



## Plurilingualism and its Forms in *So long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ\*

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MARIAMA Bâ, the first Senegalese writer, mixes in her novel, *A So Long A Letter* (1979), the references to her dual African and French culture and that derived from her Muslim religion. Thus, the three languages - Wolof, French, and Arabic - play an essential role in his literary writing: French, the language of narration and thus the main language, is always present and we can find traces, visible or invisible, from the other two languages. The question is how the author uses, consciously or unconsciously, as any other plurilingual writer, different strategies for mixing the three languages.

In fact, multilingualism, in Senegal, a social fact as well as a historical one, is a completely ordinary daily practice. According to a survey report on the state of languages in Senegal, Wolof, the language inherited from ancestors but also the most widely understood and spoken national language is an oral language of daily use. French, which was introduced and imposed during the colonial era, became a language of writing and is used as an official language. Learned in the school, it benefits the status of dominant language although very little used in daily communications. Moreover, the Arabic is used from the time when Islam was introduced in the country. Plurilingualism constitutes not only a personal and social practice, but also a literary practice and the essential element of Senegalese literature, in its variations between Wolof, Arabic and French.

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In *So long a letter*, the first novel by the Senegalese writer which was published in 1979 and written in French, we constantly see the three languages mixing. This major work of African literary heritage is dotted with elements that refer to the life of the author. It is in the Koranic school that the author-narrator is introduced to Islam, the knowledge of which is limited to a few Arabic notions. The appropriate French language and culture in the school and carried by French is opposed to a tradition inherited from ancestors and carried by Wolof. In addition, on a formal level, plurilingualism manifests itself in a narration in three languages, the usage of which varies according to the narrative situation, the communities concerned and the speakers.

Plurilingualism presented by Bakhtin makes it possible to coexist the linguistic varieties of the same language but also words and expressions from different languages inserted in the romantic discourse. The plurilingualism that we propose to study in this article is therefore the second case, the variations of which, as Proto Pisani claims, can fall into three categories: Plurilingualism with translation, translation without plurilingualism and plurilingualism without translation. These different practices can sometimes coexist in the same text and the predominance of one or the other corresponds to the poetic choices and visions of the world proposed by each author.

In the first category, plurilingualism with translation, translations of words and expressions in foreign languages can be given in the body of the text, in footnotes or in a glossary to the end of the book. In *So long a letter* where the original and its translation are present in the same text (in the body of the text or in footnotes), plurilingualism with translation is then the most used variant. Because in fact we see a very present author, mediator of African culture and anxious to make it understand in its most details to her monolingual reader.

The words or expressions maintained in their original language (Arabic or Wolof) are those related to African culture or Muslim religion that the author refuses to translate into French, to be able to better show to her French reader the differences of cultures or religions. In fact, Bâ lets Wolof and Arabic (dialect) mix with the French of the narration and helps her reader by explanations or metalinguistic comments.

On the formal level, next to the explanations, the change of the transcription code is another process implemented by the author whenever there is question of religious and cultural information.

However, she uses the standard character for French in general: either for the French of the narrative or for the instrumental French, which translates the religious or cultural practices.

Translation without plurilingualism consists in directly translating the other language of the author, without leaving traces of plurilingualism. In this case, the traces of the mother tongue are not explicit and visible. At first glance invisible, because a linguistic study would make it possible to discover a translated language, a tracing of the mother tongue. In *So long a letter*, we see parts where the author literally translates into French the words, expressions or popular proverbs from Wolof which also reproduce their orality. Because an African text is a text with strong oral dependence, which borrows its elements from the oral by inserting into the body of the text fragments of proverbs, tales, fables, etc. Among the different aspects of this aesthetic of orality, we can name "repetition", "anaphora", "hyperbola", and "the economy of terms useless to understanding". Bâ, creates the French language written at the border of the two languages-cultures, written and oral, French-Wolof.

For the case of plurilingualism without translation where plurilingualism is present explicitly in the texts without a translation accompanying it, we found no example.

If literary plurilingualism is a fact, which was imposed on Bâ but the translation (visible or invisible) is a personal choice. If she begins her story with the confidences of a narrator to her friend but on the second page she blurs the boundaries between genres, between fiction and reality intending to orient her reader and making her better understand the realities socio-cultural of his country. On the one hand, there is the narration and an author behind; on the other hand, there is the intervention of an author who takes distance from the narration, who breaks the narration to speak to her reader through explanations, notes or translation. It is therefore less a matter of telling a story than of establishing contact with the reader who cannot understand cultural connotations, of respecting a reader who does not know the meaning of words because they belong to a sphere sociolinguistics unknown to him. The translation then allows the reader to establish links with the world of the author, which, although different, can be accepted and recognized in its rules.

Plurilingualism, a concrete manifestation of cultural diversity, is illustrated in *So long a letter* in different ways, visible or invisible, depending on the strategy consciously or unconsciously adopted by the author. Plurilingualism with translation and translation without plurilingualism are the dominant strategies and in both cases, translation

takes part in the act of writing and becomes its constituent. Through this self-translation, the author asserts himself as a translator: she is the witness, the mediator, the passer, the messenger between two worlds, which already exist, and which can be translated one into the other. In this narration in French, the author thus recognizes her culture, in the relationships it has with the culture of "Other". This strategy of building and recognizing linguistic and cultural identities presents a strong desire to reduce the differences between the two languages and dominated-dominant cultures and the translation is intended to make contact with the French reader.

For the last case, plurilingualism without translation where the author remains silent, we have found no example in a novel written by a writer who, mindful of contact with cultures, tries to establish a bridge between his culture and the foreign culture. Because plurilingualism without translation, making the text opaque, underlines the plurilingual aspect of the text and putting a clear linguistic barrier in front of the comprehension of the reader, is the linguistic sign of conflict and war. The translation reconciling the languages of the novel while accounting for their differences invites the reader to perceive the different worlds that make up the author's universe and to hear this voice that would not have been heard without it.

**Keywords**— Mariama Bâ, Plurilingualism, Reader, Translation, *So long a letter*.

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