and possible reasons for her disconnectedness from her family. Bahiah is unable to initially understand where these feelings of hate originate and this is what the narrative explores that through delving into past experiences and emotions that attached to the experiences the character is able to understand how these impact her present consciousness.

Understanding of the self takes place by suturing the experiences of the past and the present. This process of reflecting from present to the past is relevant to the first person narrative but the reader is not always privileged to the social context in which these events and experiences take place. The character finds the cause in her past of the effects she feels in her present. Bahiah's feelings of disconnectedness are felt but she needs to understand why she is feeling this way. Unlike the character Mireille who is unable to make sense of her present state of consciousness because she is not fully aware of what is happening around her. Many of the events are kept a secret and so the

feelings and thoughts which are narrated by the third person narrator allows the reader to see what is happening but the character remains uninformed.

The narrator hints at Bahiah's determined nature as her need for self fulfilment grows. Bahiah is portrayed as continually different to the other female characters who shuffle along in their tightly wound, narrow skirts while she is depicted as standing with her "right foot on the edge of the table and her left foot on the floor" a posture which she knew was unbecoming of a woman (7). Unlike the other girls, the narrator describes Bahiah as looking no different to the other girls "except that she wore trousers, had long legs with straight bones and strong muscles, and could walk firmly, swinging her legs freely and striding out confidently" (7). The emphasis here is placed on the freedom of movement which Bahiah displays while walking and standing, not because it is permissible by society to do so but it is something which she allows herself to do. This behaviour could therefore be seen as a response to her feeling that all her life, her thoughts and actions are determined by others, whereas as these are small attempts at setting herself apart from them. The narrator shows that Bahiah sets herself further apart when she values her art over medicine, even when she knows that her artistic interests are not valued by her father. From his perspective her drawings are considered scribbles and a waste of time. Time she should rather use studying. Studying medicine and becoming a doctor is thus part of the collective notion of self whereas her art is seen by others such as her father as an individualistic notion of self. Her art is thus considered important in the way she defines herself and also an important link between her and Saleem.

The narrator illustrates that Bahiah's differences in walk, posture, behaviour and responses creates a distance between herself and others to the point where she is unable

to feel a part of the group. Bahiah feels alienated from those around her describing them as belonging to one species and she to another. Furthermore the character reflects on the Bahiah Shaheen who represents the collective and how different it was to the self which she considered to be her “real” self. The narrator describes the central character’s dislike of the self which is a reflection of the collective self and states;

She did not like Bahiah Shaheen. She could see her defects all too clearly. She hated that polite obedient voice. She was irritated by that placid look which did not see things, but allowed them to be reflected from her, like a watery surface. She hated that nose which was not sufficiently upturned. She despised that paleness, whose real cause she knew. It was the paleness drained of blood by fear, a fear that people seek to hide (37).

The above quote gives the reader the impression that Bahiah is looking at herself and simultaneously commenting on how she perceives herself, which is made possible through the form of narration. The narrator describes the protagonist’s description the self connected to the collective as having defects. These defects referring to the expected behaviour of individuals based on whether they are male or female. The polite, obedient voice would be a reference to behaviour which is considered becoming of a female and once again conforming to the prescribed social roles. The “placid look” refers to the passivity which is expected from women but also from individuals in general. This idea further refers to the notion that one is expected to merely reflect that which is expected of you rather than have individual thoughts which may be different to those of the group. The fear which the narrator speaks of is the fear of individuals acknowledging that they are different to the group and that their interests and values are not represented by those of the collective. The narrator describes the character’s fear of

discovering her “real” self and refers to the “real” self as “the other self dwelling within her, that devil who moved and saw things with the sharpest powers of perception” (37). The “real” self is described as something which has evil tendencies which should be controlled and suppressed because of the ability which it allows the individual to see the contradictions of reality. The fear which the narrator speaks of is very real for Bahiah who comes to understand the effect of acknowledging the “real” self which would entail having to give up the self which is connected to the collective and the familial and societal ties which are connected to this self. This is an important realisation, because Bahiah comes to understand that there is no possible way that she would be able to integrate her individual and collective identity. This can be contrasted to the male central character Ousmane who attempts to integrate the two but eventually his personal identity is repressed for that of the group. This in a sense would benefit her as an individual but not the group. The fear therefore originates from leaving behind that which is known and embracing that which is unknown. The narrator describes her dilemma as; “She had never known exactly who that real self was. But she had always been sure that she was Bahiah Shaheen, hardworking, well-behaved medical student, the girl with the light brown skin standing hesitantly before the door” (36). The fear is thus rooted in uncertainty of what the future self imagined would be in contrast to the collective self which is shaped by others. The impact of the character’s realisation is that she is that the intensity of this feeling continues to increase rather than diminish and eventually she will be unable to contain it.

The narrator’s description of the central character and how she perceives herself is relevant when looking at how she contrasts to other characters and how this further entrenches her feelings of disconnectedness. The narrator describes the relationship

between mother and daughter as one which develops from a relationship of connectedness and affection to later disconnectedness and distrust. This can be attributed to; that as Bahiah grows older she develops an awareness and an understanding of events and experiences which may have happened earlier but is only able to interpret the effect of these as she is able to connect the effect to certain events. As discussed earlier, Bahiah's hatred of men can be attributed to the earlier event of her sister's cliterodectomy and her mother's constant suppression of her daughter's growing sexual awareness. As Bahiah grows older the narrator describes a shift in the mother's gaze which depicts the increasing distance between the two. The narrator describes a childhood memory where Bahiah's mother would look at her "with eyes as black as her own" to a more recent interaction where the narrator notes that "Her eyes could never meet her daughter's gaze" (15).

Bahiah's father who has been established earlier is a patriarchal figure and their relationship is described throughout the novel as being distant and disconnected. The narrator portrays Bahiah's perception of her father as; "Her father stood like a vast, high barrier between her and her real self, blocking her way, guarding the entrance to the house with the bulk of his body, his loud coarse voice, huge palms and wide eyes" (27). Their relationship is never described as being affectionate but rather as one without any affection or personal interest. The father would question her about her studies and considered her drawings a waste of time. At her eighteenth birthday the narrator describes Bahiah observing her father while she blows out her candles and reflects that she is suspicious of his smile and that he had become dubious (16). Once again there is disconnectedness between father and daughter but this appears to have always been the nature of their relationship.

The turning point in the novel and where she is portrayed as most determined is when she meets Saleem. The narrator describes their first meeting and the significance of this moment which holds what she has been searching for. The narrator draws an immediate contrast between Bahiah's perception of Saleem and the other male students. Saleem is an important figure in Bahiah's quest for an authentic self and he represents the future self which she imagines. The narrator describes the initial contact between the two being through their eyes;

Then their eyes met and she realised that the secret behind this extraordinary face lay in the way his eyes moved. It was strange, different from the other male students. Their eyes seemed not to see or do anything. They just opened like mirrors in which things were reflected. The eyes of the male students did not really see, or rather, they did not see things as they really were. When his eyes moved in front of hers, she felt as if he were seeing her. It was the first time she had ever been seen by any eyes other than her own (35-36).

The contrast which the narrator provides at the beginning is relevant to understanding why their meeting is so significant. The comparison draws the reader's attention to the eyes being able to portray the impact of being part of the collective identity. This identity places emphasis on the eyes not really seeing but that they merely reflect what is expected of them. Once again the narrator is referring to the element of sameness as part of the collective. Saleem's eyes are different because they acknowledge Bahiah as an individual without any preconceived ideas of who she is and how she should behave. The concept of being seen finally allows Bahiah to feel a sense of connectedness and a sense of self worth as an individual outside of the group. Bahiah's relationship which she forms with Saleem provides meaning and purpose in her life and provides insight as

to why she feels disconnected from her family. The narrator explains that Bahiah comes to the realisation that her parents are interested only in that which benefits them and not the interests of the daughter. They were not interested in what was meaningful to her because of the patriarchal father/ daughter relationship. All the events and experiences up until Bahiah meets Saleem have been consolidated to form meaning for the character. Her position of questioning and observing which is narrated to the reader forms a reflexive position for the character and thus she is able to come to understand why she feels alienated in her present consciousness. The narrator has been able to convey that this is not an easy journey for the character and describes the fear which she experiences when she realises that she has to and is transforming.

The narrator identifies Bahiah visiting Saleem at his home as the moment where Bahiah realises that she would not be able to return from. The conflict which she experiences during this visit is derived from the social norms and values prescribed by the collective identity and her emerging individual personal identity. Bahiah is described as anxious and concerned about her father's reaction to finding out about her visit with Saleem. The narrator describes her thoughts; "Her mind balked at imagining her father's shock on seeing his polite, obedient daughter's body naked, not in her own bedroom but in a young man's flat" (63). She expresses concern about how many others would read about this imagined event in the newspaper, and more specifically what her father's superiors and subordinates would have to say at the Ministry of Health when "they have been convinced for over thirty years that he was an efficient superintendent with close family ties and an honourable reputation, that his sons and daughters were diligent and well-behaved, especially his hardworking medical-student daughter Bahiah" (63). The narrator portrays how the individual becomes restricted by social

roles and values and is often filled with fear and conflict when attempting to pursue personal desires. The narrator also emphasises the father/ daughter relationship, where the daughter is considered an extension of the father who makes decisions on her behalf. Of course this is a very traditional view expressed and I am certainly not generalising this notion to all families. However, the notion of honour and the family is being emphasised here as well. Bahiah realises that her actions will have a direct impact on her family's honour, a value dictated by the collective and is further entrenched whilst growing up. The notion of the individual's actions having a direct impact on the family's honour appears in the novel firstly when she visits Saleem and then later when she is married off to Muhammad Yaseen. The narrator describes her anger at being married off to a strange man without her consent whom she detests and she refuses to consummate their marriage. Instead she attempts to create a scandal which would "make everyone cast her out" (102). However, the narrator describes that Bahiah appears determined to be cast out by her family whom she perceives as "the usurpation of her will and of her very existence" (103). The scandal which awaits her family arises because she has defied her husband by leaving him and that there will be no evidence on the sheets or her nightdresses of the bride losing her virginity and thus "the family would be searching in vain for their non-existent honour" (103). The character's defiance of both her husband and her father leads to her defining and determining her own values and norms and thus her own sense of self. She is at this point considered by others as an outsider but this no longer has an impact on the self she has become. The narrator thus presents Bahiah's position of understanding as only being possible because she has reflected on how events and experiences of the present and past are connected and have a further impact on the future self.

The concluding paragraph of the novel is important to the theme of fragmentation and finally how coherence develops out of this fragmentation. The novel ends with the protagonist being arrested for her political public activities. The narrator describes this moment as:

One of them locked the handcuffs around her wrists and put the key in his pocket. She walked briskly in front of them, her eyes darting, her feet searching among all those faces for the thin face with the exhausted features burdened with the world's worries, for those eyes that could pick out her face from all other faces and distinguish her body from among millions of bodies floating in the universe (124).

The narrator reveals the character's renewed form of personal self defined by a sense of determination which is carried over into the public sphere. There are a number of events which drive this determination. Firstly Saleem is arrested. Secondly, her father decides that she will no longer study and that she will marry a complete stranger. And finally, she decides to abandon the husband she despises, knowing that that this act will directly impact on her family. The narrator emphasises that with this shift from being unrecognised, silenced and alienated as part of the collective, Bahiah has now found her voice when she becomes politically and publicly involved. The irony is that even though she is physically imprisoned, psychologically she feels liberated. Bahiah Shaheen is no longer a mere face in the crowd, she is now an individual.

Bahiah and Mireille, the female central character in *Scarlet Song* have very different experiences and very different outcomes, even though they are both considered as marginalised characters. Bahiah considers herself an outsider to the collective group because she does not share the same norms and values. Bahiah is also depicted as

actively seeking the “truth” as to why she feels disconnected from her family and her community and why she does not share their same viewpoints. The character’s process of questioning and observing becomes a form of reflection and a means of obtaining knowledge. This knowledge allows the character to create meaning of all the events and experiences and in turn becomes a coherent, liberated self. Bahiah comes to understand the source of her disconnectedness and is able to find meaning through defining herself and identity along values and norms which reflect who she is. This is further observed in the development of her political identity. The meaning which is created further informs the idea that her imprisonment is a form of liberation in contrast to the knowledge that society represents conformity and “usurpation of the individual’s will”. This view is similarly expressed by the protagonist Firdaus in the novel *Woman At Point Zero*. The events and experiences which the character narrates contribute to her understanding that the murder of the pimp was a necessary act with regard to not murdering the person but rather what he symbolises; the power which men wield over women. The “truth” which she comes to realise that as long as patriarchal domination continues in both the personal as well as the public sphere, her marginalisation and that of many other women will continue. This of course is a very extreme view perhaps as extreme as Bahiah cutting all ties with her family and community. In contrast to these two characters, the outcome of Mireille’s journey is that she remains a fragmented figure within the Senegalese community and her own country. There are a number of factors which contribute to this position; firstly Mireille cuts all ties with her family when she marries Ousmane. This is a painful situation for her but she, similarly to Bahiah is unable to relate to her father’s racist views and ideologies. Determined to maintain her personal identity, the character experiences conflict when these norms and values hinder her from being able to carry the roles as prescribed by the Senegalese

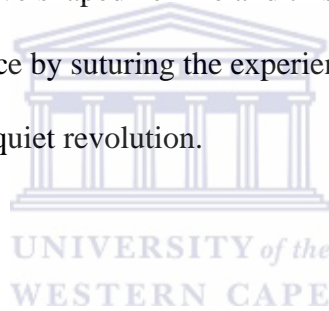
community. She thus remains an outsider to both worlds and is unable to negotiate a position where she finds meaning and understanding. She remains marginalised because of her race and class and because of her husband's rejection of the western ideologies which he believes she comes to represent.

Conclusion

The primary concern of this discussion has been to emphasise the crucial relationship between narrative and the forming, informing and reforming of the narrative self. It has been my intention to illustrate how narrative creates meaning and understanding through the introspective process of tracing effects observed in the present consciousness of the individual and tracing the effect to an initial event in the past. The argument presented throughout here and elsewhere is that the introspective process is pivotal to the exploration of the individual's subjectivity and understanding how psychological transformation is attained. In contrast to the narrative in first person which allows the reader direct access to the character's thoughts and experiences and the emotions attached to these, the narrative in third person also proves useful in this exploration of the self.

The third person narrative focuses on the internal consciousness of the character but also provides a social context for the reader. This panoramic view of both the internal and external view of the character allows the reader with an understanding of the obstacles which individuals have to contend with in society whilst searching for self fulfilment. Depending on the extent of the external pressure and the individual's interpretation of these pressures, the character may have difficulty achieving this level of self realisation or not attain it at all. Often the character has to go to great lengths, as is observed with the characters Bahiah and Firdaus, both characters perceive themselves

to be alienated and disconnected from their communities, but are able to reconnect and transform themselves through an introspective process. For Bahiah the introspective process is enabled through the narrative technique of free indirect discourse and for Firdaus, introspection takes place through confession. The predominance of free indirect discourse in this novel as opposed to *Scarlet Song* allows the suturing of the public and private selves. In *Two Women In One* the narrator is like a god guiding the character's introspection, leading her to wholeness. Whereas in *Scarlet Song* the narrator does not "lead" the character but rather simply presents the contradictions and allows the character to fall apart. In *Two Women In One* the protagonist obtains knowledge about how events and experiences have shaped her life and this knowledge is ultimately used to create meaning and coherence by suturing the experiences of the past and present self. This in turn becomes her quiet revolution.



Conclusion

Reclaiming and rewriting the self through narrative: the *quiet* revolution

At first glance it would appear that surgery and writing have very little in common, but I think that is not so The surgeon sutures together the tissues of the body to make whole what is sick or injured; the writer sews words into sentences to fashion a new version of human experience. A surgical operation is rather like a short story. You make the incision, rummage inside for a bit then stitch up. It has a beginning, a middle and an end.

Richard Selzer, "The Pen and the Scalpel" (in Davis)

Richard Selzer in the above quote is referring to the act of writing being a powerful instrument in understanding and recording the individual's experience of being-in-the-world. The act of writing acts as a catalyst for self reflection and allows the writer the space to rewrite and reclaim the self and identity. This thesis explores how narrative provides a creative space to reclaim and rewrite the identity of the marginalised individual and thus acts as a tool to bring about this revolutionary change in the characters. Furthermore, this exploration was extended to investigate how the form of the novel plays an influential role in portraying the experiences of individuals who find themselves disconnected and alienated from and within their respective societies. Narrative therefore plays an important role in creating meaning and a hence coherence of the events which affect the self. This study reveals that meaning and coherence is attained through a process of introspection "looking inward".

Narrative therefore allows for the exploration of subjectivity; the subject questions how knowledge is acquired forcing a splitting of the self. The splitting or fragmentation of the self takes place when the individual remains in the present, often a state of crisis, and reflects on events and experiences of the past to find how these have contributed to the individual's present perceptions and emotions. This continuous back and forth between present and past creates a causal relationship and thus meaning is attained. Thus, the narrative enables the individual to identify problems or concerns, to give possible causes and to illustrate ways in which to deal with these problems and finally allows the suturing of the self to take place. It is this reflexive process which provides a means of making sense of experiences and the impact thereof on the individual. This introspective process is therefore considered imperative for self discovery. Once the individual has established a connection between the present and past self and an understanding is reached of the influential role the past plays in shaping the self and identity, a psychological transformation can then take place. This transformation is thus dependant on the coherence of events and experiences; without this, the individual will remain fragmented as seen in the novel *Scarlet Song*.

The introspective process is an important part of self discovery because it places the individual in a position to ask questions, to obtain "facts" about who or what influences and shapes the self and identity. This is further important when analysing how these external factors contribute to the development of self, but even more importantly how these same factors may also serve as obstacles and contribute to the individual remaining fragmented or the repression of the self and identity. As stated earlier, a split in the self is necessary to reflect on present and past self to be able to reach a coherent future self filled with purpose. The exploration of the relationship

between narrative and the self is important to understand how narrative firstly constructs and secondly, reconstructs the self and identity. Furthermore this exploration has shown that redefining and reclaiming a new identity requires the individual to participate in an active process of questioning in order to gain knowledge of the self. This active process is required because as established previously, the concepts of self and identity are not abstract nor fixed but rather fluid and constantly changing. It has also been established the often it is the individual's state of being in crisis which initiates the introspective process, as a means of making sense of and finding a possible solution.

The form of the narrative is relevant and crucial to understanding how the introspective process contributes to self discovery. The novels, *Woman At Point Zero* and *So Long A Letter* have been identified as personal narratives and are narrated in first person. The first novel portrays in confessional form the story of Firdaus who finds herself fragmented, occupying the position at point zero. Her confession requires her to look inward and to narrate the events and experiences from her past which have contributed to her present state of crisis. Firdaus is able to create a new transformed sense of self originating from the meaning conveyed from the knowledge she obtains. Ramatoulaye in *So Long A Letter*, finds a newly transformed self through the introspective process of letter writing. The act of writing here, forces the protagonist to split into the self who is narrating and the self who is experiencing. The narrating self is connected to the present whereas the experiencing self is linked to the past. This splitting of the self is necessary to create meaning for the character that is; who she is, how she has been defined by others and finally her own definition of self worth. Both Firdaus and Ramatoulaye experience their introspective journey during a period of

“forced” isolation. Firdaus is imprisoned for the crime she has committed, and Ramatoulaye is mourning the death of her husband. This state of enclosure appears to be influential in enabling them to disclose.

The form of first person narrative creates an intimate space in exploring the internal consciousness of the character without any interference. The focus remains on the individual and the reader is able to trace the character’s introspective process of questioning and becoming informed and finally understanding how the self has been shaped. This form of narrative allows the character’s own voice to be foregrounded and to emerge. The reader is able to ascertain the character’s own perceptions and feelings about their experiences.

The aim of this study is to establish how the form of the novel contributes to portraying the experiences of the individual and making sense of these experiences. In contrast to the first person narrative form, this study has included the novels *Scarlet Song* and *Two Women In One*, which are both third person narratives. The contrast drawn with regard to focus on subjectivity and access to the character’s internal consciousness in revealing the introspective, reveals the first person narrative provides a direct focus on the character’s process of questioning and understanding and finally transforming. The third person narrative form is useful because it foregrounds the social context which shapes the individual’s sense of self and identity. Social context is relevant to first person narrative but not a central focus. Third person narrative is therefore helpful in exploring how social constructs often force individuals to oblige the roles and views of the collective. The pressure which individuals are placed under often has varying effects on the individual, Ousmane is unable to find a way to integrate his personal identity with that of the collective and the outcome is that

he represses the personal identity for that of the collective. Mireille on the other hand enters an outsider to the Senegalese community and remains an outsider because of others' perceptions of her. She thus remains a fragmented and marginalised figure throughout the novel. This particular form of narrative benefits the reader to understand the effects of the complex nature of society has on the individual and that if introspection is not allowed, understanding is not attained and thus the individual remains incoherent. The character Bahiah however, has a different experience to the female central character Mireille. Bahiah initially displays feelings of disconnectedness and alienation but through a process of questioning and observing allowed by the free indirect style of narration, she emerges a transformed self at the end of the novel. The contrast between the forms of narrative, first and third person depicts the benefits of each form but also to establish that in view of the aims of this study, first person narrative is a pivotal and relevant form in the exploration of individuality, subjectivity and internal consciousness. This narrative form explicitly shows the character's position of reflection and how they shift from a point of being fragmented to a new reclaimed self. This form of narration gives the individual a voice and to express their own views and feelings about problems or concerns that they may have.

The novels which have been selected for this study focus on concerns of polygyny, patriarchy, marriage, race, culture and so forth, and how these influence the lived experiences of the central characters. The novels not only portray the characters' experiences but also present new perceptions of selfhood and identity. The novels reveal the experiences and significant people who shape and influence the lives of the central characters but also reveal these experiences and individuals as the source of alienation and marginalisation. The modes adopted by these novels allow the

protagonists to express their feelings of disconnection. Through the process of introspection, the central characters are able to discover and transform themselves. This “revolution” in the characters’ self- and world view is enabled by the narrative which is rebellious and resistant in form – but quietly so. Narration and novel form thus effect for the heroines of *Woman At Point Zero*, *So Long A Letter* and *Two Women In One* a restrained and elegant, but strikingly triumphant revolution.



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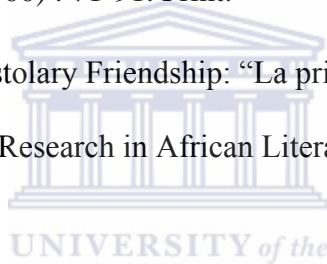
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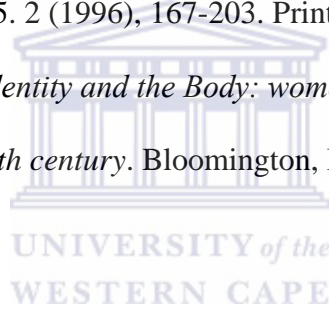
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