



"Africa through African lenses"

SO LONG A LETTER (2025, Senegal, 104 min.), directed by Angèle Diabang Brener; screenplay by Angèle Diabang Brener from the novel by Mariama Bâ; cinematography by Amath Niane; edited by Yannick Leroy and Hyacinthe Tiemtore; music by Omar Fadel, AbouBassa Bomou, and Yilim; with Amélie Mbaye (Ramatoulaye), Serge Abessolo (Modou), Sine Ngom Sall (Aissatou), Ndéye Dionkola Ndiaye (Daba), Aissata Esperance SY (Binetou), Cheikh Babou Gaye (Madani), Khady FALL (Farmata the Family Griot), Coumba Coulibaly (Aminata, the Mother-In-Law), Cheikh Seck (Imam). In French and Wolof with English subtitles.

My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows.--Mariama Bâ

So Long a Letter explores the tensions between Ramatoulaye's feminist values and her religion, which is often used to justify the mistreatment of women. There is a lot of misinterpretation and misappropriation of Islamic scripture that blinds many to the inherent sexism that justifies polygamy. It's up to a new generation of women to carry a different message forward.-- Angèle Diabang Brener at the film's opening at the NY African Film Festival.

Published in French in 1979, Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* has been translated into 25 languages (Wolof of course, as well as other African and international languages) and has long been a part of the school curriculum in Senegal. It tells its story, focused on the marital travails of two lifelong friends

in Dakar, in a unique manner: through an extremely long letter—a letter that has actually turned into a diary--that school headmistress Ramatoulaye is writing Aissatou, who has left Dakar and is now living far away.

Through the diary, we learn early on that Ramatoulaye has recently become a widow, and we are taken through the extensive traditional funeral rites that she must endure. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that Ramatoulaye and her late husband, Modou Fall, had been married for more than twenty-five years and had twelve children. And we come to learn that Modou Fall had recently exercised his legal and religious right to take a second wife.

Her situation echoes and in some ways contrasts with that of Aissatou. Like Ramatoulaye and Modou, Aissatou and her husband, Dr. Mawdo (who becomes Madani in the film), were married for many years and had many children together. But their marriage was blemished in his mother's eyes by the fact that they had married for love, and Aissatou didn't come from the same noble caste as do Mawdo and their friends, Ramatoulaye and Modou Fall. (Her father was from a family of goldsmiths, part of the lower artisan caste within the traditional social hierarchy.) Mawdo's mother eventually persuades him to take a second wife, a relative who is also of the noble caste. Aissatou, like Ramatoulaye an educated, progressive woman, will have none of that. To the shock of everyone, she forces a divorce and leaves.

This is a blow to Ramatoulaye, who feels abandoned by the departure of her friend. And when Modou Fall eventually follows in his friend's footsteps and falls for and marries a girl the same age as his daughter (though in this case from a lower caste), her life is further turned upside down.

Her inner struggle to reconcile tradition and progressive feminism, traditional privilege and democratic ideals, her role as a wife and mother and her role as a working professional, become the central dynamic that the novel explores.

Given the book's status as an icon of feminist literature and a text known to all Senegalese students, Angèle Diabang Brener's decision to take on the adaptation to film was ambitious and courageous. One might have thought

that a story from more than forty years ago, focused on the lingering effects of traditional polygamy, would no longer be relevant today, particularly in an urban setting. The truth is that polygamy and the traditional male privilege that underlies it, remain very much in force. In fact, the director tells us in interviews, the present President and Prime Minister of Senegal both have taken second wives.

The film is faithful to the novel in many ways, but there are differences. Rather than use flashbacks, Diabang has chosen a more straightforward narrative. The fact that this is all a letter/diary that Ramatoulaye is writing her friend is introduced via voice-over narration at the beginning, and we are reminded of it at various points in the film. However, for the most part, she chooses not to bring us into her protagonist's head via narration, but allows us to SEE what is going on internally via the speech, silences, expressions, and body language of the excellent Senegalese actress, Amélie Mbaye.

She opens the film with some scenes not in the source novel: Ramatoulaye in the classroom, telling her students about Aline Sittoe Diatta (1920-1944), the Jola mystic and resistance leader known as the Senegalese Joan of Arc; as well as romantic and amorous scenes between Ramatoulaye and Modou. (By the way, the number of children has been reduced from twelve to four!) These added scenes do a good job of establishing the characters at their height and the relationship that will eventually be demolished.

Ramatoulaye's family griot, Farmata, plays a more prominent role here, reminding us of her status as a noblewoman, her connection to a different kind of tradition (one not male-dominated), and her link to the outside world of gossip and convention. And so does her co-wife's mother, the grasping, lower-class, resentful, and social-striving Aminata, brought to life with power and subtlety by Coumba Coulibaly. In fact, in general the women in the film, including daughters, rivals, and supporting characters, are more strikingly present and powerful than they are in the novel, where everyone must pass through the filter of Ramatoulaye's meditations. The men generally come

across as individually less powerful and more pathetic in the film, even as we recognize the power of the patriarchy that is behind them.

Throughout her disorientation and her struggles, her newly-found and accepted orientations, there is one thing that Ramatoulaye can count on to serve as her anchor and her compass--in both the novel and the film—and that is the power of her enduring friendship with Assiatou. As you'll see in the Director's Statement below, it is emblematic of the underlying messages that Angèle Diabang Brener is seeking to convey in this film.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Like every student in Senegal, I had to read the novel So Long a Letter by Mariama Bâ as part of the school curriculum. Several years later, I reread it with pleasure. I realized then the force and the subtlety of the book in its manner of depicting Senegalese society and its impact on the collective coming-to-consciousness of the condition of women.

Mariama Bâ is an inescapable figure in African literature, whose foundational work has marked subsequent generations by the strength of her narrative and the modernity of her questioning.

In modern Senegal, the film will rekindle the debate over polygamy and socio-cultural demands that are frequently too constraining and ultimately useless, as well as over social cohesion versus individual liberty. Although aware of their progress and their emancipation, women are still prisoners of stereotypes that remain obstacles to the actualization of their inner rebellion. The social "WE" always dominates the individual "I."

Beyond the desire to depict Senegalese society, my desire to adapt this novel is above all that of recounting the trajectory of a woman who loves, abandoned suddenly from one day to the next by the person she loves. It's this unconditional love felt by a woman for her partner that will give this film its universal character.

For me, there's no distinction between Western women and African women—they're simply women! There's the necessity of solidarity between women!

This solidarity, however, is often fractured by dividing lines that are often nourished by women themselves. Thus, they alone can create the conditions for change that will improve their situation.

As a woman, I want to speak of the feminine condition and to leave the choices up to the women in the film, allowing them to evolve according to their own rhythm. Because that's the sum total of all the struggles that define, bit by bit, a pathway for women's liberation.

--From the *Une Si Longue Lettre* Press Packet (tr. Michael Dembrow)

For more of Angèle Diabang Brener's thoughts on the project, here's a link to an interview that she did with Olivier Barlet in 2014, as she was still writing the screenplay. <https://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2014/07/i-am-not-interested-in-denouncing.html>

ANGÈLE DIABANG BRENER

Angèle Diabang Brener was born in Dakar in 1979, the year that *Une Si Longue Lettre* was published. She began her university studies in Law, but soon realized that she couldn't ignore her passion for film. She went on to study at the Média Centre de Dakar and then was accepted into La Fémis, the prestigious Parisian La Fondation Européenne Pour les Métiers de l'Image et du Son (European Foundation for the Professions of Image and Sound), which had succeeded IDHEC, the French "grand école" for the study of cinema as the French national cinema school. This was followed by further study at the Film Academy Baden-Wurtemberg in Germany.

After working as a camera operator and editor, Diabang began making documentary films in 2005 with *My Beautiful Smile*, focused on the beauty standards for Senegalese women. Her short fictional film, *My Beloved Co-*

Wife (2019), won the prize for Best Screenplay at the 2019 Émergence du Togo Festival.

So Long a Letter is her first feature film. This adaptation of the Mariama Bâ epistolary novel is the product of twelve years of writing, fundraising, preparation, and production. It opened in Senegal to great acclaim, playing in two of Senegal's five movie theaters (all of them in Dakar) for two months starting in July 2025. By September it was playing in sixteen different theaters on the African continent, a remarkable achievement (sadly) for the debut of a film made by an African director, let alone by an African woman.

She also has led the production company Karoninka, which produces films with a woman-centered social focus, for the last fourteen years.

MARIAMA BÂ BIOGRAPHY (from *Qiraat Africa*)

Mariama Bá is a prominent figure in African feminist literature. As a writer and women's rights activist, she used her pen to address complex social and political issues, such as polygamy, gender equality, and the challenges faced by African women in a society torn between tradition and modernity. Her career, which began as a teacher and ended as one of Africa's most celebrated female writers, reflects a dual commitment: expressing women's realities and advocating for social change.

Mariama Bá was born on April 17, 1929, in Dakar, Senegal, to a prominent Senegalese family. Her father was a civil servant and served as Minister of Health under President Léopold Sédar Senghor. Her mother died when she was young, and she was raised by her grandparents. This social situation exposed her to strict traditions, especially those that governed the lives of girls.

Bá was fortunate to receive a good education. She attended the French school and then the École Normale Rousseau in Saint-Louis, a boarding school for female teachers. This school was an important place in shaping her intellectual awareness. There, she read Western literature and was exposed to

new ideas about women's rights. Although her grandfather opposed her education, her father supported her, enabling her to continue her studies.

After graduating, Ba worked as a teacher and then as a regional school inspector. During this period, she became involved in journalism, writing articles on women's issues in local magazines, which provided her with a platform to express her opinions.

Mariam Ba's literary work, though limited, is considered highly influential. She wrote only two novels, but each one generated widespread acclaim in literary and academic circles.

"A Very Long Letter" (1979): This novel is considered a masterpiece of African literature. The novel tells the story of a Senegalese woman named Ramatoulaye, whose husband leaves her for a younger woman. The novel is presented in the form of a long letter from Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou, who has gone through a similar experience.

The novel addresses the issue of polygamy from a feminist perspective, revealing the emotional and social challenges women face in a polygamous society. Ba shows how tradition can interfere with women's rights and how women can regain their dignity in the face of injustice. This novel shocked Senegalese society, as it was the first literary work to address this issue so openly. The novel won the Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa in 1980, bringing her international acclaim.

Bâ, in her [acceptance speech for the Noma](#), remarked that she was surprised at winning:

I was very surprised. Even more so because I did not know of the existence of the prize. And even more, I did not even know that my book was being considered for any prize ... A friend came to my house to tell me I had won. I was unaware of it. I didn't even realise that there was prize money ... I was even more proud and happy because it was not only a prize for Francophone Africa, but a prize for black Africa. That is, all of French- and English-speaking

Africa. There were many candidates, so it was a prize which obviously was important.

“The Red Song” (1981): This novel is considered a continuation of her previous work. It tells the story of two women from different social backgrounds, showing how social class and education can impact a woman’s life. In this novel, Ba offers a critique of Senegalese society, showing how poverty, corruption, and discrimination can impact a woman’s life. The novel focuses on the importance of education for women and the need for women to achieve financial independence.

Mariamama Bá was active in several women’s movements. She believed that literature was a tool for change, and that writers had a responsibility to express the reality of their society. She fought for gender equality, access to education for girls, and the rejection of traditions that restricted women.

Bá was also a member of several women’s organizations and participated in numerous conferences on women’s rights. She believed that true emancipation for women could only be achieved through education, financial independence, and participation in public life.

Mariamama Bá died on August 17, 1981, at the age of 52, after a battle with cancer.

Mariamama Bá’s legacy is profoundly influential. Although her literary output was limited, it revolutionized African literature. Bá’s work is considered the foundation of African feminist literature. She was the first writer to address women’s issues with such frankness and depth, opening the door for a new generation of African female writers.

<https://qiraatafrican.com/en/17465/mariama-ba-1929-1981-senegalese-author-and-womens-rights-activist/>

For a more intimate portrait of Mariama Bâ, I’d recommend her obituary in the *NY Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/11/obituaries/mariama-ba->

[overlooked.html?smid=nytcare-ios-share](#), entitled “Overlooked No More: Mariama Bâ, Voice of African Feminism.” Published in 2024, more than forty years after her death in 1981 at the age of 52, it is part of [Overlooked](#), “a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in *The Times*.”

--Notes by Michael Dembrow
Cascade Festival of African Films
[Africanfilmfestival.org](#)