THROUGH THE FILTER OF AGEING: ELSA TRIOLET, MARIAMA BÂ AND MARYSE CONDÉ

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the portrayal of literary images of ageing women through selected works by Mariama Bâ, Maryse Condé and Elsa Triolet. It looks at different generations, nationalities, races and cultures, yet, through the common medium of French, whilst their approaches may differ, all three writers ultimately display a perhaps surprising consensus with regard to the various travails that beset women d'*un certain âge*. In particular, and reading through the concept of liminality, I demonstrate that these authors uphold the view that, consciously or sub-consciously, women in their midlife years do undergo a rite of passage, with the changes in a woman's body being mirrored by changes in her identity: life *is*, at least for these authors' female characters, different after the menopause.

Reading these novels through the filter of ageing, I explore how Elsa Triolet uses her characters to articulate, on a micro-level, her own fear and distress at the signs of deterioration of the physical body, whilst on a macro-level, and writing through a particularly turbulent period of history, her personal angst becomes a fear for the future of mankind. In contrast, both Mariama Bâ and Maryse Condé focus on the reconstruction of identity that is forced upon their characters as a result of their midlife crises, with the resultant freedom from domination being expressed on various levels by both authors through their discourses on culture and identity.

At the start of the twenty-first century, with growing awareness of our increased longevity and all its consequences, ageing is a topical subject. Given that youth and beauty are seen as the holy grails of modern society, ageing women can easily feel marginalised, yet I argue that these authors demonstrate how one can take on the challenge of building a new relationship with one's changing body and successfully negotiate the passage of time.

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My thanks also to the staff at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Richelieu, whose flexible interpretation of the rules meant I was granted access to Elsa Triolet's unpublished manuscripts relating to *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*. I was very grateful for this privilege.

Finally, I should like to thank my husband, who inhabits the business world, for enduring the vicissitudes of living with someone who has spent much of the last four years inhabiting the academic world, and for providing me with a 'room of my own' in which to work.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

Works by Elsa Triolet

CB	*Le Cheval blanc*
CO	*Brik, Lili – Triolet, Elsa, Correspondance 1921-1970*
CR	*Le Cheval roux*
EI	*Triolet, Elsa, Écrits intimes 1912-1939*
IR	*L'Inspecteur des ruines*
MR	*Mille regrets*
ORC	*Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*
R	*Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*

Works by Mariama Bâ

CE	*Un Chant écarlate*
SLL	*Une si longue lettre*

Works by Maryse Condé

HFC	*Histoire de la femme cannibale*
USR	*Une Saison à Rihata*

INTRODUCTION

There is not one process of aging, but many; there is not one life course that is followed, but multiple courses[1]

Bethany Ladimer wrote that she often saw distinct uneasiness reflected in many faces at gatherings when she mentioned that she was working on the subject of ageing writers[2] and I would have to agree. In my own case, if I declare that my research topic is how female authors writing in French in the twentieth century handle the question of female midlife ageing, which necessarily implies a reference to the menopause, younger interlocutors' eyes tend to glaze over instantly. That is because I have dared mention two words taboo to them in one sentence: 'ageing' and 'menopause', both subjects on which, male or female, they consider they have neither knowledge, nor, at least for the time being, interest, thus revealing the insouciance of youth in their lack of awareness that, whatever our age, we are all ageing subjects, since from the moment of birth our lives are a lived process of continual maturation unto death. As Simone de Beauvoir said: "l'âge, c'est un passage de l'infini au fini"[3].

However, while the juxtaposition of 'ageing' and 'French women writers' invariably suggests, without too much reflection, Colette and Simone de Beauvoir, both of whom are wonderful authors to read on this subject with their contrastive views on female ageing[4], I wanted to reach out further to include not only different generations, but different nationalities, different races and different cultures writing about women ageing, primarily in their midlife years: "à la veille de leur vieillesse"[5], hence the attraction of my seemingly arbitrary choices of Elsa Triolet, Mariama Bâ and Maryse Condé. Different writers, different approaches, and all three, coincidentally, also engaging, in different ways but quite openly, with the politics of the time in which they were writing, thus their novels can be read on a macro as well as micro-level, yet ultimately all three, through their literary images of ageing women, dealing with: "l'expérience féminine" which, as Françoise Thébaud points out: "c'est le mot clé de l'époque avec «identité»[6].

Elsa Triolet's work that I examine comes closest to: "the creation of fictions that address the body, that imbed it in narrative, and that therefore embody meanings: stories on the body, and the body in story"[7]

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[1] Pearlin, Leonard, I., 'Discontinuities in the Study of Aging' in *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Hareven, Tamara K. & Adams, Kathleen, J., London: Tavistock Publications (1982), p.63.
[2] Ladimer, Bethany, *Colette, Beauvoir, & Duras: Age and Women Writers*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1999), p.ix.
[3] Schwarzer, A., *Simone de Beauvoir aujourd'hui*, Paris: Mercure de France (1984), p.93.
[4] *Colette's Rite of Passage* was the title of my MA thesis: Barnes, Linda, University of Kent (2001)
[5] Fisher, Claudine Guégan, a book review of Paule Constant's *Confidence pour Confidence* in *French Review*, 73:4 (2000), p.760.
[6] Thébaud, Françoise, *Écrire l'histoire des femmes*, Fontenay/Saint-Cloud: ENS (1998), p.101.
[7] Brooks, Peter, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1993), p.xi.

and in her writings in particular, it is possible to observe the truth of the observation that: "vieillir est pour chaque homme l'occasion d'une rencontre décisive avec lui-même, qui l'invite à réinventer le temps"[8]. Among themes embracing time passing, the future, the past, memories, dreams and fears, Triolet also manages to integrate individual and collective identities, by articulating such subjective experiences as ageing seen through the deterioration of the physical body in *Mille regrets*[9] or the narrator's 'masked' ageing body in *Le cheval roux*[10], and collective nightmares, where radiation fall-out is a universal experience, affecting everyone equally, young, old, even the unborn, in *Le cheval roux*. Her work succeeds on a number of levels by reflecting: "a psychodynamic understanding of identity as something that is inevitably layered, having depth as well as appearance"[11], as well as the more mundane, stereotypical portrayal of the female ageing body as the site of negative ageing, as exhibited by the unnamed, middle-aged protagonist in *Mille regrets* who internalises society's judgement on fading beauty and, socialised to see herself as an object, becomes overly dependent on seeking male approval. I should mention at this stage that I am following Peter Brooks' example in allowing a broad semantic range for "body" – biological entity, psycho-sexual construction, cultural product – since, like him, I believe it is all of these, often all at once, to writers and readers[12].

In contrast, for cultural reasons, Mariama Bâ focuses less on the body, which remains peripheral to the novel, and more on the reconstruction of identity that is forced on Ramatoulaye as she writes through her midlife crisis. My original instinct was to read *Une si longue lettre*[13] as a *Bildungsroman* for a mature woman, with no contradiction implied by the apparent paradox, but on closer reading, and borrowing the concept of liminality proposed by Victor Turner[14], and appropriated by Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa[15], I see *Une si longue lettre* as having many (but not all) of the characteristics of a liminal novel. Turner's view, based on observation of ritual in traditional cultures[16] (which makes liminality more suitable for an analysis of African literature) is that: "all rites of passage or 'transition' are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation"[17]. Ramatoulaye is clearly in the 'separation' phase when she is isolated in mourning in the 'liminal place', after being symbolically

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[8] Guillaumin, Jean, 'Le temps et l'âge: Réflexions psychanalytiques sur le vieillir' in *Le temps et la vie: les dynamismes du vieillissement*, ed. by Guillaumin, Jean & Reboul, Hélène, Lyon: Chronique Sociale (1982), p.133.

[9] Triolet, Elsa, *Mille regrets*, Paris: Denoël (1942).

[10] Triolet, Elsa, *Le Cheval roux ou les intentions humaines*, Paris: Gallimard (1972). First published in 1953.

[11] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1 (2004), p.46.

[12] Brooks, Peter, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1993), p.xii.

[13] Bâ, Mariama, *Une si longue lettre*, Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes (2001) – first publication: Dakar, Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines in 1979.

[14] Turner, Victor, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1967).

[15] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996).

[16] Primarily the Ndembu of Zambia.

[17] Quoted by Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.1.

and literally stripped of her possessions: "notre belle-famille [...] nous laisse dans un dénuement total, nous qui aurons besoin de soutien matériel" (SLL. p.23) and her seclusion, whilst not strictly according to Turner's conditions, can nevertheless be seen as the middle phase of liminality, where she is on the threshold, symbolically invisible, being temporarily buried as it were between two fixed points: what she was and what she is going to become[18]. By contrasting the lives of Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye, as well as taking us through Ramatoulaye's rite of passage[19], Bâ also demonstrates the truth of Foucault's earlier proposition that state (here, religion) power and (male) discourses work to contain people: "les disciplines du corps et les régulations de la population constituent les deux pôles autour desquels s'est déployée l'organisation du pouvoir sur la vie"[20] where those in power use: "techniques diverses et nombreuses pour obtenir l'assujettissement des corps et le contrôle des populations"[21], as well as his later contention that the dynamics of power are not fixed: "on exerce le pouvoir à l'intérieur d'un réseau où on occupe une position charnière. On est toujours d'une certaine façon gouvernant et gouverné [...] ou d'une rotation: on est tantôt gouvernant, tantôt gouverné"[22].

The most recent of the texts under examination, Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale*[23] could be considered part of a relatively new genre, the midlife woman's progress novel, where instead of midlife being represented as loss and decline: "the plots [...] show them [the heroines] rescuing themselves from situations of radical depletion"[24]. In this novel, Rosélie, a fifty year old Guadeloupian in exile, victim of her own *mauvaise foi* or self-delusion, is forced through a painful period of transition as a crisis compels her to take control of her life and redefine her self-image. As with Ramatoulaye, there is the possibility of reading Rosélie's seclusion from society after her partner's murder as placing her in the 'separation' phase of liminality, since although she is not literally stripped of any possessions, she is certainly metaphorically stripped of all that is certain in her life, and until the truth behind the murder is revealed, she is in limbo, lacking self-esteem, trapped between what she was in the past, and what she has the chance, if she seizes it, to become in the future. If, at first, Rosélie appears to be the epitome of the passive woman, compliant in her own subjugation, reduced here to the privileged world of the child and thus saved from having to make consequential choices, she finally comes through to prove herself to be an independent woman of the twenty-first century, and, as a metaphor for the wider issue of black empowerment, finds pleasure in her freedom from domination. Shelton writes: "Condé's discourse on culture and identity is formulated such that it represents a critique of power. Here I refer to power rooted in historically determined

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[18] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.2.
[19] Term generally attributed to the Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his publication *Les rites de passage*, Paris: Picard (1909).
[20] Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.183.
[21] ibid., p.184.
[22] Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité III: Le souci de soi*, Paris: Gallimard (1984), p121.
[23] Condé, Maryse, *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, Paris: Mercure de France (2003).
[24] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*", Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1997), p.82.

relations of master/slave, white/black – power generated by the sociocultural system which governs male-female relations"[25] and this is certainly applicable to *Histoire de la femme cannibale* which, enhanced through being set in South Africa, also confronts the issue of how personal identity is inextricably bound up with cultural and racial identity.

Given the obvious truth of Leonard Pearlin's epigraph, I was not anticipating any prescriptive writing on how women in midlife should lead their lives, but rather expected to be stimulated by how, or perhaps I should say whether, through a close reading of selected texts, these discrete authors: "conscious of their status as women"[26] achieved an authentic existence for their female protagonists at this time in their life and how they actually represented ageing in their fiction. I was also interested in discovering whether there are any true universals to be found in their narratives of female ageing, which, given the authors under review, necessarily encompasses what literature has to say about ageing and ethnicity, as well as how these authors illustrate continuity theory[27], that is how individuals maintain their identity by evolving and adapting while at the same time experiencing change.

In addition, although none of the works I have chosen to study is autobiographical[28], in that they do not conform to the strict definition of the term according to Lejeune where: "dans l'autobiographie, on suppose qu'il y a identité entre l'auteur d'une part, et le narrateur et le protagoniste d'autre part"[29], there is no doubt that all three authors, to a lesser or greater extent, can be read through their novels. Therefore, given that two of Triolet's works and Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* were written when they were in their own midlife years, and given a certain amount of biographical detail, I will not be adhering to a post-modern perspective which would ignore ageing issues directly related to the author. In fact, particularly with regard to Triolet, I consider that her views on ageing have a direct and dramatic impact on her work, and that her life, and her body, can be seen as a text which she continuously reworks through her novels, a technique of which, in my opinion[30], Colette is the arch-promulgator. Ryan Song sees Colette and Beauvoir as both having recourse to their body as a site of self-knowledge and I consider that Triolet writes in the same manner:

> Ageing, for Colette and Beauvoir is not merely a literary or theoretical concern. Old age in Colette and Beauvoir is invoked *because* embodied – that is, old age is vocalized because the body is experienced as a site of vital episteme. The body in

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[25] Shelton, Marie-Denise, 'Condé: the Politics of Gender and Identity' in *World Literature Today*, 67:4, Autumn 1993, p.717.
[26] Fallaize, Elizabeth, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (1993), p.2.
[27] "Continuity is not an absence of change. Continuity refers to a coherence or consistency of patterns over time. Specific changes tend to be given significance in relation to a general notion of a relatively continuous whole". Atchley, Robert C., 'Continuity Theory and the Evolution of Activity in Later Adulthood' in *Activity and Aging: Staying Involved in Later Life*, ed. by Kelly, John R., London: Sage Publications (1993), p.7.
[28] Although Elsa Triolet appears as herself in *Le Cheval roux*.
[29] Lejeune, Philippe, *L'autobiographie en France*, Paris: Armand Colin (1998), p.17.
[30] I have analysed this in: Barnes, Linda, *Colette's Rite of Passage*, MA Thesis, University of Kent (2001).

> Colette and Beauvoir, contrary to the Cartesian dualism which dominated most of Western metaphysics from the Renaissance to Modernity, can be consulted as a reliable source of self-knowledge[31].

With such a wide remit, my research inevitably encroaches on a number of fields, including sociology, psychology and gerontology[32], as well as the natural sciences. Since I am dealing with ageing in (Francophone) literature, my approach can best be described as being in the domain of literary gerontology, a relatively new[33], exciting area of research which can be summarised by this quotation from Mike Hepworth: "where experts in literary criticism and the history of literature have drawn on gerontological research (often from a psychological/developmental perspective) to carry out an in-depth analysis of particular texts or writers"[34]. Anne Wyatt-Brown further elaborates on this, contending that literary gerontologists seek to challenge the preconceptions about ageing that influence our thinking about later life[35], thus highlighting both the broad scope of this discipline, and the need, given that the first sentence of *Aging and Gender in Literature* published in 1993 admits that: "aging is a missing category in current literary theory"[36]. The fact that this statement no longer holds true today is thanks to a small, but growing nucleus of researchers, male and female, who have been determined to give ageing in literature the status it deserves, although it must be admitted that it still hovers on the margins of literary theory. One would have expected a plethora of books and articles to have appeared after Bethany Ladimer's well-received *Colette, Beauvoir, & Duras: Age and Women Writers*, published in 1999, and certainly papers and books continue to appear relating to ageing with reference to the works and life of Colette and Simone de Beauvoir, but what of other authors, male and female?

However, before proceeding to the texts by three authors as yet unread through the filter of ageing, I consider it important to include some background to the topic of ageing in general, incorporating aspects of the current theories of ageing which have influenced my research and guided my interpretations of the novels under review. In the following sections, therefore, I examine what we mean by ageing, including a brief historical overview, and I explore the process of ageing, together with how identity is related to that

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[31] Song, Ryan, 'Comparative Figures of Ageing in the Memoirs of Colette and Beauvoir: Corporeality, Infirmity, Identity' in *Corporeal Practices (Re)figuring the Body in French Studies*, ed. by Prest, Julia & Thompson, Hannah, Bern: Peter Lang (2000), p.80.

[32] Gerontology, along with Geriatrics, are sciences of old age. The science of Gerontology dates back to 1881 when the French physician Jean-Martin Charcot published his Clinical Lectures on Senile and Chronic Diseases, clearly outlining the scientific principles for the practical study of ageing.

[33] Literary scholars first presented papers at the Conference on Human Values and Aging at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, USA in 1975 and *The Gerontologist* published the first qualitative study in literature in 1962. Source: Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. 'Literary Gerontology Comes of Age' in *Handbook of the Humanities & Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), pp.331-332.

[34] Hepworth, Mike, *Stories of Ageing*, Buckingham: OUP (2000), p.4.

[35] Wyatt-Brown, Anne, M., 'Introduction: Aging, Gender, and Creativity' in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, ed. by Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. & Rossen, Janice, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1993), p.3.

[36] ibid., p.1.

process. I also devote a section to the menopause, which I consider to be a constituent part of the biological process of ageing in women, and I assess how ageing is, to at least some extent, socially and culturally constructed according to gender. I appreciate that much of what follows refers to research in English, although I have endeavoured to include French references, but in this Introduction I am considering ageing in its widest sense, rather than relating it to any particular culture.

I should also like to emphasise that I am aware that by deliberately focusing on female midlife ageing in the texts under examination, I am perpetuating the schism in gender differences. However, whilst I concur with Margaret Gullette's observation that: "'midlife aging' like ageing in general is a unisex dilemma with a powerful component of cultural construction"[37], my particular interest is how female ageing is affected by this cultural construction as I am aware that, for women, sexism and ageism are often linked, resulting in the double jeopardy that can be experienced by older women (or, as illustrated through Rosélie, the protagonist of *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, the triple jeopardy of ageism, sexism and racism), since it is generally accepted that if one is a woman: "old age encompasses a double absence, that of being 'not male' and of being 'not young'. From being only too visible, one becomes invisible[38], as the attention of a masculinised and youth-obsessed society ebbs away"[39].

Given that, although reading in French, I am a white, middle-class female writing in English, living in England, I am also conscious at all times of: "the irony of writing about differences within communities of which I am outside"[40], yet believe that I can still make a valid contribution despite being an outsider in so many ways. Thus, at the conclusion of this thesis, using a methodology which: "repose sur le repérage des constantes dans un corpus de fictions aussi varié que possible"[41], I intend to have demonstrated the truth of Rosalie Baum's statement that:

> literature has [...] been influential in forming current views of aging. It has done so by acting as a mirror to culturally accepted views of aging and to the underlying assumptions of those views. But it has also done so by investigating those views, by testing new concepts of aging, and by inventing different paradigms for meaningful living in the last stages of life[42].

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[37] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, 'Menopause as Magic Marker: Discursive Consolidation in the United States and Strategies for Cultural Combat' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.187.
[38] Thus Kathleen Woodward felt able to write in 1999 that her book addresses: "the virtually invisible subject of older women". Woodward, Kathleen, (ed.), *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1999), p.x.
[39] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1 (2004), p.49.
[40] Michie, Helena, *Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture*, New York: OUP (1992), p.11.
[41] Heinich, Nathalie, *États de femme: L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale*, Paris: Gallimard (1996), p.14.
[42] Baum, Roselie Murphy, 'Work, Contentment, and Identity in Aging Women in Literature' in *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, ed. by Deats, Sara Munson & Lenker, Lagretta Tallent, Westport, CT: Praeger (1999), p.89.

I feel it is also appropriate to mention at this juncture something that I do not usually admit in public, which is that, at the age of fifty-two, I am writing as a post-menopausal woman, hence my personal interest in the subject of midlife ageing generally. Indeed, it would be disingenuous, if not fundamentally dishonest, if I did not reveal my age, and sex, since my own experiences will necessarily be reflected in my interpretations of the novels I have studied, perhaps even more so than is usual given that the process of ageing is a subjective experience. Whilst my intent throughout this thesis has been to be objective and academically rigorous in my research, my personal view on the menopause and the experience of midlife ageing is that they are, somehow, inextricably linked. I believe, therefore, that there is a physiological reason why some women, if not all to some degree or other, experience this time in their midlife years as a period of transition from one stage to another, and that successful ageing relies on whether and how women adjust, consciously or not, to a new state of being.

i. Ageing and the ages of (wo)man

> "Aging is an ongoing biological, psychological and sociological process involving the individual and the structural characteristics of the social system within which it occurs"[43]

At the start of the twenty-first century, with growing awareness of our increased longevity[44] and all its attendant social and economic consequences[45], ageing is topical, witness the increasing amount of research on the subject over the last twenty or so years[46] and, as the above quotation suggests, it requires a multidisciplinary approach which I will endeavour to provide in the sections which follow.

First, however, we need to understand what is meant by ageing. The definition of the noun "ageing", according to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998), is: "the process of growing old", citing: the external signs of ageing | [as modifier] the ageing process. Interestingly, when used as an adjective, it states: "(of a person) growing old; elderly: looking after ageing relatives | an ageing population" and: "(of a thing) reaching the end of useful life: the world's ageing fleet of oil tankers". Is there really a difference in the meaning of the adjective when applied to people or things, or did the lexicographers consider that the less than subtle definition: "reaching the end of useful life" for 'things' was too extreme for 'people's' delicate sensibilities? Many of the elderly alive today would no doubt attest that they are treated as 'things' rather than 'people' in the youth-obsessed culture[47] currently reigning in the Western world where to be young is to be part of the dominant culture[48] and old age, in Simone de Beauvoir's words: "n'est pas seulement un fait biologique, mais un fait culturel"[49] as well as: "un secret honteux dont il est indécent de parler"[50].

Beauvoir's observations are still apposite at the start of the twenty-first century since, unless financially secure, the elderly are still relatively powerless and largely unheard – her plea therefore fell on deaf ears.

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[43] Matcha, Donna, *The Sociology of Aging: A Social Problems Perspective*, London: Allyn & Bacon (1997), p.2.

[44] "Whereas just one per cent of the world's population was aged sixty-five and above a century ago, this figure has already risen seven-fold and will rise to around twenty per cent by the middle of the twenty-first century." Kirkwood, Tom, *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London: Profile Books (2001), p.6.

[45] The transcript of the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid from 8-12 April 2002 can be accessed on the United Nations website: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/waa/

[46] The first issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* that applied an explicitly feminist approach to ageing studies was 7:2, published in 1993.

[47] Philippe Albou points out that: "sur le plan artistique, le culte de la jeunesse est l'une des caractéristiques de la Renaissance: les artistes, pour une fois d'accord avec les gens de Cour, condamnent la vieillesse et exaltent la jeunesse (Castiglione, Érasme), même si elle n'est qu'éphémère (Ronsard)." Albou, Philippe, *L'image des personnes âgées à travers l'histoire*, Paris: Glyphe & Biotem (1999), p.85.

[48] Although in countries seriously affected with AIDS, particularly third world countries in sub-Saharan Africa, a whole generation is in the process of being eradicated, leaving grandparents to look after their grandchildren.

[49] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Vieillesse*, Paris: Gallimard (1970), p.19.

[50] ibid., p.7.

Increasingly syphoned off into retirement homes thus separated from the rest of society, post-traditional, Western societies do not treat their elderly well, yet, after all, given a good dose of luck coupled with good health, old age is simply the last stage in life's course which we all hope to reach in the fullness of time. In our midlife, therefore, we have a vested interest in how society treats the elderly. Stephen Katz points out: "to be old merely requires that one ages. However, to be part of a population of elderly persons requires that one be absorbed into a specific discourse of differentiation"[51]. As numerous statistics bear witness, that population of elderly persons is set to increase exponentially all over the world[52] within the next twenty-five years, therefore that discourse will need to be tailored accordingly. Foucault demonstrated how subjectivity is constructed at the levels of the body and the population as well as that of the individual and Katz sees this as an especially valuable insight since the aged body and the elderly population are the primary sights of meaning for the development of knowledge about old age; in their respective histories one can explore the basis on which modern understandings of old age came about[53].

Meanwhile, for those in midlife, modern medical techniques, healthier lifestyles and improved environment mean there is significant life after forty (and there are signs that this is not just in the affluent Western world) with the baby boomer[54] generation now entering early retirement proudly trumpeting the power of the 'grey' pound/euro/dollar (although probably not yet the CFA franc of Senegal, the South African rand[55] or the Sudanese dinar), yet, whilst in the West in our post-traditional society we are seeing ageing terms being redefined, there are still considerable barriers to be overcome in people's perception of middle-age, hence Margaret Gullette's succinct observation that: "ageism is an ancient prejudice, but middle-ageism is our own local twentieth-century toxin"[56].

Seen from the perspective of science, ageing is being revolutionised by the inroads towards increasing longevity, and as Tom Kirkwood revealed in The Reith Lectures[57] on ageing given in 2001, recent research is beginning to show that: "we are not programmed to die but to survive"[58] with the corollory that there is: "nothing necessary or inevitable about ageing"[59], which in turn means that the: "ageing

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[51] Katz, Stephen, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1996), p.51.
[52] As an example, I have included in Appendix A population growth rates for Senegal, 1950-2050.
[53] Katz, Stephen, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1996), p.10.
[54] "the demographic bulge of babies born in a surge of postwar optimism", James Harkin, 'Grey Pride' in *FT Magazine Property Special*, April 9 2005, issue 100, p.27.
[55] The Old Age Grant, which is means tested, is 780 rand/month for 2005; the euro equivalent is €99/month and the pound equivalent is £67/month (using the exchange rates applicable on 19 September 2005).
[56] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1997), p.3.
[57] The Reith Lectures, broadcast on the BBC, were inaugurated in 1948 with the aim of advancing public understanding and debate about significant issues of contemporary interest.
[58] Kirkwood, Tom, *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London: Profile Books (2001), p.ix.
[59] ibid., p.xi.

process is malleable"[60] since: "ageing is not some fixed process but comes about through the accumulation or subtle faults within the cells and organs of our bodies as we live our lives"[61]. Kirkwood points out that the future to increased longevity lies in the successful search to discover the nature of these faults, and thus the chance to slow down their accumulation, and also emphasises that each one of us has a 'duty of care' towards our own body, implying, therefore, that we each have a hand in our own ageing process and that it is not necessarily all preordained in our genes. For a fascinating and detailed account of the body of humans and animals, longevity, the differences between youth and old age, diet, medicines for the prolongation of life, the spirits of the body and death as seen through the eyes of a philosopher and a scientist in the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) *History of Life and Death, of the Second Title in Natural and Experimental History for the Foundation of Philosophy being the Third Part of the Instauratio Magna to the Present and Future Ages* (1623)[62] proves that the question of longevity is certainly not a new one.

Man's MLP (Maximum Life Span – the age of the longest lived member of a population[63]) may not have altered very much over the last one hundred thousand years (and nor has the average age of the menopause), but the ages of man have been viewed in very different ways over the centuries, although within each tradition: "there was a good deal of variation both in naming the ages and in defining their limits"[64]. Most ancient and medieval authorities viewed life as a series of transits from one distinct stage to another, the life-cycle approach, rather than a process of continual development, the life-course approach currently in favour, and were, therefore, much less interested in the process of change from one age to another, hence Cicero's words in *De Senectute*[65]:

> "Cursus est certus aetatis et une via naturae eaque simplex, suaque cuique parti aetatis tempestivitas est data"
>
> (Life's racecourse is fixed; Nature has only a single path and that path is run but once, and to each stage of existence has been allotted its own appropriate quality)

where 'cursus aetatis' involves physical growth and decay, and 'tempestivitas' or 'seasonableness' implies that certain kinds of behaviour were held to be natural in young people but not in old ones. Horace continued this theme in a famous passage in his *Arts Poetica*, (11.156-7), where he advised writers to

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[60] Kirkwood, Tom, *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London: Profile Books (2001), p.13.
[61] ibid., p.49.
[62] http://www.sirbacon.org/historylifedeath.htm.
[63] Jeanne-Louise Calment (1875-1997) who died aged 122 years and 164 days was the oldest human ever fully authenticated. MLP is, of course, different from 'life expectancy' – the mean length of life for a population of individuals – which has gradually been extended over the centuries, most rapidly in the twentieth century in the developed world.
[64] Burrow, John Anthony, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1986), p.93.
[65] Edited and translated by Falconer, W.A., *De Senectute*, London (1923), x 33, cited by Burrow, John Anthony, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1986), p.1.

observe in their portrayal of *dramatis personae* the differing characteristics of boyhood, youth, maturity, and old age:

> "Aetatis cuiusque notandi sunt tibi mores,
> Mobilibusque decor naturis dandus et annis."
>
> (You must represent the distinctive behaviour of each age and assign what is appropriate to the characters as they change with the changing years)[66]

However, the Greeks recognised the four stages in the life of a woman as running in parallel with her biological development:

1) 'pais' - child, not yet capable of motherhood
2) 'korê' - young woman, sexually of age but not married
3) 'gynê' - mature, married woman/wife (women tended to marry around fifteen whereas men married around thirty)
4) 'graia' - no longer capable of motherhood[67]

therefore for a woman: "the passage to old age and the social changes that accompany it commence with menopause, when she ceases to be useful for sexual or reproductive purposes" whereas for men: "the transition to old age is more social and generational than physical"[68].

If the Classical era viewed human life through a biological lens, seeing man's life in three, or possibly four stages, in tune with nature: growth (including childhood and youth), maturity and decline, the Medievalists favoured a physiological split based on the extensive work of the Greek, Claudius Galen[69], physician to five Roman emperors (although it is reputed to be Phythagoras (c.569-475BC) who first recognised a correlation between the four seasons of the year and the four seasons of man).

Galen's view was that the humoural fluids (the four humours had been developed by Hippocrates) were produced in the body by the various stages of digestion, thus, for example, an excess of black choler/bile in the body resulted in melancholy, thus linking inextricably the physiological aspects of the body with the psychological, since both were determined by the balance within the body. Indeed, the imbalance of humours was thought to be the direct cause of all diseases:

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[66] Burrow, John Anthony, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1986), p.3.
[67] Falkner, Thomas M. & de Luce, Judith, 'A View from Antiquity and Greece, Rome, and Elders' in *Handbook of the Humanities & Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.4.
[68] ibid., p.5.
[69] Galen, c.129-201 AD, an ancient Greek physician who expounded on Hippocrates's work (c.460-380 BC) and whose views dominated medicine until at least the sixteenth century. Indeed, some of his findings, such as the taking of the pulse, are still valid today.

Temperament	Quality	Element	Humour	Seat
Sanguine	hot & moist	Air	Blood	Liver
Choleric	hot & dry	Fire	Yellow Bile	Gall Bladder
Phlegmatic	cold & moist	Water	Phlegm	Lungs
Melancholic	cold & dry	Earth	Black Bile	Spleen

The table below shows the Physical and Physiological Fours of the Venerable Bede given in chapter XXXV "On the four seasons, Elements, and Humours" in his *De temporum Ratione* of 725[70] which also show the body as polysemic, or multiply signed, in its capacity to represent an array of univeral forces and moral principles[71]. It was this physiological division of life into four stages which saw the prime of life in maturity, and sexuality as a function of 'calor naturalis', bodily heat whose gradual cooling, as the fuelling moisture ran out, caused the body to dry out through the process of ageing. This theory of the ageing process prevailed for many centuries:

Qualities	Age	Humour	Season	Element
moist and hot	childhood	blood	spring	air
hot and dry	youth	red choler	summer	fire
dry and cold	maturity	black choler	autumn	earth
cold and moist	old age	phlegm	winter	water

Christianity had entered the debate on the ages of man with St Augustine of Hippo's (354-430AD) division of temporal history and temporal life into six ages relating to the six days of creation in his *De Diversis Quaestionibus LXXXIII* and *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*. This view of life differed greatly from pagan authorities because the sixth day of creation when God created man in his own image meant that the sixth age, senectus, could not be negative, therefore although man's external self may be in decline, his interior, spiritual self should be an age of spiritual renovation. "By emphasizing moral and spiritual values, rather than material and bodily ones, Christian thought transforms the stage of outward decay into one of inward fulfillment" and thus: "this dialectic between decline and redemption is in tension with secular modernity, attempting to abolish the decline of aging through promises of protracted youth"[72]. It follows, therefore, that from a Christian point of view: "meaningful aging is difficult in a society that places no value on the contemplative vision of God"[73].

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[70] Burrow, John Anthony, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1986), pp.12-14.
[71] Katz, Stephen, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1996), p.30.
[72] Post, Stephen, G., 'Aging and Meaning: The Christian Tradition' in *Handbook of the Humanities & Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.127.
[73] ibid., p.139.

It was, however, the astrologers who favoured the seven ages of man, famously cited by Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (see Appendix B), relating a person's growth to his or her progress through the planetary system where each planet represented different attributes and abilities, with the life cycle beginning at birth with the moon and ending in old age with Saturn[74]. Burrow emphasises that these theories, scholarly writings in Latin, were not disseminated to the wider public until the mid twelfth century when, for example, a layman, Philippe de Novare, wrote *Les quatre âges de l'homme* (1265)[75]. In fact common experience, so far as that is represented by common linguistic usage, simply did not distinguish between divisions of life, and given that most people did not know their date of birth, age was largely a matter of status, conferred by rites of passage such as marriage which occurred at intervals only loosely prescribed by custom[76].

It was not until the fourteenth century that poets made the correlation between the life of man and the twelve months of the year and it was only in the late Middle Ages that there was a shift from a cyclical view of ageing to the early modern 'stepladder' stages: "the cyclical view emphasized preparation for death at any moment, whereas the *Lebensteppe* or *degrés des âges* turned life into a rising and falling career, peaking at forty or fifty"[77].

It was in the thirteenth century that Roger Bacon (c.1214-1292) English philosopher, Franciscan monk, scientist and a practising alchemist (thus a believer in the elixir of life[78]) wrote *The Cure of Old Age and the Preservation of Youth* (translated into English and published in London in 1683) a medical treatise on ways of preventing or slowing the process of ageing. Bacon argued that excessive passions such as joy, grief and fear shorten life, but that moderate passions extend life by restraining and strengthening the spirits (pp.222-223)[79]. This theory that passions affected the ageing process was prevalent for many centuries, and indeed can be seen, in a modified form, in such writings as Madame de Lambert's *La Traitesse de la Vieillesse*[80]. It was, in fact, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century with its move away from the dogmatism of the medieval era which brought a new appreciation of ageing and old age as a result of increased secularisation which forced people to pay greater attention to the life they had, rather

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[74] Katz, Stephen, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1996), p.31.
[75] Burrow, John Anthony, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1986), p.25.
[76] ibid., pp.92-93.
[77] Troyanski, David, G., 'The Older Person in the Western World: From the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution' in *Handbook of the Humanities & Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.47.
[78] Various recipes are quoted by Philippe Albou: Arnaud de Villeneuve (c.1235-1313) recommended: "bois de santal, bois d'aloès, huile d'or, vin d'antimoine, sirop de vipère et solution de pierres précieuses", whilst Gabriel Zerbi, at the end of the fifteenth century, proposed: "un mélange de chair de vipère et de sang humain". Albou, Philippe, *L'image des personnes âgées à travers l'histoire*, Paris: Glyphe & Biotem Éditions (1999), p.203.
[79] Quoted by MacInnes, Ian. 'Cheerful Girls and Willing Boys' in *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 6:2 September, 2000, 1.1-26 <URL: http://purl.oclc.org/emls/06-2/macisonn.htm>.
[80] Lambert, Anne Thérèse de, *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes: 1727*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1989).

than the life they might aspire to after death, and philosophical treatises started to address questions on how to age rather than how to die.

The awakening of modernity found the graphic arts seeing the elderly as worthy in their own right rather than just useful allegorical figures[81] (in the Middle Ages, Jean de Meun's allegory of old age[82] as portrayed in his unflattering description of 'La Vieille' in the second part of *Le Roman de la Rose*[83] was fairly typical of such depictions at that time). Thus, in the nineteenth century, Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1835) with its elderly protagonist and intergenerational conflict, spread age-consciousness, albeit only among the literate, whilst scientific interest in ageing started with the emergence of modern medicine, and women's ailments and diseases, particularly those of older women, came to the forefront of medical research with pioneering work in Paris at la Salpêtrière (Hospice de Vieillesse-Femmes) carried out by Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), the world's first neuropathologist.

Whilst the history of ageing whether from a biological, scientific, philosophical or religious viewpoint is fascinating and I regret that I cannot go into it in more depth in this thesis, from the brief outline sketched above, it is obvious that almost all the above references speak of the ageing or ages of man, because, of course, until the modern era (and, some would say, including the modern era, thus Simone de Beauvoir felt compelled to write in *La Vieillesse*: "un autre fait saute aux yeux: il s'agit là d'un problème d'hommes. En tant qu'expérience personnelle, la vieillesse concerne autant les femmes et même davantage puisqu'elles vivent plus longtemps. Mais quand on en fait un objet de spéculation, on considère essentiellement la condition des mâles"[84]), the voices, and thus the experiences of women regarding ageing are missing, a lacuna only relatively recently recognised in the developed world, and one hardly addressed as yet in the rest of the world.

As a postscript to this section, it is interesting to observe that ageing women were also absent in art. George Duby points out that for centuries the Middle Ages produced hardly any images of women, ageing or not, and that the following centuries produced only: "des équivalences symboliques, des signes conventionnels, les emblèmes stéréotypés d'une certaine idée de la femme"[85]. One reason given is that there were rules (formulated by men, obviously) and conventions governing how women were depicted in portraits: "au travers des siècles, les règles artistiques ont édicté que les femmes ne pouvaient montrer

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[81] Troyanski, David, G., 'The Older Person in the Western World: From the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution' in *Handbook of the Humanities & Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.52.

[82] 'La vieillesse' here is unlikely to mean extreme old age as we would understand it today, but rather late middle-age, but still seen as on the threshold of death. Old age is here depicted as a vice personified, whereas (young) women are represented by the Rose of the title, the symbol of *l'éternel féminin*.

[83] The first part (4,058 lines) of *Le Roman de la Rose* was written by Guillaume de Lorris c.1237, and the second, larger section (18,000 lines) concluded by Jean de Meun c.1277.

[84] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Vieillesse*, Paris: Gallimard (1970), p.99.

[85] Duby, Georges, *Images de femmes*, Paris: Plon (1992), p.10.

leurs dents, ne pouvaient montrer leurs cheveux dénoués, ne pouvaient gesticuler et certainement pas croiser leurs jambes"[86]. In the sixteenth century: "c'était une convention de l'autoportrait féminin [...] d'inclure une femme plus âgée, peut-être en chaperon et en faire-valoir de la jeunesse et la beauté"[87], a convention that did not apply to male artists of course. With regard to the twentieth century, Borzello comments: "le vieillissement est un processus inévitable auquel les artistes font face selon leur tempérament, choisissant d'avoir l'air plus jeune que leur âge [...], de proclamer leur fierté de vivre si longtemps [...] ou d'enregistrer sans passion la déchéance physique [...]"[88].

I have included a self-portrait entitled 'Autoportrait personnifiant l'Hiver' by Rosalba Carriera (1731) to conclude this section because it encapsulates, visually and beautifully, how women artists, in this case in the eighteenth century, depicted themselves as ageing persona. Borzello observes that: "certains thèmes semblaient échapper à l'influence de l'histoire. Dans les années 1950, l'artiste hollandaise Charley Toorop effectue un parallèle entre son image de femme mûre et l'arbre hivernal derrière sa fenêtre. En 1731, l'Italienne Rosalba Carriera, qui a alors cinquante-cinq ans, s'est dépeinte personnifiant l'hiver"[89].

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[86] Borzello, Frances, *Femmes au miroir: une histoire de l'autoportrait féminin*, Paris: Thames & Hudson (1998), p.32.
[87] ibid., p.45.
[88] ibid., p.179.
[89] ibid., p.18.

ii. The ageing process and identity

Scientists describe ageing as: "a *process* that progressively converts physiologically and cognitively fit, healthy adults into less fit individuals with increasing vulnerability to injury, illness, and death"[90] (my italics), whereas a sociologist sees ageing as: "a complex and potentially open-ended *process* of interaction between the body, self and society" (my italics) and: "simultaneously a collective human condition and an individualized subjective experience" [91]. The two disciplines agree, at least, that ageing is a process. Since I will be examining individualised subjective experiences in the novels under review, I believe it is pertinent at this stage to look at what social gerontologists now prefer to call the 'life course' – a more flexible way of looking at life where the previously clearly marked stages have become blurred as a result of social changes and attitudes – rather than 'life span', now out of fashion, or 'life cycle', a concept which, as briefly outlined in the previous section, sees life as a relatively fixed series of biologically determined stages through which natural life-forms move[92].

Of course, if I accept Hepworth's use of the term 'life course' then I am instantly at odds with him, since in his looser definition of ageing, he sees the constitutive strands of the process – biological (body); psychological (self); and society (culture and social structure) – not as distinctive factors which can be separated out, but as woven closely together into the fabric of everyday social life[93], whereas in this Introduction I have attempted to do just the opposite. I am further at odds with the life course approach since: "rather than viewing any one stage of life, such as childhood, youth, and old age, or any age group in isolation, it is concerned with an understanding of the place of that stage in an entire life continuum"[94]. However, I reserve the right to select a particular stage in the life course on which to focus because I believe that, with the menopause being a unique feature of a woman's life-course, midlife is a particularly rich time in a woman's life as I will illustrate in the body of this thesis and I thus defend my decision to study midlife independently of the other life-stages.

Why the change from life cycle to life course? Chronological age is no longer a reliable indicator of how people are expected to behave at certain stages in their lives and this is particularly true in the midlife and later years (although popular wisdom would have it that children have never been so old as this particular techno-savvy generation). As people live longer, and particularly if they are relatively affluent (changes tend to start with the so-called middle classes, and filter down as income levels and life expectancy

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[90] 'Biomarkers of Aging: From Primitive Organisms to Man', International Longevity Center-USA (2001).
[91] Hepworth, Mike, *Stories of Ageing*, Buckingham: OUP (2000), p.1.
[92] ibid., p.2.
[93] ibid., p.2.
[94] Hareven, Tamara K., 'The Study of the Life Course and Ageing in Different Societies' in *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Hareven, Tamara K. & Adams, Kathleen, J., London: Tavistock Publications (1982), p.xiii.

increase in the poorer strata of society[95]), they are no longer content to behave like their grandparents, or even their parents. Indeed, retirement is a relatively recent phenomenon since earlier generations used to carry on working as long as they were physically capable of so doing – illhealth, not a healthy pension plan used to be the deciding factor in ceasing to work. These days, 'forty is the new thirty'[96] is the new mantra (and it follows naturally that 'fifty is the new forty'), as perceptions shift as to what age is considered to be 'over the hill' (Kathleen Woodward calls this a distasteful metaphor since it implies being out of sight, invisible and hence out of mind[97]). If one assumes a lifespan of eighty years, people do not consider themselves middle-aged at forty, or even fifty, although technically, of course, they are. It follows, therefore, that there is a destabilisation of perceived age group norms[98], leading to such conundrums as what age does one choose to start a study on middle-age?

With regard to the psychological (self) strand of the ageing process, Robert Atchley, an acknowledged expert on continuity theory, has useful definitions of self and identity, which he sees as being two important inner mental structures that persist over time. Self refers to what we think and feel when we focus attention specifically on ourselves. Self-concept is what we think we are like: our appearance, abilities, preferences, emotionality, personal goals, level of performance, attitudes, roles, and so on; the ideal self is what we think we ought to be like; and self-esteem is how much we like or dislike what we see. Identity is a core self that stays with us throughout most of the settings in which we find ourselves. Identity also serves as the basis for dealing with new information about the self[99]. Elsa Triolet's *Le Cheval roux* will demonstrate admirably how identity stays with us despite being severely tested, and, in contrast, her short story, *Mille regrets*, is a masterclass on how to write about lack of self-esteem as evidenced by its middle-aged, nameless protagonist; Mariama Bâ's Ramatoulaye allows us to bear witness to her concept of self in all its detail and Maryse Condé's Rosélie tackles lack of self-esteem and how she finds her way to improve that situation.

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[95] The upper classes have to be considered different in this regard since as a result of their higher income and less physically-draining working practices, they have enjoyed much better health than the rest of society.

[96] Is this a variation on the quotation: "Quarante ans, c'est la vieillesse de la jeunesse, mais cinquante ans, c'est la jeunesse de la vieillesse" attributed to Victor Hugo?

[97] Woodward, Kathleen, (ed.), *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1999), p.xii.

[98] The explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes continues to prove that age is no barrier to pushing one's body to the absolute limits. In November 2003, at the age of fifty-nine, he and Dr Mike Stroud completed seven marathons on seven continents in seven days, a feat made even more extraordinary by the fact that in June of that year he had undergone an emergency double heart by-pass operation following a heart attack. Famous for his flat expeditions on ice, snow or in the desert, in April 2005, at the age of sixty-one, he attempted to climb Everest for the first time, taking the more difficult Northern route. (Close to the summit, he had to turn back because of chest pains). The average man or woman may not wish to tackle Everest at the age of sixty-one, but nor is he or she necessarily content to simply tend the allotment for the rest of his or her life.

[99] Atchley, Robert C., 'Continuity Theory and the Evolution of Activity in Later Adulthood' in *Activity and Aging: Staying Involved in Later Life*, ed. by Kelly, John R., London: Sage Publications (1993), pp.7-8.

One of the contemporary theories of ageing involving identity and the sense of self is the 'mask of age'. This expression is used to describe how people see age, not as an integral part of who they are, but as a mask which hides the real person underneath, thus creating a core contradiction, a tension between an inner sense of oneself as ageless and one's outwardly visible ageing body, that which is presented to the outside world, a form of: "cage from which a younger self-identity cannot escape"[100]. To state that this is a universal feeling amongst men and women would be a bold assumption, but from my personal experience as well as my empirical 'vox pop' research conducted with women d*'un certain âge* (and men) with whom I come into contact, as well as countless references in literature[101] together with numerous academic studies, there seems little doubt that many people, male and female, are aware of a fragmentation between mind and body to at least some degree, even if it is just a vague feeling that is difficult to put into words. Simone de Beauvoir saw it as: "la femme qui «ne s'est jamais sentie aussi jeune» et qui jamais ne s'est vue aussi âgée ne parvient pas à concilier ces deux aspects d'elle-même"[102].

What it means, of course, is that one feels at odds with one's visible body, and in Biggs' words, an endgame emerges with older people being at war with themselves, an internalised battle between a desire to express oneself and the ageing body[103]. McHugh believes that: "the mask of ageing speaks to the repression and denial of old age and mortality in a society that adulates youthfulness. It alludes to the Cartesian split of mind and body, a split that has so thoroughly permeated Western thought that it is taken for granted as common sense"[104], whilst Andrews goes further in stating it is a pretence and form of self-hatred and sees it as a form of ageism in that it deprives the old of one of their most hard-earned resources: their age[105]. These are all quite harsh judgements on what could, instead, be seen more positively as: "a sense of self that is ageless – an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age"[106]. Condé's Rosélie is surely creating a meaningful and coherent sense of self after the shock of her partner's murder, when she formulates and reformulates personal and cultural

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[100] Biggs, Simon, 'Surface, Depth and Masquerade: The Pursuit of Successful Identities and Genuine Ageing", a paper presented at the XVII World Congress of the International Association of Gerontology in Vancouver, 1-6 July 2001, Keele University's Centre for Social Gerontology's web page: http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/so/csg/surface_dept.htm.

[101] At ninety-three years of age, Nathalie Sarraute made the following observation in an interview with the actress Isabelle Huppert: "je suis très âgée vous savez, c'est pour ça que je ne voulais pas de photo, c'est embêtant d'être photographiée quand on est très âgé parce que le grand âge, vous ne le ressentez absolument pas du dedans. Si les facultés diminuent, on ne s'en aperçoit pas, les autres vous le montrent." Huppert, Isabelle, 'Rencontre avec Nathalie Sarraute', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 477, March 1994, cited by Lee, Mark, 'l'écriture et la vie: Nathalie Sarraute' in *Dalhousie French Studies*, 47, Summer 1999, p.150.

[102] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.462.

[103] Biggs, Simon, 'Surface, Depth and Masquerade: The Pursuit of Successful Identities and Genuine Ageing", a paper presented at the XVII World Congress of the International Association of Gerontology in Vancouver, 1-6 July 2001, Keele University's Centre for Social Gerontology's web page: http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/so/csg/surface_dept.htm.

[104] McHugh, Kevin E., 'Three Faces of Ageism: Society, Image and Place" in *Ageing and Society*, 23 (2003), p.169.

[105] Andrews, Molly, 'The Seductiveness of Agelessness' in *Ageing and Society*, 19 (1999), p.304.

[106] Kaufman, Sharon, R., 'Values as Sources of the Ageless Self' in *Activity and Aging: Staying Involved in Later Life*, ed. by Kelly, John R., London: Sage (1993), p.17.

symbols from her past to create a viable present, so that she is able to release the ageless self whose definition is ongoing, continuous, and creative[107].

The 'mask of ageing' theory impacts on how we interact, since if it is: "par le corps que nous entrons en relation avec les autres", then age, by changing our appearance, changes: "de même coup notre rapport à autrui"[108]; as Dominique in Beauvoir's *Les Belles images* points out to her daughter: "je vois bien comment les gens me regardent: crois-moi ce n'est plus du tout comme avant"[109]. In a circular argument, it follows that since our identity is formed by interaction with others, then our appearance will have an impact on the construction and reconstruction of our identity, therefore: "on peut distinguer, dans ce réseau d'interactions, trois «moments» fondamentaux: l'image qu'on a de soi-même (autoperception), celle qu'on donne à autrui (représentation), celle qui est renvoyée par autrui (désignation)"[110].

Nowadays there is an extra dimension to this 'mask of age' inasmuch as women (and, increasingly, men) who have cosmetic surgery, are, in effect, manipulating their exterior image with an actual mask/masque to better match their internal image of self, as well as indulging in a deliberate act of deception towards others. However, as Biggs points out, whilst a masque may conceal signs of ageing, the very act of hiding alerts the performer and audience that something is being hidden, therefore everyone colludes in the performance and, worse, as ageing gathers pace, the body inevitably loses its flexibility and it becomes increasingly difficult to 'recycle' the body through cosmetics, surgery, props and protheses[111] (witness the increasingly unreal-looking faces of Michael Douglas, Joan Collins or Joan Rivers). Ultimately, therefore, despite all their attempts to externalise their inner sense of self as ageless, they are let down by their body which eventually resists all manipulation and reverts to nature.

Gilleard makes the observation that the modern manipulation of one's appearance is a cultural practice that is transmitted across a particular generational cohort rather than a practice that was passed down through the generations[112]. Thus it appears that, aided by advances in surgical techniques and modern

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[107] Kaufman, Sharon, R., 'Values as Sources of the Ageless Self' in *Activity and Aging: Staying Involved in Later Life*, ed. by Kelly, John R., London: Sage (1993), p.18.
[108] Mayrat, Antoinette, 'Vieillesses de femmes seules en région Parisienne' in *Penelope, pour l'histoire des femmes: Vieillesses des femmes*, 13, Autumn 1985, p.88.
[109] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Les Belles images*, Paris: Gallimard (1966), p.143.
[110] Heinich, Nathalie, *États de femme: L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale*, Paris: Gallimard (1996), p.333.
[111] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1 (2004), p.52.
[112] A contradiction to this can be found in neck elongation through wearing neck rings, a practice for females passed down through families in the Padaung tribe of Burma, and also lip discs, still common in the Suyá tribe in Brazil for both men and women. These body ornaments are inserted during rites of passage, and mark status; thus ears are pierced and symbolically 'opened' at adolescence when youth are expected to listen to the elders, and lips are perforated several years later as confirmation of adulthood. Lip discs were also worn by the Gambella in Ethiopa, originally to scare away would-be captors, and then as a status symbol. However, the young women of that tribe generally prefer body paint nowadays to such an invasive procedure, although most young men in their tribe still believe that women who do not have lip discs are not suitable for marriage.

pharmacology, the late twentieth century/early twenty-first century, is becoming increasingly superficial, since manipulation of one's appearance is not just restricted to dealing with the signs of ageing, but could also be applied to the use of skin-whitening potions for example, or blepharoplasty (the scientific name for eye-widening surgery) which results in an eyelid à la Caucasian model (apparently the third most popular type of plastic surgery carried out in the United States today). According to Professor Sander Gilman of the University of Illinois and Chicago in an interview in *The Guardian* in 2001[113]: "the trick of understanding aesthetic surgery is understanding that the major impetus is to 'pass' [help ethnic minorities to integrate]". He states that cosmetic surgery is less about looking 'beautiful' and more about looking 'normal'. Which raises the very interesting point as to what is considered 'normal'[114] and who are the arbiters of such a judgement, and here 'normal' can indeed also relate to the question of ageing and how one is perceived. The fact is that we, as society, tend to be ambivalent about ageing and procedures to reduce its signs; we are particularly ambivalent about performers, usually film stars, and usually women, who feel they have to have a facelift to win parts in an industry that worships youth and beauty. On the one hand, we feel disappointed on learning that Julie Christie, celebrated for her natural beauty, has undergone cosmetic surgery, yet on the other hand, most people will admit to being shocked at the rare sightings of Brigitte Bardot, who starred in her last film at the age of thirty-nine and whose youthful beauty has been ravaged through natural aging, yet she is now seventy – how should she look?

Whilst evidence reveals that both men and women suffer from angst about ageing on all its various levels, there is little doubt that given the importance of appearance today, the fact is, however shallow it might be, the physical signs of ageing have particular resonance for many women since there is a perception that one's identity is part and parcel of how one looks – indeed, it has been proven that, rightly or wrongly, judgements (on either sex) are made within the first three seconds of seeing or meeting someone, therefore first impressions are all important. Biggs asks the perceptive question: when an observer sees an older woman, do they see first a woman, an old woman or someone who is old?[115] I would posit the answer: an old woman. Simone de Beauvoir's view was: "peut-être les gens qui me croisent voient-ils simplement une quinquagénaire qui n'est ni bien, ni mal, elle a l'âge qu'elle a. Mais moi je vois mon ancienne tête où une vérole s'est mise dont je ne guérirai pas"[116]. Little wonder then that manufacturers' claims for age-defying wonder creams or potions cause them to race off the shelf, and that, thanks to botox which is relatively affordable (albeit only a temporary solution) at an average cost of two hundred pounds an injection compared to at least five thousand pounds for a facelift (which can cost less than half that price abroad), such interventions are becoming mainstream.

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[113] *The Guardian*, 'In the Eye of the Beholder', 15 October 2001.
[114] Why, for instance, in urban China, is it rare to see a billboard advertisement which does not feature a very Westernised-looking Chinese man or woman? This is a clear example of the elimination of ethnic difference.
[115] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1 (2004), p.55.
[116] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Force des choses*, Paris: Gallimard (1963), p.685.

One of the dangers inherent in this tampering with nature is that: "beaucoup de femmes aujourd'hui ne trahissent ni physiquement ni moralement leur âge [...] mais, dès que l'on sait leur cinquantaine, le regard vraiment n'est plus le même"[117] – one's chronological age is still a great leveller[118]. However, this raises the further question of what happens when bodies give out misleading signals. Successful communication works on the assumption that everyone shares common meanings and uses the same basic conventions. At the level of language, unless we are linguists, we are not generally conscious of this fact when we communicate with others[119]. Visual communication tends to abide by the same rules, which is why, for instance, we do not 'get' some modern art. Our bodies also carry codes which communicate a multitude of information to others. If the codes change, vanish or become unreadable, ultimately society becomes unbalanced, thus: "discourse on modern ageing is fixated on fluidity and uncertainty in identities, and their framing in terms of language, signs and symbols"[120].

Elsa Triolet provides a perfect example of the advantages and disadvantages of this aspect of the mask of ageing in *Le Cheval roux* when her heroine's face is obliterated as a result of a nuclear explosion. In fact, her 'lack of face' can also be seen as an extreme example of social masking, another interpretation of the mask of ageing, wherein the mask is actively used to deceive others and protect the self in potentially threatening interactions[121], or, less aggressively: "is seen as a means of negotiating identity between people of different ages as well as age peers"[122]. All these aspects of the mask of ageing can be found in *Le Cheval roux*, and will be examined in the chapter on Triolet's work, but I should just like to point out here that these interpretations of her work would seem to show her a forerunner of modern gerontological thinking.

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[117] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.45.

[118] A personal observation: when living in Paris for a year, I was constantly besieged by students asking me to assist in surveys and the first question was always: "what is your age?". I found this intrusive, preferring the Anglo-Saxon methodology where you are slotted into various age groups. In addition, answering truthfully "forty-nine" provoked general embarrassment all round when it transpired occasionally that I was too old for that particular survey.

[119] "People adopt a 'cooperative principle' when they communicate: they try to get along with each other by following certain conversational 'maxims' that underlie the efficient use of language" for instance: "the *maxim of relevance* states that contributions should clearly relate to the purpose of the exchange". Crystal, David, Crystal, David, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge: CUP (1987), p.117.

[120] McHugh, Kevin E., 'Three Faces of Ageism: Society, Image and Place" in *Ageing and Society*,.23 (2003), p.178.

[121] Biggs, Simon, 'Surface, Depth and Masquerade: The Pursuit of Successful Identities and Genuine Ageing", a paper presented at the XVII World Congress of the International Association of Gerontology in Vancouver, 1-6 July 2001, Keele University's Centre for Social Gerontology's web page: http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/so/csg/surface_dept.htm.

[122] ibid.

iii. Menopause

"once women cease ovulating, they look and feel quite different"[123]

Given that the ageing process is experienced, in part at least, through our bodies, since after all: "human beings share with other species an embodied existence inevitably involving birth, growth, maturation and death"[124], and given that the menopause (like menstruation, but unlike childbirth) is an experience that all women undergo, I believe it is impossible to dissociate the time of life known as the menopause: "a unique feature of the human female life history"[125] from a review of a woman's midlife[126]. Therefore, although I am interested in attitudes to midlife as a period in time, rather than the menopause per se as an experience, I consider that a brief discussion of its characteristics is relevant at this stage.

It is important to make the perhaps obvious point that the menopause, euphemistically known as the 'change of life', or climacterium, is distinct from ageing,[127] obvious, because men do not experience the menopause but they do age. However, women tend to see it as an integral part of the process of ageing simply because most women become aware of the most visible and permanent signs of ageing as they are going through their menopausal years, although Simone de Beauvoir considered that women were aware of their ageing well before the menopause: "bien avant la définitive mutilation, la femme est hantée par l'horreur du vieillissement"[128]. Margaret Gullette emphasises the confusion surrounding the issue: "many women believe that it is menopause (rather than menopause discourse) that ages women; they accept the culture's conclusion that it's a biological marker of decline"[129].

From a scientific perspective, the menopause[130] is a mystery: "why should women invariably lose their fertility when they are far short of showing advanced signs of biological ageing, and when it happens

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[123] Greer, Germaine, *The Change*, London: Penguin (1991), p.336.
[124] Featherstone, Mike & Hepworth, Mike, 'The Mask of Ageing and the Postmodern Life Course' in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Featherstone, Mike, Hepworth, Mike & Turner, Bryan S., London: Sage Publications (1991), p.375.
[125] Kirkwood, Tom, *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London: Profile Books (2001), p.41.
[126] In rare cases, teenagers have been recorded as experiencing an early menopause and it can occur unusually in the twenties and thirties.
[127] Read Tom Kirkwood's *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London: Profile Books (2001), pp.45-46 for his intriguing hypothesis as to why women live longer than men (almost ten per cent on average) which he suggests has a link with the menopause.
[128] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.457.
[129] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, 'Menopause as Magic Marker: Discursive Consolidation in the United States and Strategies for Cultural Combat' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.184.
[130] Literally, the cessation of the menses. From a medical perspective, women are only considered to have experienced the menopause when they have had no periods for twelve months.

neither to monkeys nor to men?"[131] Research over the last ten years or so seems to support Williams's hypothesis in 1957[132] that early termination of fertility (although, in fact, our reproductive spans are at least as long as those of the great apes) would likely evolve when extended maternal care became crucial to offspring survival, an idea which has given rise to the so-called 'Grandmothering' theory, wherein the post-menopausal, older women in the tribe[133] assist their daughters in helping to provide for their young, a role which: "enhances the child-raising capacity of their daughters and decreases the mortality of grandchildren"[134]. However, regardless of the reasons for our uniqueness in having a menopause, the fact of its existence means that female humans tend to have long postmenopausal lifespans, which are getting ever longer as the lifespan of women increases, thus, in Kirkwood's words: "post-menopausal women, far from being, in Darwinian terms, worn-out biological has-beens, are actually very special"[135].

From that positive note, let us proceed to how women actually perceive their experience of the menopause, and life-after-the-menopause[136]. After all, there is no denying that the end of menstruation means, from a biological perspective, the end of a woman's fertility, thus: "an absence, the end of a gender marker"[137]. After a period of between thirty and forty years of a woman's life being marked by a monthly rhythm, she becomes, at least according to Beauvoir, that asexual being: "on a dit parfois que les femmes âgées constituaient "un troisième sexe"; et en effet elles ne sont pas des mâles mais ne sont plus des femelles"[138], a sentiment she repeated in *La Force des choses*: "c'est étrange de n'être plus un corps: il y a des moments où cette bizarrerie, par son caractère définitif, me glace le sang"[139], where she is associating her identity with her body. Not so grimly, Thiriet & Képès see the menopause as: "un avant-goût de retraite avant l'heure"[140]. Germaine Greer's statement cited at the start of this section appears unequivocal in its baldness. Yet she is making many assumptions. It is actually quite important to ascertain the truth of her observation, since it has ramifications for a woman's bodily image and her psychological wellbeing, provoking tensions between a woman's sense of self – how she feels – and her

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[131] Although humans share 98.5 per cent of their DNA with chimpanzees, we do not share the menopause with either our closest relatives, the great apes, or indeed any other female mammals. Great apes can continue to reproduce almost to the end of their lives, although with much reduced fertility in their last years. The difference is that apes only live ±50 years.

[132] Williams, G., *Evolution*, 11, pp.398-411 quoted by Hawkes, K et al., 'Grandmothering, Menopause, and the Evolution of Human Life Histories' in *Proc.Natl.Acad.Sci.USA*, 95, February 1998, p.1336.

[133] The Hadza of East Africa are the hunter-gatherers most often cited in the wealth of research on this topic.

[134] Kirkwood, Tom, *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing*, London: Profile Books (2001), p.44.

[135] ibid., p.44.

[136] I appreciate that there have been instances recently of post-menopausal women giving birth thanks to the wonders of modern science, but they are, for the moment at least, the exceptions rather than the rule. The most recent, and the oldest, was a sixty-seven year old Romanian, Adriana Iliescu, previously childless, who gave birth to a girl in December 2004 after fertility treatment. The child's twin died in the womb.

[137] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, 'Menopause as Magic Marker: Discursive Consolidation in the United States and Strategies for Cultural Combat' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.179.

[138] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.69.

[139] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Force des choses*, Paris: Gallimard (1963), p.685.

[140] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.7.

ageing body – how she looks. If one turns again to Simone de Beauvoir for clarification, she is candid in stating that:

> c'est encore par une crise difficile que la femme échappe à l'emprise de l'espèce; entre quarante-cinq et cinquante ans se déroulent les phénomènes de la ménopause, inverses de ceux de la puberté. L'activité ovarienne diminue et même disparaît: cette disparition entraîne un appauvrissement vital de l'individu. [...] Alors la femme se trouve délivrée des servitudes de la femelle; [...] elle n'est plus la proie des puissances qui la débordent: elle coïncide avec elle-même"[141].

Her sentiments tend to concur with the view that the menopause is a time of release for women, yet she also depicts it as the beginning of the end for a woman: "mais quand s'ébauche le processus fatal, irréversible, qui va détruire en elle tout l'édifice bâti pendant la puberté, elle se sent touchée par la fatalité même de la mort"[142]. Diana Holmes points out that: "Beauvoir's image of the menopause as a time of crisis and loss applies not to all women, but to the woman who is economically and emotionally dependent: the problematic of the menopause is thus made historically and socially specific rather than biologically determined"[143]. However, assuming that Beauvoir herself can be considered at least economically independent, if not perhaps emotionally, why then does she have such a problem, if not with the menopause per se, but certainly with ageing, as evidenced through much of her fiction and her autobiographical writings? Helene Deutsch neatly summarises what the onset of the climacterium means for a woman like Simone de Beauvoir:

> while the active women deny the biologic state of affairs, the depressive ones overemphasize it. The physiologic decline is felt as the proximity of death, life begins to seem pale and purposeless; a mood of grief tones the content of the woman's psychic life even though she continues to participate in external life as before[144].

My personal view is that Simone de Beauvoir is merely expressing the confusion that women experience at this time in their lives – I would challenge any woman to deny that the menopause provokes both negative and positive emotions, and, after all, why should such an experience be clear-cut either way?

The subject of the menopause tends to provoke two distinct discourses. The first is medically based which sees the hormone imbalance (more precisely, oestrogen[145] deficiency) in women which occurs

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[141] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), pp.68-69.
[142] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.457.
[143] Holmes, Diana, 'Colette, Beauvoir and the Change of Life' in *French Studies*, 53:4 (1999), p.434.
[144] Deutsch, Helene, *The Psychology of Women: a Psychoanalytic Interpretation, Vol.II: Motherhood*, New York: Grune & Stratton (1945), p.473.
[145] "Any of a group of steroid hormones which promote the development and maintenance of female characteristics of the body", *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998).

naturally as a result of the menopause as being a problem which can be fixed (albeit temporarily[146]) to a greater or lesser extent by the use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT)[147] – which gives rise to a (predominantly but not exclusively male-centred) view of the woman's body in midlife as a body in decline, and further perpetuates the idealogy of androcentrism, since: "defining an experience that is common or universal to all women as a disease supports women's inferior status"[148]. Tom Kirkwood would no doubt be distressed by what Komesaroff describes as a mechanistic metaphor of the body, wherein: "menopause comes to be seen as a breakdown of the machine's reproductive capacity, inaugurating an inexorable slide into uselessness and disrepair"[149]. That this is not a view restricted to current thinking can be seen from a reference to the 1888 Surgeon General's catalogue which directs readers interested in menopause to: "see also: insanity in women"[150] – but to be entirely fair to both sexes: "until the mid-twentieth century, doctors dismissed medical conditions that affected older people by adding the prefix "senile" or "postmenopausal" to the diagnosis"[151].

Opposition to this medically-based view comes from those who proudly proclaim that this time in a woman's life-course is natural, thus: "une étape, comme l'apparition des premières règles, un rituel féminin"[152] and therefore nature should be allowed to take its course, unhindered by medical intervention. (Whether these same women took the contraceptive pill to prevent conception is not revealed and after all: "the Pill is an example of how the natural body may be modified by cultural means, changing the menstrual cycle and separating sexuality and reproduction"[153].) Kirkwood would no doubt approve of this 'natural body' viewpoint where: "the transitions associated with menopause appear not as moves

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[146] "An American woman has become the first in the world to conceive an embryo after receiving a pioneering ovary transplant in an experiment that could lead to "*curing*" the menopause and restoring fertility to women in their fifties and sixties" (my italics). This article in www.timesonline.co.uk on 9 March 2004 entitled 'Babies at 50 and an end to the menopause?" by Mark Henderson, confirms the oft-held view that the menopause is an illness inasmuch as it can now, apparently, be cured.

[147] About a quarter of women aged 50-64 take HRT in Britain (*Sunday Times*, 9 April 2000) although that figure has since reduced since the results of two studies, one in the USA, one in the UK, which found an increased risk of breast cancer, as well as cancer in the ovaries and uterus in those taking HRT. Whilst the benefits of taking HRT are well documented; it may: act against Alzheimer's disease, improve bone density thus less risk of osteoporosis, improve libido, reduce likelihood of heart disease, reduce hot flushes (Am. flashes), the jury is still out on the extent of its possible negative effects. HRT also covers hormones such as growth hormone, testosterone, dehydroepiandrosterone – DHEA– all of which decrease with age, along with oestrogen.

[148] Gannon, Linda, *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.5.

[149] Komesaroff, Paul A., 'Introduction' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.5.

[150] Cited by Gannon, Linda, *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.35. The reference is taken from Formanek, F. 'Continuity and Change and "The Change of Life": Premodern Views of the Menopause' in *The Meanings of Menopause: Historical, Medical & Clinical Perspectives*, ed. by Formanek, R., Hillsdale N.J: The Analytic Press (1990).

[151] 'Is There an "anti-aging" Medicine?', a report from an Interdisciplinary Workshop of the International Longevity Center-USA (2001), p.iii.

[152] Angier, Natalie, *Femme!*, Paris: Robert Laffont (2000), p.253 (translated by Bella Arman from the original *Woman*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

[153] Lie, Merete, 'Science as Father? Sex and Gender in the Age of Reproductive Technologies' in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:4, November 2002, p.390.

from order into disorder, but as moves from one kind of order to another"[154]. Although Greer is part of this cohort, she goes further, by writing: "the menopause, being a non-event, the period that does not come, cannot be turned into a ritual"[155] although that does not preclude her from seeing this 'non-event' as being the catalyst for change in a woman's life. Gillian Granville describes this view as the: "opposing radical feminist response"[156] which sees a conspiracy by men and male-dominated institutions to control women's ageing at midlife. Perhaps the most positive comment is from Anne Zachary who suggests that the event of the menopause and the issues surrounding it offers women a chance to negotiate a greater psychological maturity by making use of an in-built biological advantage[157].

What is undeniable is that during the period of years known generally as the menopause there are physiological changes in a woman's body and these internal changes cause most, but not all women to experience a variety of physical symptoms, which may, or may not, be relieved by medical intervention. Interesting new research in the field of neuroscience is also starting to reveal that there may be a sound basis for what some women have always maintained, that: "cognitive changes could be associated with the hormonal changes of perimenopause and menopause"[158] with Dr John Rowe, president of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and the Mount Sinai Hospital going so far as to admit during the opening of a conference entitled "Estrogen and the Brain" that: "the equation for taking estrogen has now changed... We know now that women taking estrogen after menopause reduce their changes of getting cognitive impairments"[159].

Regardless of the medical advances being made (and a quick perusal of scientific journals reveals a healthy mix of support and scepticism for the line of investigation being pursued by Dr Rowe and fellow researchers in that field), it is this awareness that one's body is changing which gives rise to the generally held belief that this time is a period of transition for the woman herself, not just her body: "with the implication of changing from one state, or set of circumstances, to another"[160] which, in turn, leads to changes in one's inner self, how one perceives oneself at this 'change' in one's life. Thus it is not the menopause per se, but women's reaction to it, which brings about these changes in one's inner self. As Terri Apter puts it, they: "result from a psychological, not hormonal story"[161]. Simone de Beauvoir was

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[154] Komesaroff, Paul A., 'Introduction' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.5.
[155] Greer, Germaine, *The Change*, London: Penguin (1991), p.56.
[156] Granville, Gillian, 'Menopause: A Time of Private Change to a Mature Identity' in *Women Ageing: Changing Identities, Challenging Myths*, ed. by Bernard, Miriam et al., London: Routledge (2000), p.74.
[157] Zachary, Anne, 'Menopause: Dignity and Development at the End of the Reproductive Cycle' in *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, 16:1, March 2002, p.20.
[158] Warga, Claire, Dr., *Menopause and the Mind: the Complete Guide to Coping with the Cognitive Effects of Perimenopause and Menopause, including Memory Loss, Foggy Thinking, and Verbal Slips*, London: Simon & Schuster (1999), p.xvi.
[159] Cited by Dr Claire Warga, ibid., p.xvii.
[160] Granville, Gillian, 'Menopause: A Time of Private Change to a Mature Identity' in *Women Ageing: Changing Identities, Challenging Myths*, ed. by Bernard, Miriam et al., London: Routledge (2000), p.80.
[161] Apter, Terri, *Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife*, London: W W Norton (1995), p.201.

obviously thinking along similar lines, and does not deny the menopause is a 'change in a woman's life', but she paints a very negative picture of what awaits the woman on the other side:

> la crise de la ménopause coupe en deux avec brutalité la vie féminine; c'est cette discontinuité qui donne à la femme l'illusion d'une «nouvelle vie»; c'est un *autre* temps qui s'ouvre devant elle: elle l'aborde avec une ferveur de convertie; [...] elle croit s'envoler vers des cimes intouchées" but: "les cimes demeurent hors d'atteinte; [...] il reste devant la glace une femme qui a encore vieilli d'un jour depuis la veille. Aux moments de ferveur succèdent de mornes heures de dépression"[162].

There are many studies available which have, through empirical evidence, sought to exemplify women's experiences of the menopause and, by extension, ageing. These studies relate, largely but not exclusively, to Western women's experiences[163]. To cite just one, Gillian Granville conducted interviews with twenty women from diverse backgrounds to identify emerging themes and found, despite differing experiences, that many of the women interpreted the menopause transition as a time in the life-course when they could pause to reflect on themselves, before moving forward into a new phase of their lives. Crucially, they were aware that this opportunity for reflection was not available in the same way to midlife men[164], which I take as validation of my concentration in this thesis on the experiences in literature of women in their midlife years. She also found proof positive of the 'mask of ageing', whereby it seemed possible to construct an external self that was different from the maturing inner self, and that this process of maintaining a public image which was acceptable to others was a way of managing and accepting the realisation of becoming an older woman[165].

It does appear, therefore, that Terri Apter's observation holds true in: "that menopause is only one of a myriad of reminders of aging that can serve as a catalyst to the process by which women, in this new midlife, gain inner strength and greater control over life's inevitable compromises"[166]. What does appear certain is that there are as many different ways of handling the menopause as there are women, and its very diversity means that there are only individuals, no stereotypes or sexual scripts[167] to be found at this time of change.

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[162] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.464.
[163] In Appendix C, I have included a black South African woman's views on the menopause.
[164] Granville, Gillian, 'Menopause: A Time of Private Change to a Mature Identity' in *Women Ageing: Changing Identities, Challenging Myths*, ed. by Bernard, Miriam et al., London: Routledge (2000), p.84.
[165] ibid., p.88.
[166] Apter, Terri, *Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife*, London: W W Norton (1995), p.203.
[167] Notion introduced by Gagnon & Simon in 1973 – scripts that give us preparation for situations we have not yet encountered – definition in Laws, J.L. & Schwartz, P., *Sexual Scripts*, Illinois: Dryden Press (1977), p.viii.

iv. Aged by gender and culture

"The aging process [...] is experienced differently depending on gender"[168]

In 1985, the editors of a short-lived journal entitled *Penelope, pour l'histoire des femmes* wrote in the introduction to the thirteenth and last volume of the series entitled 'Vieillesses des femmes': "ce qui est [...] étonnant, c'est que les féministes se soient si peu intéressées à cette période de la vie des femmes, et, disons-le, aux femmes qui n'étaient plus jeunes"[169]. One explanation which is frequently offered is that the leading feminists would have little interest in this subject until they themselves reached their midlife years; an observation which appears to have been accurate, since it was on reaching their late forties/early fifties that leading feminists such as Frieden, Greer, Gullette, Woodward, Bartky et al[170] became interested in the topic of ageing.

As my interest is in how females age, as seen through their representations in literature, the issue of sex (a biological category – male or female) and gender (culturally defined – masculine or feminine) necessarily arises, and, given the fact of the menopause, it seems safe to assume that the: "lived experience of middle-age"[171] (where 'lived experience' is defined as: "the way an individual makes sense of her situation and actions" but also comprises one's freedom[172]) differs between men and women, certainly if we are concerned with 'writing the body' and my analysis of Elsa Triolet's writing in her midlife will prove this hypothesis. Susan Sontag is credited with the epigrammatic "double standard of ageing", whereby men are "allowed" to age, without penalty, in several ways that women are not[173], although some twenty-five years after that observation, it is fair to say that men are becoming increasingly affected by what Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls 'middle-ageism'.

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal, and still highly relevant text, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, is, of course, justly recognised for its major contribution to the theory of gender relations. Beauvoir sees a difference between male and female ageing and attributes as uncompromising the effects of the menopause on women, so that while the male: "vieillit continûment, la femme est brusquement dépouillée de sa féminité; c'est encore jeune qu'elle perd l'attrait érotique et la fécondité d'où elle tirait, aux yeux de la

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[168] Matcha, Donna, *The Sociology of Aging: A Social Problems Perspective*, London: Allyn & Bacon (1997), p.181.
[169] Introduction, *Penelope, pour l'histoire des femmes*, 13, Autumn 1985, p.6.
[170] Cited by Twigg, Julia, 'The Body, Gender and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1 (2004), p.61.
[171] Holmes, Diana, 'Colette, Beauvoir and the Change of Life' in *French Studies*, 53:4 (1999), p.430.
[172] Moi, Toril, *What is a Woman?* Oxford: OUP (1999), p.63.
[173] Sontag, Susan, 'The Double Standard of Aging' in *An Ageing Population*, ed. by Carver, Vida & Liddiard, Penny, Milton Keynes: The Open University (1978), p.73. Sontag first used the phrase in 1972 in 'The Double Standard of Aging', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 39, pp.29-38.

société et à ses propres yeux, la justification de son existence [...]"[174]. She is insisting, in effect, on the reality of the physical and sexual difference of the female's body, as well as the: "symbolic value that is ascribed to that body within the sociocultural domain"[175], and in *Le Deuxième Sexe* she goes on to expose how, in so many ways, patriarchy exploits the sexual difference to create systems of inequality, something we see very clearly in Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*.

Judith Butler writes: "it has seemed to many, I think, that in order for feminism to proceed as a critical practice, it must ground itself in the sexed specificity of the female body. Even as the category of sex is always reinscribed as gender, that sex must still be presumed as the irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it has come to bear"[176]. I wonder if she is aware of Dr Caufeynon's (pseudonym of Jean Fauconney) opinion in 1904 that all can be blamed on the uterus, as: "le mâle n'est mâle qu'en certains moments, mais la femelle est femelle pendant toute sa vie, et c'est à cette influence de l'utérus[177] qu'il faut attribuer cette vérité"[178]. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism & the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues that feminism has made a mistake by trying to assert that 'women' are a group with common characteristics and interests – that only reinforces a binary view of gender relations in which men and women divide into two clear-cut groups: "an unwitting regulation and reification of [binary] gender relations"[179] and does not allow people to form their own identity. Her view is that gender is a performance, it is what you do at particular times, rather than a universal 'who you are', thus our identities do not express some authentic inner core self[180].

If my interpretation of Butler's words is correct, then Ramatoulaye, Bâ's heroine in *Une si longue lettre*, fluctuates between male and female gender, as, for example, her interactions with her brother-in-law Tamsir illustrate. When Tamsir, the Imam and Mawdo inform her of Modou's marriage, she behaves submissively and modestly, seated before them, as she acquiesces (Bâ's terminology), bowing literally and figuratively to hegemonic power. Contrast this scene with the later episode when Tamsir comes to inform her that he will marry her after the mourning period. Ramatoulaye confronts him, using language appropriate to the male, looking him straight in the eyes, thus disrupting the male gaze, and rejecting him and his male right of seizure – of her body, the traditional way that males exercise power over women, as well as her material goods recently returned to her possession. A symbolic interaction perspective, which sees people as active agents, would see the interaction between Ramatoulaye and Tamsir as part of the ongoing creation of Ramatoulaye's identity, since:

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[174] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.456.
[175] Fishwick, Sarah, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, Bern: Peter Lang (2002), p.148.
[176] Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London: Routledge (1993), p.28.
[177] See Appendix D for information relating to the historic 'imperfection' of female bodies.
[178] Fauconney, Jean, *Histoire de la femme: son corps, ses organes... etc.*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1904), p.39.
[179] Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge (1999), p.9.
[180] ibid., p.33.

> the self is created through such interactions, but it is not necessarily a fixed and inflexible self, but one that is constantly adjusting to others. The concern is with how the self develops, how individual lives develop a biography, how social order is constantly being created, and how larger social forces emerge from these[181].

This perspective is useful if one considers that this scene is pivotal in Ramatoulaye's development of self and in how her image is perceived by others, but it is also crucial in understanding what it stands for in terms of changing the established, or patriarchal, order of things, particularly in comparison with that first face-to-face meeting of Tamsir and Ramatoulaye where: "tacitly enacted rituals... defend, protect, and preserve social face"[182].

Whilst gender undoubtedly has a role to play in age studies, being 'aged by culture'[183] affects both men and women particularly in midlife, although not necessarily equally. As mentioned earlier, the discourses which surround the topic of ageing invariably have negative connotations and gerontological topics themselves are not immune, thus: grieving, loneliness, depression, poverty, asexuality, physical frailties and illnesses, dependency, loss of attractiveness, contrast with the few positives of wisdom, friendship and generativity. The process of indoctrination is, therefore, insidious; we imbibe ageist propaganda which we internalise and act upon subconsciously, or consciously – after all, when we send an amusing card on someone's fiftieth birthday, it will almost certainly be denigratory, and does this not depict a touch of Schadenfreude on our part? So, despite often being in despair at ageism, we fail to realise how much we collude in perpetuating this particular 'ism'. Age is, after all, a relation of difference just like gender, race or class, hence the nouns 'ageism', 'sexism', 'racism' and 'classism' – prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, sex, race or class[184], although as Andrews points out, ageism is unique in that those who practice it will one day join the group they presently discriminate against[185].

"We think we age by nature; we are insistently and precociously being aged by culture"[186]. In *Declining to Decline*, Margaret Gullette highlights the discursive formations, the economic and political forces, and the practices that all coincide in the concept: "aged by culture"[187] and goes so far as to say that whatever happens in the body, human beings are aged by culture first of all[188]. Ironically, as she points out, despite the longevity revolution currently underway, we are being aged by culture younger all the time[189]. Julia

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[181] Gingrich, Paul, 'Symbolic Interactionism', 3 February 2000, http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/f100.htm.
[182] Goffman, Erving quoted by Gingrich, Paul, 'Symbolic Interactionism', 3 February 2000, http://uregina.ca/~gingrich/f100.htm.
[183] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Aged by Culture*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press (2004).
[184] Popular usage tends to apply these terms pejoratively, yet they can equally apply to positive discrimination in favour of a particular age/sex/race or class.
[185] Andrews, Molly, 'The Seductiveness of Agelessness' in *Ageing and Society*, 19 (1999), p.303.
[186] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1997), pp.6-7.
[187] ibid., p.211.
[188] ibid., p.3.
[189] ibid., p.4.

Twigg notes, however, that we have little choice in the matter since we live our lives in a particular historical period and culture; we are part of that, and there are limits to our capacity for cultural resistance, and thus of our capacity for age resistance[190]. Thus, for instance, *La vieille fille of Balzac* (1836) describes a woman in her forties and Balzac's portrait: "suggère que son apparence physique n'est pas un modèle de féminité" and: "au moral, le portrait n'est guère plus flatteur, qui dresse un catalogue des ridicules associés à l'état de vieille fille: maniaquerie, souci des petites choses, hypochondrie, passion pour sa jument"[191].

Cultural ageing includes the notion of social ageing. In Bourdieu's opinion, social ageing is nothing other than the slow renunciation or disinvestment (socially assisted and encouraged) which leads agents to adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have, even if this entails deceiving themselves as to what they are and what they have, with collective complicity, and accepting bereavement of all the 'lateral possibles' they have abandoned along the way[192]. However, social ageing also depends on the relational field, whereby the new Pope, Benedict XVI[193], at the age of seventy-eight, is not considered too old for such a position, and Tony Blair was considered young at forty-two when he became Prime Minister of Great Britain for the first time, yet retirement at fifty is common in France and in the perceived 'young' fields of Information Technology and the Media, workers in their early thirties have reported age discrimination in the UK.

Jean Améry describes a feeling common to many as they enter their fifties: "il y a, dans la vie d'un homme, un point temps [...] où celui-ci découvre qu'il n'est que ce qu'il est. Il reconnaît d'un seul coup que le monde ne prête plus son crédit à son avenir, que le monde n'est plus disposé à le considérer comme celui qu'il pourrait être"[194]. It appears that this 'point temps' may be occurring earlier in each generation, for at least some categories of people, although it is encouraging to see that Rosélie in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* is not discouraged by her age as she maps out her near future at the end of the novel – however, given that she is an artist, that is almost certainly one of the categories least affected by ageism.

If we look back in time for examples of ageing and cultural restraints, we find, for example, in the nineteenth century, treatises advising women how to behave once they reach a certain age, such as la baronne de Maussion's *Quatre Lettres sur la vieillesse* (1822) and la Marquise de Lambert's *La Traitesse*

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[190] Twigg, Julia, 'The Body, Gender, and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1 (2004), p.63.
[191] Heinich, Nathalie, *États de femme: L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale*, Paris: Gallimard (1996), p.258.
[192] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (translated by Richard Nice), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1986), pp.110-111.
[193] Inaugurated on 24 April 2005.
[194] Améry, Jean, *Du vieillissement: Révolte et Résignation*, Paris: Payot (1991), p.38 (translated from the German by Anick Yaiche) Original entited: *Über das Altern: Revolte und Resignation*, Stuttgart: Ernst Klett (1968), p.92.

de la Vieillesse[195] which she wrote for her eldest daughter. La Marquise's salon, which opened in December 1692, was the first of the great literary salons of the eighteenth century. The views of this well educated woman obviously reflected the aristocratic milieu into which she married and those of the literary salon over which she presided, but Roger Marchal, in his excellent study entitled *Madame de Lambert et son milieu*[196] is careful to point out that none of her work was intended for publication, therefore: "devant son enfant, elle peut se laisser aller à quelques confidences sur les souffrances de la vieillesse et les maux de l'âge"[197]. Hence, la Marquise felt free to write:

> tout le monde craint la vieillesse: on la regarde comme un âge livré à la douleur et au chagrin, où tous les plaisirs et les agréments disparaissent. Chacun perd en avançant dans l'âge, et les femmes plus que les hommes. Comme tout leur mérite consiste en agréments extérieurs, et que le temps les détruit, elles se trouvent absolument dénouées: car il y a peu de femmes dont le mérite dure plus que beauté[198].

Her words also reveal that, at that time, life was seen in stages, thus: "enfin, vous quittez chaque âge de la vie quand vous commencez à le connaître, et vous arrivez toute neuve dans un autre"[199]. She recommends her daughter to restrict her presence in public places and at events, or even abandon them completely since: "n'en de moins décent que d'y montrer un visage sans grâce; dès qu'on ne peut plus parer ces lieux là, il faut les abandonner. Les avantages de l'esprit se soutiennent mal au milieu d'une jeunesse brillante. Ils vous font trop sentir ce que vous avez perdu"[200]. She advises strongly against trying to maintain one's youth when one is d'*un certain âge*, and is remarkably prescient with her view that: "ce qui fait les malheurs d'un certain temps, c'est que vous voulez conserver et porter des sentiments dans un âge où ils ne doivent point être: est-ce la faute de l'âge? n'est-ce pas la nôtre? Ce sont les mœurs qui font les malheurs, et non pas la vieillesse"[201]. Sadly, little appears to have changed if Thiriet and Képès can write in 1981:

> nous voilà piégées par cette société dans des normes illusoires, et la lente évolution de l'âge peut rendre dramatique pour certaines d'entre nous cette course folle à l'impossible: comment peuvent-elles supporter qu'échappe cette perfection mythique à l'abri du temps, si elles y ont acccroché toute l'image d'elles-mêmes?[202]

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[195] Lambert, Anne Thérèse de, *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes: 1727*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1989).
[196] Marchal, Roger, *Madame de Lambert et son milieu*, Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution (1991).
[197] ibid., p.159.
[198] Lambert, Anne Thérèse de, 'Traité de la vieillesse' in *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes: 1727*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1989), p.232.
[199] ibid., p.237.
[200] ibid., pp.238-239.
[201] ibid., pp.239-240.
[202] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.49.

La Marquise is outspoken, for her era, being openly critical of men when she writes: "j'attaquerai les mœurs du temps, qui sont l'ouvrage des hommes" and she sees that : "les hommes, plutôt par la force que par le droit naturel, ont usurpé l'autorité sur les femmes: elles ne rentrent dans leur domination que par la beauté et par la vertu [...] Mais le règne de la beauté est peu durable: on l'appelle une courte tyrannie; [...]" whereas: "le règne de la vertu est pour toute la vie"[203], and she criticises the lack of education for women which gives them nothing to think about other than pleasure, so it is hardly surprising if: "il semble qu'elles ne se soient faites que pour être un spectacle agréable à nos yeux"[204]. After all: "on a dans tout les temps négligé l'éducation des filles; l'on n'a d'attention que pour les hommes; et, comme si les femmes étaient une espèce à part, on les abandonne à elles-mêmes, sans secours; sans penser qu'elles composent la moitié du monde"[205].

Madame de Lambert and Simone de Beauvoir would have made interesting dinner companions as, perhaps surprisingly, they had much in common in how they saw the ageing woman and how she was viewed by society. Thus, Beauvoir writes about the postmenopausal woman, more than two hundred years after Madame de Lambert: "si elle n'a d'autres ressources que l'exploitation de ses charmes, elle luttera pied à pied pour les conserver"[206].

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[203] Lambert, Anne Thérèse de, 'Traité de la vieillesse' in *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes: 1727*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1989), pp.40-41.
[204] ibid., p.50.
[205] Lambert, Anne Thérèse de, 'Avis d'une Mère à sa Fille" in *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes: 1727*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1989), p.73.
[206] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.465.

v. Elsa Triolet, Mariama Bâ and Maryse Condé

Finally, after setting out a brief overview of the background to the concept of ageing in general, I come to the authors and their works that I have chosen to represent some of the many facets of this intriguing subject, particularly in relation to midlife ageing in women. All three wrote in French, but French was not the mother tongue for Triolet and Bâ. Triolet was born in Russia, Bâ in Senegal and Condé in Guadeloupe. Triolet lived the majority of her life in exile from her beloved homeland and was always conscious of being an émigrée. Bâ was brought up under French colonial rule in Senegal, and lived through her country's fight for independence and the realisation afterwards that achieving independence was only the start of the battle the country had to face, and Condé, having left Guadeloupe although later reconciled to the island of her birth, always seems to return to the theme of exile in her novels. The female protagonists in the novels I have selected are, with one exception, in their midlife years and all undergo some crisis in their life at this time, whether a matter of existential angst in the case of Triolet's heroines, abandonment for Bâ's Ramatoulaye, or murder and unwelcome revelations for Condé's Rosélie.

With regard to the chapter on Elsa Triolet's works, my modus operandi is necessarily different to the other two chapters, as I consider that it is impossible to separate the woman from the writer, particularly with regard to the subject of ageing, since it is such a recurrent theme throughout her work. One can see similarities with her contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, in that not only did Triolet also live her life somewhat in the shadow of a man, in her case her husband, the poet Aragon, but her writing, like Beauvoir's, reflects, often vividly, the turbulent period through which she lives, as well as exhibiting, like Beauvoir, signs of gerontophobia. There can be no doubt that Triolet's life instructs her work; her emotions can be read through her words and her writing is a perfect example of the: "use of the body as a source of personal and social identity"[207]. With the publication in French of her correspondence with her sister Lili Brik, there exists now an excellent supplementary tool to aid in the analysis of her considerable œuvre.

Mille regrets is a short story expressing an unnamed woman's sense of despair at losing her looks as she ages, which she fears will lead to the loss of her partner, whilst *Le Cheval roux* is a complex novel set in a world ravaged by a nuclear explosion, which on a micro-level confronts the angst of the heroine's ageing persona, and on a macro-level, transforms her personal despair for her future into a despair for the future of mankind. Although Triolet's final novel, *Le rossignol se tait à l'aube*, deals with old age, rather than midlife ageing, I feel it appropriate to include it since it is a novel suffused with memories and nostalgia which concludes the life of a novelist obsessed with ageing, even at the very end of her life.

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[207] Gilleard, Chris, 'Women Aging and Body Talk' in Cultural Gerontology, ed. by Andersson, Lars, London: Auburn House (2002), p.139.

My intention in choosing Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale* for this thesis is to broaden the field of literature studied to encompass a wide spectrum of francophone writers in an attempt to examine how different cultures treat the subject of female ageing. Immediately this poses its own unique problems since by choosing to focus on a novel published in 1979 by a Senegalese and one published in 2003 by a Guadeloupian, I appear to be crossing not only oceans but also time, race, mother-tongues and religions, or as Carole Boyce Davies puts it: "crossing boundaries of geography, time and place and genre"[208], thus, at first glance, with all those differences, these two writers, along with Triolet, would seem to have only the French language in common.

I also appreciate that my use of the term 'francophone' to describe Maryse Condé would not meet with her approval[209], yet it is a common terminology and I am using it in its widest sense, that of French-speaking, although I recognise fully the diversity of all those nations and peoples who speak and write in French beyond the hexagon. Francophonie aside, I hasten to add at this juncture that there is no intention to make any of the chapters of this thesis comparative in the true sense of the word. What I am looking for, despite the individuality of each woman writer, are common threads, trends, concerns, to see if there are any true universals in women writing about ageing, since after all: "literature remains a privileged place where women's voices can be heard, all the more so in first person accounts or what one might call "experiental texts"[210].

I am encouraged to believe that I will find some coherence overall by Florence Stratton's observation that: "the most likely hypothesis" for similarities in the works of writers who are often geographically, historically, and psychologically distant from each other: "is similarity of female psychological and artistic response to what, despite cultural specificity in its manifestations, is a cultural constant: patriarchy"[211]. Taking 'patriarchy' as broadly meaning women's subordination by men, I would expect to find evidence of this in both Bâ and Condé's novels, with the link to ageing to be found in Susan Sontag's 'double standard' of ageing (p.28). In addition, I am also interested in how these "francophemmes", to borrow Christiane Makward's poetic expression[212], depict women in their midlife years in general and my

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[208] Davies, Carole Boyce (ed), *Black Women's Writing: Crossing the Boundaries*, Frankfurt: Matatu (1989), p.1.

[209] Maryse Condé says: "Maryse Condé does not write in French or Creole. Maryse Condé writes in Maryse Condé. Each of us has to find a voice, a way of expressing the emotions, the inner impressions that we have, and to do that we should use all the languages that are at our disposal." Talking to...Maryse Condé: Grand Dame of Caribbean Literature, *UNESCO Courier*, 53:11, November 2000.

[210] Zabus, Chantal, 'Writing Women's Rites: Excision in Experiental African Literature" in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24:3 & 4, May-August 2001, p.335.

[211] Stratton, Florence, 'The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African fiction' in the Special Issue on Women's Writing of *Research in African Literatures*, ed. by Cobham, Rhoda & Ogunyemi, Chikwengy Okonjo, 19:2, Summer 1988, p.143.

[212] Makward, Christiane P., 'Cherchez La Franco-femme' in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press (1996), p.118.

approach will, I believe, satisfy Bill Bytheway's desire for a move away from idealised models and processes of ageing and toward an interest in how people talk about and act upon their age[213].

Why did I choose Mariama Bâ? Reading *Une si longue lettre*, I was struck immediately by the fact that here was a middle-aged author, writing about a middle-aged woman whose life was in crisis. That the author was Senegalese writing about her own culture and that the situation which caused the initial crisis, polygyny, may be foreign to Western readers does not detract from the fact that the protagonist's emotions are all too familiar, one could even say universal. This is not to say, of course, that the whole novel is reducible to universals because although the conflict between tradition and modernity that Senegal faces as it embraces independence which is also a feature of the novel is, in general terms, faced by all emerging nations gaining independence from their colonial masters, obviously certain aspects pertain only to Senegal, such as the specificity of their caste system and the Wolof language[214], all of which: "illustrates the difficulty of defining a pure African code of behavior"[215]. However, Bâ's dedication is addressed: "à toutes les femmes et aux hommes de bonne volonté" and in her own words the novel is:

> a cry from the heart of all women everywhere. It is first a cry from the heart of Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, women constrained by religion and other social constraints that weigh them down. But, it is also a cry that can symbolize the cry of women everywhere[216].

Une si longue lettre was Bâ's first novel and won the first Japanese Noma Prize for publishing in Africa in 1981 (an award which propelled the novel rapidly into the international arena). It covers an astonishing array of subjects ranging from sharing one's husband with another woman to life as a single mother, illegitimacy to interfering mother-in-laws, nervous depression to death – nothing strange or foreign there then – and is ultimately an 'ageing' woman's re-affirmation of herself. However, these "personal" topics are interwoven skilfully throughout the novel with the wider issues affecting Senegal twenty years after achieving independence from the French. Tanella Boni sees the interior chaos of woman as a symbolic representation of the confusion which reigns in Africa[217]. Thus, this novel can justifiably: "se vanter de révéler, souvent même de guider, les orientations profondes d'une époque"[218] whilst at the same time (and allowing for the fact that *Une si longue lettre* is not an autobiography, but rather more of a pseudo-

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[213] Bytheway, Bill, 'Positioning Gerontology in an Ageist World' in *Cultural Gerontology*, ed. by Andersson, Lars, London: Auburn House (2002), p.74.
[214] French is the official language of Senegal. Wolof is the mother tongue of the Wolof ethnic group which makes up approximately 40 per cent of the nation. There are various dialects of Wolof in Senegal and it is also spoken in surrounding countries: Gambia (a different dialect), Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Mauritania..
[215] Klaw, Barbara, 'Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Subverting a Mythology of Sex-Based Oppression' in *Research in African Literatures*, 31:2, Summer 2000, p.132.
[216] Bâ, Mariama, speaking to Dr Barbara Harrell-Bond in Dakar, 9 July 1979. Originally in French. Reproduced in: *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), pp.396-397.
[217] Boni, Tanella, 'La femme n'est-elle qu'une femme?' in *Africultures*, 35, February 2001, p.27.
[218] Nahas, Hélène, *La femme dans la littérature existentielle*, Paris: PUF (1957), p.2.

autobiography), it also manages to disprove Estelle Jelinik's observation that while a male-authored autobiography: "is representative of his times, a mirror of his era", traditionally: "women's autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives"[219].

I chose Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, her most recently published novel, on the author's own recommendation. I was fortunate to attend a reading given by her in London on 24 March 2004 and afterwards asked her how she thought ageing affected an author's creativity and whether it affected their choice of subject matter. She replied that she had not actually thought about ageing in that way, but suggested I read *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, published in 2003. Compared to her earlier works, this novel has received relatively little literary criticism, yet it is a marvellous tale of a middle-aged woman's gradual realisation, provoked by a murder-mystery, that throughout her life she has let her identity become submerged by others, particularly in regard to her dependence on men. The protagonist, Rosélie, has allowed herself to become a victim not only of racism but of her own lack of self-esteem, to the extent that she does, indeed, see herself as the invisible woman.

There are strong similarities with Simone de Beauvoir's *La Femme rompue*[220] in which Monique, a middle-aged woman, has all her illusions slowly and painfully shattered when her husband reveals he is having an affair with a younger woman, while in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, Rosélie gradually discovers that her partner has, in fact, throughout their twenty years together, simultaneously been indulging in homosexual relationships. Just like Monique, Rosélie goes through a period in which she sees herself: "comme un marécage. Tout s'est englouti dans la vase"[221]. However, whilst at the end of *La Femme rompue* the future remains a mystery to Monique, the conclusion of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* sees: "la porte de l'avenir va s'ouvrir"[222] for Rosélie via the medium of her painting, as she breaks free finally from her dependence on men to become, at the age of fifty, independent in mind and body.

I believe that many women, and no doubt many men too, can identify with at least some of the characters' personal experiences in their midlife years portrayed in these novels – the sense of loss for some, the transition to a more positive future for others, the recourse to memories, the coming to terms with bodily changes. It is not the subject matter per se that reveals the gender, it is the perspective on that subject matter, and that is what makes all the novels under review so interesting and appropriate for this study.

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[219] Jelinik, Estelle, C. (ed), *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, London: Indiana University Press (1980), pp.7-9.
[220] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Femme rompue*, Paris: Gallimard (1967).
[221] ibid., p.249.
[222] ibid., p.251.

CHAPTER 1

ELSA TRIOLET

"Une réalité objective qu'il nous faut bien reconnaître: vieillir, c'est voir sa vie raccourcir, c'est devoir réviser l'image idéale de soi"[223]

1.1 "Je suis une Russe qui écrit en français"[224]

If the name Elsa Triolet is at all familiar at the start of the twenty first century[225], then it is more than likely that she is still remembered as the celebrated muse of Louis Aragon: "la femme du poète national, dont les yeux [...] sont «les pupilles de la nation»"[226]. What is perhaps less well known is that over a period of forty-five years, Triolet wrote hundreds of articles, literary critiques, a film scenario, well received books on authors and poets such as Chekhov and Mayakovsky[227], an anthology of Russian poets, theatre chronicles[228], as well as being responsible for some impressive translations including Anton Chekhov's plays and the poetry of Mayakovsky and Pasternak, and around twenty novels, one of which, a collection of short stories about the French Resistance entitled *Le Premier accroc coûte deux cents francs*, won the Goncourt Prize for literature in 1945 – the first time a female author had won this prestigious prize.

Triolet was also a keen nurturer of literary and poetic talent, as this extract from a letter written to her sister on 20 January 1950 reveals: "je suis très prise par les manuscrits des jeunes poètes «non majeurs». Samedi dernier, j'ai fait une sorte d'exposé, une réponse collective aux jeunes poètes. [...] Cinq, six d'entre eux en tout (sur une ou deux centaines) font preuve de talent, ce sont des garçons très bien" (CO. p.327) and she helped create a young poets' group influenced by the poetry of the Resistance called 'La Belle Jeunesse'. She was also the principal organiser for many years of the National Committee of Writers: "tout ce mois-ci, je me suis débattue avec la correction des épreuves, l'organisation de cette gigantesque manifestation (cent écrivains, plus de cent actrices et acteurs, la décoration du local, le transport des livres, l'éclairage, la musique, etc.)[229] as well as being responsible for remarkable initiatives

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[223] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.201.
[224] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 27, Préface au *Mal du pays*, p.15.
[225] An international and interdisciplinary conference was held on Aragon and Elsa Triolet called 'Love and Politics in the time of the Cold War' at Columbia University's Maison Française on 13-14 October 2000, the first of its kind at an American university.
[226] Reference to Louis Aragon, *Les Yeux d'Elsa*, Paris: Pierre Seghers (1942). The quote is from Desanti, Dominique, Elsa-Aragon, *Le couple ambigu*, Paris: Belfond (1994), p.301.
[227] Vladimir Maïakovski in Russian, see Triolet, Elsa, *Maïakovski: Poète russe*, Paris: Pierre Seghers (1945).
[228] Some of which have been published: Triolet, Elsa, *Chroniques théâtricales: Les Lettres Françaises 1948-1951*, ed. Monique Lebre-Peyfard, Paris: Gallimard (1981).
[229] CO. 26 October 1952, pp.425-426. Later in the same letter Triolet described how that particular Book Sale had been a great success, with around thirty thousand visitors, and sales of books worth five million, two hundred and fifty thousand francs.

such as promoting libraries throughout France: "je me passionne actuellement pour l'organisation de bibliothèques à travers toute la France. Si cela marche, cette entreprise aura une grande importance et de grandes conséquences pour l'avenir" (CO. 28 December 1950, p.360). Her stature at the time of her death was such that the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris held an exhibition dedicated to her life and works in 1972[230], although, to be scrupulously honest, this was at the behest of Aragon who was determined that his wife should receive, at least posthumously, the public and critical acclaim he felt she deserved and which, for the large part, had eluded her during her lifetime[231].

My interest in Elsa Triolet stems from the fact that she was one of the few women writing in French in the twentieth century to express so candidly through her writings – her novels as well as her diary and her correspondence – on both an emotional and experiential level, her apprehensions regarding her ageing, including a beautifully poignant final novel evoking her anticipated death. My contention is, therefore, that what amounted to almost an obsession with ageing played a significant role in dictating some of the avenues she explored as a writer, and thus was a prominent feature of her creativity.

Closely allied to Triolet's feelings regarding ageing are her sentiments on solitude, despite being half of one of the most famous literary couples in post-Second World War France, and her feelings on exile, which are often translated in her novels into identity crises for her protagonists. These characteristics are, in turn, linked to the undercurrent of marginalisation which pervades her work which dates back, no doubt, to her childhood when: "l'appartenance à l'intelligentsia juive – même laïque et ayant choisi l'assimilation – la plaçait dans une situation de marginalité par rapport à la bourgeoisie russe"[232], as well as to the aura of unpopularity which she felt always surrounded her, in both her chosen domicile, France, and her mother country, Russia. In *Le Cheval roux*, she goes so far as to describe this as hatred which: "m'a suivie toute ma vie, même lorsque j'étais jeune et suffisamment attrayante pour être suivie par d'autres sentiments. Tout de moi a péri, mais pas ce don que j'ai de susciter la haine" (CR. p.155).

Vis-à-vis her solitude, there is a passage in *Le Cheval roux* which seems to epitomise the essence of Elsa Triolet:

> Un dégoût puissant pour moi-même me saisit comme le mal de mer. J'ai toujours été odieuse. Voilà pourquoi personne ne m'a jamais aimée. De ces fous qui ont entouré ma jeunesse de leur délire amoureux, aucun n'a été l'Amoureux. Je ne l'ai pas mérité, voilà pourquoi aucune des passions que l'on a eues pour moi n'a tenu devant l'âge. C'est ma faute. Je suis juste, implacable, indifférente, dure,

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[230] Beaudiquez, Marcelle & Massuard, Alain, *Elsa Triolet* (exhibition catalogue), Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale (1972).

[231] Interestingly, Michel Apel-Muller revealed in *L'Humanité* of 14 November 1996 that the bookshop at Aragon and Triolet's former home, the mill at Saint-Arnoult-en-Yvelines (which is open to the public), sells between one thousand and one thousand five hundred books annually, of which two-thirds are Triolet's.

[232] Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, 'Preface' in *Triolet, Elsa, Écrits intimes 1912-1939*, ed. by Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, translated by Lily Denis, Paris: Stock (1998), p.15.

> revendicatrice, rancunière [...]. J'étais bonne et tendre, mais chacun m'aimait pour soi, personne n'a jamais eu pitié de moi, n'a rien voulu savoir de moi, ne m'a aidée à vivre. De toute ma vie, personne. Ni ma mère, ni ma sœur, ni mon mari, ni mon chien. Ils ont tous été si peu miens. Jamais il n'y a eu quelqu'un de plus solitaire que moi, jamais je n'ai rencontré quelqu'un qui m'aurait été simplement dévoué...(CR. pp.160-161)

With regard to ageing, what makes Triolet such an interesting author to study is fourfold. As Susanne Ditschler points out:

> son écriture, dès le début de sa carrière d'écrivain, s'appuie sur son propre vécu et se nourrira, jusqu'à son dernier roman *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* (1970), de la matière autobiographique. Deuxième point: cette matière autobiographique est celle d'un sujet qui, de par son appartenance au sexe féminin, est vu et se voit comme femme[233]

although Triolet certainly does not restrict herself to only representing heroines. Indeed, one of her most celebrated novels, *Le Cheval blanc*, features a young man, Michel Vigaud, as hero, and *L'Inspecteur des ruines* also has a male protagonist.

Thirdly, Triolet is refreshingly honest in her approach to the body and the limitations it can impose on men and women, as the plethora of references both in her literature and her personal writings attest. In the "Preface à *la Contrebande*" for Volume 3 of *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, she writes: "j'ai souvent été étonnée par la diversité des souffrances qui peuvent traverser notre corps: mal de tête, brûlures, coupures, rage de dents, membres brisés... Les douleurs ne se ressemblant pas, varient à l'infini"[234] and even a cursory glance at the recently published *Correspondance 1921-1970* between Triolet and her elder sister, Lili Brik[235] reveals a veritable litany of illnesses and diseases on which she speaks from personal experience. To cite just one example, Triolet suffered with her teeth throughout her life, which has both personal and professional consequences, as she describes in her letter to Brik of 25 November 1951:

> je ne t'ai pas annoncé l'événement le plus important de ma vie: mes dents sont fixées! J'ai été mise à rude épreuve ces quatre derniers mois. Les dentiers me déprime tant que j'en avais des crises de neurasthénie aiguë, sans compter qu'à plusieurs reprises, dans des circonstances extrêmement importantes, je n'ai pas pu intervenir en public" (CO. p.401).

However, these sufferings of the human body do not interest her only in their physical manifestations, but also metaphorically: "les ruines dont j'étais habituée faisaient que la démolition humaine, que les hommes portant une blessure ou la mort dans l'âme, m'attiraient, me fascinaient"[236], thus Antonin Blond, the main

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[233] Ditschler, Susanne, '*La Mise en Mots* d'Elsa Triolet' in *Genèses du «Je»: manuscrits et autobiographie*, ed. by Lejeune, Philippe, Paris: CNRS (2000), p.123.
[234] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 3, p.27.
[235] *Brik, Lili - Triolet, Elsa, Correspondance 1921-1970*, Paris: Gallimard (2000).
[236] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 13, p.21.

protagonist in *L'Inspecteur des ruines*, although a survivor of the war in the physical sense, has returned after five years as a: "naufragé comme il y en a des millions" (IR. p.14), damaged for life by his experiences: "je suis vide, une noix creuse. Rien, ni personne, ne me tient. J'ai rompu avec ceux qui vivent vraiment, tout ce que j'ai essayé pour rester avec eux, ne faisait que me remettre à ma place d'ancien combattant qui n'a de place qu'au combat" (IR. p.38) – echoes here of Chéri in Colette's *La Fin de Chéri* on his return from the First World War.

Finally, in Triolet's later novels, it is the ageing body, invariably female and often her own (or herself masquerading as her character), that largely preoccupies her in its descent into death, as she writes to her sister in this poignant insight:

> Je me sens très mal… Les sœurs sont de véritables ruines. Je te souhaite quand même un bon anniversaire, même si, en vérité, il n'y a pas de quoi…[…] Je pense à la mort en permanence, comme d'autres à un voyage prévu pour une date précise. Je ne fais rien sans avoir cette pensée. C'est apaisant. Au demeurant, tant mieux. Ce qui montre combien je suis lasse… Et pour parler come Nadia: «Papa et Maman nous ont inculqué le sens du devoir…» C'est bien cela, je vis par devoir, je me domine, je marche quand mes jambes refusent d'avancer, et je m'accroche à des fétus de paille, dans tous les domaines, toujours par sens du devoir (CO. 2 November 1959, p.750).

Thus, whilst she agonises over the outward signs of ageing and the loss of youth that it entails, death is accepted as inevitable, and even welcome: "tout m'embête. Comme dans *Le rossignol*. Il est temps de «mettre un terme aux plaisirs». Je quitterai ce monde avec soulagement" (CO. 27 January 1970, p.1539).

I should mention at this stage that my intention is not to write Elsa Triolet's biography – that has already been undertaken quite comprehensively, if not always entirely as rigorously as one would have liked owing to occasional overtones of hagiography perhaps difficult to avoid if one is a close friend (as well as some hints of ill-will from former friends) by, amongst others, Huguette Bouchardeau[237] and Dominique Desanti[238] in French, and Lachlan Mackinnon[239] and Maxwell Adereth[240] in English. However, since in this particular case to know the woman is essential in enabling a deeper understanding of the writer and her works, some background knowledge of her life, inasmuch as it relates to her relationships and the origins of her feelings of marginalisation and solitude, is essential before moving on to analysing the legacy she left in her writing with regard to the relationship between ageing and literature, which I intend to study in three of her works: the short story *Mille regrets* and the novels *Le Cheval roux* and *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*.

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[237] Bouchardeau, Huguette, *Elsa Triolet: Écrivain*, Paris: Flammarion (2000).
[238] Desanti, Dominique, *Les clés d'Elsa*, Paris: Ramsay (1983).
[239] Mackinnon, Lachlin, *The Lives of Elsa Triolet*, London: Chatto & Windus (1992).
[240] Adereth, Maxwell, *Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon: An Introduction to Their Interwoven Lives and Works*, Lewingston, NY, Lampeter, UK: Edwin Meller Press (1994).

1.2 Elsa Triolet's personal life and its influence on her writing

Born Ella Jurievna Kagan in Moscow on 12 September 1896, she was five years younger than her sister Lili. Their father, Yuri, a non-practising Jew, was, unusually for the time, a lawyer, and the family were part of the thriving intellectual bourgeoisie to be found in Russia in that period. Their mother, Yelena, a talented pianist, was bilingual in German. The sisters also learnt French[241] from the age of six, and were fortunate enough to be able to travel widely with their parents. Despite studying architecture at university, Triolet's true passion was for the arts, and literature in particular. Her sister was, by all accounts, very beautiful and had many suitors throughout her life and Triolet's evident low self-esteem and feelings of isolation presumably date from what she perceived as her unattractiveness compared with her sister, although photographs of Triolet from that era reveal a pretty young woman. We are fortunate in having Triolet's intimate thoughts as confided to her journal, *Écrits intimes: 1912-1939* recently translated into French[242]. Thus, aged sixteen, Triolet writes poignantly in her journal entry of 21 February 1913 of her appearance at a masked ball: "mon costume de Pierrot était ravissant et me seyait à merveille. J'étais complètement maquillée: les lèvres très, très rouges, les yeux fortement soulignés, les sourcils épaissis et les joues absolument blanches. J'étais réellement jolie. Je ne l'avais jamais été à ce point et, hélas, je ne le serais plus" (EI. p.58).

Clara Malraux, also an émigrée from Russia who later became the first wife of André Malraux, was friends with Aragon and Elsa Triolet (despite Malraux's disapproval), and recalls in *La Fin et le commencement* a revealing comment that Triolet made when talking of her childhood: "vous ne savez pas ce que c'est d'être la petite sœur d'une fille trop belle"[243]. One can only imagine, therefore, how she felt when she lost the poet Mayakovsky[244] to that beautiful elder sister. Triolet discovered this supremely talented, young, bohemian poet; was certainly enamoured of him judging by her journal entries from that time, and considered herself responsible for launching his career, when she introduced him to her sister and he was swept off his feet by a combination of Lili's beauty and her waywardness. Triolet and Mayakovsky remained close friends until his suicide in 1930, and she, and her sister, worked tirelessly all their lives to promote his work both in Russia and abroad, yet that does not detract from the fact that, when Elsa was an emotionally vulnerable teenager, he chose Lili over her, particularly as Lili was already married to the Marxist, Osip Brik. That this was an apparently frequent occurrence is revealed in Triolet's diary entries; thus in her entry of 10 February 1913, she wrote regarding one of her suitors: "Mara n'aime que Lili en moi, il n'a aimé que notre extraordinaire ressemblance" (EI. p.55) and later that year: "j'ai dit à Mara que je n'épouserais qu'un homme qui me placerait aussi haut qu'il place lui-même

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[241] The sisters had a privileged childhood. In 1907, only 120,000 girls received a secondary education in Russia, and any Jewish girl wanting to go to university was subject to a three-per-cent quota.
[242] *Triolet, Elsa, Écrits intimes 1912-1939*, ed. by Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, translated by Lily Denis, Paris: Stock (1998).
[243] Malraux, Clara, *La Fin et le commencement*, Paris: Bernard Grasset (1976), p.114.
[244] Vladimir Maïakovski.

Lili" (EI. 4 November 1913, pp.121-122). Knowledge of Triolet's history confirms the following observation by Marie-Thérèse Eychart, editor of *Écrits intimes 1912-1939*:

> parce qu'à seize ans, comme plus tard à trente, Elsa ne se plaît pas, ne se sent pas attirante, alors qu'elle a le sentiment que la beauté ouvre toutes les portes de l'affection et de la reconnaissance. La blessure de l'amour-propre est en elle profonde. Elle estime que son intelligence ne procure pas le bonheur que donne la beauté (EI. p.18).

Eychart attributes this feeling of low self-esteem to: "une blessure narcissique née du prestige d'une sœur aînée belle, séduisante et adulée de son entourage et surtout des hommes" (EI. p.19).

Triolet was not, however, without suitors and her childhood friend, Roman Jakobson, the celebrated linguist, was certainly one who proposed to her. Indeed, a certain caution has to be exercised in not taking Triolet's words too literally; for all that she writes of her feelings of solitude in her journal, she was rarely alone in the true sense of the word. Thus at the time of her entry dated 16 May 1925 when she agonises that: "viendront les rides définitives, la graisse, et je resterai seule" (EI. p.195), she was actually in the throes of a new love in the form of Marc Chadourne, a writer linked to the Surrealists. Shades here of Colette's alter ego renouncing men in her midlife novel *La Naissance du jour*, whilst the real-life Colette was just embarking on a highly passionate relationship with Maurice Goudeket who would become her third husband. For Triolet, solitude seems to mean the feeling of being all alone, even if in a relationship and is, in her case, no doubt linked to her feelings of exile from her closest friends and family and her life in Russia, thus it becomes: "cette solitude essentielle de l'homme ou de la femme privés de milieu naturel"[245].

However, in 1918 in Moscow, Elsa Kagan met a Frenchman, André Triolet, an officer in the French army and they were married in Paris in 1919. Their marriage was shortlived and, after a brief sojourn in Tahiti, they separated in 1921 when she returned to Paris alone, although they did not divorce until 1939[246]. This marriage was, however, pivotal in Triolet's life, as it entailed her departure from a beleaguered Russia in 1918, and the start of half a century of exile from her beloved homeland: "... privé de sa patrie, l'homme éprouve un inconfort constant du corps et de l'âme toujours en peine. (...) le mal du pays"[247]. Although at the time she believed it was just a trip and she would return shortly, Triolet never lived in Russia again, only visiting occasionally over the years, and as she said: "c'est ainsi que je me suis jetée pour la vie dans un océan de nostalgie"[248].

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[245] Madaule, Jacques, *Ce que dit Elsa*, Paris: Denoël (1961), p.68.
[246] They kept in touch and she visited the hospital every day in 1963 when André Triolet had an operation for an ulcer at the age of seventy-four.
[247] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon,* 27, p.13.
[248] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon,* 1, Ouverture, p.14.

Triolet eventually settled in Montparnasse and made Paris, and France, her home for the rest of her life. However, the feeling of being in exile from her homeland: "je n'étais plus de plain-pied avec les miens, famille ou pas: ils avaient vécu la guerre civile, la famine, les hivers-assassins, pendant que moi j'avais été dans quelque Tahiti paradisiaque"[249] and, in addition, never feeling truly accepted in her adopted country, were sentiments which would stay with her forever. In Triolet's case it was a matter of a double exile. When she wrote of her childhood, it was, as her friend Jacques Madaule points out: "le souvenir nostalgique d'un paradis perdu"[250], lost to her not only in terms of years passed, but also by the Revolution which changed everything so totally that the Russia of her childhood, pre-Revolution, had gone forever, and then, with her departure from present-day Russia, she in effect became a triple exile. It is interesting, therefore, to read that Edmonde Charles-Roux[251], a close friend of Aragon and Triolet, revealed that at Aragon's request, 'l'acte de propriété' for the mill that the couple bought in 1951 at Saint-Arnoult-en-Yvelines was put in Elsa's name only, in order that: "celle qui si longtemps et partout avait été traitée en étrangère, possédât enfin un coin de France bien à elle"[252].

Elsa Triolet met Louis Aragon in 1928 when, as Lilly Marcou points out: "elle a alors trente-deux ans, presque vieille ou du moins plus tout à fait jeune pour cette époque-là"[253]. In *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, Triolet summarises their meeting thus: "j'avais lu *Le Paysan de Paris* et parce que rien ne pouvait m'être plus proche, plus mien, plus parent comme on dit en russe, j'ai voulu connaître l'homme qui avait écrit cela. Je t'ai rencontré et je suis restée en France"[254] and indeed, on reading *Le Paysan de Paris*, it is easy to see wherein lay the attraction for Triolet – the following passage, to cite just one example, was obviously written by a kindred soul:

> Plus seul que les pierres, plus seul que les moules dans les ténèbres, plus seul qu'un pyrogène vide à midi sur une table de terrasse. Plus seul que tout. Plus seul que ce qui est seul dans son manteau d'hermine, que ce qui est seul sur un anneau de cristal, que ce qui est seul dans le cœur d'une cité ensevelie[255].

They did not marry, however, until 1939, which was also the year Triolet abandoned her diary (which she had kept since 1908) because: "les temps à venir n'allaient pas être propices aux confidences, fût-ce à soi-même"[256]. The Second World War was to prove a catalyst in their lives, as in the lives of so many, as their literature of that time attests.

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[249] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.15.
[250] Madaule, Jacques, *Ce que dit Elsa*, Paris: Denoël (1961), p.19.
[251] Quoted by Apel-Muller, Michel, *Elsa Triolet et Aragon au moulin de Villeneuve: Saint-Arnoult-en-Yvelines*, Boulogne: Castelet (1996), p.7.
[252] Although in her letter to her sister dated 25 July 1951, p.375, Triolet wrote à propos l'acte de vente: "à mon nom d'ailleurs, car Aragocha est toujours privé de ses droits civiques et on ne sait pas bien tout ce que ça implique".
[253] Marcou, Lilly, *Elsa Triolet: Les Yeux et la Mémoire*, Paris: Librairie Plon (1994), p.88.
[254] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.27.
[255] Aragon, Louis, *Le Paysan de Paris*, Paris: Gallimard (1926) pp.213-214.
[256] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.32

Despite keeping a diary from such an early age, Triolet had not intended to become a writer. In 1924, whilst writing her second book *Fraise-des-bois*, she confided to her diary: "je ne suis pas un écrivain, mais seulement une femme malheureuse qui écrit son malheur" (EI. 29 September 1924, p.186). After leaving her first husband, Triolet spent some time in Berlin, along with many other Russian emigrés, and it was there that Maxim Gorki, having read her letters in Victor Chklovski's *ZOO, lettres qui ne parlent pas d'amour, ou La Troisième Héloise*[257], persuaded her to take up writing – and thus was born her first novel, *À Tahiti*, written in Russian, published in 1925. Chklovski's *ZOO* was an epistolary novel, but although Triolet had forbidden him to write about his love for her in his book, Chklovski incorporated real letters that Elsa, here called Alya, had sent him – she was therefore first published indirectly, in Russian, in 1923. It is also interesting to note, given her later status as Aragon's muse, that she was obviously destined to be a written subject, since it is in Chklovski's novel that Triolet appears as subject for the first time: "Elsa functions in the book as the heroine of a romance, but she is also, as the author explicitly states, a realized metaphor. She stands for the bourgeois values of effete Western Europe"[258]. Chklovski wrote in letter no. 29: "Alya is the realization of a metaphor. I invented a woman and love in order to make a book about misunderstanding, about alien people, about an alien land. I want to go back to Russia"[259]. In fact, the whole act of writing *ZOO, lettres qui ne parlent pas d'amour, ou La Troisième Héloise* for Chklovski could serve as a blueprint for Triolet's mingling of facts and fiction in her own literature over the years, as he wrote: "je ne sais plus où j'en suis, Alia! C'est que, en même temps que je t'écris des lettres, je travaille à un livre. Son contenu et le contenu de la vie sont tout à fait emmêlés"[260].

It is important, at this stage, to correct the oft-held view that Triolet began to write under the influence of Aragon. Whilst living with Aragon, she actually wrote in secret, hiding her efforts from him for some five years, as did Clara Malraux from her own husband. Thus Clara's comment: "il reste que nous pouvions «compromettre» un homme par notre succès ou notre échec"[261] is very revealing both of the attitudes prevailing at the time and on the reason why Triolet hesitated to 'come out' as an author for fear of upsetting the status quo in her marriage. Indeed, Triolet reveals in *Œuvres romanesques croisées* that even after Aragon knew she was writing, she was waiting for his approval: "je me persuadais que pour écrire il m'aurait fallu t'entendre dire: écris! Or, tu ne voulais toujours pas me le dire. Et quand j'ai recommencé à écrire, c'était contre toi, avec rage et désespoir, parce que tu ne me faisais pas confiance"[262]. She had, of course, published in Russian before she met Aragon. In fact, part of her novel, *Fraise-des-bois*, was published in *Krasnaja Nov'* in 1926 and as Marianne Delranc-Gaudric

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[257] 'La Troisième Héloise' is an anagram of 'Elsa Triolet' in Russian.
[258] Shklovsky, Viktor, *ZOO or Letters not about Love*, (translated from the Russian and edited by Richard Sheldon), Ithaca, NY, London: Cornell University Press (1971), p.xxviii.
[259] ibid., p.103.
[260] Chklovski, Victor, *ZOO, lettres qui ne parlent pas d'amour, ou la troisième Héloise*, Paris: Gallimard (1963), p.76.
[261] Malraux, Clara, *La Fin et le commencement*, Paris: Bernard Grasset (1976), p.113.
[262] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, Ouverture, 1, p.31.

reveals, a Russian critic, Avram Lejnev: "situe Elsa Triolet dans le contexte littéraire russe par une phrase-clé: «Elsa Triolet est issue de l'école de Victor Chklovski»"[263], thus situating her writing firmly in the Russian school.

It is true, however, to say that generally Triolet's books were not received well in Russia, which was always a source of distress and irritation, as she wrote to her sister in 1948: "ce qui me chagrine particulièrement, c'est que chez vous on n'a pas beaucoup de considération pour moi et qu'il faut demander qu'Ogoniok me publie, eh bien! que ce soit Ogoniok qui fasse la demande, et si ça ne l'intéresse pas, qu'il aille au diable. On ne se fait pas aimer de force" (CO. 3 May 1948, p.249), and again, even more indignantly, in 1956:

> L'article d'Isbakh est affligeant parce qu'il fait de moi un écrivain de troisième ordre, et cela, même mes ennemis ne le font pas. Si Fréville, disons, parlait comme ça de moi dans *L'Humanité*, alors personne ne me respecterait plus comme écrivain. Non, je n'arriverai jamais à me faire un nom en russe! C'est fichu. Ne crois pas que je m'arrache les cheveux, je n'ai pas le droit d'être un écrivain de quelque importance, et cela n'a rien à voir avec la qualité de mon livre. (CO. 7 September [?]1956, p.589).

In addition, she always had problems with poor translations of her books written originally in French: "pourquoi mon article n'est-il pas passé dans la *Komsomolka*[264]? Pourquoi ne traduit-on pas en 1946 *le Premier accroc*? Pourquoi y a-t-il tant de fâcheuses erreurs dans *Les Amants d'Avignon*? Et pourquoi personne ne m'aime?" (CO. 4 December 1945, pp.182-183). All this negativity in Russia surrounding her work simply fed into the feeling of *dépaysement* which never left her.

When Triolet started writing in France, she chose to write first in Russian, and then do her own translation into French, but soon abandoned this time-consuming method. As she writes much later in *La Mise en mots*: "n'est-ce pas que le passage de la pensée aux mots est pour moi plus court en russe qu'en français?"[265] and she wondered whether it was as a result of her bilingualism that she had to work on her words rather than: "sauter sur les mots directement"[266]. She always retained a vestige of her Russian accent, which made her voice distinctive (and caused her to be recognised by the young students in *Le Cheval roux* when her features had been obliterated by the nuclear explosion), even if she admits in *La Mise en mots* that: "mon accent russe me gêne"[267] (although only a page later, she declares: "j'aurais pu me faire passer mon accent russe. J'ai préféré le garder. J'écris avec mon authentique accent"[268]). Her

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[263] Delranc-Gaudric, Marianne, 'L'accueil critique des premiers romans d'Elsa Triolet en union Soviétique' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 6, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1998), p.19.
[264] Familiar name given to the *Komsomolskaïa Pravda*, daily morning newspaper.
[265] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, p.271.
[266] ibid., p.271.
[267] ibid., p.271.
[268] ibid., p.272.

bilingualism played a major role in her life, as she writes in *La Mise en Mots*: "la langue est un facteur majeur de la vie et de la création. [...] j'ai un bi-destin. Ou un demi-destin."[269]

Given that: "a major function of language is the expression of personal identity – the signalling of who we are and where we 'belong'"[270], then one can understand Triolet's underlying identity confusion. Maintaining a vestige of a Russian accent meant that her ethnic identity[271] showed she belonged forever to Russia, as did certain of her habits and lifestyle choices, yet her status[272] in life, her social identity, belonged to France as proven by the fact that she chose to write in French, thus marking her allegiance to that country. Indeed, since much of her work was only published in French, that sent a message, intentional or not, on how she would be read in the future.

Her letters to her sister are fascinating in the detail they reveal concerning the strong ties she always maintained to Russia, its people and culture, whilst also showing how much at home she felt at the Moulin de Villeneuve, the property in the French countryside that she and Aragon bought in 1951. There can be no doubt, therefore, that this "bi-destin" or "demi-destin" played a significant role in the feelings of marginalisation and alienation that Triolet suffered from throughout her life.

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[269] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, p.224.
[270] Crystal, David, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge: CUP (1987), p.13.
[271] "Ethnic identity is allegiance to a group with which one has ancestral links", ibid., p.34.
[272] "Status is the position a person holds in the social structure of a community", ibid., p.41.

1.3 Elsa Triolet and her close relationships

It is this dualism in Triolet, her Russian childhood and her French life, as well, of course, as the era in which she lived, which make the recent publication in French of the letters exchanged between Elsa Triolet and her sister Lili Brik such an enthralling read. As Triolet admitted to Brik: "en général, tu le sais bien, je n'ai pas le sens de la famille" (CO. 2 October 1959, p.742), but her sister was the obvious exception. Certainly in the early days, when her journal shows clearly that she was jealous of her more beautiful and dynamic older sister: "lorsque l'on voit constamment près de soi un homme en adoration devant une autre, en l'occurrence Lili, on commence malgré soi à se trouver insignifiante et pitoyable" (EI. 13 February 1913, p.56), there is evidence of an ambivalence in her relationship with Brik, but the warmth that emanates from the correspondence between the two sisters over a period of nearly fifty years is an undeniable testament to the deep love and esteem they had for each other, although perhaps it was a love that flourished because of, rather than despite the distance between them.

The two sisters obviously provided each other with emotional support, as well as financial and material succour during the hard times which both experienced over the turbulent years, but what shines through especially in their letters is the sense of the importance of their shared history from which Triolet, in particular, derives much comfort in her estrangement from her birthplace. In her letter of 1 May 1949, she writes most movingly:

> Ces derniers temps, je pense à vous sans cesse. Tu sais fort bien qu'en réalité il n'existe ni temps ni espace, et quel que soit le moment où nous nous rencontrons, c'est comme si nous ne nous étions pas séparées, nous aimons et détestons les mêmes gens et les mêmes choses et reprenons la conversation commencée dans notre chambre d'enfants, passage Spassoglinitchevski. Et ainsi jusqu'à la tombe (CO. p.299).

Triolet's relationship with her parents appears not to have played such a crucial role in her life and although she writes in *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*: "mes père et mère s'occupaient de moi, mais je ne leur étais pas sympathique" (R. p.29), it is difficult to substantiate their relationship from reading her diary and her letters to Brik. It was certainly a great shock when their father died in 1915 and Triolet describes her feelings with regard to his death most movingly in *Fraise-des-bois* and reprises his death in her last novel, *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*. With regard to Triolet's mother, Edmonde Charles-Roux writes, rather dramatically, that a few days after her father's burial, Elsa wanted to kiss her mother: "celle-ci détourna la tête et refusa le baiser d'Elsa qui chercha éperdument à comprendre. Quelle était la raison de ce refus? Elle s'interrogea encore et encore. Pourquoi sa mère l'avait-elle rejetée? Elle contempla le désastre, le bonheur perdu, l'enfance envolée et cessa d'aimer sa mère"[273]. She did,

[273] Charles-Roux, Edmonde, 'Elsa Triolet: Une femme dans le feu' in *Faites entrer l'infini*, 10, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, December 1990, p.10.

however, leave Russia with her mother, and lived with her in London and Paris before her marriage, but there are few references to her in her letters, and strangely no conscious identification with her mother as an ageing persona, which I think one would expect. It is, in fact, in her sister's first letter to Triolet after the war (CO. 21 November 1944, p.157) that she learns of her mother's death in a sanatorium in 1942. In her reply dated 1 February 1945, Triolet writes: "quelle pitié pour maman. J'étais sûre qu'elle n'était plus vivante. Ainsi donc c'est la mort qui l'a sauvée des Allemands, merci à la mort" (CO. p.159) and later in the same letter, she continues: "sans maman il est devenu triste de vivre, je me rends compte que je vivais un peu aussi pour elle: quand il arrivait quelque chose de mauvais, je me disais, dieu soit loué, maman n'en sait rien: quelque chose de bon, c'est maman qui sera contente!" (CO. p.161).

It is the relationship which existed between Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon, however, which remains one of the literary world's great mysteries, and one about which the two revealed little during their lifetimes, although in an (unpublished) interview by Aragon recorded on 21 January 1972 at an evening entitled 'La Véritable histoire d'Antonin Blond' given in honour of his late wife, he revealed: "notre vie n'a pas été simple, elle n'a pas été facile, elle a été très peu ce que l'on croit"[274]. As to Triolet's views on their relationship, Francis Crémieux reports that in responding to a question as to whether the poems of Aragon about her amounted to: "une trahison d'un secret intime", Triolet said: "les véritables relations du peintre avec son modèle ne sont pas peintes, pas plus que dans la poésie d'Aragon ne sont peints nos rapports"[275].

What does appear certain is that there was a crisis in the marriage around the end of 1942 or the beginning of 1943. Lily Marcou recounts that at that time, Aragon wrote the poem with the oft-repeated phrase which was also popularised in a song by Georges Brassens: "Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux" which has been assumed by many to mean 'the impossibility of the couple'. It appears that he: "se trouve confronté à une femme en pleine maturation". Maxwell Adereth confirms that in 1943 Triolet informed Aragon that she wanted to leave him, the official version being that as part of the Resistance, they could not live together as husband and wife, and Triolet wanted to do more for the cause. Unofficially, it is generally accepted by the couple's biographers that she did want to leave him at that stage, although there is no documentary evidence cited. Yet as Pierre Daix, a close friend of the couple[276], reveals, it was:

> elle qui avait fait leur couple, et, ensuite, que leur couple demeure un couple; au moins aux yeux des gens, parce qu'il y eut des moments où elle n'y tenait plus [...] Quoi qu'en pense et dise Aragon, Elsa l'avait empêché de se disperser de femme en femme et savait à quoi s'en tenir sur sa tendance vers les hommes. [...] Elsa, la

[274] 'Aragon inédit, enregistré le 21/1/1972 à la Maison de la Culture de Bourges' in *Faites entrer l'infini*, 8, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, December 1989, p.10.
[275] Aragon, Louis & Crémieux, Francis, *Aragon: Entretiens avec Francis Crémieux*, Paris: Gallimard (1964), p.165.
[276] He met them as a young man of twenty-three in 1945, therefore he did not know them at the time of the alleged 'crisis' in their marriage.

quarantaine passée, mesurant sans doute avec son pessimisme cruel le peu qui lui restait de sa vie de femme, a voulu quitter Louis[277].

Dominique Desanti, who knew the couple from 1944 to 1956, described Aragon and Triolet's relationship as one where: "elle était devenue la sœur maternelle, la complice éternelle. [...] Elle devient la partie féminine de lui. Elle a, pendant quarante-et-un ans, vécu à l'intérieur d'un amour-haine dont les autres voyaient les lilas et les roses mais dont elle sentait les épines la déchirer"[278].

Whatever the truth of the matter, Triolet's letter to Aragon, undated but assumed, by Michel Apel-Muller who found it in Aragon's effects, to have been written around 1965, is a truly anguished plea from the heart and is a poignant testimony to her apparent unhappiness throughout the marriage and goes some way to explaining the overwhelming aura of solitude in all her novels[279]. Yet, reading Triolet's letters to her sister, which, as Léon Robel points out: "n'est pas une correspondance d'écrivains destinée à la publication mais des écrits parfaitement intimes et d'une totale authenticité"[280], one cannot help but observe that over a period of fifty years, there are surprisingly few negative references to Aragon. Certainly in 1931 she wrote: "avec Aragocha, nous nous disputons comme avant, et les choses ne vont pas bien" (CO. 15 February 1932, p.63) and again in 1937: "Aragon a complètement perdu la tête avec son journal. Il ne dort pas, ne mange pas and plus ça va, pire c'est. Lorsque cela prend de telles proportions, je commence à trouver cela désagréable, je ne supporte pas les fous" (CO.[281] p.102), but these comments simply confirm the overwhelming impression gained from Triolet's letters of Aragon's prodigious work ethic which could not have been easy to live with and obviously contributed to her sense of solitude. It could also explain why Triolet wrote in *Le Cheval roux*: "quel est ce besoin d'affection, sans laquelle la vie nous semble dure comme une couche de pierre. Mais je suis peut-être d'une'espèce qui en a plus besoin qu'une autre" (CR. p.172). Yet throughout the fifty years of correspondence: "on voit l'admiration pour l'écrivain et l'extraordinaire affection qu'elle porte à l'homme. On a écrit à ce propos quantité de sottises. Il est évident à cette lecture que vivre avec Aragon n'est pas une tâche de tout repos mais on a tendance à oublier la tendresse et le respect qui les unissaient"[282].

However, it is fair to say that Triolet probably believed her entire life was lived in the shadow of first, her elder sister, Lili Brik, and then Aragon, perhaps not in his role as her long-term partner and husband, but

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[277] Daix, Pierre, *Aragon: Une vie à changer*, Paris: Flammarion (1994), p.407.
[278] Desanti, Dominique, *Elsa-Aragon: Le couple ambigu*, Paris: Belfond (1994), p.371. NB. this biography appeared in 1983 under the title *Les Clés d'Elsa.*
[279] Published in 1994, it does not appear to have been widely disseminated, therefore I have included it in Appendix E. As Apel-Muller writes: une lettre qui est beaucoup plus qu'un geste privé, c'est une clé de lecture et par conséquent un acte de littérature". Apel-Muller, Michel, 'Les jambages bleus du malheur' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 5, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1994), pp.24-25.
[280] Interview with Léon Robel and Michel Apel-Muller, *L'Humanité*, 24 February 2000. http://www.humanite.presse.fr/popup_print.php3?id_article=220658
[281] Undated letter, judged by the editor according to its contents to have been written in April 1937.
[282] Michel Apel-Muller writing in *L'Humanité*, 24 February 2000.

certainly in his roles of poet, author, surrealist and then communist (Triolet herself was never a member of the Communist party, although it is accepted that she introduced Aragon to the party). This deep-seated feeling of almost always being seen in public as second-best was a powerful driver in her life: "mon anniversaire n'a pas fait grand bruit... Plus Aragon est célèbre, moins j'ai d'amis personnels. Vous êtes les seuls, avec Gilberte et Mme Fréville, à y avoir pensé...[...] En revanche, Aragon croulait sous les télégrammes, les cadeaux, les fleurs!" (CO. 4 October 1962, p.1002). The following quotation encapsulates neatly her feelings with regard to her position vis-à-vis Aragon, her ageing, her reception by others and her relationship with her sister:

> Tout le monde lui [Aragon] fait des compliments du matin au soir: il est revenu si beau, comme tout doré, [...]. Personne ne me fait de compliments à moi. Je vieillis à toute allure, mais moi aussi j'ai bronzé et je me fais belle. Mais personne ne m'aime... je ne voulais pas répondre à la lettre si affectueuse de ma petite Lili, ce n'est pas bien de répondre à l'affection en la mettant en doute, et voilà que Lili se fâche parce que je n'ai pas réagi... Mais vous nous aimez de loin, et quand nous sommes ensemble, je tape sur les nerfs de Lili et elle s'ennuie avec moi à en grincer des dents. Mais pour ce qui est d'aimer, comment ne nous aimerions-nous pas, nous n'aimons que vous, sans trêve ni repos, pour ainsi dire, tout le reste est provisoire, passager, précaire (CO. 11 September 1958, pp.682-683).

On a professional level, it is worth noting that just when Triolet felt her talents as a writer were finally being recognised with the award of the Prix Goncourt in 1945, which happened to coincide at a time when Aragon's bourgeois novels were being spurned by public and critics alike, Edmonde Charles-Roux recalls a meeting which took place shortly after the war when Triolet was introduced as: "Madame Aragon qui écrit aussi"[283]. Notwithstanding this personal slight, the period after the Second World War was not as successful for the couple as they would have liked: "on continue de nous injurier sans cesse dans les journaux, on ne peut plus bouger le petit doigt" as Triolet revealed to her sister in late 1950 (CO. 27 November 1950, p.358). Dominique Desanti suggests: "les milieux littéraires boudaient les Aragon. Déception insurmontable: ils avaient cru régner. Mais dans l'opinion internationale, la France, c'était un autre couple, celui de Sartre et Simone de Beauvoir"[284]. Triolet herself recalls that at the time of the Liberation: "la calomnie, politique et autre, atteignait à cette époque un degré monstreux; on s'acharnait sur nous deux, pour faire de nous des personnages odieux, des pestifères. En attendant, nous étions les pestifères les plus fêtés de Paris"[285].

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[283] Charles-Roux, Edmonde, 'Elsa Triolet: Une femme dans le feu' in *Faites entrer l'infini*, 10, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, December 1990, p.10.
[284] Desanti, Dominique, *Les Clés d'Elsa*, Paris: Ramsay (1983), p.310.
[285] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 9, pp.12-13.

1.4 Ageing and Elsa Triolet

Elsa Triolet did not only reflect society at the time of writing, hence in her words: "le *quoi* de mes écrits dépend, suit ou précède des événements, un état de choses dont je suis contemporaine. Mon sentier est parallèle au chemin de l'Histoire"[286], but also herself and her feelings, and the translation into French of her private journal entries from 1912-1939 clearly shows a woman tormented by the physical signs of ageing from a very early age. Thus at the tender age of seventeen, her entry on 9 October 1913 reads: "Jeune! Si l'on pouvait toujours rester jeune. J'ai horriblement peur de la vieillesse et de la mort" (EI. p.88). On 16 November 1924, at the onset of her thirties, she confides to her journal: "j'ai beaucoup vieilli. Je ne plais plus" (EI. p.191) and she writes to Brik on 8 June 1937: "je n'ai pas grossi, mais j'ai pris de l'embonpoint sur les hanches. Les années! Quelle saleté..." (CO. p.106). Kathleen Woodward points out that in Freudian psychoanalysis the body is paramount, and that the aging body would represent a narcissistic wound to the ego[287]. Although Freud had little interest in ageing women, what would he have made of someone who exhibited such evident narcissistic wounds as Triolet, and at such a young age? Perhaps surprisingly he may have shown much sympathy, since Woodward reveals, citing Peter Gay's biography on Freud, that Freud's age – that is, his melancholic sense of being old – haunted him from then on [forty-four]and became an "obsession"[288].

This same obsession permeates Triolet's writings, thus in *L'Inspecteur des ruines*, written in 1948, she has one of the female characters write a long letter describing her distress at growing old, lamenting first the physical signs of ageing:

> mon mal est simple et toutes les femmes, et peut-être bien les hommes aussi, le connaissent: je souffre de vieillir. La vieillesse est une maladie incurable comme la lèpre. Ses progrès sont plus ou moins rapides, mais l'issue en est toujours fatale. Ce n'est pas la mort qui m'effraye, c'est le cours de la maladie. Une terrible maladie de la peau, des glandes, des os... Les poches sous les yeux, les bajoues, le nez qui s'allonge, la bouche qui s'enfonce, la peau qui se ratatine comme une baudruche crevée, les dents qui jaunissent, les jointures qui perdent leur souplesse, les cheveux qui se raréfient...(IR. p.300)

and then its social consequences:

> je n'ai plus rien à dire aux gens, ils n'ont rien à me dire. [...] La conversation la mieux nourrie, avec la personne la plus dynamique, ne vaut pas l'intérêt d'une conversation soutenue par de beaux seins. [...] Je deviens misanthrope, j'ai envie de partir, de m'enfermer dans ma propriété, mais ce n'est que dépit, parce que je ne suis plus adulée et fêtée. Oui, la grande femme un peu lourde [...] avec ses yeux myopes et sa bouche sèche, n'est pas vieille, mais elle a perdu la sève, la féminité qui est

[286] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, p.243.
[287] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991), p.10.
[288] ibid., p.27.

> l'attrait, l'appel du sexe... C'est fini [...] le désir est mort en moi et autour de moi. (IR. pp.301-302).

It is easy to believe that it is Triolet's own views that she is expressing through her female protagonist. As she enters her fifties, her correspondence is liberally peppered with comments vis-à-vis her distress at the visible signs of ageing, and also its effects on her cognitive powers. Thus on 1 May 1949 at the age of fifty-three, she writes to her sister: "je me suis fatiguée, il faut que j'écrive ma chronique, ma conférence, et j'ai de purée de pois dans la tête... Il m'est difficile de me concentrer, et j'éprouve un constant désir de solitude, ça doit être une raisonnable autodéfense de 'organisme" (CO. pp.298-299). On 22 February 1950 she writes to Brik: "j'ai grossi et j'ai féeriquement vieilli. Il m'est même désagréable de me montrer en public" (CO. p.332), a sentiment she reiterates in her letter of 6 October 1952:

> je suis incroyablement vieille. Et le pire, c'est que je vieillisse si mal, d'une manière si répugnante: il y a de vieilles femmes jolies, séduisantes, justement parce qu'elles sont vieilles. J'ai le visage tourmenté, fripé, dur, commme si tous les soucis, les nuits d'insomnie et les chagrins passés étaient remontés de ma jeunesse. J'ai honte de me montrer aux gens (CO. p.422)

and by all accounts Triolet then takes to wearing a veil, even when indoors. Brik replies promptly to this anguished cry and on 17 October 1952, she writes encouragingly to her younger sister: "ne me dis pas que tu es vieille et laide. N'oublie pas que j'ai cinq bonnes années de plus que toi et rappelle-toi toujours que tu es mieux que toutes les jeunes prises ensemble. Tant pis pour ceux que ne le comprennent pas, je les plains de tout mon cœur" (CO. p.424). Madame de Lambert was one who certainly would not have understood Triolet's despair as these words written in the early eighteenth century reveal: "il faut se soumettre aux lois de notre condition: nous sommes tout faits pour faiblir, vieillir et mourir. Rien de si inutile que de se révolter contre les effets du temps, il est plus fort que nous"[289].

Triolet's low self-esteem, aggravated by the visible signs of ageing and problems with her health, played a predominant role in her life, as this quotation relating to her joy at her new teeth reveals:

> Dès que j'ai eu mes nouvelles dents, j'ai couru me commander des nippes. Avant, je portais des bas filés, je ne me mettais plus de rouge à lèvres, je ne me regardais pas dans une glace. Non pas parce que les autres remarquaient qu'il me manquait des dents, mais simplement parce que j'avais perdu ma joie de vivre. Pour ceux qui me voient de l'extérieur, je ne suis pas devenue plus belle, c'était moi qui éprouvais auparavant une impression de délabrement, de pourrissement, ce qui est bien pire que la vieillesse et la maladie. Bref, je n'aurais pas tardé à mettre fin à mes jours (CO. 25 November 1951, pp.401-402).

In her later years, Triolet suffered a great deal from arthritis and François Nourissier recalls:

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[289] Lambert, Anne-Thérèse de, *Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes: 1727*, Paris: Côté-femmes (1989), p.243.

> la maladie d'Elsa, la présence de la maladie d'Elsa était très intense, parce qu'elle avait cette forme très spectaculaire d'artérite: tout d'un coup elle marchait très difficilement. [...] Elle avait une faiblesse physique à laquelle on ne pouvait pas ne pas penser, qui était très visible; elle paraissait plus âgée que son âge[290].

In 1950, at the time she and Aragon were searching for a house in the country, Triolet wrote to Brik: "nous n'écrivons rien, je suis complètement harassée, je vieillis d'une façon qui n'est même pas normale" (CO. 11 July 1950, p.340) and 1961 became the year which, as Michel Apel-Muller put it: "va confondre l'imaginé et le vécu"[291]. An operation on Triolet's arthritis failed; she had increasing difficulty in walking, and in 1969 had to have an electric seat installed on her stairs. She was also to discover that, like her sister, she had a heart problem and it was this that finally brought about her death, at her home in the countryside, in June 1970.

In addition, Triolet had the added burden of being married to a man who also agonised about ageing, as can be seen from much of his poetry[292]. At a conference held at the Théâtre de France in 1967, where the couple appeared and spoke together, Aragon revealed: "pour nous le sphinx moderne, c'est la jeunesse. Mais peut-être cela tient-il à ce que nous sommes arrivés à un âge où la jeunesse, c'est la jeunesse des autres"[293]. Triolet had always been Aragon's *image idéale*: "à qui je dois d'avoir trouvé, du fond de mes nuages, l'entrée du Monde réel où cela vaut la peine de vivre et de mourir"[294] and Dominique Desanti suggests that: "le désespoir de vieillir – que Louis éprouve aussi – lui fait obligation de célébrer Elsa de plus en plus constamment"[295] at a time when Triolet herself was feeling less and less attractive.

Pierre Daix has an interesting insight into the writing of *Le Cheval blanc*:

> Elsa vient de franchir le cap des quarante-cinq ans. Écrire *Le Cheval blanc*, c'est tout de même de passer beaucoup de temps en compagnie d'un héros jeune et séduisant qui n'est pas son mari. Je sais bien que Michel Vigaud meurt aux dernièrs lignes. Et que cette disparition clôt l'aventure aussi bien que le roman[296].

However, paradoxically, whilst Triolet enjoyed associating with the young, notably the poets she nurtured and sponsored: "mes jeunes poètes ont formé un groupe et me sont une grande consolation dans le

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[290] Nourissier, François, 'Entretien avec Maryse Vassevière', *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 4, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1992), p.28.
[291] Apel-Muller, Michel, 'Les jambages bleus du malheur' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 5, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1994), p.24.
[292] "Plus il vieillit, plus l'homme se sent seul, délaissé, face à la mort: «Seul et nu vieux et nu sans défense (...) Qu'est-ce qu'il m'arrive où est-elle ma vie et tout ce qui valait qu'on lui sacrifiât tout qu'on mourût et me voici comme une cible au milieu des bras armés de flèches de sagaies»": Aragon, *Elsa*, (1959), pp.101-102. Cited by Lecherbonnier, Bernard, *Le cycle d'Elsa, Aragon: analyse critique*, Paris: Hatier (1974), p.52.
[293] *Cahiers Renaud Barrault, Conférence-Spectacle: Elsa Triolet – Aragon*, 68, Paris: Gallimard (1968), p.65.
[294] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 12, p.261.
[295] Desanti, Dominique, *Les Clés d'Elsa*, Paris: Ramsay (1983), p.356.
[296] Daix, Pierre, *Aragon: Une vie à changer*, Paris: Flammarion (1994), p.408.

moment présent" as she wrote to her sister on 22 February 1950 (CO. p.332), she also appreciated that her ageing persona had some benefit in that it granted her privileged access to a world unknown to younger people. Thus she writes with reference to *Le Grand jamais*[297] in the preface to Volume 35 of *Œuvres romanesques croisées*: "j'ai pu parler de la Mort autrement que mes jeunes personnages encore sûrs que ce sont les autres qui meurent, pas eux"(ORC. pp.13-14) and Triolet uses her own experience of immobility when she empathises with Natalie in *L'Âme*, also immobile, albeit in her case due to obesity.

Interestingly, whilst rather disparagingly referring to Colette's "légèreté" as an author, it seems that Triolet did appreciate Colette's writings on female ageing. She wrote to her sister on 9 July 1954:

> Colette est morte. C'est un grand écrivain, bien que son seul credo, ce soit l'amour, d'une façon ou d'une autre, la nature, les odeurs, la bonne chère. Mais c'est écrit de telle sorte que l'on ressent tout cela, que c'en est hallucinant – et elle écrit de telle façon sur la vieillesse féminine, qu'il ne reste plus qu'à hurler...(CO. p.473).

However, Jean Pandolfi reports that Triolet did not believe that Colette understood solitude in the same way as she did, when she observed astutely in 1943 when Colette was seventy years old:

> mais la grande solitude de la vieillesse, Colette ne la connaîtra pas, pour elle le monde ne sera jamais dépeuplé. Jeune ou vieille, elle ne connaîtra pas le grand malheur et le grand bonheur du solitaire, et quand elle parle de solitude, le vrai désespoir reste à la porte. Quand elle est seule, c'est qu'elle n'est pas avec ceux qu'elle aime et qui l'aiment, qu'elle est loin des visages aimés, de ses bêtes, de ses fleurs...[298].

It was in *Le Mythe de la baronne Mélanie*, her riposte to Camus's *L'Étranger – Mythe de Sisyphe*, that Triolet explained her views on solitude: "une chose seulement: je ne crois pas que l'amitié, ni tout ce qui touche au cœur humain, soit tout à fait une illusion... C'est pour ça que je n'ai pas parlé de solitude personnelle – qui ne regarde que moi – mais d'une solitude de l'espèce, si j'ose dire"[299] which Desanti suggests is a cultural solitude. However, I believe that Emma's views on solitude, as expressed in *L'Inspecteur des ruines*: "tous les vieux sont seuls. Même ceux qui sont affligés d'une famille nombreuse. Quelqu'un qui ne participe pas à la vie, est seul. [...] On ne vit plus quand on ne partage pas les besoins, les passions des hommes. On est seul comme un cadavre" (IR. pp.249-250) also express Triolet's belief that when passion dies, and one is no longer desired, then one is truly alone, and certainly that sentiment is the dominant theme of the title short story of the collection *Mille regrets* which I analyse in Section 1.6 in this chapter.

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[297] Published in 1966.
[298] Pandolfi, Jean, 'Elsa/Colette 1943' in *Faites entrer l'infini*, 15, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, June 1993, p.11.
[299] Cited by Dominique Desanti, *Elsa-Aragon: Le couple ambigu*, Paris: Belfond (1994), p.301.

1.5 The role of writing in Triolet's life

It was in fact the Second World War, the Resistance and the aftermath of the war which had a profound and lasting effect on Triolet's writing where, interwoven with personal reflections, the public past she had shared with the citizens of France, her adopted country and the new present to which they all had to adapt became the bedrock of many of her novels, and indeed she cited her writing as having helped her through those traumatic years: "s'il n'y avait pas eu l'écriture, je crois bien que je me serais donné la mort, tellement, par moments, c'était dur et pénible" (CO. 1 February 1945, p.161). It is perhaps, therefore, to do Elsa Triolet an injustice if one says: "les écrivains apprécient les situations troubles parce qu'elles stimulent leur imagination. Ils cherchent le sens d'événements qui laissent les gens ordinaires désemparés"[300]. Triolet wrote in her journal: "je veux simplement dire que pour tout le monde au monde, pour les absolument apolitiques, les événements extérieurs à leur vie personnelle et intime jouent un rôle. Et pas seulement comme répercussion directe (l'homme qu'on mobilise, qu'on tue), mais pour les pensées de tous les jours" (EI. 8 September 1938, p.249).

Indeed, her personal experiences as an active member of the Resistance[301] and the general destruction and desolation caused by the war permeate much of her writings, and she does not hesitate to openly admit as much: "l'histoire se répétait, mais je la prenais autrement, je n'avais ni le même âge, ni les mêmes espoirs, ni le même désespoir qu'en 1939. J'étais certaine de la catastrophe finale, et je pleurais le monde, ses espoirs calcinés" (CR. p.197). In the postscript to a letter addressed to her friend Jacques Madaule, reprinted in *Faites entrer l'infini*, she writes: "savez-vous (...) que j'aime La France comme une patrie depuis la Résistance seulement? Parce que j'ai souffert avec elle"[302]. In Madaule's words: "la Résistance est une fraternité vécue en face d'un danger qui nous est commun"[303] and Triolet's participation obviously answered that feeling of being *déracinée* which is so crucial to understanding her work. It was also the time where she felt she was beginning to be accepted: "mes livres ont beaucoup de succès, on s'est mis à me respecter et à me prendre au sérieux" (CO. 1 February 1945, p.161).

In addition to her letters, diary and novels, it is perhaps ironic that much as Triolet wanted to be recognised as a writer in her own right (she was always published as Elsa Triolet, not Elsa Aragon), the best introduction to her works can be found in the *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, that artificial amalgam of the works of Aragon and Elsa Triolet. Her preface to the first volume reveals their desire that:

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[300] Bourdil, Pierre-Yves, *Les Miroirs du moi: les héros et les fous*, Paris: l'École (1987), pp.67-68.
[301] Aragon and Elsa Triolet were both arrested and interned in Tours for ten days and were at the forefront of the Resistance in their efforts in the literary underground press, including publishing their own works clandestinely.
[302] *Faites entrer l'infini*, 4, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, September 1987, p.3.
[303] Madaule, Jacques, *Ce que dit Elsa*, Paris: Denoël (1961), p.80.

> quand côte à côte nous serons enfin des gisants, l'alliance de nos livres nous unira pour le meilleur et pour le pire dans cet avenir qui était notre rêve et notre souci majeur, à toi et à moi. La mort aidant, on aurait peut-être essayé et réussi à nous séparer plus sûrement que la guerre de notre vivant: les morts sont sans défense. Alors nos livres croisés viendront, noir sur blanc, la main dans la main, s'opposer à ce qu'on nous arrache l'un à l'autre[304].

These words can also be found on their tombstone in the garden of their home - the Moulin de Villeneuve at Saint-Arnoult-en-Yvelines – together in death as in life. Apparently, when M. Cristobal de Acevedo first suggested to the couple that they publish their works together, their initial reaction was negative, but: "enfin, nous avons pensé, senti que c'était là une chance, notre chance de ne pas être séparés après notre mort"[305]. However, contrary to Triolet's wishes, I shall be studying her separately, although always aware of Aragon's presence in the background, since: "each writer's personality was shaped by the sharing of his or her life with the other"[306]. I shall also bear in mind Triolet's words when she warned her readers not to come to her novels with pre-conceived ideas:

> Les écrits sont précédés de leur propre légende et de la légende de l'auteur. J'ai des yeux qui sont ceux d'Elsa. J'ai un mari qui est communiste. Communiste par ma faute. Je suis un outil des Soviets. Je suis une femme à bijoux. Je suis une grande femme et une souillon. [...] Je suis la muse et la malédiction du poète. Je suis belle et je suis repoussante.[307]

The forty-two volumes of their *Œuvres romanesques croisées* prove to be a rich source of material not only with regard to the works of literature contained therein, but also from an autobiographical viewpoint, where, courtesy of the long and detailed prefaces to each of the volumes, written largely retrospectively, and despite their reticence in writing about themselves, both Aragon and Triolet, albeit to differing degrees, seek to shed some light on the background to their œuvre: "on y trouve les seuls faits de notre biographie que nous livrons volontiers au public: ceux qui ont trait à nos écrits"[308]. Helpful as this is, given that the prefaces were written, in some cases, many years after the texts were originally published, they should be considered as a useful but separate adjunct to the texts, and should always be read with awareness since: "les paratextes [...] entendent en reprendre en main la réception et l'interprétation[309]. As Elisabeth Nardout-Lafarge warns: "la préface, discursive, argumentative, qui prend position et statue

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[304] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.13.
[305] *Cahiers Renaud Barrault, Conférence-Spectacle: Elsa Triolet – Aragon*, 68, Paris: Gallimard (1968), p.3.
[306] Adereth, Maxwell, *Elsa Triolet & Louis Aragon: An Introduction to their Interwoven Lives and Works*, Lewingston, NY, Lampeter, UK: Edwin Meller Press (1994), p.347.
[307] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, p.266.
[308] *Cahiers Renaud Barrault, Conférence-Spectacle: Elsa Triolet – Aragon*, 68, Paris: Gallimard (1968), p.4.
[309] Dominique, Jullien, 'L'auteur et ses masques: stratégies de dissimulation dans le paratexte des *Œuvres romanesques croisées*' in *Paratextes: Études aux bords du texte*, ed. by Calle-Gruber, Mireille & Zawisza, Paris: L'Harmattan (2000), p.42.

sur le sens, risque de restreindre les possibilités de signification, de réduire la portée, et, finalement, de briser paradoxalement l'élan du texte"[310].

On reading the prefaces, one is struck immediately by their intimacy, because each is writing to the other, which is apt given that, certainly in the case of Aragon, his wife was his sounding-board, since he always recited his poems to her, and appreciated her comments. They were, therefore, each other's first reader and, working so closely together, there were inevitable cross-overs between the two, whether it was simply a matter of an identical name used by both authors, or similar themes. Writing is normally considered a solitary pursuit – perhaps these two were trying to advance towards a collective approach, as advocated by one of the participants in the meeting in Russia to discuss Triolet's possible novel of the future: "il me semble que nos écrivains font encore du travail artisanal, qu'ils n'ont pas encore vaincu leur solitude. Ils ne travaillent pas comme les scientifiques qui résolvent leurs problèmes collectivement" (CR. p.306). Yet for Triolet, writing was a solace, a companion in times of feeling alone. In the first letter known to be in existence from her after a break of five years as a result of the Second World War, she wrote to her sister on 1 February 1945, describing their life during the war and the occupation and she mentions: "je me suis prise de passion pour cette activité [l'écriture], elle me remplace les amis, la jeunesse et bien d'autres choses encore qui manquent dans la vie" (CO. p.161).

With regard to themes, Triolet was explicit on why she chose certain themes over others:

> La façon dont je regarde le vaste paysage du monde, cette vue imprenable, fait que j'y distingue certains éléments mieux que d'autres. Alors se mettent en branle mes passions, mes curiosités, et celles-ci me font choisir certain thèmes de préférence à d'autres. Je peux même dire que ces thèmes s'imposent à moi. Le respect de ceux pour qui j'écris fait que j'essaye de m'expliquer le plus clairement possible. Je ne tiens pas compte des gens qui sont fermés à l'art par manque de culture ou vice de naissance, je ne tiens à leur compagnie. Mes romans sont ce que je suis. Si j'écrivais autre chose ou autrement, cela ne serait qu'un exercice de style[311].

In addition, she was very clear regarding her views on autobiography and since I am interested in how the woman and the writer interact, it is important to appreciate just how much of herself she believed can be reliably read through her writings. In 1961 she wrote to her sister:

> Oui, les Mémoires sont à la mode. Julliard m'a demandé d'écrire les miens pour faire concurrence à Simone de Beauvoir. J'ai été prise d'un tel ennui en envisageant la chose que je ne veux plus en entendre parler. Les Mémoires, qu'ils soient historiques ou autobiographiques, ne m'intéressent pas. L'éditeur aurait voulu une autobiographie, mais je ne m'intéresse pas le moins du monde à moi-même, y penser me répugne; même en tant que simple échantillon de l'humanité, je ne m'intéresse

[310] Nardout-Lafarge, Elisabeth, 'Signature et contre-signature dans l'exergue' in *Paratextes: Études aux bords du texte* ed. by Calle-Gruber, Mireille & Zawisza, Paris: L'Harmattan (2000), p.302.
[311] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.45.

> pas. Je n'ai rien de neuf pour moi, je suis si lasse de moi que je préfère n'importe quelle fiction. Les «mémoristes» mentent tous, l'histoire ment cruellement, les causes des actes ne sont jamais (ou, en tout cas, pas toujours) celles que l'on croit. Seul l'art ne ment pas (CO. 5 April 1961, p.847).

As Aragon wrote in his Préambule to Volume 39 of their *Œuvres romanesques croisées*:

> [...] on va entendre ce que je vais dire comme la reconnaissance du caractère autobiographique des romans d'Elsa, et en général de tous les romans. Alors que ces romans-ci, au moins, même quand ils partent d'un souvenir personnel, et c'est souvent ainsi, dépassent la mémoire, le genre, même dissimulé, des mémoires[312].

Indeed, one of Triolet's earliest books, *Fraise-des-bois*, mixes a third person narration together with first person extracts from her journal, and as can be seen from my analysis of three of her later books which follows in this chapter, extracts from either her journal or her correspondence appear, usually just slightly amended, in her œuvre. That Triolet considered: "mes romans sont ce que je suis"[313] is emphasised further in her "Préface à *La mort dans l'âme*", where she wrote:

> [...] toujours, je me détourne d'un roman terminé, publié, discuté, comme de ma propre image dans une glace. Je souhaite ardemment avoir une autre tête, oui, je souhaite non seulement changer de coiffure, mais de tête. Ce qui est, bien entendu, impossible et, quoi que je fasse, ce qui est écrit par moi est reconnaissable comme ma tête, même si elle change d'expression et d'âge (IR. xvii).

Perhaps even more striking than this admission of how Triolet sees her relationship with her work is her comment in *L'Inspecteur des ruines*: "une chose écrite, même si elle n'existe pas, est tangible. Je veux me donner de la consistance" (IR. p.13). This encompasses both the real, the invented and the 'moi', the 'je' of Triolet, all gelled together in the act of writing, the act of creation not just of a novel, but of Triolet herself. Yet, as if almost afraid that the reader will see the real Elsa Triolet in her writing, she is at pains to point out that all is not as real as it seems:

> et le lecteur qui déjà ne voit pas très clair [...], qui déjà confond le romancier et ses créatures, se met encore à chercher la clef du roman, une clef qui ouvrirait la porte sur la vie de l'auteur et de ses personnages, et le romancier a beau aimer que «toute ressemblance serait le fait d'un hasard», on cherche, on trouve... On veut à tout prix qu'il y ait eu modèles vivants, quand, selon moi, l'écriture d'un roman, c'est invention et non copie. Le créateur, ce n'est pas parmi ses personnages qu'on doit le chercher, ses secrets sont dans sa manière de créer[314].

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[312] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 39, p.11.
[313] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.45.
[314] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, p.266-267.

Thus, the Triolet she reveals through her writing is, just like Triolet herself, in a state of flux and this continual re-invention of herself through her writing is as if she: "met en place un vertigineux jeu de miroirs. Un portrait, ici, en cache un autre"[315]. It is, perhaps, not until her last novel, *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, that the reader 'sees' the real Triolet – the woman/writer who knows she is very close to death and chooses to reveal herself through a series of dreams[316] of events in the past. Yet even here, as her notebooks show, there is confusion, since her protagonist was originally intended to be male. What is certain is how much Triolet felt compelled to write this final book: "'j'avais, moi, besoin de l'écrire" (CO. 12 August 1969, p.1517) and this 'moi' reveals itself also in her musings on *Le Cheval blanc* contained in *Le Cheval roux*, when she compares herself to Flaubert's famous alleged proclamation: «Madame Bovary, c'est moi»[317], so:

> Michel Vigot, le héros du *Cheval Blanc*, c'était moi. J'ai eu sa vie facile et difficile, sa solitude entourée, sa sotte pureté, son ignorance, son emprise inutile et inconsciente sur les gens autour de lui, sa joie de vivre, et ses désespoirs. Comme tous les écrivains, je donnais mon sang pour créer un être qui ne serait plus moi. J'ai toujours mis un point d'honneur à ne pas parler de moi-même dans ce que j'écrivais. Le narcissisme, le perpétuel autoportrait me font honte, une si petite chose quand l'humanité est si grande et si diverse (CR. p.245).

She continues:

> Tout écrivain sait que Mme Bovary est toujours l'auteur lui-même, quel que soit son héros et sans que pour cela l'auteur veuille fustiger ou porter au pinacle sa propre personne, ni que sa personne entre en ligne de compte. La contradiction n'est ici qu'apparente : il s'agit plutôt d'une expérience, qui, elle, est personnelle, d'un don de substitution, d'embryons de choses vécues et senties… (CR. pp.245-246).

Triolet is even more open with regard to another of her novels, *L'Inspecteur des ruines*, written in 1948, the *après-guerre* years. In a note prior to the preface[318], she writes: "oubliant pseudonyme et fiction, j'ai écrit la biographie d'Antonin Blond, comme si c'était la mienne, comme une autobiographie. Je vous présente donc cet Antonin Blond-là, inspecteur des ruines, comme quelqu'un qui a été un autre moi-même." She then goes on to write: "vous lirez, si vous le voulez bien, l'histoire de sa solitude. La

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[315] Dominique, Jullien, 'L'auteur et ses masques: stratégies de dissimulation dans le paratexte des *Œuvres romanesques croisées*' in *Paratextes: Études aux bords du texte*, ed. by Callee-Gruber, Mireille & Zawisza, Paris: L'Harmattan (2000), p.50.

[316] It is interesting to speculate how much Triolet was influenced by Surrealism, a movement both she and Aragon were very much involved with at one stage in their lives, given that it is with reference to dreams that Surrealism was initially formulated in Andre Breton's First Surrealism Manifesto of 1924.

[317] There is no documentary evidence that Flaubert did actually say this. However, he did write in a letter to his lover, Louise Colet, dated 6 April 1853: «ce qui fait que je vais si lentement, c'est que rien n'est tiré de moi; jamais ma personnalité ne m'aura plus inutile. (…) Tout est de tête».

[318] This text, which appeared in the preface of the first edition, Éditeurs Français Réunis, 1948, did not appear in *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, but reappeared in the Folio edition of 1978 published by Gallimard.

solitude est un fléau qui ronge les hommes, un à un." In fact, the solitude she refers to here encompasses the: "solitude faite de la nostalgie des déracinés en mal d'horizons perdus, solitude qui accompagne la vieillesse, mais surtout solitude sentimentale"[319].

Thus, as neatly summarised by Susanne Ditschler: "très tôt, dans l'écriture d'Elsa Triolet, se désignent ses thèmes récurrents: la solitude, la mort, ainsi que, en lien étroit avec le corps féminin et anticipant sur le vécu, la vieillesse"[320]. I propose, therefore, to study in depth three of her works: the short story, *Mille regrets*, from the collection of short stories published in 1942 entitled *Mille regrets*; *Le Cheval roux ou Les intentions humaines* published in 1953 and *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, her last novel, published in 1970 shortly before her death – this choice being dictated not only by the themes and views expressed, but also because these novels encompass the three last decades of Triolet's life – her midlife years to her death.

[319] Apel-Muller, Michel, 'Michel Vigaud, c'est moi…' in *Europe*, February-March 1967, 454-455, p.53.
[320] Ditschler, Susanne, 'Elsa Triolet: sujet écrivant et sujet d'écriture' in *Œuvres et Critiques*, 25:1 (2000), p.124.

1.6 *Mille regrets*

"Que voulez-vous qu'une femme seule fasse d'elle-même?"[321]

At the age of forty-five, sequestered with Aragon in a tiny apartment in Nice during the Second World War, Elsa Triolet wrote a collection of short stories entitled *Mille regrets*, and the title story of that collection is a masterclass on writing of solitude, ageing, the past and the future, all encompassed in a real-life situation unfortunately all too familiar to her readers at that time. In this seemingly slight tale, there is neither subtlety nor a need to read between the lines to discover what the author thought of the situation for a woman in 1941 approaching middle-age and alone. Her character's anonymity speaks for all those women in similar circumstances, yet the denouement, its ambiguity aside, is shocking. Did Elsa Triolet, the author, really believe that happiness departed as wrinkles appeared? Did she really believe that men were that superficial that they could not love a woman no longer in the first flush of youth? Could a thinking woman really reduce the choice of life or death to a trivial wrinkle when all around her men were dying, with no choice in the matter, on the fields of battle? Or is *Mille regrets* simply to be read as an allegorical tale reflecting the futility and waste of war? Perhaps the answer lies in Triolet's entry in her diary dated 6 November 1938:

> ...Au fond, on écrit contre soi-même: pour se prouver qu'on peut faire autre chose que ce qu'on a déjà fait. [...] Le mal que vous font les mots, les arrière-pensées, les regards, les intentions, les racontars, les jugements des autres... Oui, mais il faut, si j'ose dire, mettre tout cela en musique. Il faut raconter une histoire. Pas pour raconter une histoire, mais pour se faire comprendre (EI. pp.304-305).

The underlying story of *Mille regrets* is a simple but tragic one. The main protagonist (I shall call her Madame X) is a childless widow whose age, like her name, is not revealed but whose: "jeunesse [...] ne tient plus qu'à un fil" (MR. p.10). Like countless others, she has fled Paris in the June 1940 exodus after learning of the death of her long-term, secret, married lover, Tony. Alone in a rented room in Nice with her last few hundred francs, she meets a "vilain bonhomme", "un vieux pouilleux", M. Oléonard, a wheeler-dealer in the flourishing black-market of the time who offers to buy her one remaining luxury, her mink coat, so that she can afford to eat. Fortuitously, however, she then meets Tony's lawyer, M. Ferdinand, who informs her that Tony is not dead after all and that he will be overjoyed to learn that she is safe and sound. M. Ferdinand advances her some money and suggests she move into a hotel to await Tony's arrival in Nice. She delays her move, however, and in the meantime meets M. Oléonard again, who proposes she join him in his trafficking. Rejecting his offer she returns to her shabby room, finds a cheque for 20,000 francs waiting for her, but is discovered dead the next morning, gassed, while a beautiful bouquet of flowers lies wilting outside her door.

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[321] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 1, Ouverture, p.38 – entry from her diary dated 11 September 1938, p.255.

What the above synopsis omits, however, are the emotions behind these bare facts: the character's confused feelings regarding her solitude, her neurosis (which is not too strong a word to use in this case) regarding the first signs of ageing which leads to her possibly committing suicide, together with her awareness of her growing invisibility as a mature woman:

> et puis, je ne sais ni comment, ni quand ça s'est fait, mais il n'y avait plus de courant. Il n'y avait plus rien entre le monde et moi. Je me sens une ombre parmi des êtres vivants. Pas encore un revenant, une ombre. Je peux déjà regarder les gens, sans qu'ils me voient les regarder (MR. p.33).

Are there echoes here of Simone de Beauvoir's similar emotion: "maintenant, j'en avais quarante-quatre, j'étais reléguée au pays des ombres"[322]? As Hélène Cixous writes: "[...] lorsque ce regard des hommes sur nous se fond dans une neutralité asexuée, nous pouvons avoir l'impression que nous perdons notre identité de femmes"[323]. This correlation between ageing, female identity and loss of sexual attractiveness is one familiar to readers of Colette whose portrayal of Léa in *La Fin de Chéri*, seen through the eyes of her young ex-lover Chéri, epitomises this:

> Elle n'était pas monstreuse, mais vaste, et chargée d'un plantureux développement de toutes les parties de son corps. Ses bras, comme de rondes cuisses, s'écartaient de ses hanches, soulevés près de l'aisselle par leur épaisseur charnue. La jupe unie, la longue veste impersonnelle entr'ouverte sur du linge à jabot annonçaient l'abdication, la rétraction normales de la féminité, et une sorte de dignité sans sexe[324].

Writing this short story in her mid-forties, Elsa Triolet will have been no stranger to those emotions. Indeed, she recalls this feeling of invisibility in her penultimate book, *La Mise en mots*, when she recounts her experience, albeit at the age of seventy-two, on being driven through the rue de Sèvres occupied by young men and women students who: "avaient les yeux ailleurs" and: "j'ai compris dans un éblouissement que je connaissais pas cet ailleurs, la foule ne m'absorbait pas, j'étais une ombre qu'elle ne pouvait voir"[325]. The students are looking forward to the future and, at seventy-two, she realises she is not to be part of it; she does not exist for them and their vision of the future.

In addition, there is real depth in Triolet's awareness of the relevance of nostalgia, and her prescience regarding the atomic bomb prepares the reader for the horrors of *Le Cheval roux* when she writes: "mais sûrement à s'agiter de la sorte, à secouer la terre, l'eau et l'air, les hommes finiront par déclencher le cataclysme final. La terre n'est peut-être guère plus solide qu'un bol fendu. Un léger choc et elle s'ouvrira ou roulera, comme une boule qu'elle est, vers quelque abîme inconnu" (MR. p.34).

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[322] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Force des choses*, Paris: Gallimard (1963), p.301.
[323] Cixous, Hélène, *Préparatifs de noces au delà de l'abîme*, Paris: des Femmes (1978), p.104.
[324] Colette, *La Fin de Chéri* in *Colette Œuvres III*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard (1991), p.117.
[325] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, p.248.

Madame X's growing despair at the signs of ageing is not straightforward. As a former model, albeit for a brief eight days before she met her husband, she knows that her youth, and presumably her looks, had a value: "je n'ai jamais été pauvre. Quand j'étais jeune et sans le sou, j'avais le luxe de ma jeunesse. Je pouvais, par exemple, choisir n'importe quel homme, comme on choisit un objet dans une vitrine, quand on a les poches pleines et que rien ne peut être trop cher" (MR. p.32). She epitomises here the notion that fear of ageing is most prevalent when beauty and/or youth equate to power – a feeling with which one can certainly relate in the youth-obsessed culture in which we live today. Beauvoir is forthright on this topic in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, writing:

> pour retenir son mari, s'assurer des protections, dans la plupart des métiers qu'elle [la femme] exerce, il est necessaire qu'elle plaise; on ne lui a permis d'avoir de prise sur le monde que par la médiation de l'homme: que deviendra-t-elle quand elle n'aura plus de prise sur lui? C'est ce qu'elle se demande anxieusement tandis qu'elle assiste impuissante à la dégradation de cet objet de chair avec lequel elle se confond[326].

It is interesting to note, therefore, that Madame X's main concern is with the loss of her youth, and hence the loss of her power over men, more than its actual physical manifestation in her appearance. The author makes plain her feelings on her own loss of youth in a letter to her sister dated 1 February 1945:

> j'ai vieilli, mais mes rides sont pour le moment convenables, sinon cela parfois donne la nausée. Mes cheveux blancs ne se voient pas parce que j'ai des cheveux blonds, mais il y en a beaucoup. Je me suis déjà habituée à moi non jeune et je ne me chagrine pas, tant pis pour la jeunesse, elle n'a pas grand-chose de bon, non plus (EI. p.162).

Three years later, Brik queries her younger sister's apparent complacency when she enquires: "la petite Elsa, se peut-il vraiment que ça ne te soit pas égal d'avoir 35 ou 50 ans?" (CO. 3 January 1948, p.222) and indeed Triolet herself is much less sanguine in her letter to Brik three months later: "je suis une toute vieille vieillarde. J'essaie de m'habituer à cet ordre des choses, tout de même nouveau. Je continue de m'occuper de mes dents, prise de panique à l'idée qu'il me faudra un jour en porter d'autres que les miennes, et je serais incapable de m'y faire" (CO. 26 March 1948, p.237) and it is interesting to note that the protagonist in *Mille regrets* is also concerned about her teeth: "c'est bizarre, depuis quelque temps, j'ai l'impression que toutes mes dents bougent" (MR. p.20).

The less than careful reader would assume that the protagonist had been beautiful once – after all, she had been a model – but apart from that one reference, there is no evidence at all in the text to attest to her beauty. Indeed, when an opportunity arises to emphasise her looks, we are treated, instead, to a practical description of her fading appearance:

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[326] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, II, L'Expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.457.

> Aujourd'hui, en honneur des cinq cents francs, je me coiffe soigneusement. J'arrange mes boucles sur le sommet de la tête. J'essaye d'arranger mon visage. Il a fallu remplacer toutes mes crèmes par un tube de cold-cream de chez le pharmacien voisin. J'ai des yeux de plomb, gris et lourds. Ils ont perdu ce regard qu'ils avaient eu toute la vie. Le tailleur dans lequel j'ai quitté Paris, qui faisait se retourner toutes les femmes, et aussi les hommes, n'est plus qu'une loque. La jupe fait une poche sur le derrière, la doublure est déchirée, et même quand je viens de la repasser, j'ai l'air d'avoir été sous une averse. [...] Je ne vais plus chez le coiffeur, heureusement que mes cheveux sont dociles et que je ne les ai jamais teints, ce sont d'honnêtes cheveux châtains comme on n'en voit plus (MR, p.26)

It would appear, therefore, that it is not just the loss of her looks per se that is the problem, it is also the fact of her ageing and what that signifies. She is, indeed, exhibiting all the signs of one who, regarding her body as being the basis of personal identity, necessarily sees her: "earlier self-image starts cracking and altering"[327] at the first signs of ageing. Interestingly, Madame X appears to have no sense of an experiential shift between interior and exterior. With no intimation at all of a feeling of difference between how old she looks and how old she feels, there is, therefore, no: "awareness of a discrepancy between the meaning of the reflection and our sense of who we are"[328]. Thus, looking at her reflection in the mirror, she 'thinks herself' into a state of being no longer young and hence no longer attractive.

In addition, she appears to be subscribing to the view of cultural ageing that only the young have a value, and that value increases according to looks. Madame X appears to see herself as a luxurious commodity, perhaps apt in the context of the war where commodities were undoubtedly of more value than looks, but just as she has lost everything of material value, she believes that she is now also losing her youth and is thus becoming devalued as a commodity: "que la jeunesse me quitte comme un luxe, comme mon beau lit capitonné de satin rose, mes draps fins, mon reflet dans les glaces embuées de la salle de bains..." (MR. p.15) which, in her mind, can lead to only one conclusion: once she becomes "une vieille femme", she has no intrinsic value.

As Thiriet & Képès observe: "narcissisme et identité sont intimement liés, ils suivent tout au long de la vie un «destin» commun, le narcissisme ayant un rôle capital pour la continuité de notre identité. Ce qui va toucher notre narcissisme, c'est la peur ou le constat de notre dévalorisation physique ou sociale"[329]. There is no indication in the text of the protagonist's age, but she may well be menopausal, after all: "cela [des signes de la ménopause] menace notre manière d'habiter notre corps et de compter sur lui"[330] and this could account for her irrational feelings and the roller-coaster of emotions she is experiencing. In addition, one could say that her anguish at these external signs of ageing exemplify

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[327] Stein, Murray, *In Midlife – A Jungian Perspective*, Dallas: Spring Publications (1983), p.25.
[328] Apter, Terri, *Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife*, London: Norton & Co. (1995), p.59.
[329] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.63.
[330] ibid., p.7.

exactly the notion of menopause as a deficiency disease, mirroring Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical depictions where, as Diana Holmes points out: "Beauvoir's female subject is a young woman whom age attacks like a disease or a cruel disfigurement; she ceases to be desired or desirable"[331]. Thus, in *La Force des choses,* Beauvoir feels compelled to write: "je décrétais à trente ans: "Un certain amour, après quarante ans, il faut y renoncer." Je détestais ce que j'appelais "les vieilles peaux" et je me promettais bien, quand la mienne aurait fait son temps de la remiser"[332], and whilst Beauvoir does go on, at the age of forty-four, to start a six-year affair with Lanzmann, a man seventeen years younger than her, she writes: "je trouvais révoltant de l'entraîner déjà dans les affres du déclin"[333].

Thus, talking herself into a state of neurosis regarding her value as a woman, how appropriate that the one luxury Madame X has managed to retain is her mink coat. Yet, paradoxically, she wears that luxury lightly; it is worth perhaps 30,000 francs, but she is prepared to accept M. Oléonard's offer of 2,150 francs rather than exert herself to try and obtain a fair price elsewhere. As she admits: "je n'ai jamais rien fait de ma vie, on a toujours tout fait pour moi" (MR. p.25) and is that not one of the prerequisites of being a mistress to a rich factory owner? "Tony a toujours dit que j'étais un objet de luxe et une sybarite" (MR. p.30). M. Oléonard knows just by looking at her that she likes the good things in life: "pâté de foie gras, caviar, sandwiches au poulet [...] des confitures, et des chocolats, et des petits fours" (MR. pp.11-12) and, of course, Nice had been a symbol of the good life in the pre-war days. Yet the Casino of Monte Carlo that she visits with her last one hundred francs before handing over her mink coat to M. Oléonard is, as she discovers, just like her, a luxurious facade.

However, for our heroine her ageing is part of a wider scenario which encompasses her single state and her solitude; as she says: "faut-il que tout arrive en même temps..." (MR. p.10). When she looks in the tarnished mirror, she reflects: "à contre-jour, avec mes épaules et mes bras graciles, j'ai l'air d'une jeune fille" (MR. p.26) but her lack of self-esteem means she only sees herself in terms of what 'the other' sees, therefore if 'the other' does not value her any more for her looks, she internalises that and discounts herself as unworthwhile goods:

> D'abord mes rides n'avaient pas d'importance, on n'avait pas l'air de les remarquer. Et puis, je ne sais comment, elles ont pris... Voilà bientôt un an que personne ne m'a dit que j'étais jolie, ou simplement que j'avais bonne mine, ou même que j'avais une jolie robe. La dernière fois que j'ai rencontré le regard que je connais, c'était dans un train. Un officier... Il m'aurait suffi de lui faire signe et il m'aurait suivie n'importe où. Même du temps de Tony, cela me plaisait de voir un homme se rendre ainsi dans un regard, il me fallait vérifier mes moyens, il me fallait savoir si ce que je donnais à Tony était vraiment aimable (MR. p.33).

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[331] Holmes, Diana, 'Colette, Beauvoir and the Change of Life' in *French Studies*, 53:4, October 1999, p.441.
[332] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Force des choses*, Paris: Gallimard (1963), p.301.
[333] ibid., p.307.

She is, therefore, speaking the absolute truth when she says: "Tony était pour moi le monde entier, tout le monde. Quand j'ai appris qu'il était tué, j'ai tout à fait perdu l'équilibre" (MR. p.35). She is in a double-bind; Tony was everything to her and: "à cause de Tony, je ne voyais pas beaucoup de monde. Je l'attendais. Nous ne sortions que rarement ensemble, de crainte que sa femme ne l'apprît. Et comme Tony était jaloux, je ne sortais pas sans lui non plus" (MR. p.35). Therefore, although she had had someone special in her life, she had been effectively alone, waiting for what time he could spare her when he was not busy with his wife, his children and his factory. She had been, in fact, a trophy, to be enjoyed by him alone; a songbird in a gilded cage, just like one of Triolet's beloved nightingales that only sing at night. Now, however, believing Tony dead, she finds herself in a metaphorical, solitary darkness with Tony as her hero, a particularly incongruous epithet for a time busy producing real heros on the battlefield.

In addition, it is not just Madame X's lack of a lover and a companion, but her lack of a family which causes her much anguish: "une femme seule est toujours suspecte. Les gens trouvent que cela ne se fait pas, qu'une famille est obligatoire" (MR. p.16), and especially the fact of being childless: "j'étais seule, seule, seule, tout était fini pour moi. Il y avait des enfants qui naissaient, il y avait la vie qui continuait, mais pas pour moi, pas pour moi" (MR. p.24). After all: "stériles, à 50 ans, nous le devenons toutes, sortant ainsi de notre finalité essentielle aux yeux de la société"[334]. As far as she can see, therefore, her life as a single, ageing, childless woman has no value at all and promises only a lonely future. Shades here of Beauvoir's Dominique in *Les Belles images*: "être vieille, c'est déjà affreux. [...] vieille et seule: c'est atroce. [...] Sous les masques, il y a une femme de chair et de sang, avec un cœur, qui se sent vieillir et que la solitude épouvante; elle murmure: – une femme sans homme est une femme seule"[335].

This solitude in Nice is therefore not new to Madame X, yet it is a different kind of solitude now since: "rien ne peut être remis à sa place. Je veux dire à la même place. Tony ne ressuscitera pas" (MR. p.28). She does the same as everyone – going to the cinema, to the café, to the square to watch the children play, but: "jamais personne ne m'adresse la parole, jamais personne ne me sourit..." (MR. p.28), although she makes no attempt to speak to anyone either, since: "je veux être seule avec lui, l'avoir pour moi toute seule" (MR. p.32). However, there is no avoiding the chance meeting with M. Ferdinand, Tony's lawyer, yet even he, apparently, judges her on her appearance since: "j'ai vu passer dans ses yeux un effarement qui voulait dire: «comme elle a changé!» mais il s'est aussitôt ressaisi" (MR. p.38) – once again seeing herself through the eyes of 'the other'. Yet what wonderful news he imparts: the announcement of Tony's death had been a terrible mistake; he is alive and desperately seeking her. Surely she should be overjoyed. Her lover is alive, she would no longer be alone in the world.

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[334] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.46.
[335] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Les Belles images*, Paris: Gallimard (1966), pp.161-162.

Perpetuating her belief that youth and beauty are commodities and therefore can be purchased, she hastens off to the hairdressers and then to Galeries Lafayette to buy stockings, a scarf and a pair of satin shoes, where, to her satisfaction, she reads in the shop assistant's eyes that: "j'ai donc encore l'air d'un objet de luxe" (MR. p.39). However, even though M. Ferdinand is appreciative of her efforts at dinner that night when: "tout souriant de me voir plus semblable à moi-même, il m'est reconnaissant d'avoir mis un peu d'ordre dans le désastre" (MR. pp.39-40), the doubts are beginning to crowd her mind. All of a sudden she thinks, with palpable despair: "que peut-il avoir de plus lamentable, de plus dégoutant qu'une vieille femme qui s'est laissé griser..." (MR. p.41) and when M. Ferdinand says: "ce soir, je retrouve votre regard, Madame, enfin je le retrouve!" (MR. p.42), she wonders: "Quel regard avais-je donc ce matin?" (MR. p.42).

From this insecurity, this lack of self-esteem, it is just a short step into a full-blown depression:

> Je ne sais pas ce qu'il y a, je ne peux pas me remettre. Le choc a dû être trop fort. Pas celui de la résurrection, celui de la mort de Tony. Je ne m'en remets pas. Tout me dégoûte et en premier lieu moi-même. [...] Je n'ai même pas déménagé, ici ou ailleurs, mon dégoût me suivra. Je pleure souvent, et ce n'est pas de joie (MR. p.42).

She imagines Tony rushing around between his family, his work, always busy, reading the papers, up-to-date with all the news and the politics, while:

> je suis devenue une de ces femmes qui ne savent que faire de leur temps et d'elles-mêmes, qui s'ennuient à longueur de journée, et accablent l'homme de reproches parce qu'il ne leur donne pas assez de temps. Comme si un homme était une manière de tuer le temps, un divertissement. Qu'est-ce Tony ferait de moi, d'un poids mort?" (MR. p.43)

She wonders why she is not happy since Tony is alive, and is coming to find her. In this day and age, these fluctuations in emotion would probably be attributed to the menopause: "...une place incertaine et inconfortable entre jeunesse et vieillesse [...] ce signal précurseur du terme de la vie"[336]. For the protagonist, the situation can only deteriorate as she wanders along the seafront. Highlighting: "the importance of appearance in the social world of older women, where the women engage in a deception that is knowingly undertaken"[337], she sees old ladies warming themselves in the sun which: "révèle leurs tricheries, fait couler les fards au fond des rides, va chercher les cheveux gris sous la teinture" (MR. p.43), thus proving that: "such masquerade is ultimately always visible to others, that the mask does not hide old age but that it makes it all the more visible"[338]. She finds amusement in an old lady dressed all in white

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[336] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), pp.8-9.
[337] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Ageing Studies*, 18:1, February 2004, p.50.
[338] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991), p.150.

(apparently a cross-reference to Aragon's 'femme blanche'), a frightful caricature of a young bride, and she is shocked at the sight of an older woman who, with her back to the public, lifts her skirt and adjusts her garter, all whilst glancing over her shoulder with: "des regards effarouchés et coquets sur les passants" (MR. p.45) which finds an echo later in one of Triolet's letters to Brik: "je préfère inspirer du respect plutôt que des sourires! et une vieille dame agréable est plus agréable qu'une coquette qui veut rester «jeune» à tout prix!" (CO. 29 September 1953, p.453).

Surrounded by all these pathetic reminders of the potential grotesqueness and sadness of old age, she realises suddenly: "Voilà! Voilà pourquoi je ne veux pas revoir Tony! Non, je ne peux pas supporter l'idée de son premier regard sur moi, de cette stupeur vite réprimée: «Mon Dieu, mais c'est une vieille femme!»" (MR. p.45). She is obsessed by the idea that, although she has discovered that Tony is alive after all, it is too late: "Ah, s'il ne m'avait pas quittée! On aurait vieilli ensemble, l'usure serait venue peu à peu... Peut-être que même lui aurait un peu changé... Peu à peu... Mon beau Tony!" (MR. p.45).

She tells herself she needs to look carefully in the mirror: "peut-être ne suis-je que fatiguée, peut-être que de belles robes, des massages..." (MR. p.45) but on her way home, she is distracted from this task by another encounter with M. Oléonard and herein lies the true tragedy of this short story. For someone who perceives her value to be in the eyes of the beholder, she is blind to M. Oléonard's approval of her value to him. There is nothing explicit in the text, apart from a rather obvious simile with Masséna Square: "comme elle est belle, cette place, avec ses grands bâtiments fraîchement repeints, rose et blanc. On dirait qu'elle s'était préparée pour une fête qui n'a pas eu lieu" (MR. p.46). However, she tells M. Oléonard she no longer wishes to sell her mink, and when he asks her if she wishes to work with him, to travel and be paid ten per cent with all expenses paid, she rejects his offer since she sees him only as a rather sordid trafficker (although she does wonder how he knew that she would go to the ends of the earth to hide herself from Tony, so that he did not have to see her).

She is incapable of imagining that someone could appreciate her as she is, and sees M. Oléonard only as: "un vilain bonhomme" who keeps crossing her path like a black cat: "un présage de malheur. Il m'a fait oublier ce que je voulais faire" (MR. p.47) and after all: "de quoi ai-je donc l'air pour qu'il ait songé à me proposer une affaire? Il faut que je me regarde dans la glace, que je me regarde bien" (MR. p.48). Yet sadly, looking in the mirror, she would not be able to see herself through M. Oléonard's appreciative eyes, even if his appreciation is no doubt heightened by the value he believes a woman like her could bring to his business. Even if she is still being perceived as an object, a view she has done nothing to discourage, of course, since she is incapable of seeing herself otherwise, it is at least as an object which still has some value, therefore confirming her over-reaction to the first signs of ageing.

Finally arriving back in her room, she finds a cheque for 20,000 francs which she assumes must be from Tony, and a mixture of joy and fear envelops her:

> Tony pense à moi! Comme il a dû courir, téléphoner, écrire pour me faire parvenir cet argent. Il pense à moi telle que j'étais. Je parle comme si entre-temps j'avais été défigurée par la petite vérole... Mais je ne peux pas supporter l'idée de son premier regard sur moi (MR, p.48)

and then, fatally, she looks in the mirror:

> Il n'y a rien à faire. Mon corps était fait d'une matière trop fragile, fragile comme certaines pierres que le vent creuse, comme certaines soies qui se coupent, comme certains alliages qui se brisent... C'était pourtant beau quand c'était neuf...
> Comment pourrais-je avoir du désir? N'est-ce pas de son propre corps que naît le désir? Un jour où j'ai voulu me tuer, il y a de ça plusieurs années, je n'ai pas pu le faire parce que je me suis regardée dans la glace: comment détruire un si bel objet? Mais quand ce n'est plus un cadeau à faire à quelqu'un, quand ce n'est plus un cadeau à faire à Tony... Ah non, ne plus sentir sous les vêtements toutes ces déchéances... (MR, p.48).

If, referring to her body as "neuf" she means young, she is certainly subscribing here to the cult of youth: "implying that the normal condition of the skin is to be smooth (that is young) and that thus, the flaccid, wrinkled skin of old age is abnormal"[339]. She decides that if she cannot love herself the way she now appears, then how could she expect anyone else to love and desire her. Her fate is sealed at that point.

Madame X is found dead the next evening, with the gas on, and a basket of beautifully scented hyacinths waiting for her outside her door, with a card from M. Alexandre Oléanard: "A la plus belle des femmes" (MR. p.50). Her death could have been an accident – there have already been thirty-five such fatal accidents in the previous three months owing to the intermittent supply of gas as a result of war restrictions – but given her state of mind, and the hint that she had thought of ending her life once before... She had also stated earlier: "je ne veux pas mourir de faim, je mourrai autrement, comme et quand je voudrai" (MR. p.14).

Her problem was not only that she had not learnt to love herself, but that she had failed to understand that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, whether that eye belonged to the handsome Tony, or to the "vilain bonhomme", yet did she project her negativity in such a way that the one beholding her had almost no choice but to see her the way she saw herself? She was unfair to Tony in that she did not give him the chance to make up his own mind; she prejudged his reaction and she was incapable of imagining that anyone, let alone the "vilain bonhomme" could possibly find her still attractive.

In the end, whether it was suicide or a tragic accident is irrelevant – the intent was in her mind, and Triolet herself was no stranger to these thoughts. As early as 1916 she mentions suicide in her letters to

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[339] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991), p.56.

Mayokovsky: "cet été, j'ai songé à m'empoisonner: plus le temps passait depuis ces jours maudits, plus c'était dur, parfois insupportable... Maintenant, tout est odieux et inutile"[340]. Mayokovsky did, of course, commit suicide himself at a very young age (according to Brik: "il se plaignait du temps qui passait. Il ne voulait absolument pas être vieux"[341]). In fact, according to Léon Robel, editor of the letters between the two sisters as well as being a family friend: "lors de notre dernière rencontre, juste avant qu'elle ne parte au Moulin, Elsa m'avait dit, après m'avoir montré les reliques de son enfance, qu'elle ne voulait plus vivre «comme une plante» et qu'elle cesserait de prendre ses médicaments"[342] and Triolet was certainly unhappy with her medication when she wrote to her sister:

> les médicaments que je prends m'abrutissent tellement que je préfère les crises. Entre les crises, j'étais gaie, j'écrivais beaucoup, je faisais de l'ordre dans le Moulin. Mais maintenant, c'est comme s'il n'y avait pas eu de crise, mais en revanche, un tel cafard dès le matin que je reste allongée comme un cadavre, et tout ça c'est à cause des médicaments! (CO. 3 October 1969, p.1522).

However, she did write to Brik in March 1970: "tu vois, ma petite Lili, à quel point nous sommes pareilles, toutes les deux. Et moi non plus je ne peux pas mettre fin à mes jours, pour ne pas faire de la peine" (CO. p.1556). Robel also adds that some years later, Brik followed her younger sister's example when she learnt, after an accident, that she would never leave her bed again. With regard to *Mille regrets*, Aragon revealed in 1971[343] that his wife had originally planned an even more tragic ending for her heroine: she would become a tramp to be found by her lover Tony wrapped in newspapers, lying on a park bench, but Triolet eventually decided that actual death would be preferable to the living death that being a tramp would represent.

For such a slight tale, there is much to ponder; for instance, is M. Alexandre Oléanard the protagonist's alter ago? Is his raison d'être to show her that one should: "judge not according to the appearance"[344]? After all, he dresses like a tramp, yet wears a diamond and a ruby ring, and repeats: "je suis un pouilleux, n'est-ce pas? [...] Rien qu'un vieux pouilleux? [...] Dans les magasins on ne veut pas me montrer les beaux bijoux, parce que je ne suis qu'un vieux poullieux..." (MR. p.13). Madame X judges him on his appearance, both physical and material – he dresses like a tramp, but, on the other hand, he has money to buy caviar in a time of food restrictions.

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[340] Moscow, 7 October 1916.
[341] Saint Bris, Gonzague & Fédorovski, Vladimir, *Les Égéries russes*, Paris: J.-C. Lattès (1994), p.224.
[342] Robel, Léon, Preface to *Lili Brik – Elsa Triolet, Correspondance 1921-1970*, Paris: Gallimard (2000), p.22.
[343] *Europe*, 506, June 1971, p.5, cited by Adereth, Maxwell, *Elsa Triolet & Louis Aragon: An Introduction to their Interwoven Lives and Works*, Lewingston, NY, Lampeter, UK: Edwin Meller Press (1994), p.237.
[344] *The Bible*, St. John, Ch.7, v.24.

Then there is the confusion between hope for the future with: "je suis encore capable de curiosité pour notre avenir collectif" (MR. p.14) and: "ah, si j'avais devant moi l'éternité" (MR. p.33) and regret for the past, when:

> dans les eaux troubles de la glace, je vois mon visage reprendre son air d'enfance. Je me retrouve ainsi tous les soirs, et tous les soirs j'ai un moment plus que d'illusions: d'espoir... Il y a pourtant des gens qui vieillissent si bien, tout comme certain matières, comme l'ivoire qui fonce et embellit, comme le cuir qui se tanne. [...] Je vieillis mal, moi (MR. p.21).

One cannot ignore the very real fact of the war which has turned everything upside down, since both the writer and her heroine understand the importance of what they all had 'avant la guerre' and why people need to look back, nostalgically, to a life that made sense, particularly as at the time of writing (1941), no one knew the outcome of that terrible war:

> Il y avait une ville. Il y avait une maison. Il y avait tout un réseau de gens, d'occupations, de rapports humains. Il y avait des points fixes qu'on pouvait retrouver sûrement: une amitié, un livre, un sourire, une rue... Un réseau qui avait poussé lentement, comme on constitue un collection de papillons. Et brusquement cette toile d'araignée se déchire et vous lâche, et on tombe, on tombe... Si on ne s'est pas cassé le cou d'avoir fait du trapèze sans filet, on peut recommencer. Cela dépend de l'âge... (MR. p.36).

Taking the story as an allegory for the futility of war, Madame X appears to lose all sense of who she is, and what her purpose in life is meant to be. Previously, as Tony's mistress, she was to all intents and purposes invisible to the outside world and, of course, to his wife: "elle ignorait tout, elle ignorait que j'existe" (MR. p.17), and her purpose in life then was simply: "j'attendais, je passais ma vie à attendre" (MR. p.17). Tony's reported death, however, means that she ceases to have a reason to exist. She is blind to M. Oléanard's overtures to her – trafficking may not be very respectable but it would give her a purpose in life – but on learning of Tony's existence, she is thrown into total confusion, coupled with the uncertainty of what the future holds, in a global sense. There are similarities here with Colette, who also experienced the fallout from a war (in Colette's case the First World War of course) and focused, in some of her work : "upon the self's struggle to move on, to adapt, to break free from the past"[345]. Unfortunately, just like Colette's Chéri in *La Fin de Chéri*, Triolet's protagonist is trapped in the past and incapable of moving on.

In addition, this short story represents the theme of exile which is omnipresent in Elsa Triolet's œuvre. In this case, the protagonist is exiled both from Paris, her soi-disant home, and her lover, presumed dead, thus: "we might venture the thought that the condition of exile intensifies the impulse to remember; because one can't literally go home again, one travels there in memory. In the state of *dépaysement*,

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[345] Best, Victoria, *Critical Subjectivities: Identity and Narrative in the Work of Colette and Marguerite Duras*, Bern: Peter Lang (2000), p.46.

memory reigns. In this state everything becomes vivid and precious, even grief"[346]. Hence Madame X's tendency to live in the past, to remember the good times when she was young and beautiful, is heightened not only by the fact that she believes her lover is dead, but also because she is in exile from all that is familiar.

So much contained in such a short story. Solitude, ageing and death, the past, the present and the future, and, ultimately, the failure of a life, reflecting, on another level, the waste of life as a result of war. There is no attempt at an effective rite of passage for Madame X in her time of crisis. In common with the vast majority of the population in France at that time, Madame X had to learn how to deal with loss and death, yet she, who believed: "moi, je n'ai personne" (MR. p.16), proved incapable of moving on. In periods of transition, it usually transpires that something is given up in order that something new can emerge, but one has to be prepared to be open to whatever new state emerges.

Erikson[347] highlights the fact that our lives always have a psychosocial aspect – how the person fits into the social structure – and it is clear that at least part of Madame X's problems with self-esteem and lack of psychological well-being arise out of the poor quality of her relationships with others. She may well have experienced isolation in her hurried departure from Paris and her subsequent confinement in one room in Nice, but there is no corresponding societal support which is essential if the transition phase is to prove successful, or rather, since a hand is held out in friendship offering a way out of her misery with a chance for possible rebirth, she is blind to that possibility, as well as being too fearful of rejection to see Tony again, which could also have opened up a chance for rebirth. The tone and mood of *Mille regrets*, as well as the focus on negative imagery no doubt befits the mood of France at that time in her history, possibly also unwilling to face up to what the uncertain future holds.

If this is what Elsa Triolet is writing at the age of forty-five, to what will she turn her hand at the age of fifty-seven?

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[346] Porter, Roger & Reisberg, Daniel, 'Autobiography and Memory' in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 13:1, (1998), p.66.
[347] Erikson, Erik, *Childhood and Society*, New York: Norton (1950).

1.7 *Le Cheval roux*

> La nouvelle guerre nous attaquerait de partout, mystérieuse, sans pardon, inévitable comme la vieillesse, qui, avant que la mort vienne, a le temps de s'attaquer à l'homme de toutes parts (CR. p.7).

At the age of seventy, Elsa Triolet wrote the above words in the Preface to *Le Cheval roux ou les intentions humaines* in *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, Volume 21, although the novel first appeared in October 1953, published by Les Éditeurs français réunis, when she was fifty-seven years old. Whilst my intention is not to focus specifically on the political emphasis in this novel, it is so intertwined with the personal that it is difficult to divide the two. To understand this novel, it is necessary to understand the personal emotions of its author at this time. Marie-Thérèse Eychart points out that:

> les souffrances du peuple russe auquel elle restait profondément attachée, les exécutions de ses amis résistants comme l'extermination, du fait du leur judéité, de membres de sa famille par les nazis, provoquèrent chez elle un traumatisme indélébile et l'amenèrent à mettre toutes ses forces dans le combat contre la guerre à venir[348].

Triolet's preface leaves no doubt as to the relationship she saw between the ravages of time and the ravages of war:

> le roman que je voulais écrire sur l'homme de l'avenir faisait pour moi naturellement image avec la mort naturelle et, lorsque j'imaginais les ravages de la guerre, je voyais immanquablement les ravages de la vieillesse. Dès lors, tout devenait terriblement simple et douloureux: j'allais écrire mon autobiographie anticipée[349]

and since she has signposted this association so clearly in that preface, it would appear that I may struggle to reveal any astounding new insights into Triolet's views on ageing in my reading of this novel. Yet, as Peter Brooks points out: "the body can be made to bear messages of all kinds"[350] and the particular way in which Triolet chooses to challenge ageing through obliteration of facial identity is provocative, proving that this is one of those texts which: "explicitly or implicitly speak of or dramatize the marking or imprinting of the body with meaning, its recreation as a narrative signifier"[351]. I consider, therefore, that *Le Cheval roux* is worthy of an in-depth analysis because if a person's predicament or deep concern can be understood through an act of imagination, this novel explores the interplay between not only Triolet's deep-seated feelings with regard to ageing and death, but also the politics of the time, the role of

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[348] Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, 'Du *Cheval roux* au *Rendez-vous des étrangers* d'Elsa Triolet: vision de l'Amérique au temps de la guerre froide' in *The Romanic Review*, 92:1-2, Jan-Mar 2001, p.135.
[349] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 21, Préface à *La Guerre ou à la paix*, p.16.
[350] Brooks, Peter, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1993), p.22.
[351] ibid., p.22.

friendship as well as what it reveals of her perennial anxiety regarding solitude and how it relates to creativity and identity. Thus, as Triolet continues in the preface:

> je décidais donc de mettre en scène l'auteur lui-même, moi, Elsa Triolet; et *Le Cheval roux* est une transposition dans le domaine collectif de la guerre, de mes sentiments personnels devant la mort, et devant la vieillesse que je commençais à connaitre. Et il me semblait, avec l'exagération à laquelle on est enclin tant que l'on se trouve dans le feu de l'écriture, que je me sacrifiais pour mes prochains, que je m'immolais pour eux (CR. pp.14-15).

Although it has its own very distinct individuality as a novel and can thus be read and appreciated as a separate entity, it must be remembered that it serves as part of the continuum of Triolet's writings in this vein, following on thematically, if not consecutively, from *Le Cheval blanc*, a novel dealing with the years between the First and Second World Wars, published in 1943 and written in 1941 in Nice where Elsa Triolet and Aragon lived out that part of the Second World War and *L'Inspecteur des ruines* written in 1948. As Triolet makes clear in her *Préface à une «Vie de Michel Vigaud»* (which precedes *Le Cheval blanc*) written in September 1965 for Volume 27 of *Œuvres romanesques croisées*, her despair then encompassed not only the wider issues facing mankind:

> je me savais prise dans la souricière d'un monde bouleversé, je vivais chaque malheur et chaque espoir d'un horizon à l'autre, et je portais en moi, envers et contre tout, des sentiments excessifs d'allégresse et de désespoir. C'est alors, en 1941-1942, que toute ma vie vécue jusque-là allait passer dans l'écriture, dans un roman: *Le Cheval blanc* (CB. p.10)

but also her personal melancholy:

> j'avais encore assez de jeunesse pour vivre dans l'amour. Or, si je ne connais pas l'amour malheureux, je sais ce que c'est que le malheur de l'amour. Le désespoir devant ce qui toujours reste «l'autre» [...]. Et j'allais, comme malgré moi, inventer un homme pour me plaire, imprenable, innocent des ravages de sa séduction [...]. Michel Vigaud, mon héros, prenait pour moi consistance, devenait un homme de son époque (CB. pp.16-17).

Yet, if Michel Vigaud is a man of his time, the naïve conquering hero, dying a selfless and wasteful death on the bloody battlefield of the Somme, through the loss of his body in the confusion of war, he becomes anonymous, thus representative of all anonymous heros of all time – *Le Cheval blanc* of the title referring to the first horse of the Apocalypse: "[...] and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer[352]. Following on from *Le Cheval blanc*, it becomes clear that *Le Cheval roux* is Triolet's riposte to a world which

[352] *The Bible*, Revelation, Ch.6, v.2.

has clearly not learned its lesson from those earlier years of self-destruction:

> And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword[353].

Published at the height of the Cold War, the fact of the pilot's American nationality is not a chance occurrence. Eychart suggests that: "en fraternisant avec un soldat américain – le pire choix pour certains – elle invite son lecteur à ne pas s'arrêter aux apparences et aux idées reçues"[354]. Writing not of the conventional warfare of the past two World Wars which, although devastating to much of Europe and its inhabitants did finally see a new Europe arising out of the ashes, but of the final apocalypse, nuclear war, Triolet has raised the stakes in *Le Cheval roux*. In this novel she follows a handful of survivors, including herself, as they try to live, or rather survive, in the aftermath of an explosion which has not just laid waste to the world such as they knew it, but in so doing has planted, via radiation, the seeds of their inevitable destruction deep in their being. As Elaine Marks observes: "to be conscious of mortality is to be conscious of past, present, and future. The attempt to break through the limits posed by mortality is the attempt to stop or to fix time, in an ecstatic experience or in a metaphor"[355]. Jean Marcenac, a close friend of Triolet's since helping her infiltrate *les maquis* during the Second World War for her research for *Le Premier accroc coûte deux cent francs*, writes effusively: "le mort, dans sa ténèbre, laisse pourtant filtrer une lueur qui n'est qu'à lui, neuve-née du néant comme une étoile engendrée par la nuit. De cette femme que j'ai connue, Elsa Triolet, qui me fut la plus chère et la plus exigeante des amis, se défait chaque jour un peu plus l'image mortelle"[356].

The preface is both a help and a hindrance in reading this book. Written thirteen years after the novel was first published, it serves as Triolet's retrospective musings on the meaning of the text, its context at the time of writing and her reasons for writing it. Perhaps perversely, I chose to read her novels without reading first the prefaces, as I did not want to prejudice my reading of the text with her words of explanation ringing in my ears. Having read first her published diary and the correspondence between the two sisters, I was aware of Triolet's obsession with ageing, hence my excitement when I realised that *Le Cheval roux*, whilst dealing with the aftermath of a nuclear explosion, was also about Triolet (who frequently refers to herself in the novel as: "un monstre", "un vieux monstre", "un épouvantail" or "un cadavre") confronting her own fears of ageing through the ambiguity of phrases such as: "une morne accoutumance à l'horreur" (CR. p.61) or: "il fallait supporter l'insupportable" (CR. p.36).

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[353] *The Bible*, Revelation, Ch.6, v.4.
[354] Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, 'Du *Cheval roux* au *Rendez-vous des étrangers* d'Elsa Triolet: vision de l'Amérique au temps de la guerre froide' in *The Romanic Review*, 92:1-2, Jan-Mar 2001, p.143.
[355] Marks, Elaine, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press (1973), p.114.
[356] Marcenac, Jean, *Je n'ai pas perdu mon temps*, Paris: Messidor/Temps Actuel (1982), p.317.

Awakening alone after a nuclear explosion has devastated the world, it appears that with the terrible burning of the napalm, Triolet has found a novel, if grotesque and rather drastic, method of rejuvenation: "j'étais nue. Mon corps, de la viande pourrie, sans peau" (CR. p.35) and courtesy of the soothing properties of the mud in which she has lain, she has found the perfect unguent, reminiscent of the protective fluids that surround an embryo in the birth sac. She is, therefore, as if reborn, waking up in the new universe naked as a baby, leaving her old body, literally and metaphorically, behind in the mud, just as a snake sloughs off its old skin, thus: "elle (la boue) avait gardé aussi ma vieille peau. J'étais recouverte d'une peau nouvelle, tendre et brillante comme le sont les cicatrices des brûlures" (CR. p.36). Marie-Thérèse Eychart suggests that: "cette naissance symbolique dans la souffrance et le dégoût scelle l'entrée dans l'horreur de la vieillesse: une nouvelle femme naît qui portera désormais le nom atrocement dérisoire d'Ève"[357], as she sees Triolet being born into old age, whereas I believe this dramatic scene can also be interpreted as seeing Triolet being reborn with a new skin, albeit not the beautiful skin of a newborn baby but one which hides the signs of her ageing. Indeed, at a conference in 1967, Triolet confirmed this view: "Henry ne sait rien de moi, m'appelle Ève, me croit jeune...mon âge est étrangement camouflé par les brûlures atomiques"[358]. However, being burnt beyond recognition through radiation is a rather extreme version of the mask of ageing, as described in the Introduction. Is this an example of the: "strategies people use to continue to live and develop in circumstances not of their own choosing"[359]? Indeed, Biggs points out that:

> a consideration of adult ageing reintroduces the temporal to the issue of gender and identity. We exist in time as well as in the here-and-now and any convincing story of age, gender and identity must come to terms with both. [...] These issues become most acute once age is aligned with the embodied self, not only in terms of appearance, reproductive, and productive capacities, but also [...] in the relationship between the inner self and the self that is socially performed[360].

Le Cheval roux is certainly witness to Triolet's attempts to juggle time, age and identity, particularly since she is determined, at all costs, at least at the start of the novel, not to align age with the embodied self.

When she describes her first sight of Henry, an American pilot, we realise that one of his purposes in the novel is to serve as Triolet's alter ego, her 'other', a mirror to herself, in this case reflecting back the horror that is also her face, yet at the same time, just like a mirror, he is not a perfect reflection of herself. He serves a similar function as Fiéla does for Rosélie in Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, analysed in Chapter 3. Hence Triolet sees:

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[357] Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, 'L'intertextualité biblique dans *Le Cheval roux*' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 4, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1992), p.71.
[358] *Cahiers Renaud Barrault, Conférence-Spectacle: Elsa Triolet – Aragon*, No.68, Paris: Gallimard (1968), pp.41-42.
[359] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Ageing Studies*, 18:1, February 2004, p.46.
[360] ibid., p.56.

> une face sans nez, au regard vif, vivant, venant du fond de deux trous percés dans une peau rouge, luisante... de larges bourrelets bleutés autour d'un autre trou, figurant la bouche. Chauve. La peau, tendue à craquer sur le crâne et le front, et plissée autour des trous pour les yeux. (CR. p.40).

This terrible description graphically depicts the horrors of war. It is the meeting with the faceless Henry, serving as her mirror, literally and metaphorically, which reveals to Eve the true extent of her disfigurement, yet she only understands the real meaning of his words: "il ne faut pas avoir peur, [...] puisque nous sommes pareils" (CR. p.40) when she sees herself in the washroom mirror of Henry's plane. Incidentally, Henry shows his humanity by breaking this mirror after Eve faints at the sight of her destroyed face. Yet it is interesting that Triolet focuses on the faces of both Henry and Eve, rather than their bodies, which, although also burnt, are rarely mentioned. Is this because it is the face which reveals the first signs of ageing, or is it because she wants the loss of their faces to serve as a symbol for the loss of the face of humanity in exploding such a bomb? Or, since this is a novel which functions on both a macro and micro-level, does she, in fact, manage to convey both sentiments in her vivid depiction of ruined faces? Yet similarly afflicted as they are, Triolet has not gone to the extreme of eliminating the differences between male and female. She has not allowed her obsession with ageing to see it primarily as a process of desexualization, disablement and impoverishment[361], rather, she has chosen to disguise the visible signs of ageing by obliteration, a subtle difference. Thus, Henry is bald, while Elsa still has her hair, and Henry is a man, while Elsa is a woman: "une femme, un homme, comme Adam et Ève en enfer" (CR. p.44) and later, someone mocks her, referring to her as: "sortie de la côte de Henry" (CR. p.164).

There are further correlations between the horror of the end of the world, the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, the last book in *The Bible* and the creation of the world in Genesis, the first book of *The Bible*. Yet Eve (as Henry names her) and Henry, a Christian, have not awakened in a brand new world untainted by evil where: "they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed"[362]. On the contrary, since it is man's evil which has brought about this horrific new world: "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons"[363]. Thus, before she meets Henry and believing herself to be alone in the world, Triolet seeks to cover her nudity: "je m'en suis tressé un vêtement raide et cassant" (CR. p.37).

Throughout her life, although surrounded by people at all times, Triolet complained of feeling alone, as evidenced in numerous letters to her sister, and comments made in her journal and the majority of her female characters in her œuvre lived solitary lives. In *Le Cheval roux*, although reborn into the new world alone and frightened to the degree of contemplating suicide if only she could have worked out a

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[361] Gilleard, Chris, 'Women Aging and Body Talk' in *Cultural Gerontology*, ed. by Andersson, Lars, London: Auburn House (2002), p.155.
[362] *The Bible*, Genesis, Ch.2, v.25.
[363] *The Bible*, Genesis, Ch.3, v.7.

means to carry it out, Eve realises: "il fallait supporter l'insupportable" (CR. p.36). However, it is one of the paradoxes of the novel that Eve is not allowed to remain in solitude, or is this a wish fulfilment on the part of Triolet, expressing her longing not to be alone? On meeting Henry: "j'ai senti un terrible bonheur m'envahir: je n'étais plus seule au monde! Si on avait su ce que c'est que d'être seule au monde, personne n'aurait jamais osé se servir de cette expression «poétique»: Seule au monde!" (CR. p.41), which can only be a reference to Triolet's relationship with Aragon – a relationship in which she felt alone at all times (see Appendix E).

Whilst it is understandable that one may feel regret at the sight of a grey hair, or the appearance of a wrinkle around the eyes, it seems extreme to equate the trivial vanity of ageing with the horror of nuclear war, yet Triolet is quite clear on this comparison:

> cette gymnastique d'illusions, je l'avais déjà pratiquée autrefois, devant la vieillesse envahissante : la nuit, je feignais de croire que ce n'était pas vrai, que j'étais toujours jeune, et belle de jeunesse. En vérité, l'horreur d'aujourd'hui, j'en ai eu l'avant-goût, j'ai déjà passé par le désespoir de me trouver graduellement transformée en épouvantail. Non, l'horreur d'aujourd'hui n'est pas tout à fait neuve. La vieillesse d'une femme n'est pas moins solitaire que la solitude dans un monde vidé d'êtres humains (CR. p.95).

She is determined, in fact, to carry on this analogy throughout the book, thus:

> j'étais un épouvantail, il fallait être heureuse de pouvoir cacher sa hideur, même au prix du cataclysme universel. Il valait mieux périr avec le monde que d'y vivre en y promenant la face hideuse de la vieillesse et sa hideuse solitude (CR. p.149).

However, she appears to feel some shame at making the comparison when she sees herself in the mirror, all dressed up for the first time since 'avant':

> De dos, j'étais une jeune femme, la taille fine et les hanches artificiellement rondes sous les fronces de la jupe, la nuque cachée par les cheveux. De face... J'enveloppai ce qui me servait de visage, un visage inondé de larmes, la bouche crispée comme un cul de poule, j'enveloppai tout cela d'une grande écharpe de tulle. [...] Voyons Elsa, assez pleurer! Et il faut aussi que tu y voies. Ah, mais ça me dégoûte, ça me dégoûte! Allez, allez, ça suffit comme ça, cela ne t'est pas arrivé à seize ans, c'est arrivé à une vieille femme, alors sur quoi pleures-tu? sur tes rides? Elles étaient tout aussi dégoûtantes que cette peau écarlate. C'est ridicule de pleurer pour une si petite chose, dans un monde détruit. Oui, c'est honteux, mais on a beau avoir la peau d'un éléphant rouge, on n'en a pas moins mal au contact d'un simple regard... (CR. p.186).

By disfiguring her face, Triolet has played with her identity and it is interesting to see how people react when the codes on which society depends for successful interaction suddenly disappear, such as when a person's appearance sends out misleading signals. Numerous studies have shown that, on meeting

someone face to face, certain assumptions about a person are made within the first few seconds: sex, age, colour, physique, voice, all play a part, and as Triolet herself points out: "on dit qu'il ne faut pas juger les gens sur leur mine! C'est, au contraire, ce qu'il faudrait faire, mais ce jugement n'est pas donné à tout un chacun. Il faut y être expert, être un expert, comme il y a des experts en peinture ou écriture" (CR. p.158). Yet given their circumstances: "il est difficile de juger des êtres quand ils ont tous le même masque figé, sans expression ni âge" (CR. p.65) and Henry: "vue de dos, c'était un homme comme un autre" (CR. p.45). Thus for Eve, there is at least something to be salvaged from this horrific disaster, since: "avant la catastrophe, ma vieille peau avait été une vieille peau de vieille femme. Le monstre que je suis a perdu son âge" (CR. p.63) – and this quotation confirms my interpretation rather than Marie-Thérèse Eychart's view of Eve's appearance.

When Henry and Eve take to the skies in Henry's plane, they eventually see a cluster of buildings, albeit appropriately facades for the most part, and find a small group of people, similarly afflicted as themselves, existing in a village named Sainte-Normienne. The name of the village, along with its buildings, may have provided a semblance of normality for these escapees from the horror, yet with all trappings of modern consumerism lacking: "le temps, notre ennemi. Il ne passe pas" (CR. p.70) and civilisation begins to break down. All hope for the future lies in the birth of a baby: "la seule pensée de voir un petit être normal nous rendait plus humains" (CR. p.80), since 'la belle Hélène' is pregnant. Obviously the sobriquet refers to Hélène as she was before the bomb and perhaps it is used to emphasise the naïve hope of the community that she will, in turn, produce a beautiful child, since: "nous voulions avant de mourir revoir le visage de notre vie d'autrefois. Pour l'enfant à venir, on recommençait à attendre, à espérer le miracle..." (CR. p.84). It would, of course, be a miracle if the baby is born perfect under these circumstances, yet perhaps the power of creation is such that one can still believe in the safe haven of the maternal body, even when everything and everybody around, including the maternal body, have absorbed the seeds of destruction.

To carry on the theme of the redemption of Christ, the father of the unborn child believes: "il sera beau notre petit Jésus" (CR. p.82) and in case the reader misses this allusion, Triolet emphasises it with: "nous attendions tous cet événement comme la venue d'un enfant Messie" (CR. p.83). Yet there is to be no redemptive birth. When the baby is born – a boy – he is: "un monstre – sans nez, sans peau, aveugle... Il a été atteint par la radioactivité dans le ventre de sa mère" (CR. p.84) and it is not the male doctor who suffocates the child, but his mother, 'la belle Hélène'.

Yet despite this early setback, throughout the novel the emphasis is on the young to rebuild the world. Aragon himself emphasises this aspect of Triolet's work in his anthology *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, writing:

> l'art, la vieillesse, l'homme de l'avenir, dans l'œuvre d'Elsa Triolet, ce ne sont point de simples refrains, mais des sources inépuisables. Et si, à la limite atroce de l'âge individuel, Camus avoue qu'aucune philosophie ne peut remédier, mais peut-être l'art et le mythe, Elsa Triolet, elle, n'oppose au drame personnel de vieillir que cette confiance dans l'homme de demain, cette jeunesse des autres, cet or humain, qu'il faut sauver[364].

Aragon is referring to Camus's letter dated 29 May 1943 to his wife à propos *Le Mythe de la Baronne Mélanie* in which Triolet invents a myth wherein the baroness, who dies at the age of seventy, immediately relives her life, but in reverse from old age to birth, thus living her second life as an optimist, the underlying meaning being that old age and death should be kept in perspective and that there is more to life than simply the inevitable degeneration towards old age and death. Triolet wrote it as a riposte to Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: "car je sais bien pour finir que la vieillesse dérange tout et qu'avec elle s'en iront le courage, la passion et le défi et qu'il n'y a pas de philosophie qui puisse arranger ça. Ou alors comme vous dites et comme le disent mieux encore certains pages de *Mille regrets*, l'art et le mythe"[365].

The sub-title of *Le Cheval roux* is *ou les intentions humaines* and, as an ageing woman, the fictional Triolet does not see herself as part of the future. She may be called Eve, but she is not the mother of the future. Triolet herself did not have any children. In an interview with Ruta Sadoul, who met Triolet in 1932, Maryse Vassevière asked Sadoul whether Elsa Triolet had ever spoken to her about the impossibility of having children and Ruta replied: "elle n'en a pas vraiment parlé. Elle m'a seulement dit qu'elle avait eu un accident de grossesse en Allemagne[366]. Elsa était quelqu'un – tout en étant très sensible – de très secret. [...] mais je pouvais en conclure, moi qui étais mère, que c'était quelque chose de très dur, qui la touchait"[367]. Perhaps the harsh judgement expressed in *Le destin personnel* (one of the short stories in the collection entitled *Mille regrets*) is a true reflection of Triolet's feelings on childlessness: "une femme qui n'a pas d'enfants est un monstre, dans le genre d'un hermaphrodite"[368] – could this be one of the reasons she disfigures herself so badly in this novel and why she sees herself as on the margins of society? Or is she passing judgement on all women who do not have children?

Triolet's letter of 29 January 1939 to her sister reveals her excitement at the possibility that she may be able to adopt a Spanish child:

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[364] Aragon, Louis, *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, Paris: Messidor (1990), p.36.
[365] ibid., p.31.
[366] However, Lilly Marcou writes in *Elsa Triolet: Les Yeux et la Mémoire*, Paris: Librairie Plon (1994), p.189: "il y a aussi la stérilité incurable dont souffre Elsa, à la suite d'un avortement pratiqué lorsqu'elle était encore très jeune, en Russie".
[367] Vassevière, Maryse, 'Entretien avec Ruta Sadoul' in *Faites entrer l'infini*, 12, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, December 1991, p.8.
[368] Triolet, Elsa, '*Le destin personnel*' in *Mille regrets*, Paris: Denoël (1942), p.176.

> je suis émue: je m'apprête à adopter un petit enfant espagnol. Pour le moment, on ne laisse pas les enfants entrer en France et il y a des discussions à ce sujet, mais nous ésperons quand même qu'on ne les mettra pas dans un camp de concentration! La discussion porte justement là-dessus. Je rêve que ce petit enfant va me déranger et être dans mes jupes! J'aurais voulu une petite fille de cinq-six ans... au demeurant, peu importe l'âge et le sexe (CO. p.137).

However, it appears that there was a problem in allowing Parisians to adopt Spanish children, and Triolet does not refer to this adoption again in her letters. Perhaps she looked to her books to be not only her all-consuming interest in her life-time: "je pourrais refuser ceci ou cela, mais de nouveau les livres déjà écrits exigent des soins, il ne suffit pas de les mettre au monde, il faut encore les élever" (CO. 5 March 1969, p.1476), but also her legacy to future generations. There are shades here of Stephen and Rosélie's view of creativity as espoused by Condé in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* which I will examine in Chapter 3. This motif of legacy also recalls 'Stage Seven: Middle Adulthood' of Erik Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development[369], the stage which encompasses the ages forty to sixty-five where parenting skills dominate under the general heading of generativity. However, Erikson does not believe it is necessary to have one's own children. One can also become involved with future generations in a wider sense, such as caring about the future of the environment, being concerned as to what kind of world will be left for the next generation. Whether Triolet is aware of Erikson's thesis or not, one can certainly attest to her concern for the future generation, and her letters to her sister reveal the copious amount of hard work she engaged in to promote the works of her young poets, as well as supporting them on a personal level.

When Henry and Eve reach what used to be Stockholm, now: "une ville en perdition", it is the young students, boys and girls, who have formed a breakaway group: "ils ne sentaient rien d'autre que l'exaltation de l'espoir, et l'amour" (CR. p.119) and of course: "in a period of catastrophe belief in the future is essential to survival"[370]. It is on the eve of their escape from the main group that Eve reveals her true identity to them, that she is Elsa Triolet, the writer. There is a long silence as one of the boys mentions he has read *Les yeux d'Elsa*, one of Aragon's most moving poems celebrating his wife's beauty, yet now: "j'étais là dans ma honte d'être hideuse, devant des enfants qui avaient cru à un rêve..." (CR. p.120). Triolet quotes from the poem the phrase: "tes yeux sont si profonds..." and as Eychart highlights: "la reprise du vers du poète invite à un commentaire immédiat: la perte de la jeunesse, de la beauté est non seulement une souffrance insupportable mais elle brise le rêve et donc le mythe"[371].

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[369] Erikson, Erik, *Childhood and Society*, New York: Norton (1950).
[370] Marks, Elaine, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (1973), p.74.
[371] Eychart, Marie-Thérèse, 'L'intertextualité biblique dans *Le Cheval roux*' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 4, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1992), p.72.

The preponderance of young people in the novel with whom Triolet associates and with whom she feels at ease result in this being a relatively rare example of a successful generational novel. Triolet positions herself as the older storyteller surrounded by a younger cohort eager to hear of the past, and, more particularly, her past. It is a successful attempt at inter-generational dialogue; a mixing of ages and people who would not, under normal circumstances, necessarily meet. In creating this post-apocalpytic world, Triolet is forming a new space with new situations and disjointed elements which she has to transform into a coherent whole.

It is at this point that the intermingling of narrator, character and author reaches its apotheosis. For Henry, read Louis Aragon sometimes, when Triolet writes: "pour Henry je suis restée Ève, seulement il était frappé par l'existence d'Elsa, il en était jaloux" (CR. p.123-124), but: "nous nous aimons tendrement" (CR. p.124) and even Greta, the maid, unknowingly equates the two: "ne me dites pas que cela dépend de Henry, nous savons très bien que Henry fait ce que vous lui dites de faire" (CR. p.158). Yet, since Henry does not know of Elsa Triolet, he:

> ne savait pas que j'étais vieille, il me croyait une jeune femme défigurée. Coquetterie sinistre, je ne le démentais pas. Ce mensonge, cette illusion était tout ce qui me restait de vie. Je sais que même dans le tombe, même pourris et pleins de vers, le squelette et le crâne d'une jeune femme peuvent encore faire rêver; les restes d'une vieille n'éveillent qu'horreur et répulsion. Le jour où cela me sera indifférent que Henry sache mon âge, je tomberai en poussière (CR. p.149).

As Greta the maid points out cruelly: "Vous, vous ne pouvez pas comprendre ça, vous n'avez plus rien à craindre des hommes" (CR. p.134), little realising that Triolet's damaged face is merely replacing the aged face of before-the-bomb:

> Elle ne sait pas que je n'avais déjà rien à craindre des hommes avant d'être transformée en épouvantail: j'étais vieille, et ne souhaitais pas la poursuite des hommes. Oui, ce qui m'est arrivé ne se distingue guère de la vieillesse. Il est même comique de penser que, faite comme je suis, on me prenne pour une jeune femme défigurée, quand, dans l'autre monde, j'étais simplement vieille (CR. pp.134-135).

The sentiments expressed here by Triolet can be confirmed by Pierre Daix. In his book *Aragon: Une vie à changer*, he writes: "quand je les ai rencontrés fin 1945, dès la première conversation que j'eus avec Elsa, elle me dit, à ma stupéfaction, qu'allant avoir cinquante ans elle avait décidé de mettre un terme à sa vie de femme"[372]. He goes on to explain that between 1948 and 1951, he and Aragon went out together at night two or three times a week and Aragon: "prenait comme un fait établi pour moi qu'il n'y avait plus de relations sexuelles entre Elsa et lui et ne faisait pas mystère de sa frustration. Quoi faire de son corps

[372] Daix, Pierre, *Aragon: Une vie à changer*, Paris: Flammarion (1994), p.529.

quand on veut rester fidèle à sa femme?"[373] In fact, in Triolet's letters to Brik, she mentioned this some seven years earlier, when she was only forty-one: "pas d'hommes. Après ma maladie, j'ai fortement vieilli et suis devenue triste. Je n'ai pas besoin d'hommes et ils n'ont pas besoin de moi" (CO. 26 January 1938, p.116), although one can read this as referring to other men in her life, rather than Aragon.

This anecdote can be compared with a conversation Picasso allegedly had with Aragon, reported by several sources, when he questioned Aragon on his monogamy in front of Triolet and Françoise (Paloma's mother) asking: "«Comment peux-tu continuer à aimer la même femme? Après tout, elle va vieillir comme tout le monde»". Louis replied: "«mais c'est justement cela. J'accueille tous ces petits changements. Ils me font vivre. J'aime l'automne d'une femme»"[374]. Triolet, meanwhile, prey to her ever present anxieties about her ageing body, was obviously full of despair when she wrote to Aragon (a letter that was never sent, but found in her notebooks): "j'ai une vision trop nette de ta vision de moi pour la supporter. J'ai perdu mes cheveux, mes dents et comme il se doit, mon amour"[375].

After fleeing Stockholm, Triolet and Henry's next stop is Switzerland, to a hotel high up in the Alps, where an assortment of the upper echelons of society had gathered to ski before the explosion, and now cannot depart for fear of the danger of the radioactive rays further down in the valleys, which may, or may not, have already attacked them from within – "la mort différée" or "la mort à terme" as they call it. Here, living in the luxurious surroundings of the hotel, Triolet writes of all that has happened to her since waking up in the mud, and also, almost in spite of herself:

> je revis pas à pas ma vie, mes amis disparus me prennent tout entière, je marche dans la neige au bras de Louis, je lui raconte tout, tout, tout ce que je n'ai pas eu le temps de lui dire pendant les longues années de vie en commun. [...] Les couleurs de mon passé sont fraîches, je retrouve mes sentiments, mes sensations, les sons, les parfums" (CR. p.214).

In her correspondence, however, Triolet is not quite so sanguine on the subject of memories which her work of translating Mayokovsky necessarily brings back to the surface: "je souffre terriblement en revivant mes souvenirs [...] La difficulté n'est pas seulement dans le travail, bien sûr, mais encore dans le retour forcé en arrière" (CO. 20 August 1955, p.512).

Triolet has reason to thank the bomb for rendering her faceless, thus ageless, as she hears 'une femme décharnée' described:

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[373] Daix, Pierre, *Aragon: Une vie à changer*, Paris: Flammarion (1994), pp.529-530.
[374] Gilot, Françoise, 'Les rencontres Picasso-Aragon' in *Faites entrer l'infini*, 13, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, June 1992, p.16.
[375] *Faites entrer l'infini*, 24, Journal de la Société des Amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet, December 1997.

> elle est si pourrie que même le parfum qu'elle emploie se décompose sur elle et pue... C'est la vanité faite femme. Elle est heureuse ici, vous m'entendez, heureuse! parce qu'ici elle peut «jouer un rôle»... Elle a eu des enfants, un mari, un chien, elle n'a plus personne et elle est heureuse! A la veille de tomber en poussière, il lui a été offert cette chance : se sentir importante! Regardez-la, elle est encore attirante aux lumières, mais un de ces jours cette momie va se désagrérer au soleil (CR. p.226).

This description confirms the observation that feminity is seen as a performance developed by women[376] – a performance of which Eve/Triolet is certainly guilty of in this novel, if, indeed, it should be considered a guilt. It could also be seen as perpetuating the stereotype of women trying to act younger than their age, 'mutton dressed up as lamb' as the saying goes. However, it is not made clear whether Triolet believes that women behave like this for themselves, or whether they think that society, and men in particular, expect them, as women, to behave in a certain fashion and they are thus conforming to expectations, even if it does make them look ridiculous. I tend towards the latter interpretation, since Triolet was always conscious of acting appropriately for her age.

Ironically, however, it is Triolet's voice which reveals her true identity to three young people, accidentally trapped with all the others in the hotel: "dès qu'on t'a entendue, on t'a reconnue à ton accent – ça ne pouvait être que toi!" (CR. p.246) and it is true that, in real life, Triolet always kept her distinctive accent. Peter Brooks suggests that: "signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story"[377]. If one can consider the obliteration of one's face as 'signing the body', then one can concur that Triolet did write her body into her novel. However, the obliteration of identity through facial features means that identity and its recognition is left to Triolet's voice.

It is, in fact, Michel, Josy and Camille who rejuvenate Triolet, acting on her as an 'élixir de vie'[378] and while she drinks in the: "illusion of youth, romance, and love [...] she gazes at the young with pleasure"[379] as together they embark on a long and dangerous excursion through the mountains to a place of safety where they, plus a select band of other escapees from the hotel, will live a self-sufficient life, à la Robinson Crusoe. Strangely, there is little sense of the truth that is revealed through the metaphorical unmasking of Triolet. After all, as Kathleen Woodward points out: "at times the most radical gesture

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[376] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Ageing Studies*, 18:1, February 2004, p.52. Biggs is referring in this instance to J Riviere's 1929 paper on "womanliness", facilitating survival in a patriarchal environment. (Riviere, J., 'Womanliness as masquerade' in *Formations and Fantasy*, ed. by Burgin, V., London: Methuen (1929), pp.35-44).

[377] Brooks, Peter, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1993), p.3.

[378] With apologies to Tom Kirkwood who writes in *The End of Age: Why Everything about Ageing is Changing* (op.cit.) that: "it appears impossible for advances in such research [ageing] to be reported without a phrase like 'fountain of youth' creeping into the body, if not the headline, of the article" (p.xi).

[379] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991), p.86.

may be in fact to take off a mask and show what is underneath it"[380] and whilst Triolet has been at pains to make the point that her damaged face does her a favour in that it disguises the fact that she is, in fact, an older woman, she seems strangely unperturbed by the fact that the trio, and Henry, are now aware of her true age. However, if it is true that: "tout changement corporel ou relationnel que nous pensons pouvoir attribuer au vieillissement touche à notre intégrité, et donc à notre identité"[381], it is Elsa Triolet, the ageing writer (as she sees herself) who has been mutilated, thus the mutilation has released her from her embodied self. With her real identity revealed, she has to accept that all pretence has to be dropped. This implies, of course, that it is not Triolet's chronological age itself which is the problem, but rather her aged appearance which causes her so much angst. However, as Woodward points out, a mask may express rather than hide a truth. The mask itself may be one of multiple truths[382]. Therein lies the paradox. It could be that by destroying her face, she has definitively destroyed any chance of being desired for her looks, yet since, at the time of the bomb, she was no longer young, perhaps she has already experienced that loss of desire in a man's gaze, and by destroying her face, therefore, she is pre-empting any such repeat of feeling undesired. In a bizarre, rather drastic manner, therefore, she is relinquishing her: "desire to be looked at in admiration" and in turn has become one who gazes on others, discovering that: "this too is a pleasure, one that works to strengthen social bonds"[383].

Whilst walking through the mountains, Triolet tells the story of her last visit to Russia in 1951, where she hoped to gain some insight from the intellectual elite of Moscow at that time, to enable her to write a book which would speak of the future. Of course, the subject of resurrection was to the fore during that meeting, with Triolet wondering whether: "l'avenir radieux est-il dans une perpétuelle jeunesse? Oui, oui, les jeunes sont plus heureux..." (CR. p.287), and it was a Ukrainien who posed the question: "pourquoi l'homme meurt-il? Parce qu'il a été privé de certaines conditions qui lui sont indispensables. Il s'agit de trouver les moyens de lui rendre ces conditions" (CR. p.287). That could be Tom Kirkwood talking again, suggesting that: "ageing comes about through the gradual build-up of unrepaired faults in the cells and tissues of our bodies as we live our lives, not as a result of some active mechanism for death and destruction. If we can discover the nature of these faults, we can hope to slow their accumulation"[384]. As Triolet says to her young companions:

> j'aurais certainement écrit un livre optimiste, j'aurais essayé, avec toutes les données que j'ai recueillies, d'imaginer le développement de l'humanité, le bonheur de la confiance retrouvée, le bonheur de la création, la libération de la crainte de perdre ceux qu'on aime... de la mort. Avez-vous remarqué que tout le début de cette conversation roulait sur la prolongation de la vie, sur la résurrection? La mort est

[380] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991), p.148.
[381] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil, (1981), p.64.
[382] ibid., p.148.
[383] ibid., p.87.
[384] Kirkwood, Tom, op.cit., p.13.

> contraire à l'idée du bonheur. Médecine, biologie, sciences sociales, cherchent les moyens de prendre l'existence physique de l'homme entre leurs mains (CR. p.295).

Yet Triolet wonders whether we really believe today that: "mortels, nous l'avons toujours été, sans y penser, sans y croire" (CR. p.248) despite her visit to Russia in 1951 where all the specialists confirmed: "nous, les médecins biologistes, nous connaissons les lois de la nature, et nous savons que tout ce qui vit doit mourir. La vie nouvelle vient à la place de ce qui est mort. Les tissus de l'homme subissent une usure naturelle" (CR. p.300). Triolet may have been prescient in including in her novel this debate on whether mortality is, indeed, a natural consequence of growing old, but at the time of writing, she ultimately seems to opt for the fact that we are all mortal. However, she appears undecided as to whether this results in resurrection, which has distinct religious overtones (and neither she nor Aragon are believers), or 'recommencer' as the young in *Le Cheval roux* are hoping will be the case.

Yet it is in the mountains, surrounded by the fog, alone with Michel, Camille and Josy, that Triolet feels a strange, physical well-being, although she acknowledges she is holding back the demons since: "j'ai toute ma vie été mal dans ma peau, ma peau lisse et blanche; et c'est dans cette peau d'éléphant que je suis enfin à mon aise. Mais cela ne sert plus à rien de respirer. Je luttais contre le désespoir que je sentais venir de loin comme l'avalanche" (CR. p.315). It is only with this group that she allows herself to be Elsa Triolet, the writer and wife of Aragon, the poet and through her reminiscences: "je retrouvais ma vie passée, et aussi ce qui nous unissait les uns aux autres, nos rêves, notre douleur commune. On reprenait aussitôt l'histoire de mon «roman de l'avenir», prétexte pour nous retrouver dans l'avenir de notre passé" (CR. p.350). Indeed, this is a perfect example of Biggs's observation that: "narrativity includes a relationship to the past. More often than not, the past is used as source material from which to build a serviceable identity in the present"[385], which is surely what Triolet is helping these young people, as well as herself, to do – an act of compassion, perhaps, given that their present is likely to be cut short.

Having established that Triolet had never written her 'book of the future', they discover that she had started another, one that she calls: "le roman que je n'ai pas écrit où l'on parle du passé" (CR. p.352) in which she writes of a distant future where: "une humanité de vingt et quelques siècles n'avait été que le terreau qui a nourri votre génération. Vous voici maîtres de la terre, vous qui avez découvert tous les secrets de la nature et qui savez vous en servir" (CR. p.354). Here she is speaking from the grave, the ultimate place of solitude, "voilée de terre" (CR. p.355) (her protagonist died young of a broken heart) to a Stranger, sitting above her grave who is living in the future. She says that: "pour vous, la mort est un accident, vous vivez peut-être sans fin, dans un va-et-vient de jeunesse et de vieillesse, qui reviennent comme des saisons" (CR. p.354). At the same time, Triolet uses this protagonist to speak of solitude:

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[385] Biggs, Simon, 'Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades' in *Journal of Ageing Studies*, 18:1, February 2004, p.50.

> j'ai l'habitude d'être seule, je ne suis pas plus seule sous la terre que je ne l'ai été sur la terre. J'ai connu toutes les variétés de la solitude: la solitude choisie et la solitude forcée, celle d'entre les quatre murs et celle dans la foule, celle de l'abandon et celle de la fuite. Et ce n'est pas tout: solitude de la pensée, de la foi, par cécité et par surdité des autres, ou de moi-même. La solitude de la clairvoyance, de l'exception, la solitude de l'amour (CR. p.353)

and the hope that she cherishes, which is that in the future (a future which, at least for these humans, is unlikely to exist) in the time of the Stranger, human beings will have dispensed with the cult of the primacy of youth and beauty, thus whilst: "de notre temps, comme de tout temps, la beauté régnait, les belles vedettes, les stars attiraient des foules immenses, [...]. Je voudrais croire que, chez vous, Passant, la beauté est propre à tous les humains comme elle l'est aux fleurs. Être homme serait être beau" (CR. p.436). Perhaps Triolet feels compelled to speak out here in view of the impending never-ending silence, but it is, indeed, sentiments such as these which make this such a contemporary book.

For Triolet, "l'avenir radieux" (CR. p.358) means questioning: "la vie peut-elle être belle pour nous tant que nous sommes mortels? Je n'ai eu peur de la mort que lorsque j'ai été heureuse. Ne pas mourir, ne pas vieillir, avoir le temps...(CR. p.358). This view of death is one that is found replicated in her correspondence, as in the letter of 1 May 1949: "je n'ai eu peur de la mort que quand j'étais heureuse, et si je regarde en arrière et me souviens, on pourrait compter sur les doigts de la main les fois où la mort m'est apparue fâcheuse et terrible" (CO. p.299). The key for Triolet appears to be: "l'avenir n'est pas une amélioration du présent, c'est autre chose" (CR. p.362), thus immortality for her is not the religious belief in 'life after death', but: "lorsque vous aurez rendu l'homme immortel, cela aura une autre signification que celle que nous lui donnions de mon temps"(CR. p.363).

Unfortunately, Triolet and her fellow survivors do not attain immortality. The small group that escaped from the hotel set up their own commune in an abandoned farm, and work with what is available to them in their immediate environs, not daring to go down into the valley for fear of radiation. They live effectively to work, in a life stripped down to the bare essentials, but consider themselves lucky to have survived thus far, and even dare hope that they will have a future, of sorts. Then eight of the women in the group announce, during the harvest, that they have fallen pregnant, with all their offspring, the commune's future, to be born in the spring; the symbolism is obvious, although they wonder: "comment sera l'avenir de l'humanité qui recommence à zero" (CR. p.462). However, there is to be no happy ending, neither for the group, nor for Triolet. Just as they are daring to hope in the possibility of a future, two of the group suddenly die, without warning, presumably from "la mort différée", and fearing that the babies, the future, may be born into a world where the remaining adults have not long to live, Triolet and Henry are despatched in the plane to seek help.

The ending, it has to be said, feels rather contrived. The plane sets out even though there are signs of a storm ahead, and it crashes. Rather than death by radiation, therefore, Triolet's death is an accident, or perhaps a sacrificial choice. However induced, the real significance of her death in this novel, as Maxwell Adereth points out, is that we would be deceiving ourselves if we thought that the victims of a nuclear war have any real future before them[386]. Yet Triolet leaves the reader with just the faint hope that there will be a future even if not for her, since just before the plane crashes, they hear music and human voices on the long-silent radio, suggesting that life still exists somewhere on Earth. There is, therefore, a chance the human race may survive, thus: "la nature n'a pas d'intentions humaines, elle est implacable comme un automate, mais l'homme est grand, lui qui a su créer ce jeu des sons, et qui a su leur faire traverser les espaces. Que l'homme soit loué!" (CR. p.493).

This is not Elsa Triolet's best book. It starts with a flourish and promises much, but there is no denying that the momentum of the plot stumbles with the retrospective stories told by Triolet, even if their intention is to emphasise her views on mortality and the future, and to mingle past, present and future in one text. However, it offers a different take on the ageing persona, and is revealing with regard to Triolet's own despair at this stage in her life, for herself and for society in general. Yet even in this surreal tale, set in a barren, battered vision of the world to come, there exists hope. After all, if Triolet foresaw the total obliteration of the world as she knew it with no man, beast, nor blade of grass left standing, would she not then have chosen the fourth horse of the Apocalypse? "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth"[387].

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[386] Adereth, Maxwell, *Elsa Triolet & Louis Aragon: An Introduction to their Interwoven Lives and Works*, Lewingston, NY, Lampeter, UK: Edwin Meller Press (1994), p.390.
[387] *The Bible*, Revelation, Ch.6, v.8.

1.8 *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*

> *Ah, que me vienne vite la vieillesse*
> *Et plus pour moi ne chante un rossignol* (R. p.23)[388]

Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube was Elsa Triolet's last novel, written in 1969 and published shortly before her death in 1970. It was well received by critics and public alike, as she described to her sister in her letter of 27 January 1970:

> bien sûr, un intérêt si grand, si ému, porté au Rossignol me touche, me ravit et m'étonne. Surtout le fait que ce soit si bien «ressenti» par les jeunes. Je pensais que j'écrivais pour ceux qui ont le sentiment d'avoir leur vie derrière eux. Or, mes jeunes poètes, qui du fait de leur jeune âge ne savent pas mentir, sont des admirateurs tout particuliers du Rossignol (CO. p.1538).

Perhaps the best resumé of this novel is Triolet's own description in her letter to Brik of 7 September 1969:

> de vieux amis, qui sont à présent des vieillards, se réunissent et vont passer ensemble toute la nuit, sans allumer la lumière, pour ne pas se voir les uns les autres, à la campagne, dans une pièce qui donne sur un parc. Ils sont une dizaine, une seule femme... Un rossignol chante. Bribes de conversation... Elle dort à moitié, elle rêve au passé, au présent... (CO. p.1520).

However, Triolet neglected to add the punchline, which is that: "des hommes presque morts ont donné rendez-vous à leur jeunesse, à leur amour commun, la Femme qui va mourir au matin"[389]. Thus, the novel ends with a death, indeed the narrator's own death, although Aragon's view of his wife's intention was: "[...] elle tenait à souligner que si *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, comme à l'aube se tait la récitante, cela signifie pourtant bien qu'il y aura une aube et qu'il y en aura d'autres. Peu importe que ce ne soient pas les nôtres"[390], reinforcing Triolet's oft-repeated message, outlined so clearly in *Le Cheval roux*, of the need to have a belief in the future, even while she saw her own life ebbing away. In this novel, therefore, the nightingale and the dawn are substitutes for the sound of human voices on the radio in *Le Cheval roux*: both portents of the continuance of life, albeit without the narrator. Her words to her sister in March[391] 1970 were prescient: "Pour moi c'est mon testament (*Le rossignol*)" (CO. p.1555).

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[388] In her manuscripts, Cahier 043, f° 15 and f° 24, Elsa plays with the couplet a number of times, with her final version reading: Qu'elle me vienne plus vite, la vieillesse,
Que le rossignol ne chante plus pour moi...
which she changes again in the definitive version in the book on p.23.

[389] Barthélemy-Madaule, Madeleine, 'La quatrième dimension' in *Europe*, 506, June 1971, p.134.

[390] Gamarra, Pierre, 'L'art du conte' in *Europe*, 506, June 1971, p.169.

[391] No actual day given in the text.

As Elsa Triolet's final novel, *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* stands out in her œuvre in a number of ways. First, whilst she used images and photographs previously in her novels (and was responsible for selecting the illustrations throughout the *Œuvres romanesques croisées*), in this novel one is struck instantly by the fact that the structure of the text is rendered visible by the print used, following explicit instructions from the author. In black print, there is the third person narration of the twelve waking sequences; in red print, there is the first person narration of the eleven passages of dreams (perhaps the colours should have been reversed since on p.97, she says: "je rêve en noir") and in italics are found the poems or rather extracts of poems, Aragon's of course, which pepper the narrative.

The fact that Triolet includes poems of Aragon's in this novel may imply not only that she considers him as inseparable from her own being, once again the interweaving of two people to become one, but in addition, since the poems that appear all refer to Triolet herself as subject of the verse, by incorporating these words of Aragon's she is textualising herself further into a story about herself and her memories – although the narrator, "la seule femme" of the gathering is not actually identified as Elsa Triolet herself. As Susanne Ditschler points out: "le je autobiographique est pris dans un mouvement de ré-écriture pour se muer en je fictif" [392] although Triolet does admit to her sister in her letter dated 22 January 1970: "c'est la première fois que j'écris sur moi-même, si l'on excepte *Fraise-des-bois*, là c'est l'unique livre à reflet dans le miroir, certes flou et déformant, mais malgré tout personnel" (CO. p.1537). In addition to the narrator, the author herself intervenes occasionally, usually to illuminate something that is not clear, as when she identifies a voice: " - c'était la voix de la femme, elle-même invisible - " (R. p.25) and, when asked if she wanted to go for a short walk in the park before they all left, the narrator and author become one: "non, non, elle aime mieux se reposer ici, allez, allez, je vais rester un peu seule avant de partir" (R. p.132).

Secondly, and perhaps inevitable for a novel with ageing as a theme although in so doing it perpetuates ageism, the action is either happening to the young, the next generation, such as when the group discuss the year's events and in particular May 1968: "«Jeunes de tous les pays, unissez-vous!» [...] La radio introduisait entre vos quatre murs l'affrontement de la jeunessse avec notre monde invivable" (R. p.127), or it is all in the past, neatly contained in the narrator's memories in her dream sequences. Therefore, compared with, say, *Le Cheval blanc*, which is action-packed with its young hero, Michel Vigaud, flitting between a dizzying array of milieux, or *Le Cheval roux* which sees the narrator, Triolet herself, fly from country to country trying to find survivors in the wake of a nuclear bomb, and in both of which there is a cast of many, this novel simply recounts one evening and night in the company of one woman, an unnamed actress and her shadowy, in all senses of the word, male entourage, all played out in the confined space of one room and the immediate environs of the park. Indeed, the spatial limitations of this novel

[392] Ditschler, Susanne, 'Elsa Triolet: sujet écrivant et sujet d'écriture' in *Œuvres et Critiques*, 25:1 (2000), p.125.

would tend to suggest a replication of the generally perceived narrowing of horizons, both literally and metaphorically, of the aged in society, hence the appeal of dreams, since: "dans notre tête, nous n'avons ni âge ni contraintes pour rêver"[393].

In a letter to her sister dated 7 September 1969, Triolet writes: "ce qui me plaît à moi, dans cette chose, c'est l'«unité de temps et de lieu» et le fait que la nuit passe en quelque sorte naturellement" (CO. p.1520). One of her interests in later years is how novels try to convey time; how in a novel it is necessary to compress 'le temps vécu' into 'le temps romanesque', or as Madeleine Barthélemy-Madaule puts it: "lorsqu'elle touche au problème du romancier ou de l'historien [...] qui condensent le temps que les choses ont duré dans le temps de leur narration"[394]. Therefore in this novel, the impression is of an evening evolving slowly, languidly, in a sensory overload. The atmosphere is almost tangible with its pipe and cigarette smoke inside, and outside the freshness of the garden after the hailstorm; the narrator is sunk deep into an armchair in a room lit only by candles, thus she cannot see what is going on around her, she can only hear the background hum of conversations, the chinking of glasses, the sound of chairs scraping back. The sense of the gradual 'shutting down' of a life is overwhelming – all movement is restricted, all conversations abridged – and it all takes place in obscurity as:

> ils émergèrent dans cette salle pleine d'un crépuscule gris de film où, dans un mur transparent, les portes en verre demeuraient ouvertes sur le parc aussi bien tenu qu'eux-mêmes, gazon, allées, arbres, enveloppés d'un demi-deuil et de parfums crépusculaires, en attendant que leur tombe dessus le couvercle de la nuit (R. p.10).

In one of the narrator's later dreams, no.9[395], she dreams that her life is shrinking, a common enough feeling for the elderly as their perspectives become more and more restricted, albeit that is another stereotypical view of the elderly:

> jadis, j'ai vécu au centre de cercles concentriques et c'était moi le centre. Je ne veux plus émettre, je ne bouge pas, je retiens ma respiration pour ne pas faire de vapeur, je me ramasse, je ne suis plus qu'un point, qu'un poing, mes cinq doigts pliés, le pouce par-dessus, je n'occupe que très peu de place, de moins et moins" (R. p.121).

Thus her dream, like most dreams, is a mixture of significant memories, as well as, more importantly, a subjective experience in the feelings and physical sensations it evokes, whilst it is probable that the shrinking effect she experiences is linked with the feeling Triolet has all her life of not being liked or appreciated: "on croit que j'avale les insultes par lâcheté, et moi je me tais par l'énorme fierté qui est la mienne et, autour de moi, s'épaississent les malentendus et les défenses d'entrer dont j'entoure mon moi"

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[393] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil, (1981), p.232.
[394] Barthélemy-Madaule, Madeleine, 'La quatrième dimension' in *Europe*, 506, June 1971, p.128.
[395] The dreams are unnumbered in the text. I have numbered them for ease of reference.

(R. p.122) – a sentiment which finds its parallel in many of Triolet's letters to her sister when she complains of not being appreciated, whether in France or in Russia, as, for example: "pour ce qui est de moi, bien sûr, tout le monde s'en moque" (CO. 2 November 1959, p.749).

The real action in this novel is played out in the eleven dream sequences where the narrator re-enacts certain key moments in her life, including the death of her father, oblique references to her abortion, men she has known, her feelings of jealousy, betrayal and being unappreciated – and all the action in the dreams takes place either in the late evening or at night, thus continuing the theme of darkness. There is a sense here that Triolet is repeating what the (deceased) hero, Régis Lalande of *Le Grand jamais*, believed: "le temps n'existe pas, mais seulement une succession d'événements"[396]. The intertextuality of this novel is emphasised not only by Aragon's poems, but also by the re-writing, in the narrator's memory, in her dreams, of certain passages in her earlier books, as with her father's death already recorded in *Fraise-des-bois*, and, as befits memories, these are not word-perfect repetitions of scenes already written. Indeed, Triolet's treatment of memories is another feature of this book. She is quite clear on what she believes:

> on ne garde aucun souvenir de l'amour, ni de ses joies, ni de ses souffrances, on se rappelle, on ne revit rien. Se rappeler qu'on a eu une rage de dents ne vous la redonne pas, heureusement. La rencontre avec son grand homme de mari ne lui donnait aucune émotion, elle savait tranquillement qu'ils avaient été furieusement mari et femme (R. pp.43-44).

Her dreams also embrace and confront the theme of ageing; thus dream no.7 which starts:

> un cri... Sur scène, Valentine Tessier devant un miroir, elle se regarde longuement, le cri jaillit d'elle entre deux pauses noires. Moi, je n'ai pas d'amant plus jeune que moi. Le poète a mon âge, je vieillis en toute indépendance. Le cri... Formidable! Me voilà embrochée, le crochet traverse l'index. Un cri isolé au-dessus de la terre, au travers de mon corps, il accroche les organes vitaux, comment l'arracher... Ce qu'il faut de courage pour se battre contre celui qui a déjà vaincu (R. p.95)

is an intermingling of two cries, one of an actress on stage confronting her ageing persona in a mirror, the other a cry deep inside tearing the narrator apart – a reference to her abortion? Perhaps Triolet feels the reference to the cry on stage needs no further elaboration to the Parisians of 1969, yet in her notebook, she is more specific:

> Au théâtre. Sur scène, 'Chéri'. Le cri de Valentine Tessier devant son miroir, un cri entre deux pauses. Un long regard sur son reflet. Le poète n'était pas son jeune amant. Ni son amant, ni plus jeune qu'elle. Elle vieillissait en toute indépendance. Le cri... Formidable! La voilà embrochée. Le crochet traversait l'index. [Une locomotive.] Un cri – [nait] isolé au dessus de la terre, en travers de son corps,

[396] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 35, *Le Grand jamais*, p.269.

accrochant des organes essentiels. Un duel. Ce qu'il faut de courage pour se battre contre un vainqueur. Les hommes sont fous (Notebook No.146, f° 39)[397].

Valentine Tessier was obviously playing the role of Léa in Colette's *Chéri* and had arrived at the point where Léa recognises herself as the: "vieille femme haletante...dans le miroir"[398] after the painful departure of her young lover, Chéri. What an apt choice of fictional character to depict the despair that a woman feels on looking into the mirror and realising that she is no longer young and beautiful[399].

Indeed, one of the possibilities as to why the narrator believes she is the only woman present at: "ce rendez-vous nocturne des amis de jeunesse" is that perhaps her other female contemporaries: "ne voulaient-elles pas se montrer sans leur beauté, déchues de leur jeunesse?" (R. p.13). Yet this particular memory is one of middle age: her own, the actress's, Léa's and Colette's (since *Chéri* represented the time in Colette's life when she truly deplored the loss of her youth and beauty) and whilst ageing has been a recurring motif in Elsa Triolet's writing, in this particular novel it is as if, at the age of seventy-three, she has now gone past the revulsion she felt in her middle age at seeing her physical attributes dissolve in the face of the demon ageing; as she says: "il y a longtemps qu'elle ne pleure plus sur ses rides" (R. p.123). It would appear that, finally, Triolet has come to terms with her own ageing, proving the truth of Woodward's observation: "that the normal process of aging itself, which takes place over a long period of time and which entails a gradual rearrangement of narcissistic energy, facilitates our accepting the approach of our own death"[400].

Thus, at this time in her life, Triolet's protagonist has to deal with the spectre of mortality, rather than ageing, and not just her own but her contemporaries, her age-group, the ethereal remnants of which are present at this gathering which has the feel not only of a wake for an individual, but also a collective wake for the end of a generation. Spared the terrible anguish of a wake for a young child, dead before his time, there is, rather, the reflective, nostalgic, sad farewell for one, and for all, who had lived their allotted span. By focusing the reminiscences on the narrator, she becomes the subject, assisting at her own wake, whilst distorting the view that a drowning man sees his life flash before him into her own version where a dying woman, barely conscious, relives her life, with an accompaniment of a single nightingale rather than a full-blown violin concerto, before succumbing to death, alone: "en plein soleil. La nuit était bien finie" on the last page.

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[397] The text in square brackets indicates Elsa's first attempt, then crossed out.
[398] Colette, *Chéri*, in *Colette Œuvres II*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard (1986), p.828.
[399] For a fuller analysis of the character of Léa, I would refer you to Barnes, Linda, *Colette's Rite of Passage*, MA Thesis, University of Kent (2001).
[400] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1991), p.81.

There are references to death and the passing of time on almost every page; the book is steeped in the odeur of the dying. Even the dream sequences are largely black, at least metaphorically, with the only signs of rebirth being the puppies in dream no.11. However, given that they are animal rather than human and do not even belong to her, they serve simply to reinforce the feeling that even in her dreams she is alone, or rather separate from others. It is a cliché, but the narrator is one of those people who is always alone, even in a crowd, therefore perpetuating Triolet's on-going lament on solitude. Here, the protagonist lacks that connection to other people, or at least, more importantly, feels she does, because in reality it transpires that she rarely wakes alone from her dreams, since she usually wakes to the sound of her ex-husband's voice.

If the dreams are black, the waking sequences are grey: suffused with references to time that has passed in: "l'état définitif des vieux" (R. p.11) who share: "un passé commun" (R. p.10). Thus: "cette nuit divinement chaude me rappelle qu'il n'y en a plus jamais des comme ça, ou si rarement que c'est comme jamais" (R. p.27) and remembering the past through the rose-tinted spectacles of the old: "c'était quelque chose que leur jeunesse! Époque héroïque que les jeunes d'aujourd'hui leur enviaient. Ils n'étaient pas morts, leur jeune légende vivait" (R. p.71). Yet their legend was their youth and now, in old age: "ils parlaient de leurs projets et intentions comme s'ils avaient un avenir" (R. p.9), whereas in reality: "ils étaient là, chacun porteur de sa biographie, film terminé et mis en boîte. [...] Il leur restait à vivre les quelques mètres d'épilogue, une ou deux séquences encore inconnues comme la date, le lieu et les circonstances par quoi se terminerait l'histoire" (R. pp.10-11). That the end is nigh for all is highlighted as whilst: "chacun songeait peut-être à son insomnie particulière" (R. p.26), there is simultaneously: "un petit ronflement [...] et chacun en fut un peu gêné, à leur âge c'est une preuve de l'âge que de s'endormir devant tout le monde et par une nuit incomparable; peut-être n'y en aura-t-il plus jamais une nuit comme celle-ci..."(R. pp.26-27). For the narrator, of course, that is certainly the case and thus it comes to pass that we learn she is expecting her version of the grim reaper at any time:

> Elle se surprenait cette nuit, comme toutes les nuits et tous les jours, à regarder l'heure de plus en plus souvent bien que l'heure et la date du rendez-vous n'aient pas été fixées, et qu'elle ne connût pas la personne qu'elle devait rencontrer. On la disait osseuse et souriante, reconnaissable sans qu'elle ait à tenir à la main un journal ou une rose, et même si elle arrivait en retard, au bout du compte, au bout du quai, elle était toujours fidèle au rendez-vous (R. p.13)

She would even welcome her arrival:

> Soudain, elle sut combien elle souhaitait que cela soit fait...
> *Comme c'est long de mourir une vie entière*
> [...] Attendre que cela vienne, ce que c'était donc long! Le trac! Comme avant un examen, ou une générale, une première. Être de l'autre côté. Elle n'en pouvait plus d'attendre mais ne savait comment abréger l'attente..." (R. p.102).

In a state: "demi-veille, une semi-conscience", the narrator's life is being squeezed out of her just as: "la nuit remplissait de plus en plus l'air" (R. p.18), and her heart is failing: "effondrée dans un fauteuil... Une douleur la prend aux épaules, les couvre d'une étole qui descend dans le dos jusqu'à la taille, les pans croisés sur la poitrine. Le cœur. Elle fouille dans son sac, elle tremble, un petit comprimé...le temps de le croquer et ça va s'arranger" (R. p.57). As Lily Marcou neatly summarises: "le présent, c'est avant tout la souffrance physique, la vieillesse et la maladie décrites comme seule Elsa sait le faire"[401] and, of course, Elsa Triolet suffered from heart problems in later life. As the group eventually consents to lighting some candles: "elle était à l'écart de toute reprise de vitalité" (R. p.58) saying to herself: "qu'elle était une vieille. Pas possible! Vieille depuis si longtemps sans pouvoir y croire" (R. p.70), while the rest of the group seems unaware of death's proximity: "comme s'ils n'en étaient encore qu'aux préliminaires, un orchestre dans la fosse accordant ses instruments avant le lever du rideau" (R. p.18). They had come to enjoy this evening and had left their various illnesses at the door: "les présents jouaient aux vivants, aux bons vivants" (R. p.104). Yet they are all closer to death than they realise, although there is the sense that it is not as imminent for them as it is for the main protagonist.

Thus it is the narrator who: "se laissa absorber entièrement par une nostalgie semblable à une noyade dans des marais" (R. p.114) and slips away into her dreams, although she is aware that she is dreaming: "je rêve. Je sais bien que je rêve. Je rêve une grande tristesse. Personne n'ose. Je suis un handicap. Je sens une certaine satisfaction d'avoir trouvé pour moi cette appellation: handicap" (R. p.110). Then there are the regrets: "que, même par une nuit comme celle-ci, elle ne peut oublier toutes les lettres auxquelles elle n'a pas répondu, tout ce qu'elle a promis et pas fait" (R. p.34) and the reassurances, sought, in this case, from her ex-husband: "- dis, nous avons quand même essayé? Nous avons quand même tout fait pour que l'on aime le meilleur? Contre vents et marées..." (R. p.68). All part of the classic death-bed scene with the final reconciliation of all outstanding accounts.

At the end of the novel, as the woman is alone in the room with the others either asleep or melted away into the park for a last walk, it is the start of a new day, and there is a change in the atmosphere, a lightness that was absent before. As she dozes gently: "le petit matin qui s'annonce la fait se sentir jeune et étonnamment gaie" (R. p.132) and she is smiling as she sleeps. Her penultimate dream is one in which she was a young girl on a train journey and she met a lieutenant who found her beautiful and appealing. On waking, she realises: "elle s'est bien rêvée en jeune personne d'aujourd'hui" (R. p.143) but after all: "derrière le black-out des paupières [...] rêve ce que tu veux, laisse-toi aller" (R. p.144). The coming of the dawn heralds the coming together of the past and the present – it is time to wake up and face up to what the future holds, or, in the narrator's case, time to finish with her memories once and for all.

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[401] Marcou, Lily, *Elsa Triolet: Les Yeux et la Mémoire*, Paris: Librairie Plon (1994), p.379.

Someone's premonition: "c'est notre dernière nuit à être tous ensemble" (R. p.150) occurs just as the narrator notices that the nightingale[402] has stopped singing ("le rossignol chante pour se protéger des autres par son chant)[403] and the dawn chorus has taken its place and: "elle sentit un malaise étrange" (R. p.152). She manages to climb down the three steps into the garden outside as: "la douleur dans le dos irradiait dans les bras, mais elle n'avait qu'à la supporter un peu, dans un petit instant ça serait fini. Elle allait sortir de l'auberge, la dame osseuse et souriante était au rendez-vous, reconnaissable, bien qu'elle n'eût pas de rose à la main" (R. pp.153-154) and as the sun comes up, she dies, eyes wide open, embracing all her old friends in the daylight, as for her: "la nuit était bien finie" (R. p.154).

Finally, therefore, whilst death is omnipresent in almost all Triolet's writing, she saved the best till last, with this sublimely beautiful novel about the descent into death, all the more poignant since the author was only months away from her own demise. Into this novel she worked not only her own death, but also her fears regarding Aragon: "il se leva, sortit sur le perron, disparut au fond de la pluie. Et c'est alors qu'elle sentit que, dans ses démêlés avec la mort, ce n'était pas d'elle qu'il s'agissait. Lui, lui seulement, qu'il vive n'importe où, n'importe comment, avec n'importe qui, vieux, défait, lointain, pourvu qu'il existe, qu'il soit" (R. p.106). Anne Wyatt-Brown cites Constance Rooke's essay on Margaret Laurence's *Stone Angel* in which Rooke coins the term *Vollendungsroman* (which stands for a "novel of ...'completion' or 'winding up'"[404]) – what an apt description of *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*.

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[402] Why the nightingale? Much has been written on this subject, but I feel that Triolet herself provides at least one answer in her manuscripts: "Une belle nuit sans rossignol ne m'était pas une belle nuit, c'était un ciel sans étoiles, des fleurs sans parfums nocturne. (sic) Un monde sans musique. Voilà où se cache, tapi quelque part dans le corps, le rusissime, même si j'en parle dans un français sans accent" (unnumbered page, opposite f°123 in Notebook No.146). She also answered her own question in the last text written by her which appeared in *Les Lettres Françaises* of 18 March 1970: "mais d'où me viennent tous ces rossignols? De ma jeunesse, de mon pays natal, de ma culture russe".

[403] Chklovski, Victor, '*Le Grand jamais*', in *Europe*, 506, June 1971, p.33.

[404] Wyatt-Brown, Anne, 'Literary Gerontology Comes of Age' in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas R., van Tassel, David D. and Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.342.

1.9 Conclusion: Elsa Triolet's postscript on ageing

Susanne Ditschler, one of the few to have studied Elsa Triolet's work in any depth in recent years, has published some perceptive articles on Triolet's mode of writing. She describes *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* as : "une écriture par associations, spontanée, qui mêle réflexions et souvenirs, les accumule, toute proche, toujours, de l'autobiographique"[405]. While this does, indeed, describe the composition of Triolet's last novel, I would just dispute the use of the word 'spontanée' in conjunction with Elsa Triolet's writing. Although her diary and correspondence can justifiably be considered as 'écriture spontanée', her novels are actually the reverse, since Ditschler herself points out that with regard to *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, there are three handwritten 'cahiers' nos. 012, 043, 146 and five 'chemises' with various contents, amounting to some 400 sheets, which reveal that a vast amount of re-working went on before the final proof was ready – this was, in fact, how Triolet always preferred to work. Indeed, in *La Mise en mots*, her essay on the act of writing[406], Triolet is quite explicit on her modus operandi:

> combien je la [l'écriture] voudrais simultanée avec la pensée, [...] m'interdire, la réflexion de comment mieux formuler ce que j'ai à exprimer! Écrire au contact de la pensée [...] Oublier l'acte d'écrire. On pense bien en mots? Ou comment alors? Ils devraient sortir tout prêts, se coucher sur le papier tels quels, sans qu'on ait à les former à nouveau. [...] Comme en moi prend corps la conscience d'écrire, quand j'écris à douleur [...]. C'est ensuite, une fois l'enchantement épuisé que commence la manipulation[407].

It was in Triolet's notebooks that I was able to find the following material[408] relating to the theme of ageing. In Notebook No.146, there is a succession of odd notes which, although similar to her train of thought as already revealed in her diary, her letters and her novels, seem to highlight the negative aspects of old age; thus the following: "il s'agit de mourir à temps" is a familiar refrain, but the postscript: "Vieillards: allez mourir dans un coin caché!" is a real cry from the heart on the superfluousness of the aged in society.

> Il [faut savoir][409] s'agit de mourir à temps. Avant de devenir un objet de commisération melée à un peu de dégoût et d'une envie de sourire. [...] Vieillards: allez mourir dans un coin caché! (f° 61)

> Comment cela l'avait quitté, le goût de la vie, le plaisir, la curiosité de rencontrer des gens, des amis ou des inconnus de lire, de voyager? Bien avant qu'il ne put le faire physiquement. Sa mort moral vint bien avant son délabrement physique. Il se

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[405] Ditschler, Susanne, 'Elsacriture: une approche de la genèse du roman *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* (1970)' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 6, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1998), p.55.

[406] This formed part of a collection entitled: "*Les sentiers de la création*", to which Elsa, along with Aragon and other notable authors of the time, was invited to participate by the publishing house, Skira, of Geneva.

[407] *Œuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, 40, *La Mise en mots*, pp.269-270.

[408] Material which has not yet been published, held in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

[409] I have printed in square brackets her first attempt which she has crossed out in the manuscripts.

retenait de voir des amis, ne serait-ce que pour ne pas les dégoûter de la vie. (f°63 - f°64)

[Être jeune/la jeunesse est une manie de nos jours.] Aujourd'hui, être jeune est une mode, une manie, une habitude, un rite, une exigeance collective. (f° 63)

[Impossible/Comment d'i] Imaginer ces [filles avec leur belle chevelure, l'eclat des dents, la rondeuse des seins et des cuisses, cette peau bronzée et lisse] ce qu'elles ont de rond et de long et de frais s'abîmant comme des provisions qu'ont (sic) n'aurait pas mises au frigidaire! Inimaginable! Si bien qu'on les effacera, on les jetera à la poubelle [pour avoir des frais.] [Toutes] les cover-girls seront remplacées par [la génération suivant, d'autres cover-girls?] les cover-girls suivantes? Mais que sont devenues les précédentes? Se résigner? Se battre manifester? Haïr. Envier. Jalouser. Avec ou sans mechanceté. Dans la rage ou la tristesse. Voir des couples publicitaires, vivants, dansant, nageant, grimpant sur les cols des montagnes, pédalant, footbalant, s'embrassant, passant à moins de vingt ans des voitures d'enfants; que vont-ils tous devenir? (f° 65 - f° 66)

Triolet goes on to write of Montparnasse in the years 1920-1940[410] and what it represented with all its artists and their inter-relationships, including the following lament for the women, invariably alone, who fell by the wayside:

[...] Les belles femmes entourées, et les sans charme ni beauté, toutes seules ou partageant [parfois] leur infortune avec une [copine] autre déshéritée, comme le froid glacial de l'atelier sans le moindre soupçon de confort, espérant quoi, mon Dieu, quand les jeux pour elles étaient déjà faits, qu'elles étaient perdantes, et les rêves et la passion de la peinture enterrés quelque part dans une Bornée natale, ou un coin perdu de France d'où elles étaient parties chercher à Montparnasse l'art, les artistes, [...] et qui sait ? la gloire. (f° 67 - f° 68)

She continues by saying they will never be able to return to their villages, they will stay in the smoky cafés of Montparnasse, alone and old before their time:

où l'on les saluait en passant, toujours en passant, les remarquant un peu comme une corbeille à déchets, au crachoir, faisant un petit crochet pour ne pas se laisser harponner par elles... Ont-elles jamais été jeunes? A les voir, solitaires, dans un coin ou un autre du "Dôme" [en dehors de sa febrilité du va-et-vient] febrile, mouvant, plein d'histoires, elles étaient là cramponnées à leur café-crème comme à une bouée de sauvetage.
- Tu vois, disait-elle, passant devant ces [épaves] parques au bras d'un homme, quand je serais vieille, je [serai comme elles-là ... Seule... Et] serai comme ça leur ressemblerai. Personne ne voudra de moi. Chacun fuiera mes yeux de détresse [et] personne ne me fera l'aûmone d'un sourire. (f° 68)

[410] I am indebted to Susanne Dischler for pointing out in her article that Elsa had used these memories of her days in Paris in her early books written in Russian, thus unknown to the French public. (Ditschler, Susanne, 'Elsa Triolet: sujet écrivant et sujet d'écriture' in *Œuvres et Critiques*, 25:1 (2000), pp.139-140, note 23).

These notebooks are undated, yet that hardly matters inasmuch as the sentiments expressed therein are timeless for Elsa Triolet. Whether confiding in her diary aged sixteen, comparing notes with her sister over a period of fifty years or working the subject into her short stories and novels, coming to terms with ageing and its ramifications was a concept that seemed to escape her right up until *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*. She resented ageing's physical manifestation and the restrictions it imposed on her life and she disliked her altered appearance, yet it proved a fruitful topic and one she must have felt would trigger a positive response in her readers.

This fixation with ageing which leads, inevitably and eventually to death, together with the terrible consequences of war: "se caractérise peut-être par une impossibilité radicale à saisir quoi que ce soit de stable dans la durée, et, de là, par un recours à la discussion de l'espace"[411]. Indeed, Elsa Triolet is a product of her era, having survived two World Wars, suffered, through her family, the Revolution in Russia and lived long enough to experience the Cold War. It is no wonder, therefore, that she felt compelled to focus on the future in many of her novels, which she believed held the secret to a possible antidote to the ravages of time, both for the human body and for the human psyche, as well as for humanity as a whole. In the anthology of his wife's works that Aragon published in 1960, when she was, of course, still writing prolifically, he refers to the part her Russian heritage played in her literature, and quotes from *L'Histoire d'Anton Tchekhov*, published in 1954, when she wrote, à propos of Chekhov: "et, malgré la maladie, la souffrance, malgré la solitude, c'est pendant ces dernières années que son œuvre se tourne de plus en plus vers l'avenir. La vérité sociale lui donnait cet optimisme, et le destin personnel n'influait en rien sur son espoir pour les autres"[412]. I believe these words, written about the great Russian playwright, hold the key to Elsa Triolet's writings; indeed she could have been the subject of these words rather than Chekhov.

Given Triolet's rather obsessional temperament which comes through strongly in her private writings, it may be that she transformed this into the energy she undoubtedly had when writing. She certainly suffered from a lack of self-esteem, as she wrote to her sister in 1949: "je n'ai personne avec qui partager ma déception, mon dégoût, mon chagrin, j'ai pitié d'Aragon, et je le console plus que je ne me plains" (CO. 1 May 1949, p.299) and it could be that writing allowed her to dominate in an area which was traditionally reserved for men, even in the era in which she was writing.

With regard to ageing, in *Mille regrets* one can see that Triolet is perpetuating the idea that ageing is harder for women to bear: "people in a youth-obsessed culture read physical signs of ageing as equivalent to personal failure; such judgments occur more swiftly and with more harsh consequences for women"[413]. Madame X appears incapable of grasping the idea that: "aging is a fundamental and continuous factor in

[411] Bourdil, Pierre-Yves, *Les Miroirs du moi: les héros et les fous*, Paris: l'École (1987), p.68.
[412] Aragon, Louis, *Elsa Triolet choisie par Aragon*, Paris: Messidor (1990), p.38.
[413] Gubrium, Jaber, F., 'Editorial' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1, February 2004, p.5.

the individual's construction and re-construction of self-identity throughout life"[414], and therefore is incapable of being able to re-contruct her self-identity at this critical stage in her life, despite being offered a route out from this nadir of her fortunes by M. Oléonard. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in *Mille regrets*, Triolet is perpetuating also the stereotype of negative ageing in her portrayal of Madame X. As Gannon says: "the stereotype of the menopausal woman as depressed, irritable, wrinkled, and asexual is just that, a stereotype"[415].

However, one cannot say that Eve/Triolet in *Le Cheval roux* is a stereotype. She is, rather, an extreme example of a woman feeling herself mutilated by age. By inserting herself into the text, Triolet is acting as a witness to the embodiment of her physical deterioration. Once again, there are at least surface similarities with Simone de Beauvoir's existential angst about ageing. Beauvoir wrote: "hostile à cette société à laquelle j'appartenais, bannie, par l'âge, de l'avenir, dépouillée fibre par fibre du passé, je me réduisais à ma présence nue. Quelle glace!"[416]. Perhaps Triolet has to die at the end simply because, as an ageing woman, she could play no practical, that is reproductive role, in the commune, hence she felt surplus to requirements, although reducing women to their role as 'baby-machine' would seem to be perpetuating yet another stereotype.

In *Le Cheval roux*, Triolet manages to successfully create a powerful sense not only of an individual's identity, but also a collective identity, as she paints the 'déchéance' of an individual – in this case, an ageing woman – mirrored by the 'décadence' of an entire civilisation. Yet her depiction of the circumstances in which the various groups of survivors in *Le Cheval roux* find themselves does not allow for much purification of the spirit. Petty rivalries still abound, class differences are, if anything, heightened in this survival of the fittest, inequality still thrives in this new world. Yet she seems to be saying that good will triumph over evil. To survive one must consider others, think collectively for the good of all, thus individualism is outmoded.

I mentioned liminality and rites of passage in the Introduction in connection with Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, as well as Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, but on writing this chapter, it has occurred to me that the survivors in *Le Cheval roux* could also be seen as participating in a similar process, since there is no doubt they were undergoing a significant rite of transition in having to deal with the almost total loss of all that they had known and relied on in the past. As a result, they certainly underwent the separation phase of being symbolically stripped of their status, and physically stripped of all their possessions. Separation and isolation are also often physical, and that would certainly be the case in this novel, as they

[414] Raaberg, Gwen, 'Views from "The Other Side": Theorizing Age and Difference in Yvonne Rainer's Privilege' in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 30:1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2002, p.124.
[415] Gannon, Linda, R., *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.35.
[416] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Force des choses*, Paris: Gallimard (1963), p.615.

are spatially separated from their former lives, whilst simultaneously having to deal with the twin issues of loss and death.

However, what this novel describes in detail is the liminal phase where the survivors who: "possess no status recognizable to those occupying fixed places in the social structure"[417] (although the upper echelons of society trapped in the Swiss hotel endeavour, but ultimately fail, to maintain the status quo) are seen undergoing intense experiences, where: "a special relationship born of solidarity and shared experience develops"[418] as they seek to maintain a sense of community, as well as a sense of self, which is exemplified perfectly in the communal living of the group of survivors in the Swiss Alps where they have, in effect, to depend on nature and their own ingenuity for their survival. In fact, *Le Cheval roux* is an archetypal liminal novel, since, although the multiple pregnancies offer a slim chance of possible rebirth and renewal of the human race, there is, at the end of the novel, no successful reincorporation of the survivors back into the world, therefore they remain: "suspended in the middle stage"[419].

In 1967, for the first time since its foundation in 1923, *Europe* devoted an entire issue to two living authors, Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, and I will conclude this chapter with the following words, written by someone who knew Elsa Triolet well, which neatly summarise her contribution to the world of literature: "les saisons d'Elsa, ce sont celles de la vie d'une femme; mais ce sont celles aussi de l'histoire du monde, vue de France par une Russe exilée de sa terre natale et de sa langue maternelle"[420].

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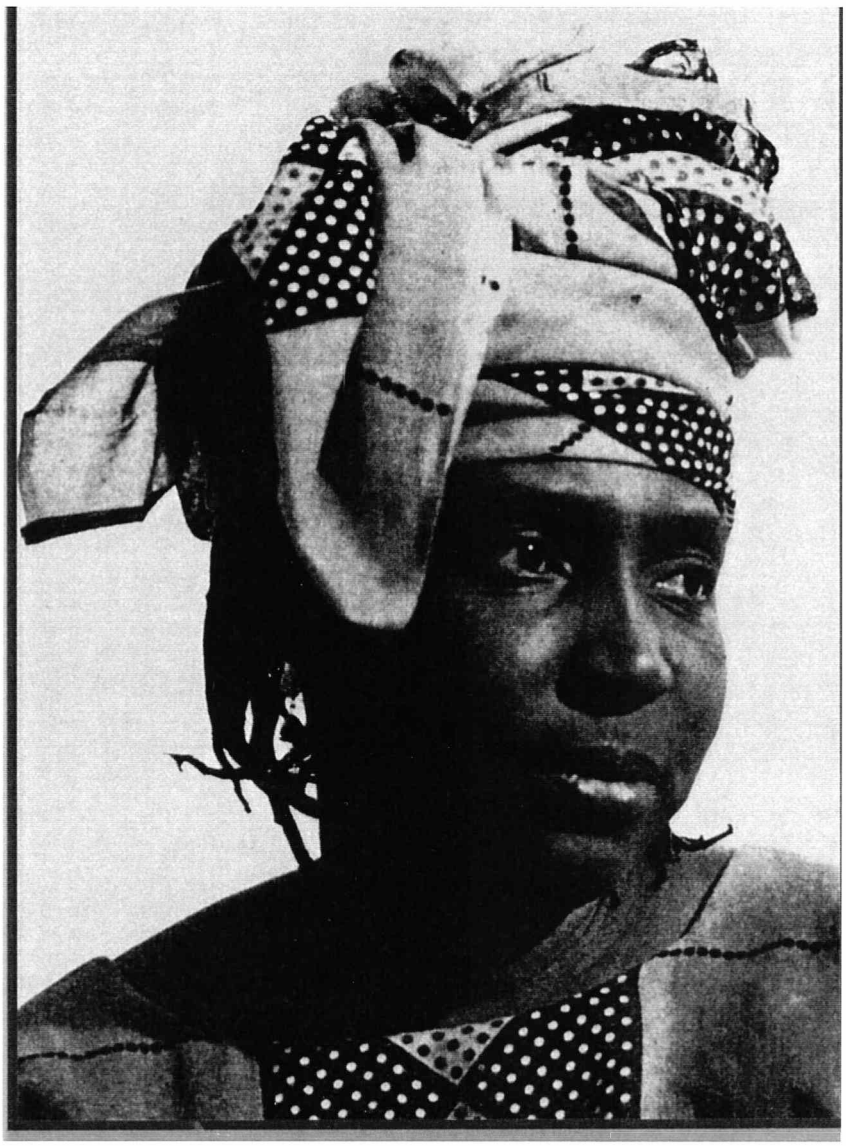
[417] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.2.
[418] ibid., p.2.
[419] ibid., p.3.
[420] Madaule, Jacques, 'Elsa Triolet, témoin de notre temps' in *Europe*, 454-455, February-March 1967, p.15.



CHAPTER 2

MARIAMA BÂ

2.1 Mariama Bâ and the genesis of *Une si longue lettre*

Born in 1929 in Dakar, the capital of Senegal (the setting for *Une si longue lettre*) and, after her mother's early death, brought up by her grandmother in a traditional Muslim family setting, Bâ could reasonably have expected a traditional upbringing, as she outlined in an interview given on the publication of her first novel:

> Normalement, j'aurais dû grandir dans ce milieu familial, sans connaître l'école, avec l'éducation traditionnelle qui comprend l'initiation à des rites. Je devais savoir faire la cuisine, la vaisselle, piler le mil, transformer la farine en couscous. Je devais savoir laver le linge, repasser les grands-boubous et chuter le moment venue, avec ou sans mon consentement dans une autre famille, chez un mari[421].

However, Mariama Bâ's father, Niélé Bâ, Secretary of State for Health, was a firm believer in the value of education, for girls as well as boys, therefore, despite serious family opposition, he insisted that Bâ would be educated first at primary level, then at the French High School and, after successfully passing the competition for entry, she went to the École Normale des jeunes filles de Rufisque, a teacher training college, where she was one of its first African pupils. Interestingly, Bâ revealed in an interview for *Amina* that, aged fourteen, she had chosen to go on to secretarial college and that it was only as a result of pressure from the headmistress of her high school who wanted her to try for entry: "pour le renom de notre école" that she prepared for the competition for entry to the École Normale[422]. Bâ's high school compositions had shown early signs of literary talent and in 1947 one of her timed class assignments was published in a journal, *Notes africaines* on the subject of memories of her birthplace, and one can see, at the age of eighteen, the beginnings of her talent and her beliefs:

> Puis un jour, vint mon père, vint l'école, et prit fin ma vie libre et simple. On a blanchi ma raison; mais ma tête est noire, mais mon sang inattaquable est demeuré pur, comme le soleil, pur, conservé de tout contact. Mon sang est resté païen dans mes veines civilisées et se révolte et piaffe aux sons des tam-tams noirs[423].

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[421] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[422] ibid., pp.12-14.

[423] Bâ, Mariama, «Combien j'ai douce souvenance du joli lieu de ma naissance... », *Notes africaines*, .35, July 1947, p.17.

Bâ also had articles published in *Esprit*, and extracts were published in a book edited by Maurice Genevoix[424]. After graduating in 1947, Bâ then taught for twelve years before ill-health resulted in a move into educational administration in 1959. She married a politician, Obèye Diop, a former Minister of Information, and had nine children, but eventually separated, and then divorced. In keeping with her background in education, the elite High School for Girls on Gorde Island, Senegal has been named after her – Lycée Mariama Bâ.

A French colony from 1885, Senegal gained its independence in June 1960 and, after growing up under colonial rule, Bâ found herself in her early thirties a member of the educated elite of the new Senegal ruled by Leopold Senghor until 1980, yet, courtesy of her grandparents, with her roots firmly based in a very traditional background – just like her heroine, Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre* which was published as a novel but with strong autobiographical input. As an activist for women's rights and member of a number of feminine organisations[425], Bâ had written many articles for newspapers in Senegal, and her friends, among them Annette Mbaye d'Erneville, former journalist at Radio-Senegal, had always encouraged her to write a novel, to the extent that the Nouvelles Éditions Africaines (NEA) were expecting a manuscript from her in the late seventies, and it was the thought of: "ces messieurs assis autour d'une table commentant le fait de la non remise de manuscrit et se moquant d'une femme"[426] that spurred Bâ to write *Une si longue lettre*, published in 1979. Her second novel, *Un chant écarlate*, was published posthumously in 1981.

The reasons for writing and why she wrote in French that Bâ gave in an interview shortly after the publication of *Une si longue lettre* are illuminating:

> I believe very deeply that to reach the masses we must write. When one writes, it is for everyone. Of course, first of all, it is for one's self, to see where we are at, for our own development. But the masses have to be educated. We must write, so that all of the masses are able to read the message. The writer records her ideas, so that the masses can read and reflect. It is vital that the masses be able to read. Therein lies the importance of our African languages. But, if our ideas for change are to reach outside Africa, we must also express ourselves in international languages [427].

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[424] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, 'Postscript: From the Author to the Nation' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.420.

[425] Amicale Germaine Legoff; Cercle Fémina; Soroptimiste Internationale, Club de Dakar.

[426] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[427] Bâ, Mariama, speaking to Dr Barbara Harrell-Bond in Dakar, 9 July 1979. Originally in French. Reproduced in: *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.398.

It was, therefore, the fact of Bâ's privileged education and her belonging to the generation who had lived through the turmoil of decolonisation that gave her the voice to write and it was the French colonisers who gave her the language. However, therein lies the dilemma common to many francophone writers – in which language to write? Bâ's mother tongue was Wolof[428], yet at the time of Ba's writing, Wolof was a predominantly spoken language, therefore to write in French would seem self-evident as it was the only written language Bâ had at her disposal. As Bâ herself said: "certes l'écrivain africain écrit dans une langue empruntée. [...] C'est avec difficulté qu'il y moule des pensées, des sensations et des angoisses particulières, charriées par son moi profond, différentes de celles du colonisateur"[429]. She also recognised that since the language she and other Senegalese writers used was only understood, spoken and read by a tiny minority of the population, they ran the risk of failing in their mission by not being accessible to the very people they were trying to reach, although as the lingua franca throughout French-speaking African countries, French was, as Bâ realised, undeniably important as a means of wider communication outside Senegal. Her compatriot, Ousmane Sembène, decided in the mid-sixties that, despite the inherent difficulties in using a language which was only just beginning to have a regular, written form, his novels should first appear in his native Wolof, and thereafter be translated into French – a practice he still follows in both his writings and his films.

Current statistics show that whilst 90 per cent of the eleven million population of Senegal understand Wolof, only 20 per cent of men and 2 per cent of women speak French. In addition, the rates for literacy have been estimated at circa 12 per cent in 1980 (2005 estimates are 50 per cent for men and 30 per cent for women). However, Senegal does have a strong literary history and one of the largest number of women writers in Africa. It also has a long-established local press which enables wide local distribution of their work. The fact that *Une si longue lettre* won the Noma Prize in 1981 meant that, despite being published in Africa, the novel reached a wide international audience very quickly and as Irène Assiba d'Almeida points out, if an African writer's work is not translated, or criticised, then that work is still invisible[430]. *Une si longue lettre* was, after Bâ's death, converted into a play as well as into a six part television series and film in Wolof[431] entitled "Bataaxalbi"[432] ('The letter' in Wolof), thus enabling it to become visible to those to whom it was otherwise inaccessible, therefore fulfilling Bâ's desires of reaching that wider audience of 'the masses'.

Written nineteen years after Senegal gained independence, there is no doubting the didactic intent of *Une si longue lettre*. As an African, a writer, and a woman, Bâ knew her duty:

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[428] See footnote no.212.
[429] Bâ, Mariama, 'La Fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites', *Écriture française dans le monde*, 5:3, (1981), p.6.
[430] d'Almeida, Irène Assiba, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1994), p.ix.
[431] ibid., p.181, note 11.
[432] Known as either 'Bataaxalbi' or 'Bataxal', by producer/director Cheikh Tidiane Diop in 1984.

> plus qu'ailleurs, le contexte social africain étant caractérisé par l'inégalité criante entre l'homme et la femme, par l'exploitation et l'oppression séculaires et barbares du sexe dit faible, la femme-écrivain a une mission particulière. Elle doit, plus que ses pairs masculins, dresser un tableau de la condition de la femme africaine"[433].

Bâ can be seen, therefore, as forming part of the vanguard of African women writers who: "had to reestablish a true image of the African woman as seen from the inside, not through the eyes of African or European men"[434], since male writers in the 1960s and 1970s tended to favour the more usual mythical and symbolic figures of womanhood, or rather motherhood, and were prone to comparing women with mother earth or, more pertinently, mother Africa. Indeed, Bâ is presumably having a subtle dig at these stereotypes when she has Modou, Ramatoulaye's future husband, write to his fiancée from France saying: "«c'est toi que je porte en moi. Tu es ma Négresse protectrice. Vite te retrouver rien que pour une pression de mains qui me fera oublier faim et soif et solitude»" (SLL. p.35) – is it really Ramatoulaye to whom he is referring, or is he, homesick, expressing his longing for his homeland? Certainly, in African male writing of the mid-twentieth century, the few, lightly-characterised female protagonists allowed to penetrate the largely male domain tended to be depicted in certain stereotypical roles – either young, desirable and submissive; or mature, child-bearer and hub of the family or old, wise and keeper of traditions, although there were some notable exceptions in the work of, amongst others, the Senegalese writer and film-maker Sembene Ousmane, the Congolese writer Henri Lopes and the Malian Ibrahima Ly who were ahead of their time and, by creating real women in realistic situations, used their talents to energetically condemn women's deplorable status[435].

Western literature of the same period was more advanced in that a hundred or so years of male writers sharing a platform with women writers had forced the stereotypes to the back of the shelf, if not entirely relegated to the stockroom. It also needs to be borne in mind that, unlike the Western world, very little is known of life for men or women in pre-colonial times outside their own societies, which of course had an oral tradition of passing down their histories. Thus, bearing in mind that sub-Saharian Africa was colonised from the sixteenth century through to the nineteenth century, these writers are all writing effectively on a blank canvas with regard to representing themselves and their societies as far as the rest of the world is concerned because as Bernard Mouralis explains:

> le colonisateur, loin de s'y opposer, a encouragé la production d'une littérature écrite autochtone. Mais, dans son esprit, celle-ci devait être centrée sur l'Afrique

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[433] Bâ, Mariama, 'La Fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites', *Écriture française dans le monde*, 5:3, (1981), pp.6-7.
[434] Cazenave, Odile, *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists*, London: Lynne Reiner (2000), p.10.
[435] Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine, *African Women: A Modern History*, (translated by Beth Gillian Raps), Boulder, Colo., Oxford: Westview Press (1997), pp.226-227.

> «véritable» et l'écrivain africain était invité notamment à recueillir des contes ou des légendes, à évoquer des figures historiques, à décrire des coutumes.[436]

In other words, male African writers were encouraged to write about mythical Africa, not their experience of colonisation, nor the present times, and female African writers did not have a voice at all, thus: "Bâ's manipulation of the Western epistolary genre offers a vehicle through which African women can tell their own stories, stories that have been mistold for so long"[437].

Thus, at the age of fifty-one, and just over a year before her premature death from cancer in August 1981, Mariama Bâ's first novel was published, a poignant paean to the values of Senagalese family life seen from the perspective of a middle-aged female protagonist, Ramatoulaye, which is, at the same time, a powerful story of female marginality in a patriarchal system. In a period of transition as a result of the death of the husband from whom she has lived apart for five years, an emotional Ramatoulaye is forced by circumstances to reconstruct her identity as she goes forward: "à la recherche d'une voie" (SLL. p.165), hence my interest in this novel. Bernard Mouralis suggests that Bâ's main thrust as an author is: "le quotidien des femmes"[438], and whilst that statement might stand true for, say, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*[439], it seriously undervalues the scope of this text and, indeed, would seem to be wildly inaccurate also in describing the content of Bâ's second novel *Un chant écarlate*, which covers mixed marriages, polygyny, murder and attempted murder – hardly the normal fare of the everyday life of an African woman – or is it?

Unusually for sub-saharan African writing, *Une si longue lettre* is written in the form of an epistolary novel because, as Mariama Bâ explained: "j'ai voulu donner au roman une forme originale. En général, l'auteur se met en dehors des personnages et raconte. J'ai choisi la forme d'une lettre pour donner à l'œuvre un visage humain. Quand on écrit une lettre, on dit je. Ce je s'identifie à Ramatoulaye et non à l'auteur"[440]. Bâ's hope, presumably, was to be able to reach more women by using the confessional/personal testimonial style of a letter, with its hint of autobiographical content which would speak more clearly and openly to women. In that same interview, Bâ underlined her belief that: "on assiste aujourd'hui à des remises en question apportées dans notre société par des violations extérieures.

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[436] Mouralis, Bernard, 'Des comptoirs aux empires, des empires aux nations: rapport au territoire et production littéraire africaine' in *Littératures postcoloniales et francophonie*, ed. by Bessière, Jean, Paris: Honoré Champion (2001), pp.18-19.
[437] McElaney-Johnson, Ann, 'Epistolary Friendship: La prise de parole in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, in *Research in African Literatures*, 30:2, Summer 1999, p.119.
[438] Mouralis, Bernard, 'Une parole autre: Aoua Keita, Mariama Bâ et Awa Thiam' in *notre librairie*, 117, April-June 1994, p.24.
[439] Emecheta, Buchi, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann Educational Books (1979).
[440] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14.
http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

Ces violations extérieures remettent en cause le noyau auquel nous croyions dans le passé et qui faisait vraiment notre force"[441]. Throughout her novel, she is pleading for a re-evaluation of the importance of a strong, solid family base to provide a firm foundation on which to build the Senegalese nation's future:

> S'il n'y a que des familles soudées, avec une vie harmonieuse, cela se répercute au niveau national. Il y a entente et épanouissement. Mais si les familles sont par contre désagrégées, les enfants, qui représentent le levain et l'avenir du pays ne sont pas bien éduqués. Ces enfants devenus adultes ne seront pas des hommes formés, conscients, aptes à tenir les rênes du pouvoir[442].

The autobiographical aspect of this novel is interesting, and, as Susan Stringer points out[443], despite Bâ's denials that either of the main characters was a self-portrait, there are a number of clear links between Bâ and her narrator including their age, career and social status, and the character of the inspirational white female director of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou's school must surely be based on Mme Legoff, director of l'École Normale des jeunes filles de Rufisque: "Mme Legoff avait une vision juste de l'avenir de l'Afrique. Son éducation reposait sur les principes que nous entendons prôner aujourd'hui: «enracinement et ouverture. Enracinement dans nos valeurs traditionnelles propres, dans ce que nous avons de bien et de beau et ouverture aux autres cultures, à la culture universelle»"[444]. Thus while *Une si longue lettre* is not an autobiography, there are occasions when for Ramatoulaye, also read Bâ: "fruit de l'école coloniale et femme travailleuse, épouse et mère"[445].

Stringer also highlights the fact that it is not until two-thirds into the novel that the narrator, whom the reader is only aware of as "je" up until that point, is named as Ramatoulaye. Stringer writes: "paradoxically, this anonymity also means that the narrator becomes the Senegalese woman abandoned for another woman after many years of marriage. She becomes representative of the many women who have suffered the same fate"[446], which, of course, widens the novel's appeal far beyond the borders of Senegal and may account, in part, for its world-wide success. In a curious way, it does not seem to matter whether it is autobiographical or not. Unlike many authors whose works are pored over to detect the least autobiographical detail, Bâ largely escapes that fate, due in part, no doubt, to the fact that she only wrote two novels before her untimely death.

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[441] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[442] ibid., pp.12-14.

[443] Stringer, Susan, *The Senegalese Novel by Women*, New York: Peter Lang (1999), p.55.

[444] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[445] Bâ, Mariama, 'La Fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites', *Écriture française dans le monde*, 5:3, (1981), p.3.

[446] Stringer, Susan, *The Senegalese Novel by Women*, New York: Peter Lang (1999), p.55.

Pseudo-autobiography or not, Keith Walker summarises succinctly the core of this novel: "*Une si longue lettre* is a chronicle of Ramatoulaye's mind, her body, her age, her time, and her nation as a woman thinks them"[447]. Although eschewing a direct role in politics which, being male-dominated, was very difficult for women to infiltrate and also, in Bâ's opinion, incompatible with the responsibilities of family life: "c'est la femme qui enfante, qui est mère, qui nourrit ses enfants, qui fait ou supervise les travaux domestiques [...]. Il est difficile d'ajouter des responsabilités à cet enlisement que représente la marche du foyer"[448] – a view which she shared with her protagonist Ramatoulaye – Bâ herself was active in women's associations (as indeed was Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter) and believed they had a useful, if less direct, role to play in forming the new Senegal. Bâ knew that women had to do more towards playing their part in changing society in order to improve women's situation: "c'est pourquoi il est si important pour Ramatoulaye de raconter son histoire [...] En tant que femme d'un certain âge, mûrie par l'expérience et la refléxion, elle a le devoir de porter témoignage, et d'assumer un but pédagogique"[449].

[447] Walker, Keith L., 'Postscripts: Mariama Bâ, Epistolarity, Menopause, and Postcoloniality' in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.252.

[448] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[449] Brahimi, Denise & Trevarthen, Anne, *Les femmes dans la littérature africaine*, Paris: Karthala & Ceda (1998), p.58.

2.2 Introduction to *Une si longue lettre*

Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* is, at first reading at least, a "speaking out", or more literally a "writing out" in the form of a so-called epistolary novel, against the practice of polygyny[450] in Senegal in 1979, nearly twenty years after the country's independence, from the perspective of a middle-aged woman which, as Irène Assiba d'Almeida points out, means that she is offering a picture which is extremely different from most male writers' portrayal of this institution[451] since from a practical point of view, if not a theoretical one, her point of view must be different from a man's.

However, although her novel is undoubtedly an attack on the practice of polygyny[452], Bâ chooses to focus on: "this *corruption* of the Muslim practice of polygamy, where the equality of wives within marriage and the economic well being of the entire family is supposed to be paramount"[453] (my italics) thus condemning the males who do not hold fast to the basic tenets of polygyny as laid out in the Koran, rather than attacking the institution per se, perhaps to avoid alienating those male and female readers who do support the practice; Obioma Nnaemeka makes the pertinent observation that the word "la polygamie/polygamy" never appears in the novel and that polygamy (the institution) never functions in *Une si longue lettre*[454].

That some things are the same the world over should not surprise – human nature is not infinitely multi-faceted – thus the novel also deals with a scenario equally familiar to the Western world – that of the abandonment of the middle-aged wife for a younger model. In this particular scenario, using polygyny as a cover, Mawdo, Modou and Samba Diack (husband of Jacqueline) simply succumb to the physical attractions of nubile young women, after all: "la petite Nabou était si tentante..." (SLL. p.63). The men are apparently justified in this behaviour because: "l'instinct sexuel a été isolé comme instinct biologique et psychique autonome"[455] and they are tacitly given permission to follow their sexual desires by the social

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[450] This is the correct term in this instance, meaning polygamy in which a man has more than one wife. Its counterpart is 'polyandry': polygamy in which a woman has more than one husband. 'Polygamy' is the practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford: OUP (1998). Henceforth I will use the term 'polygyny'.

[451] d'Almeida, Irène Assiba, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1994), p.31.

[452] In 1985, 48 per cent of Senegalese women were in a polygamous marriage according to Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine, *African Women: A Modern History*, (translated by Beth Gillian Raps), Boulder, Colo., Oxford: Westview Press (1997), p.214. Although it is not made clear whether the figure refers to polyandry or polygyny, the text appears to imply that 48 per cent of Senegalese women were in a marriage where the husband had more than one wife. The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy reports that in 1997, the figure was 46 per cent. http//www.clrp.org/pdf/sr_sen_0801_eng.pdf.

[453] Androne, Mary Jane, 'The Collective Spirit of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.44.

[454] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'Urban Spaces, Women's Places: Polygamy as Sign in Mariama Bâ's Novels' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.163.

[455] Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.138.

structure in force. Thus: "biology is assumed to determine destiny only when this assumption reinforces the prevailing ideology"[456]. As Obiama Nnaemeka succinctly summarises: "the issue here is less about Islamic or African culture and more about men's inability to control their roving eyes"[457].

While ostensibly dealing with polygyny, therefore, which, as an institution, is alien to large swathes of the world and certainly outside at least this reader's experience, *Une si longue lettre* is also the intimate portrayal of a middle-aged woman, Ramatoulaye, married for twenty-five years with twelve children, coming to terms not only with her beloved husband's betrayal and its ramifications for herself and her family, but also his subsequent death. It encompasses the struggle she undertakes as she seeks to reaffirm her identity in the wake of her loss, since the shock of discovering that her husband has taken a co-wife shakes Ramatoulaye to the core, as she is: "forced to acknowledge that her constructed identity has been grounded on a false reality"[458]. That Ramatoulaye is so shocked at her husband's betrayal, in a society that accepts polygyny as part of the teaching of The Koran, finds its roots in the era in which *Une si longue lettre* was written, when women, emancipated as a result of receiving an education previously not available to them and consequently more open to the idea of male/female relationships based on Western-style emotions, often come up against males 'cherry-picking' those practices that suit them from the traditional way of life – a problem which I examine later in this chapter.

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo sees Ramatoulaye's project: "to be to hold herself up to younger women as a model to adapt, modify, and reconstruct for their own use in whatever circumstances they might find themselves"[459], whereas I prefer to read it as an open letter to all middle-aged women, particularly Senegalese, who have suffered as Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou have, to let them know that they are not alone. In an age without reality television, writing is one of the few methods available to reach a wider audience and, in order not to alienate any age group, Bâ makes sure that there is a suitable model for younger women to emulate with the character of Daba, Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter.

With the death of her husband, Ramatoulaye is therefore at a crossroads in her life, thus this letter is also the description of the path that leads to her coming to terms with the past and her thoughts, as a fifty year old woman, on the future and the way forward. The confusion and indecisiveness she exhibits en route,

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[456] Gannon, Linda R., *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.5.
[457] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'Urban Spaces, Women's Places: Polygyny as Sign in Mariama Bâ's Novels' *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.184.
[458] Fleming, Kathryn, R., 'Exorcising Institutionalized Ghosts and Redefining Female Identity in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), pp.213-214.
[459] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, 'Lettre sénégalaise de Ramatoulaye: Writing as Action in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.13.

whilst obviously directly correlated to the life-shocks she has received, are also symbolic of the state of mind on occasions of the menopausal woman – ambivalence, wildly escalating emotions, resignation, elation – and could also describe the mixed emotions associated with the dissociation of a country from its colonial heritage. Independence is exciting, but also frightening. Instead of being able to rely on, or blame, a higher, external authority, suddenly the responsibility is all in-house. Whilst powerless, it is easy to complain, as there are no consequences of those complaints. Once in power, the fragility of that power for the leaders of the newly independent country becomes evident, particularly if the electorate are expecting their new leaders to instigate miraculous changes. If those changes are slow to arrive, there is disappointment and then resignation sets in, often accompanied with treacherous thoughts that perhaps life was not so bad after all under the previous regime – emotions that have been expressed by those who have lived previously under Communist rule, and even, surprisingly, from those who had most to fear from apartheid. Yet there is also elation – the feeling that as master of one's own destiny, anything is possible in this new world.

In fact, Ramatoulaye's whole life has been about managing new experiences at different periods in her life: in her childhood she benefited educationally from the positives of colonialism whilst at the same time experiencing the waning of colonial power; then, when she was on the cusp of adulthood, Senegal entered a new era of independence:

> Privilège de notre génération, charnière entre deux périodes historiques, l'une de domination, l'autre d'indépendance. Nous étions restés jeunes et efficaces, car nous étions porteurs de projets. L'indépendance acquise, nous assistions à l'éclosion d'une République, à la naissance d'un hymne et à l'implantation d'un drapeau (SLL. p.53).

Now entering her midlife years, she is experiencing the same frustrations on a personal level as women in Senegal do on a political level – politics in Senegal still being largely a male domain at the time of Bâ's writing. It is, of course, this breadth of experience which so enriches a midlife testimonial.

As Keith Walker points out, the fact that Bâ/Ramatoulaye chose a letter as her narrative tool is striking in that: "as an artifact the letter is in transit, crisscrossing borders and barriers, negotiating the national and international in-between places where, in francophone literature, difference, displacement, differance, change, and conflict are signified"[460]. I would just add that Ramatoulaye herself is in a phase of transition; one of the euphemisms for the menopause is "the change" and although there is no indication

[460] Walker, Keith L., 'Postscripts: Mariama Bâ, Epistolarity, Menopause, and Postcoloniality', in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.247.

in the text that Ramatoulaye is menopausal, it is a reasonable assumption given her age, thus she may be coping with major changes in her body at the same time as the enforced changes in her lifestyle.

One of Ramatoulaye's major concerns is that she faces the future alone, not alone in the solitary, isolated sense because she is wrapped around with family and friends, but alone in the sense that by the end of the novel she has chosen not to accept one of the many offers of marriage she received, but rather to live without a partner with whom to share life – at least for the time being. The novel ends on a positive note as Ramatoulaye has not definitively ruled out remarriage, as long as it is based on love. It is important, at this juncture, to point out that Bâ was a firm believer in marriage, although she knew many women who preferred to divorce and remain single. In her interview with Barbara Harrell-Bond[461], Bâ stated that although she was divorced, she wished that she were married as she believed that men and women were complementary – Ramatoulaye is simply echoing Bâ's own rather idealistic sentiments with her assumption that marriage is best. Bâ allows us to follow her heroine's reasoning and sometimes flawed logic as she gropes her way to a fuller understanding of herself and her life with, along the way, an insight into the way of life for a certain strata of Senegalese society and it is remarkable, as I analyse later in this chapter, that such a short novel could encompass such a journey of enlightenment in one woman's search for a new identity that befits her new status.

Une si longue lettre is also a generational novel, encompassing four generations of women and whilst for Ramatoulaye and her contemporaries the spectre of polygyny and the inequality between men and women casts a pall over the novel impeding women's progress, Bâ ensures that the roots of equality are sown in Ramatoulaye's children who, far more liberated from the constraints that ruled the previous generation are representative not only of the positive indices for women, but also act as a symbol for the new Senegal, growing into maturity. However, in making this point, Bâ is also making a case for the need for widespread education since Ramatoulaye's children have parents who, by dint of being educated themselves, recognise the value of education on both a personal and societal level, whereas Binetou's parents, and also Nabou's guardian, Tante Nabou, being uneducated themselves, do not recognise that value. Binetou, in particular, suffers as a result of this inequality – whilst she would like to continue her education, her mother is more concerned with surviving from day to day. By marrying Binetou off to Modou, therefore, thus ensuring that her daughter becomes a mother whilst still in her teens, she effectively mortgages Binetou's future whilst safeguarding her own.

Ramatoulaye is not alone in her predicament and her experience, as well as that of Aïssatou (the addressee of her letter and her oldest friend), is symbolic of the problems Bâ felt that many Senegalese women of a certain age were undergoing at the time of writing. In their midlife years, thus no longer young enough,

[461] Bâ, Mariama, speaking to Dr Barbara Harrell-Bond in Dakar, 9 July 1979. Originally in French. Reproduced in: *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.383.

apparently, to keep their husbands from straying, nor old enough, perhaps, to be resigned to the realities of polygyny, these educated women: "premières pionnières de la promotion de la femme africaine" (SLL. p.36) are the first generation in the new Senegal after independence to experience the contradictions between the traditions of the old world and the attractions of the new. They are the first generation of women to be able to challenge some of society's norms and with financial independence comes the opportunity for independent thought and independent action, independent, that is, of men, the traditional providers. After all, Bâ was writing at a time when women in Senegal were starting to assert themselves politically as well as domestically, therefore it is natural that the women she portrays are: "tiraillées entre la volonté d'améliorer leur sort et la conscience des pesanteurs qui s'opposent à cette amélioration"[462] – for every Aïssatou, there will be a Tante Nabou somewhere in the background.

Une si longue lettre could, in fact, be read as a *Bildungsroman* for Senegalese women in midlife. The term may normally be associated with young people, in their formative years, but I would like to argue that a woman's midlife years can equally be a formative period, and the avowed didactic intent of Bâ would seem to place this novel in the category of *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, it is the very fact that Ramatoulaye manages to come through this emotional period in her life stronger, independent and with a new sense of self which implies completeness of *Bildung*, that is the moment when the protagonist has matured to the point where she can finally make a personal choice out of what is available to her, adopting an individual attitude towards life[463]. After all, this is new territory for Ramatoulaye. She has no blueprint to follow. The older generation of women did not have the same heightened expectations of their relationships and their advice would no doubt have been to maintain the status quo. Her friend Aïssatou broke away, but took a route too extreme for Ramatoulaye to follow. There is, indeed, a lesson in this novel, a baring of the soul unusual by the standards of the day – a Rousseau, no less, for this generation of Senegalese women. By putting pen to paper, Bâ uses Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou's attacks on their menfolk and the prevailing male culture to illustrate her observation that: "books are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon", a metaphor she uses to great effect to encourage other women writers: "c'est à nous, femmes, de prendre notre destin en mains pour bouleverser l'ordre établi à notre détriment et ne point le subir. Nous devons user comme les hommes de cette arme, pacifique certes mais sûre, qu'est l'écriture"[464].

However, on closer reading I decided that, whilst primarily a *Bildungsroman*, *Une si longue lettre* also fulfils some of the criteria demanded of a liminal novel. That interpretation underlies, in part, my analysis of this novel, but at this juncture I will just outline briefly how I see the three stages of this

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[462] Brahimi, Denise, Preface to *Les femmes dans la littérature africaine*, Brahimi, Denise & Trevarthen, Anne, Paris: Karthala & Ceda (1998), p.10.
[463] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.1.
[464] Bâ, Mariama, 'La Fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites', *Écriture française dans le monde*, 5:3 (1981), p.7.

particular rite of passage are represented in this novel. I have borrowed heavily in this paragraph from the introduction to Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa's excellent exposé of the subject entitled *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman* (pp.1-3), using her theory to aid my interpretation of this novel. Thus, Ramatoulaye's ceremonial stripping, both physically of possessions and symbolically after Modou's funeral, and her isolation from society during the prescribed mourning period clearly places her in the first 'separation' phase. The middle stage of liminality, which forms the major part of this novel, is Ramatoulaye's seclusion which can be seen as her symbolic invisibility while she negotiates her status from estranged wife to widow, as she is temporarily buried between two fixed points: what she was and what she is going to become. True rites of passage in traditional cultures share all three phases with a group of like initiates and, in the liminal stage, a special relationship born of solidarity and shared experience develops among those undergoing initiation as a group – a perfect description of the relationship between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou which Ramatoulaye develops for the reader during this phase through her writing. In the final stage, the aggregation, the initiate is reincorporated into the social order and acquires a specific role and status within its structure, whilst maintaining the strong bonds formed with the other initiates. However, in keeping with the definition of a liminal novel: "a novel of coming of age in which the rite of passage, either overtly depicted, [...] or implicitly evoked, [...] remains suspended in the middle stage"[465], it is evident in this novel that although Ramatoulaye comes out of the mourning period in full acceptance of her new status as widow and soon-to-be grandmother, ready to greet in person her confidante and close friend, Aïssatou, her future role is, as yet, undefined, since she is: "still moving towards what supposedly constitutes the final stage in that quest"[466].

[465] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.3.
[466] ibid., p.3.

2.3 Female characterisation in *Une si longue lettre*

What an array of female characters! From Ramatoulaye's oldest friend Aïssatou, to her youngest daughters, Amy and her twin Ama, to her grandmother, present in memory only, as well as her wayward teenagers Dieynaba, Arame and Yacine, a sulky, young co-wife Binetou, an omnipresent griote Farmata, a meddling mother-in-law Tante Nabou and a pushy mother-in-law Dame Belle-Mère, to name but a few, together with some curious absentees: the mothers of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou.

However, given that one of the main themes of this novel is female abandonment in midlife[467], and to make sure the message is comprehensively communicated, Bâ offers up three differing, yet largely sympathetic portraits of abandoned women: Ramatoulaye, the main protagonist and narrator; Aïssatou, her oldest friend and addressee of Ramatoulaye's letter and Jacqueline, who features in a cameo role to illustrate the perils of internalising one's problems. The setting may be Senegal, a country virtually unknown to the vast majority of Western readers of this novel, yet one cannot argue with the observation that: "abandonment in the novels of Mariama Bâ is predominantly a female condition. It is both physical and psychological, and it transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste"[468]. However, the very fact that the focus of Bâ's novel is on this portrayal of her heroine Ramatoulaye and her friend Aïssatou being abandoned by their husbands for much younger women, together with her implied criticism of Samba Diack's philandering being at the root of Jacqueline's psychological illness, is not only a confirmation of the universal truism that women the world over face similar problems of rejection at *un certain âge*, but it is also, in a uniquely African way, an abandonment of the male writer's idealisation of women and motherhood.

Bâ does not shrink from tackling this dual aspect of her theme of abandonment. This is a story told from the point of view of a woman, daring to criticise male behaviour – and not just the wayward husbands, but also Modou's elder brother Tamsir who dares to assume that Ramatoulaye will marry him after the prescribed period of mourning. Nothing in Tamsir's experience of dealing with women will have prepared him for the powerful delivery of Ramatoulaye, still in mourning garb, as she angrily disabuses him of his fanciful notions: "je ne serai jamais le complément de ta collection" (SLL. p.110). Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are not the mythical mother earth figures so beloved of male African writers of the time. They are real, flesh-and-blood 'new women', not content to melt into the background, whose: "economic power and contributions are [...] well detailed, as is their physical, intellectual, and spiritual

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[467] One needs to be aware that midlife in Western society does not necessarily translate to midlife in an African society, for example, where life expectancy is much reduced. However, I would defend using this term here since Ramatoulaye appears to consider herself in midlife.

[468] Cham, Mbye Baboucar, 'The Female Condition in Africa: a Literary Exploration by Mariama Bâ" in *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 17:1, (1984-85), p.30.

strength"[469]. Their independence and departure from traditional roles is, therefore, a striking new feature in African writing of that decade.

Yet, while Bâ treats Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and Jacqueline with respect, she does not hesitate to subvert the other stereotypes. As co-wife, Binetou might still be the desirable young woman favoured by male writers generally, and Modou in this novel, but Bâ uses her to illustrate what she perceives as one of the threats to Senegalese society: "les agressions matérielles, celles de la société de consommation qui font que les jeunes filles très tôt, veulent arriver à l'échelon extrême de la richesse: voiture, villa, prêt-à-porter"[470]. The naïve Binetou may well have been manipulated by her mother into a marriage with an older man which is not of her choosing, and Ramatoulaye is surprisingly forgiving of Binetou's part in the plot, but since she is acknowledged as bright and keen to finish her schooling, there is no doubting that nice clothes, a smart car and a prestigious residence played some role in her reluctant acceptance of the situation, even though she knows that the price she will pay in the long run is beyond monetary value, because how can you put a cost on your youth and your future.

Yet perhaps Binetou could teach her elders a trick or two. Victim of her mother's desperate desire to improve her social and financial status, and effectively sold to Modou in return for promises of a house, visits to Mecca, fine clothes, and a monthly allowance – her mother has no scruples seemingly about treating her daughter as an object with which to barter – Binetou gets her revenge. "Victime, elle se voulait oppresseur. Exilée dans le monde des adultes qui n'était pas le sien, elle voulait sa prison dorée. Exigeante, elle tourmentait. Vendue, elle élevait chaque jour sa valeur" (SLL. p.93) and could it be the ultimate revenge since Modou does die suddenly of a heart attack – perhaps the struggle to keep up with his young wife proves too much for him and, in a neat twist to the plot, he pays the ultimate price as he becomes her victim. However, it is worth sounding a note of caution at this juncture. In a didactic novel such as this, it could be considered dangerous to portray men as victims of women, yet surely Binetou is simply exercising her own rights, albeit unsophisticated and limited in scope. She is no Ramatoulaye, but her behaviour serves as a warning to all those middle-aged men seeking to discard their older wives for a younger model – life is not always greener on the other side.

It is, however, with her portrayals of Tante Nabou, Aïssatou's mother-in-law, and Dame Belle-Mère, Binetou's mother, that Bâ truly excels at undermining the benign 'grandmother' stereotype (although perhaps conforming to the wicked mother-in-law stereotype). Tante Nabou may well be old, wise and the keeper of traditions – and Ramatoulaye seems to respect that aspect of her character – but her belief in the

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[469] Plant, Deborah, 'Mythic Dimensions in the Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *Research in African Literatures*, 27.2 (1996), p.103.

[470] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

sanctity of the caste system not only results in some patient and creative meddling to bring about the break-up of her daughter-in-law's marriage but also, indirectly, reinforces the male gendered culture of female oppression. Mawdo, Aïssatou's husband, does not actively seek out Nabou, his second wife (although this does not excuse his behaviour in Aïssatou's eyes as the result is the same whether he set out to find a second wife himself or was assisted in this task by his mother), it is Tante Nabou's scheming, lies and manipulation of her son that results in Mawdo being presented with a fait accompli in the young, luscious shape of Nabou, thus deliberately encouraging him to take than one wife and forcing the exile of Aïssatou, and her children, from the family. I will be examining this perhaps surprising lack of female solidarity later in this chapter as it plays a significant role in perpetuating the inferior status of women in this male-dominated society.

Likewise, Binetou's mother, the ultimate caricature of a pushy mother[471] (a role magnificently reprised in Bâ's second and last novel *Un chant écarlate* by Yaye Khady, Ousmane's mother and Mireille's mother-in-law) has no scruples in using the same tactics to promote her daughter, and there is no higher authority to sanction her: after all, Ramatoulaye is well aware that aside from Modou's infatuation with the young woman, religion and society approve of his marriage: "quand Allah tout puissant met côte à côte deux êtres, personne n'y peut rien" (SLL. p.72) and: "Dieu lui a destiné une deuxième femme, il n'y peut rien" (SLL. p.72) since, after all: "il n'a fait qu'épouser une deuxième femme" (SLL. p.72). Thus: "male friends, the system, and Binetou's mother encourage him to embrace polygyny and irresponsibility towards his first wife and family"[472] and with Binetou married, Dame Belle-Mère gains admittance to the category of women called by the griots «au bracelet lourd» (SLL. p.95).

It is, therefore, the whole complexity of women's relationships with each other which also lies at the very heart of this novel, with the machinations of the elderly women wreaking revenge – the Senegalese equivalents of witches around their cauldrons – contrasting from the very first page with the solidarity, support and friendship of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou: "nous, nous avons usé pagnes et sandales sur le même chemin caillouteux de l'école coranique." (SLL. p.11) and: "ta déception fut la mienne comme mon reniement fut le tien" (SLL. p.105), who in turn have to deal with the rivalry of those young enough to be their daughters.

However, just to keep the balance right, Bâ introduces the 'good' grandmother near the end of the novel – the memory of Ramatoulaye's grandmother who had an endless fund of sayings and wise expressions to which Ramatoulaye frequently had recourse: "brave grand-mère, je puisais, dans ton enseignement et ton

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[471] As read through Western eyes. Traditionally, an African mother-in-law was given to expect certain privileges once a daughter-in-law arrived to share the day-to-day running of the usually not inconsiderable household and often found it difficult to adjust to an influx of modern, Western values which were usually to her detriment.

[472] Klaw, Barbara, 'Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Subverting a Mythology of Sex-Based Oppression' in *Research in African Literatures*, 31:2, Summer 2000, p.136.

exemple, le courage qui galvanise au moment des choix difficiles" (SLL. p.141). Interestingly, it is when dealing with her children's crises rather than her own personal problems that Ramatoulaye invokes the memory of her grandmother: "mes tourments s'estompent à l'évocation de ma grand-mère" (SLL. p.140), perhaps to emphasise the continuity of the matriarchal strength and wisdom, passed down from (grand)mother to daughter, as Ramatoulaye herself will pass on to her daughters. However, although *Une si longue lettre* was not acknowledged as autobiographical by its author, it may not be a coincidence that Ramatoulaye's mother has a very minor role to play in this novel, since Bâ was: "orpheline de mère. J'ai été élevée par ma grand-mère"[473]. Yet, there may be another, less personal, reason why Ramatoulaye's mother is curiously almost absent from the text.

In the days when everyone shared a similar type of rural lifestyle, oral transmission of cultural values, traditions[474], legends and stories were passed on within the family from mother to daughter, and outside the family transmitted by the griots/griotes (usually men, but occasionally women, particularly in Senegal) and life changed little from generation to generation. It is important, however, to remember that nothing is truly static; even traditions evolve because they have a symbiotic relationship with history, and as each day that is lived effectively changes history, that necessarily impacts upon traditions. Thus the increase in the spread of modern medicine represented by Mawdo entails a corresponding decrease in the use of "potions" as represented by the traditional healer, thus: "on allait de moins en moins chez le guérisseur, spécialiste des mêmes décoctions de feuilles pour des maladies différentes" (SLL. p.52). However, significant change, once it comes, has a tendency to move quickly, at least to those who can pay for it. Ramatoulaye illustrates how expectations have changed within a generation as she remembers Aïssatou's mother with her: "visage ocre [...] constellé de gouttelettes de sueur, à la sortie des cuisines" (SLL. p.12) and the: "procession jacassante des fillettes trempées, revenant des fontaines" (SLL. p.12) which she contrasts with the: "mode de vie dorée" (SLL. p.94) supplied by Modou to Binetou's mother:

> un geste, dans sa salle de bain, et l'eau chaude massait son dos en jets délicieux! Un geste, dans la cuisine, et des glaçons refroidissaient l'eau de son verre. Un autre geste, une flamme jaillissait du fourneau à gaz et elle se préparait une délicieuse omelette" (SLL. pp.94-95).

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[473] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[474] An article about the Tsunami disaster of December 2004 is also revealing in this regard. In a village called Lampuuk in Aceh, Indonesia, only around nine hundred and fifty survived out of a population of about six thousand, and less than two hundred of the survivors were women. This demographic tragedy will have many consequences in a society where the role of women is central, but perhaps one of the unlikeliest is loss of culture, as a young female survivor explains: "I don't understand all the ceremonies, because that is what the old women know. But the old women have all died. In a marriage ceremony, for example, women have many rituals, but perhaps we cannot hold those any more. I am afraid of losing our culture". Parry, Richard Lloyd, 'The town left without women', 12 January 2005. http://www.timesonline.co.uk.

In the past, the information passed down remained relevant from generation to generation – daughters expected their life to mirror their mothers, sons to mirror their fathers. As Ramatoulaye reminds Aïssatou:

> chaque métier a son code que seuls des initiés possèdent et que l'on se confie de père en fils. Tes grands-frères, dès leur sortie de la case des circoncis, ont pénétré cet univers particulier qui fournit le mil nourricier de la concession. Mais tes jeunes frères? Leurs pas ont été dirigés vers l'école des Blancs. [...] Que feront ceux qui ne réussissent pas? L'apprentissage du métier traditionnel apparaît dégradant à celui qui a un mince savoir livresque. On rêve d'être commis. On honnit la truelle" (SLL. p.42).

Therefore, as Ramatoulaye reminisces about her youth and the benefits her education has brought her, Bâ makes the point that perhaps the old ways, which after all have sufficed for centuries, should not be discarded too quickly, as this example regarding Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's choice of husband illustrates. For Ramatoulaye, as a result of her education: "libérée [...] des tabous qui frustrent, apte à l'analyse, pourquoi devrais-je suivre l'index de ma mère pointé sur Daouda Dieng?" (SLL. p.38). Education was also blamed when Mawdo chose to marry out of his caste as: "l'école transforme nos filles en diablesses, qui détournent les hommes du droit chemin" (SLL. p.40). Yet perhaps all those old-fashioned, traditionalist doomsayers were right. Perhaps Ramatoulaye should have listened to her mother. Did the two women make the right choice? With hindsight, Ramatoulaye seems to be admitting that by choosing superficiality over substance, they chose the wrong men, since: "beaucoup voulaient nous posséder. Combien de rêves avions-nous alimentés désespérément, qui auraient pu se concrétiser en bonheur durable et que nous avons déçus pour en embrasser d'autres qui ont piteusement éclaté comme bulles de savon, nous laissant la main vide?" (SLL. p.36).

Thus, the real reason why Ramatoulaye's mother is a shadow in the text may well be because, in many respects, there is now such a wide gulf between the two generations. In Western novels of midlife, the female protagonists frequently delve into their past to look for solutions to their current malaises, as indeed Rosélie does in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, and it is at this time, more than any other, that they return to their mother, or the memory of their mother, to use as a possible model. But Ramatoulaye never does this. Her mother's experiences would simply be too far removed from her own in so many ways that it would be impossible for Ramatoulaye to refer to her own upbringing when worrying about how to bring up her own children, for example, as the circumstances are just too different. Faced with three daughters smoking and a teenage pregnancy, Ramatoulaye has no choice but to make up new rules as she goes along, even if she has frequent recourse to the comforting adages of her grandmother. That is not to imply, however, that progress and its inevitable link in this instance with the colonial powers, is only negative. After all, if it was not for Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's education, courtesy of the French high school, they would not be the independent women of this novel, able to challenge the received patriarchy.

Incidentally, if the females, young, middle-aged or old, in *Une si longue lettre* are highly characterised, whether negatively or positively, where are the strong men in this novel? The contrast between the middle-aged women and the middle-aged men in this novel is striking. Madou, Mawdo and Daouda Dieng, all initially the rising young stars of the new Senegal, eventually succumb to their own, or society's failings, whilst Tamsir never even gets off the starting blocks. Modou falls the furthest – perhaps apt since it is Ramatoulaye's story. Mawdo, despite remaining professionally sound, is shown to be personally weak; Aïssatou was the: "choix de sa vie" (SLL. p.40) when he defied everyone to marry her, yet when the young Nabou was presented to him as a fait accompli: "il vieillissait, usé par son pesant travail et puis, voulait-il seulement lutter, ébaucher un geste de résistance?" (SLL. p.63). It is left to Daouda Dieng who: "s'était bien conservé par rapport à Mawdo et Modou" (SLL. p.113) to be the one successful representative of that generation of males of Ramatoulaye's acquaintance. In politics: "il était un homme de droiture et se battait, chaque fois que la situation l'exigeait, pour plus de justice sociale" (SLL. p.116) and he still practised as a doctor since: "il avait compris qu'un médecin n'avait pas le droit de renier sa profession" (SLL. p.127). Even more to his credit: "jamais il n'acceptait une consécration sans son épouse. Il l'associait à son action politique, à ses déplacements nombreux, aux divers parrainages qui le sollicitaient et élargissaient sa clientèle électorale" (SLL. p.125) and, as Farmata observes he has neither exchanged his wife nor abandoned his children. Yet there is just a hint of male arrogance in his and Ramatoulaye's political debate and he certainly fails to appreciate how strongly Ramatoulaye feels about polygyny.

As with the women, therefore, the hopes lie with the younger generation – with Abdou, Daba's husband, and with Ibrahim Sall, Aïssatou's fiancé, and with Ramatoulaye's younger children. As she reminds them: "demain, mettez au pouvoir qui vous voulez, qui vous convient. Ce sera votre choix qui dirigera ce pays et non le nôtre" (SLL. p.135).

2.4 Ramatoulaye's anguish

Earlier I ventured to suggest that this novel could be considered a *Bildungsroman* for the midlife woman as we, the readers, are privy to the rite of passage that Ramatoulaye is undergoing at she enters a new phase in her life. Her 'letter' to her oldest friend whilst she is cloistered alone, in her liminal phase, for forty days of mourning after Modou's sudden death is, in effect, the equivalent of modern-day therapy where: "la confidence noie la douleur" (SLL. p.11) and, in addition, whilst the Mirasse which: "ordonné par le Coran, nécessite le dépouillement d'un individu mort de ses secrets les plus intimes. Il livre ainsi à autrui ce qui fut soigneusement dissimulé" (SLL. p.26) refers to Ramatoulaye's husband, the widows also have to strip themselves almost literally and certainly metaphorically bare, delivering themselves into the hands of their sisters-in-law whose task is to distribute all their worldly possessions.:

> C'est le moment redouté de toute Sénégalaise, celui en vue duquel elle sacrifie ses biens en cadeaux à sa belle-famille, et où, pis encore, outre les biens, elle s'ampute de sa personnalité, de sa dignité, devenant une chose au service de l'homme qui l'épouse, du grand-père, de la grand-mère, du père, de la mère, du frère, de la sœur, de l'oncle, de la tante, des cousins, des cousines, des amis de cet homme" (SLL. pp.16-17)

Previously, without doubt, Ramatoulaye had been one of those who came to pay respects on the occasion of a death, thus an outsider, as she herself writes: "je n'ai jamais autant observé, parce que n'ayant jamais eté autant concernée" (SLL. p.26) but this time she is a major player in the main event, thrust into the spotlight again after her five years of playing the role of rejected first wife. However: "her role is entirely passive"[475] as for forty days, wearing only her new identity of "widow"[476], she effectively becomes an object, first subject to the wills and caprices of her in-laws – she has no say in the distribution of goods, nor the purchase of widows' weeds – and then confined to her home for the mourning period, following prescribed rules which allow no independence of thought or deed.

Thus, ostensibly a time to remember Modou, and carry out all the rites of the Mirasse, but shocked by the extent of Modou's betrayal which is revealed during the fourth day of mourning, Ramatoulaye seizes this opportunity to reveal all her own secrets as: "the expanded mirasse becomes a means of stripping bare her own life and reviewing her status as a woman in her society"[477]. Instead of sitting on a couch talking to a

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[475] Irlam, Shaun, 'Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*: The Vocation of Memory and the Space of Writing", in *Research in African Literatures*, 29:2 (1998), p.81.

[476] The percentages of men and women aged sixty plus in Senegal who are widowed: 6 per cent men, 54 per cent women – United Nations (1993), within the normal ranges for sub-Saharian Africa, quoted by Cattell, Maria G, 'African Widows, Culture and Social Change: Case Studies from Kenya' in *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, ed. by Sokolovsky, Jay, Westport, Conn., London: Bergin & Garvey (1997), p.68.

[477] Ajayi-Soyinka, Omofolabo, 'Negritude, Feminism, and the Quest for Identity: Re-Reading Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.160.

therapist, Western-style, and unable to talk about it face-to-face with her friend, she writes it all down, reliving not only the immediacy of the moment which encompasses the death of Modou and the traditional period of mourning afterwards, but also reprising the events leading up to her abandonment by Modou for a much younger woman – and the similar crises that befell Aïssatou and Jacqueline. In fact, as Florence Stratton succinctly summarises: "in effect, Ramatoulaye mourns her own demise"[478]. Yet: "to recall her thirty silent years, to acknowledge and articulate them, the ebb and flow of them, was to begin to understand and heal self"[479].

Ramatoulaye therefore plunges back into the distant past of her courtship with Modou, as well as the more recent past when, five years before Modou's death, and after twenty five years of marriage, twelve children and two miscarriages, her husband took a co-wife and effectively abandoned both her and their children. Ramatoulaye went through the same thought processes as her friend Aïssatou yet, unlike Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye decided to stay. The questions she asked herself that first night after his second marriage could have been phrased by any middle-aged woman faced with the discovery of her husband's unfaithfulness: "Partir? Recommencer à zéro, après avoir vécu vingt-cinq ans avec un homme, après avoir mis au monde douze enfants? Avais-je assez de force pour supporter seule le poids de cette responsabilité à la fois morale et matérielle?" (SLL. p.78). The number of children apart, nothing separates Ramatoulaye from any betrayed wife faced with the prospect of having to bring up her children alone, with the loss of security and support and, of course, love and companionship.

Yet as Ramatoulaye admits, against the wishes of her children: "je choisis de rester" (SLL. p.88), which was a decision as surprising as that of Aïssatou's to leave. It was a: "choix que ma raison refusait mais qui s'accordait à l'immense tendresse que je vouais à Modou Fall" (SLL. p.88), although with the wonderful benefit of hindsight, it was the wrong decision. Her choice was determined as much by fear of the unknown as by pragmatism, and unfortunately for Ramatoulaye, it was shown immediately to be flawed, since although she was prepared to stay as co-wife, entitled to an equitable sharing of Modou according to Islam[480], he showed himself to be unworthy of her love not only by never again visiting Ramatoulaye's bed, but never visiting the house nor the children who were, to all intents and purposes, just like their mother, forgotten and cast aside. Thus, ironically, with Modou's permanent departure to Binetou's side, Ramatoulaye realised that she had the solution her children had desired: "la rupture – sans en avoir pris l'initiative" (SLL. p.99). By being passive she did, in a sense, force Modou to be the one to do the abandoning, rather than making the situation easier for him by leaving. Yet did Modou really think that Ramatoulaye would follow Aïssatou's example? The fact that he did not even tell her himself

[478] Stratton, Florence, 'The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction' in *Research in African Literatures*, 19:2, Summer 1988, p.166.
[479] Plant, Deborah, 'Mythic Dimensions in the Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *Research in African Literatures*, 27:2 (1996), p.107.
[480] According to the Family Code of 1972, wives were entitled to equal treatment in polygamous unions. Prior to 1972, tradition dictated equal treatment for wives in polygamous unions.

about his second marriage, instead leaving it to others to break the news, suggests a weak man, or else a man so obsessed with his new love that he has not given a thought to the practicalities of the future, (although, of course, one has to be careful making such judgements as a Western reader as that may simply have been normal practice). It does appear, however, to have been due to Binetou, rather than his own desires, that Modou abandoned Ramatoulaye so completely: "une voisine du nouveau couple m'expliqua que la «petite» entrait en transes chaque fois que Modou prononçait mon nom ou manifestait le désir de voir ses enfants" (SLL. p.89). Modou's initial intention may well have been to practise a truly polygamous marriage, sharing Ramatoulaye and Binetou, rather than abandoning Ramatoulaye totally.

Ramatoulaye could be accused, perhaps, possibly like many a fifty-year old woman, of being a little too complacent in her marriage and a little too naïve in ignoring the numerous signs that Modou's attention was wandering. After all, she admits that she noticed Modou paying attention to Daba's schoolfriend, yet was not worried when he used to take Binetou home by car; she accepted his explanation of union business to cover his frequent absences from home, and not even the fact that he was following a strict diet had alerted her, nor his insistence on wearing his most flattering outfit when going out. Short of actually telling Ramatoulaye he was conducting an affair behind her back, Modou left plenty of clues, yet she admits to being genuinely surprised at the news of his marriage.

Was Ramatoulaye, mother of twelve children, simply too preoccupied in her role of mother? Had she let slide her role of wife? There is no mention in detail of their married life, but that is no doubt due to natural reticence (it would take another decade or so before women writers from black Africa tackle female desire in depth), but it is evident that she believed they had a strong marriage. The fact that she described her, at the time, unknown co-wife as her rival implies that she still believed, at that stage, that she was a contender for Modou's affections. She realised, too late, that:

> alors que la femme puise, dans le cours des ans, la force de s'attacher, malgré le vieillissement de son compagnon, l'homme, lui, rétrécit de plus en plus son champ de tendresse. Son œil égoïste regarde par-dessus l'épaule de sa conjointe. Il compare ce qu'il eut à ce qu'il n'a plus, ce qu'il a à ce qu'il pourrait avoir (SLL. p.80).

Thus while: "most women know the script laid out in their particular society for the woman in mid-life"[481], which for Ramatoulaye would mean the imposition of a younger wife, she had disregarded the warning signs.

[481] Sokolovsky, Jay, 'Culture, Aging and Context' in *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, ed. by Sokolovsky, Jay, Westport, Conn., London: Bergin & Garvey (1997), p.9.

At fifty, Ramatoulaye had, in Modou's eyes, reached the: "dreaded state of older woman"[482] where she simply stopped being visible to him. Binetou represented youth, vitality, and she was available, even if Modou had, effectively, to buy what he wanted to possess. Indeed, is it too fanciful to see Ramatoulaye's replacement by Binetou as a practical illustration of the negative side of menopause, since: "only within the theoretical context of menopause being a deficiency disease is the concept of replacement a logical one"[483] where for Ramatoulaye, instead of hormones, the replacement was actually a second wife?

Yet Ramatoulaye, perhaps as a result of her upbringing and education, does have belief in herself, and her faith is her support. While her friends exort her to try traditional methods such as spells and potions to bring an errant husband back to the home, she feels that: "suivre ces exhortations aurait été me remettre en question. Je me reprochais déjà une faiblesse qui n'avait pas empeché la dégradation de mon foyer. Devais-je me renier parce que Modou avait choisi une autre voie?" (SLL. p.94). She knows that no marriage is perfect, and wonders what she has done to provoke its failure: "j'essaie de cerner mes fautes dans l'échec de mon mariage. J'ai donné sans compter, donné plus que je n'ai reçu. Je suis de celles qui ne peuvent se réaliser et s'épanouir que dans le couple. Je n'ai jamais conçu le bonheur hors du couple, tout en te comprenant, tout en respectant le choix des femmes libres" (SLL. p.106). In addition, in a curious echo of "happiness according to Ischomaque", reported by Foucault, where: "la beauté réelle de la femme est [...] suffisamment assurée par ses occupations ménagères si elle les accomplit comme il faut"[484], Ramatoulaye reveals: "j'ai aimé ma maison. Tu [Aïssatou] peux témoigner que j'en ai fait un havre de paix où toute chose a sa place, crée une symphonie harmonieuse de couleurs. [...] Tu peux témoigner que, mobilisée nuit et jour à son service, je devançais ses moindres désirs" (SLL. p.106). As Foucault went on to write:

> ce qui est en jeu dans cette pratique réfléchie de la vie du mariage, ce qui apparaît comme essentiel au bon ordre de la maison, à la paix qui doit y régner et à ce que la femme peut souhaiter, c'est que celle-ci puisse garder, en tant qu'épouse légitime, la place éminente que lui a donnée le mariage: ne pas se voir préférer une autre, ne pas se trouver déchue de son statut de sa dignité, n'être pas remplacée à côté de son mari par une autre, voilà ce qui lui importe avant tout[485].

Ramatoulaye questions herself constantly, trying to understand why Modou had broken up his family for Binetou, but only able to see the relationship through her own eyes: she still loved him as she had when they first met. Of course, therein lies the pain, just as Aïssatou had experienced, since Ramatoulaye and

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[482] Campioni, Mia, 'Revolting Women: Women in Revolt' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul, A., Rothfield, Philipe & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.92.
[483] Gannon, Linda R., *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.xi.
[484] Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs*, Paris: Gallimard (1984), pp.211-212.
[485] ibid., p.213.

Modou's marriage was also a love match not an arranged marriage. Thus, by reverting to tradition and the right to a second wife, Modou's act is a real betrayal of their love and their ideals. Interestingly, the Family Code of Senegal of 1972 (mentioned by Daouda Dieng) which came into force on 1 January 1973 states that the groom must register his option for either a monogamous, a limited polygamous (two wives) or a polygamous (up to four wives) regime upon registration of his first marriage, and the option is for life. Taking a second wife after publicly opting for a monogamous marriage is punishable by up to three years in prison[486]. Given Ramatoulaye's age, it is reasonable to assume that she and Modou married before the Family Code came into existence[487], so presumably Modou had not been required to state which option he chose, but Ramatoulaye's real pain and complete surprise at Modou's decision to take a second wife would suggest that she was under the impression that she had entered, emotionally at least, if not legally, into a monogamous marriage contract for life.

Yet despite the anguished soul-searching during her period of mourning, or perhaps because of it, Ramatoulaye arrives at a new stage in her life, which I will examine in detail later in this chapter. She finds it in herself to forgive Modou, and although she does not really understand what it is in men that enables them to treat their wives with such little respect, perhaps it is only by experiencing such a low that she can then progress.

[486] The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CLRP), New York, Women's Reproductive Rights in Senegal: A Shadow Report, August 2001, p.13. http//www.clrp.org/pdf/sr_sen_0801_eng.pdf.
[487] Prior to the enactment of the Family Code, family relations were governed by Christian, Islamic and customary laws, or under civil code. http//www.law.emory.edu/IFL/legal/senegal.htm (undated, accessed 15 June 2005).

2.5 The epistolary form and its addressee

Much has been written on Bâ's choice of an epistolary novel, and whether *Une si longue lettre* is indeed a true epistolary novel, given that it only consists of one long letter and no responses. Yet, since it starts with a salutation and ends with the correspondent's name it is, outwardly at least, a letter, even though its form is more diary-like with chapter numbers serving as pages in the diary, and in some cases even corresponding with the day, for example, chapter three refers to the third day after the death of Modou. However, as the protagonist starts by writing: "Aïssatou, j'ai reçu *ton mot. En guise de réponse, j'ouvre ce cahier*, point d'appui dans mon désarroi" (SLL. p.11 – my italics), Bâ appears to be acknowledging its hybridity. As a tool, this serves her purpose well, first by ensuring that her female protagonist, Ramatoulaye, is both narrator and focalizer: "whereas narration reveals who the speaking agent is, focalization determines who is "seeing" characters and events; it determines whose point of view informs the narration at any point of the novel"[488]. Thus, with no exterior influences permeating the text, Bâ is able to fully concentrate her mind, Ramatoulaye's mind and the readers' minds on the message Ramatoulaye is conveying.

Secondly, by giving her 'letter' an addressee, Ramatoulaye is giving herself a focus for her thoughts. McElaney-Johnson points out that: "through writing Ramatoulaye explores her inner self but she does so before and for a selected audience. Whereas diary writing is born of private introspection and solitude, whether sought or enforced, the writing of letters implies camaraderie, sharing, a reaching out to another"[489]. In this case, it is a combination of private introspection aided by Ramatoulaye's seclusion, in the house she once shared with Modou, as part of the mourning process, coupled with sharing her experience with a close friend who has lived through an almost identical experience, and it is also a reaching out of a woman's hand(writing) to all women wherever they might be. Also, the repetition of certain key phrases such as: "je survivais" (SLL. p.98 and p.99) can either serve as a mantra along the lines of the theory that if you say something often enough, you will end up believing it or it will come true, or can be seen as a reference to story-telling, where repetition was common. After all, this letter does also possess something of the aspect of a story such as would be told orally, although its structure, being non-linear, does not conform to the obligatory straightforwardness of the oral tale. Also, rather than following the traditional route of being a romanticised and idealised story usually told by men, it prefers to use a female narrator, Ramatoulaye, relating the abridged history of her life and her friends, to give a realistic perspective of women's trials and tribulations at the hands of men and male-structured society, with the added bonus of an insight into midlife women's psychological growth along the way.

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[488] d'Almeida, Irène Assiba, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1994), p.103.

[489] McElaney-Johnson, Ann, 'Epistolary Friendship: La prise de parole in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, in *Research in African Literatures*, 30:2, Summer 1999, p.113.

The reprising of the past, details that Aïssatou would surely remember, as indeed she would know, better than anyone, the contents of the letter she sent to Mawdo but repeated in full in the text, as well as the monologue in chapter 6 addressed to Modou seem unnecessary as well as at odds with the epistolary format and Ramatoulaye is aware of this as she apologises to her friend: "je t'ennuie, peut-être, à te relater ce que tu sais déjà" (SLL. p.26). However, if one looks at the situation through the eyes of the narrator, a confused, traumatised, recently widowed middle-aged woman, one can appreciate this need to make sense of her life at this time, by going over the past, seeing if any of Aïssatou's words could have helped her at the time she made her decision to stay in Modou's family-group, reaffirming this close relationship which dates from their childhood, seeking to find some stability in her life at this time of enforced change, and, of course, it serves as a successful authorial device to enable the reader to learn the background to the current situation, because this letter may be nominally addressed to Aïssatou, but it is also addressed to all women.

In addition, at the time in a woman's life when lack of oestrogen due to the onset of the menopause may start to affect her cognitive processes[490], writing becomes a means of preserving the past with its happy as well as sad memories. It is also a means by which Ramatoulaye seeks reassurance from her friend who grew up by her side that all was indeed as she remembered it, that she was not guilty of remembering the past through rose-coloured spectacles and that her memory was not playing tricks on her, thus: "notre école, revoyons-la ensemble, verte, rose, bleue, jaune, véritable arc-en-ciel [...] Notre école, entendons vibrer ses murs de notre fougue à l'étude. Revivons la griserie de son atmosphère (SLL. p.37).

The epistolary form itself is interesting in that whereas some use it as a method of keeping one's distance and therefore maintaining one's solitude (Colette's heroine, Renée Néré in *La Vagabonde* springs to mind as, by going on tour and therefore reducing her relationship with Max to one of correspondence, she kept her suitor at bay, and thus avoided any chance of sexual relations), here the converse is true: "as a form [it] is silence broken, solitude broken. [...] it is a privileged format for inscribing silent awarenesses and speechlessness into reality"[491]. This is particularly the case with Ramatoulaye who is supposed to be silent and alone as she complies with the traditional mourning period, yet is actually subverting the rule by communicating with someone. In addition, by 'voicing' in writing all her thoughts and evoking her memories, even the unpleasant ones, she is able to use this time profitably and see the path she has to take.

Ramatoulaye has no need of any reply from her addressee. Indeed it is obvious this letter was never sent, since Ramatoulaye learns, in chapter 22, that Aïssatou is due to arrive the next day, and yet still carries on

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[490] Haskell, S.G., et al., 'The Effect of Estrogen Replacement Therapy on Cognitive Function in Women: A Critical Review of the Literature' in *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 50:11, November 1997, pp.1249-1964.
[491] Walker, Keith L., 'Postscripts: Mariama Bâ, Epistolarity, Menopause, and Postcoloniality', in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.250.

writing for another six chapters. However, at a time when Ramatoulaye is so lonely and in need of someone she can trust close by, the process of writing to her friend thousands of miles away is a means of bridging that distance and bringing her closer, which indeed she does since by the time the letter ends, Ramatoulaye's story will have reached the present day and Aïssatou will actually be with her friend in person. It is, therefore, as if Ramatoulaye has conjured her up from afar, or that Aïssatou has somehow responded to her friend's impassioned call at the start of the letter: "je t'invoque" (SLL. p.12) despite never having actually received the letter. Aïssatou's presence by Ramatoulaye's side, after she emerges from this long mourning period for her husband which she has used profitably to also mourn the end of that part of her own life, is critical in order to validate Ramatoulaye's new identity, since: "identity is meaningless unless it is witnessed and rendered significant by an observer"[492] – and Aïssatou's role, as another middle-aged woman, is to provide this external perspective. It is also true that, in the rite of passage of a liminal novel, the initiate's education is overseen by those who have already travelled the same path themselves[493]; who better, therefore, than Aïssatou who had already suffered the trauma of abandonment by her husband, to fulfill this role.

Thus it is clear that the addressee of Ramatoulaye's *Une si longue lettre* has been chosen with great care. Aïssatou serves as Ramatoulaye's partial mirror image. They have similar traits, yet ultimately follow different paths in life. She is a double in a truer sense of the word than Fiéla is to Rosélie in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, yet both Aïssatou and Fiéla answer a similar need. Ramatoulaye knows Aïssatou so well that she can guess her responses and she is conscious of Aïssatou's choice and opinion throughout her correspondence. Her friend serves as a successful example of a different path that she could have taken if she so wished, or felt able to. This authorial device serves to illustrate that there is no one correct course to take, that everyone has to work out what is the best route to take, given the individual circumstances. Ramatoulaye's choice of correspondent, and her correspondent's choices (which I will examine in detail in the next section) are, therefore, illuminating, at least from the perspective of a middle-aged narrator, although, of course, they could equally be seen as prescriptive, given the didactic nature of the novel.

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[492] Best, Victoria, *Critical Subjectivities: Identity and Narrative in the Work of Colette and Marguerite Duras*, Bern: Peter Lang (2000), p.34.
[493] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.43.

2.6. Aïssatou's crisis

Ramatoulaye may be the narrator/main protagonist of *Une si longue lettre*, but her oldest friend Aïssatou has a key role to play in illustrating the other choice that Ramatoulaye could have made on learning that Modou had taken a co-wife. Obioma Nnaemeka sees Aïssatou as a shadow, a marginalised person, as she queries:

> why is the representative of tradition [...] always placed at the centre of the narrative, whereas the "deviant" less conformist characters remain marginal figures? The marginalization of non-conformist characters might reflect the dilemma of women writers who are still striving to understand who they are, especially in relation to liberation and feminism. It might also reflect a conscious effort to express a sense of cultural solidarity"[494].

However, I see Ramatoulaye's mother as an example of a shadow in the text, not Aïssatou who is omnipresent in Ramatoulaye's mind as well as in the text, albeit always just one step removed. In fact, all the characters are outside the text in that respect given that they are all perceived and reported through her words. However, I do not dispute Aïssatou's marginalisation and suspect this is probably due to the fact that she was just a little too radical and, yes, non-conformist for the time – her behaviour did indeed exemplify one option Ramatoulaye could have followed, but it was just a little too daring for her and, of course, would not be an option available to the majority of women contemplating what action to take in similar circumstances, since it presupposes a certain level of education. As Rueschmann points out: "the social structure and cultural tradition of Africa make it difficult for the African woman to readily adopt Western images of women's liberation without breaking completely with the indigenous community"[495] – thus, once Aïssatou had made her stand, her departure from Senegal was perhaps inevitable.

Incidentally, it is not just Aïssatou who has been marginalised in *Une si longue lettre*, since Ramatoulaye herself becomes marginalised when she is discarded by Modou, and Jacqueline, already marginalised as the stranger in their midst from the Ivory Coast, suffers the double bind of her depression, thus enabling her to serve as the token "femme folle" in the novel. Odile Cazenave suggests that such marginalisation is in fact an enabler for women who: "étaient en quelque sorte autorisées, sinon justifiées à une plus grande liberté de parole", which in turn, empowered them to be able to: "aborder des questions plus larges touchant à la situation de l'Afrique postcoloniale"[496] – which is, of course, exactly what Bâ does through the intermediary of Ramatoulaye.

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[494] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood' in *Research in African Literatures*, 25:4, Winter 1994, p.151.
[495] Rueschmann, Eva, 'Female Self-Definition and the African Community in Mariama Bâ's Epistolary Novel *So Long a Letter*' in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*, ed. by Brown, Anne E. & Goozé, Marjanne E., London: Greenwood Press (1995), p.6.
[496] Cazenave, Odile, 'Vingt ans après Mariama Bâ, nouvelles écritures au féminin' in *Africultures*, 35, February 2001, p.8.

With regard to the theme of abandonment of wives by their husbands, practically speaking, of course, Aïssatou was not abandoned by Mawdo. He simply chose, in the face of overwhelming pressure from his mother, to take a second wife, which does not, of itself, entail the abandonment of the first wife. Indeed, the Koran is explicit on the rules of sharing co-wives, and Mawdo did not chase Aïssatou away, as Ramatoulaye reminded her: "il allait à son devoir et souhaitait que tu restes" (SLL. p.64), and in Toucouleur society: "tant que son mari vit, une épouse reste entièrement soumise à son autorité"[497]. However, having married one of the: "premières pionnières de la promotion de la femme africaine" (SLL. p.36) in a love match, Mawdo should not have been surprised at Aïssatou's reaction: "si tu peux procréer sans aimer, rien que pour assouvir l'orgueil d'une mère déclinante, je te trouve vil. Dès lors, tu dégringoles de l'échelon supérieur, de la respectabilité où je t'ai toujours hissé" (SLL. p.65). Rather than stay and see herself become a victim of her husband's weakness, and suffer the indignity of sharing him with a co-wife, Aïssatou chose to leave and methodically set about planning a new future for herself and her sons.

> Most people do not simply remain passive in the face of the forces that adversely affect them. Instead, they actively react either (1) by seeking to alter the situations that give rise to the adverse forces, (2) by attempting perceptually and cognitively to reshape the meaning of the forces in a way that reduces their threat, or (3) by establishing devices that enable them to live with distress without being overwhelmed by it[498].

Aïssatou was not interested in nor indeed able to alter the situation – Mawdo had betrayed their love by marrying Nabou, therefore for her there was no question of going back, so: "au lieu de regarder en arrière, tu fixas l'avenir obstinément. Tu t'assignas un but difficile" (SLL. p.66). By dint of hard work, Aïssatou distanced herself, literally and metaphorically, from the scene of her distress and the crushed hopes of her youthful idealism, thus escaping: "les revers pourris du mariage" (SLL. p.78), and in so doing, also deprived her scheming mother-in-law of the satisfaction of seeing her daughter-in-law reduced in status within the marriage. As Ramatoulaye reminded Aïssatou: "tu ne comptas plus, pas plus que tes quatre fils: ceux-ci ne seront jamais les égaux des fils de la petite Nabou [...] La mère de Mawdo, princesse, ne pouvait se reconnaître dans le fils d'une bijoutière" (SLL. p.63) – shades of Medea's anguish when Jason betrayed her by taking a royal bride, and their descendants reduced his children by Medea to a state of humiliation and servitude, proving that apparently not much changes in life-stories, even over millennia.

Ramatoulaye obviously admired her friend's courage at the time of her crisis, and during her last visit to Senegal, Ramatoulaye was full of admiration again for her friend: "comme j'enviais ta tranquillité lors de

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[497] Journet, Odile & Julliard, André, 'Le van des grands-mères' in *Vieillir en Afrique*, ed. by Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Rosenmayr, Léopold, Paris: PUF (1994), p.206.
[498] Pearlin, Leonard, I., 'Discontinuities in the Study of Aging' in *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Hareven, Tamara, K. & Adams, Kathleen, J., London: Tavistock Publications (1982), p.68.

ton dernier séjour ! Tu étais là, débarrassée du masque de la souffrance. [...] Tu étais là, le passé écrasé sous ton talon. Tu étais là, victime innocente d'une injuste cause et pionnière hardie d'une nouvelle vie" (SLL. p.69). This is, in fact, one of the few uses of the word 'victim' in this novel, and Ramatoulaye does not dwell on the concept. Many critics see Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou, Jacqueline and also, for different reasons, Binetou and la petite Nabou as female victims in thrall to male oppression, polygyny, or at least victims of a patriarchal supremacy, yet Bâ manages the feat of demonstrating, particularly in the case of Aïssatou: "that victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways"[499].

In a short space of time, Aïssatou had to make many difficult decisions. First, her choice to leave Mawdo was daring in itself: "recommencer à zéro" (SLL. p.78) and secondly, divorcing Mawdo was an extremely brave move since although Islam permits divorce, it was unusual at the time for a woman to divorce her husband[500] so it should not be underestimated by Western readers what a radical move this was in a still largely traditional society. As Cyril Mokwenye highlights, this is a double revolt on the part of Aïssatou since by choosing divorce she is making a stand not only against the Islamic religion, but also against African tradition[501]. Incidentally, many critics speculate as to whether Aïssatou is actually divorced, for example Miriam Murtuza writes: "although we do not know whether Aïssatou actually divorces Mawdo"[502] yet Ramatoulaye quite clearly states at the start of her letter: "hier, tu as divorcé" (SLL. p.12) and it is an important point with regard to her status.

Thirdly, since her divorce Aïssatou made a life, and career, for herself and her four boys (which was also a challenging move since the children must have been small to have been allowed to remain with Aïssatou, as in Senegal husbands retain the right in a divorce to determine where the children will be raised and boys normally remain with their father) in the United States of America – a move which takes the novel out of the narrow confines of Senegal, and on to the worldwide stage. What better token of the Western world could Bâ have chosen? Rather than pick France, symbol of colonialism and thus associated with, and tainted by the past, the choice of the USA is inspired, serving as the origin and symbol of modern consumerism which will undoubtedly impact on all Senegalese lives even though for

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[499] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.3.

[500] In rural Senegal today, more than a third of Wolof women have divorced at least once, usually within the first five years of marriage so that they can quickly remarry, and three-quarters of Wolof divorces are requested by women, of which more than sixty percent are requested for economic reasons, including the husband's abandoning the marital home. Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine, *African Women: A Modern History*, (translated by Beth Gillian Raps), Boulder, Colo., Oxford: Westview Press (1997), pp.220-221.

[501] Mokwenye, Cyril, 'La polygamie et la révolte de la femme africaine moderne: une lecture d'«*Une si longue lettre*» de Mariama Bâ', in *L'Afrique Littéraire*, 65-66 (1982), p.61.

[502] Murtuza, Miriam, 'The Marriage and Divorce of Polygyny and Nation: Interplay of Gender, Religion, and Class in Sembène Ousmane and Mariama Bâ' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.188.

the vast majority it will remain a far-off, alien land. Yet the fact that one of their number has succeeded in making a life there and, even more importantly, the fact that she is an older woman rather than a young man or woman fresh out of high school, serves to broaden horizons which, without being patronising, may otherwise only reach as far as the borders of Senegal. In addition, by making sure the reader is aware that Aïssatou returns to her origins occasionally even if she may eat with a knife and fork and prefers a table to the traditional tablecloth spread on the ground, Bâ ensures Aïssatou retains the precious link with the homeland, thus demonstrating that embracing new ideas does not automatically mean that old ones must be discarded.

2.7 Deadlier than the male?

> "Des amitiés s'y nouaient, qui ont résisté au temps et à l'éloignement. Nous étions de véritables sœurs destinées à la même mission émancipatrice" (SLL. p.38)

Whilst the above quotation refers to Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye who, over the course of their lifetime, have offered each other succour, friendship, loyalty, generosity, and unquestioning support despite being separated by an ocean for the last eight years, many critics have seen the entire novel as a celebration of female solidarity and female sisterhood. Whilst I agree that Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are highly supportive of each other, I do feel the female solidarity on show is not always quite as well-meaning as a cursory first reading might imply. In addition, Laura Dubek[503] sees the enduring friendship between the Westernised Aïssatou and the traditional Ramatoulaye as affirming that different cultural mores can co-exist, and whilst seeing Dubek's point, it would have a better foundation if Aïssatou was not such a newcomer to the Western world. After all, she had only been divorced for eight years and whilst Aïssatou may have adopted Western ways in later life, her character was shaped by her Senegalese upbringing.

Since Ramatoulaye's mother is a mere shadow in this text and Ramatoulaye's life, and given the political sub-text of the novel, it is perhaps inevitable that it is left to Ramatoulaye's inspirational, if rather subversive, headmistress to take over the mantle of idealised role model. Ramatoulaye's mother was tied to the past, to the traditions, to the old beliefs and superstitions, thus one of the reasons she did not approve of Ramatoulaye's choice of husband was because: "de la séparation voyante de tes deux premières incisives supérieures, signe de primauté de la sensualité en l'individu" (SLL. p.35), whereas the white French headmistress represented the future, and, most importantly, she was a woman whose task was: "nous sortir de l'enlisement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts; faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle" (SLL. p.38). It is not uncommon in midlife to seek through examples of other women how to live this period of change, and often one has recourse to one's mother, but for Ramatoulaye, despite the fading hopes caused by living the reality of the so-called promised land, and seeing in maturity the gloss coming off those shining youthful visions of a golden future, it is still when she thinks of her headmistress that she is overcome with emotion:

> Comme je pense à elle! Si son souvenir résiste victorieusement à l'ingratitude du temps, à présent que les fleurs n'encensent plus aussi puissamment qu'autrefois, que le mûrissement et la réflexion dégarnissent les rêves du merveilleux, c'est que la voie choisie pour notre formation et notre épanouissment ne fut point hasard. Elle

[503] Dubek, Laura, 'Lessons in Solidarity: Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ on Female Victim(izer)s' in *Women's Studies*, 30:2, April 2001, p.214.

> concorde avec les options profondes de l'Afrique nouvelle, pour promouvoir la femme noire (SLL. p.38).

It is presumably not a coincidence, having been strongly influenced by the same headmistress, that both Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou had controversial marriages, far from the norm for the times. At the age of eighteen, Ramatoulaye married Modou for love, against her parents' wishes, and therefore had a quiet wedding without a dowry to the surprise of the town: "muette d'étonnement" (SLL. p.39) at this break with tradition. Whereas Aïssatou's presumption as the daughter of a jeweller, thus a member of the artisan caste, daring to marry a Toucouleur of royal blood, united the town in: "rumeurs coléreuses" (SLL. p.40). Given that both marriages failed, albeit after many happy years, this could be seen, possibly, as an argument in favour of traditional marriages, particularly if one adds into the equation the at least temporarily stalled marriage of Jacqueline, a woman from the Ivory Coast who also married against her parents' wishes and, in addition, was shunned by her parents-in-law because she remained a protestant.

Jacqueline's husband was not faithful, nor did he hide his indiscretions, and Jacqueline internalised her pain and unhappiness until it manifested itself in a physical symptom of a lump in her chest. She endured countless tests and examinations and spent a month in hospital, supported by her friends who also tried traditional medicine methods for: "cette sœur" (SLL. p.84) yet it was the kind words and gentle voice of the head of Neurology which eventually brought a kind of solace to this troubled soul when he explained: "les conditions de vie que vous souhaitez diffèrent de la réalité et voilà pour vous des raisons de tourments" (SLL. p.87), proving he understood that her body was reacting to the psychological suffering she had undergone since moving to Senegal with her husband and that her symptoms were: "an embodied repudiation of a gendered situation that seems to allow one no other control"[504]. In fact, his reported words could have been destined for Ramatoulaye herself – or any woman in a similar crisis: "il faut réagir, sortir, vous trouver des raisons de vivre. Prenez courage. Lentement, vous triompherez" (SLL. p.87). Although we are not party to the exact: "issue heureuse" (SLL. p.88) of Jacqueline's story, the implied meaning in Ramatoulaye's final words on Jacqueline, together with the conditional tense used (combattrait) is that she emerged from her ordeal stronger and able to deal with what life threw at her: "elle connaissait le noyau de son mal et le combattrait. Elle se moralisait. Elle revenait de loin, Jacqueline!" (SLL. p.88).

Aïssatou is described as Ramatoulaye's sister, when Ramatoulaye recalls Aïssatou's kindness and generosity in providing the family with a car which makes their day-to-day living so much easier – as well as enabling them to save face when confronted with either la Dame Belle-Mère or her daughter speeding around town in cars provided by Modou. There is another indirect benefit: having the car means

[504] Lashgari, Deirdre, 'Introduction: to Speak the Unspeakable: Implications of Gender, "Race," Class, and Culture' in *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*, ed. by Lashgari, Deirdre, London: University Press of Virginia (1995), p.8.

Ramatoulaye has to learn to drive, spurred on by the thought that if Binetou could drive, so could she, providing her with a new challenge in this already challenging phase of her life. Thus, as Ramatoulaye writes: "l'amitié a des grandeurs inconnues de l'amour. Elle se fortifie dans les difficultés, alors que les contraintes massacrent l'amour. Elle résiste au temps qui lasse et désunit les couples. Elle a des élévations inconnues de l'amour" (SLL. p.103).

Aïssatou's gift of a car to make Ramatoulaye's life easier also reinforces Ramatoulaye's choice of lifestyle – there are no questions, it is given without comment because Aïssatou accepts Ramatoulaye's decision, although it would presumably not have been her own. The car is also proof positive of Aïssatou's success in the United States of America. Modou has difficulty believing it is a gift from his wife's friend – is it so unlikely that Aïssatou, a humble goldsmith's daughter, can afford to buy his wife a car? This is, of course, something that Modou cannot afford to do, having mortgaged himself beyond his limit to keep his new wife and her mother in the style to which they wished to become accustomed. This gift also makes a clear statement that Aïssatou has arrived at the same power as a man – such a gift from a woman was no doubt fairly extraordinary at the time and a challenge to the traditional roles men and women were expected to play. In addition, since we are aware that Aïssatou lives alone, that is, without a male to provide her with economic support, Bâ is emphasising that it is possible for a woman to live an autonomous existence, fully able to provide for herself and her family (and friends) financially. Simone de Beauvoir would be proud of Aïssatou, since she has been truly brave: "refuser d'être l'Autre, refuser la complicité avec l'homme, ce serait pour elles renoncer à tous les avantages que l'alliance avec la caste supérieure peut leur conférer"[505].

Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter, Daba, a great support to her mother and never reconciled to her father's betrayal of her mother and herself and her siblings, serves as the ideal model for the next generation: caring, considerate, in an equal partnership with her husband and also witness to that generation's political and social ambitions. She rejects politics, not because she does not care about her country's future but because it is too male-centred for her to make a difference and she prefers her woman's association[506] where: "il n'y a ni rivalité, ni clivage, ni calomnie, ni bousculade [...] nous sommes utilisées selon nos compétences dans nos manifestations et organisations qui vont dans le sens de la

[505] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.21.
[506] Karen Beckwith differentiates between feminist movements and women's movements, where women's movements are a subset of sociopolitical movements that are: "characterized by the primacy of women's gendered experiences, women's issues, and women's leadership and decision-making. The relationship of women to these movements is direct and immediate; movement definition, issue articulation, and issue resolution are specific to women, developed and organized by them with reference to their gender identity" (Beckwith, 1996: 1038), with the proviso that specific content will, of course, vary across cultural contexts. Whereas feminist movements [...] are distinguished by their challenge of patriarchy. They share a gendered power analysis of women's subordination and contest political, social and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender. Beckwith, Karen, 'Beyond Compare? Women's Movements in Comparative Perspective' in *European Journal of Political Research*, 37 (2000), p.437.

promotion de la femme" (SLL. p.138). Whilst as Shari Coulis writes: "the Senegalese woman retains her status of other, largely due to Muslim custom and culture [...] Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou, Binetou – all of the Senegalese women – remain colonized by the patriarchal system of Islam"[507], (and I agree that this may be true of Binetou, but trust I will succeed in showing how first Aïssatou and then eventually Ramatoulaye manage to break through to the other side), the character of Daba is surely posited as an exception to that observation. Throughout the novel, it is implied that change will come with Daba's generation, particularly as Bâ makes sure that it is Daba's husband, Abdou, who makes the point about equality in marriage to a nonplussed Ramatoulaye who sees that: "son mari cuit le riz aussi bien qu'elle, son mari qui proclame, quand je lui dis qu'il «pourrit» sa femme: «Daba est ma femme. Elle n'est pas mon esclave, ni ma servante»" (SLL. p.137).

However, despite the positive examples of female solidarity in *Une si longue lettre*, I consider it is valid to question the notion of unalloyed female unity within this novel, as in some cases there is a hint of just lip-service being paid to foster this illusion of sisterhood. I believe that what Bâ is really saying is that, yes, in certain circumstances, some women have the type of relationship where they can help each other, can understand what the other is experiencing, to the extent where marriage struggles to improve on such a relationship, and in this she has much in common with other francophone writers such as the Algerian writers Leïla Sebbar and Assia Djebar: Djebar's last three novels, for instance, insist on female bonding as a way of achieving greater self-realization[508]. Ultimately, however, I think that Bâ is saying that, ideally, female solidarity should be the way forward, but you may also find you can only rely on yourself and have to look within yourself to find the answers that work for you, because you cannot always rely on your "sisters" to have your best interests at heart. In a patriarchal society, and with the rivalries that polygyny introduces, women are not always going to be the best of friends since: "elles vivent dispersées parmi les hommes, rattachées par l'habitat, le travail, les intérêts économiques, la condition sociale à certains hommes – père ou mari – plus étroitement qu'aux autres femmes"[509]. In defence of this argument, why did no one warn Aïssatou that she should prepare for a co-wife? Even Ramatoulaye, her oldest friend, kept silent although she admitted: "je savais. Modou savait. La ville savait. Toi, Aïssatou, tu ne soupçonnais rien et rayonnais toujours. [...] Mawdo eut enfin le courage de te dire *ce que chaque femme chuchotait*: tu avais une co-épouse" (SLL. p.62, my italics).

Likewise, for Ramatoulaye, was there no one prepared to tell her, or her daughter, what apparently the whole town knew, that Modou was infatuated with Daba's schoolfriend and was preparing to marry her. Even the smallest wedding takes some preparation. Dakar is big, but not that big and Radio Cancan

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[507] Coulis, Shari, 'The Impossibility of Choice: Gender and Genre in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.30.
[508] Abu-Haidar, Farida, 'Unmasking Women: The Female Persona in Algerian Fiction' in *African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Laïla Ibnlfassi & Nicki Hitchcott, Oxford: Berg (1996), p.74.
[509] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1999), p.19.

functioned efficiently enough later for Daouda Dieng to learn that Ramatoulaye had rejected Tamsir's offer of marriage. Then, although Ramatoulaye generously excuses Binetou for her part in the deception, does the young woman's behaviour towards her best friend, if not to her best friend's mother, really warrant such forgiveness: "elle avait innocemment confié ses secrets à la fille de sa rivale parce qu'elle croyait que ce rêve, surgi d'un cerveau vieillissant, ne serait jamais réalité" (SLL. p.77) – surely this is just too disingenuous? Thus: "la narratrice met d'autre part en lumière la solitude à laquelle se trouve condamnée la femme dans une société qui est censée par ailleurs multiplier les liens de solidarité et les réseaux de relations"[510].

Then, whilst Ramatoulaye preaches equality in marriage, she is not quite so generous with regard to social equality. As Beauvoir points out regarding female solidarity: "bourgeoises elles sont solidaires des bourgeois et non des femmes prolétaires"[511] and there is a definite undertone present in this text which hints at Ramatoulaye's desire to keep the different strata of society separate; she twice uses the word 'promotion' with regard to Binetou and her mother: "Binetou, une enfant de l'âge de ma fille Daba, promue au range de ma co-épouse et à qui je devais faire face" (SLL. pp.76-77) and: "la promotion que tirait du mariage la mère de Binetou" (SLL. p.76), as well as: "j'enregistre, courroucée, cette volonté de nivellement qui réjouit la nouvelle belle-mère de Modou" (SLL. p.17). It would be interesting to speculate how Ramatoulaye would have reacted if her husband had chosen a young woman of equal class to be her co-wife – presumably the betrayal would have been the same, but not the social snub.

And what of the meddling mothers-in-law? Where Ramatoulaye could have expected solidarity from a woman of her own age who had suffered with an unfaithful husband, she found instead the sin of envy, with Dame Belle-Mère's desire to improve her quality of life overriding any notions of sisterly unity. Likewise Aïssatou found favour with none of her in-laws: "la mienne [la belle-famille] me regarde du haut de sa noblesse déchue" (SLL. p.46). In fact, although it is generally believed, at least in the West, that older women in non-Westernised cultures actually gain power once they pass child-bearing age, this is apparently a myth, with the reality being that for the African woman of any age: "her power is a pseudopower, accorded to her by her male oppressors who equate the woman's role with African tradition"[512]. Thus older women are, as seen in this novel, restricted to exercising a real domination only in: "les réseaux informels: dans les groupes de commérage qui s'assurent le contrôle sur les conduites d'autrui, à travers leurs commentaires publics, dans les groupes d'entraide, dans les réseaux d'information

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[510] Mouralis, Bernard, 'Une parole autre: Aoua Keita, Mariama Bâ et Awa Thiam' in *notre librairie*, 117, April-June 1994, p.25.
[511] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1999), p.19.
[512] Rueschmann, Eva, 'Female Self-Definition and the African Community in Mariama Bâ's Epistolary Novel *So Long a Letter*' in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*, ed. by Brown, Anne E. & Goozé, Marjanne E., London: Greenwood Press (1995), p.4.

et au sein du foyer"[513] and, I would add, influence over their sons as ably demonstrated by Tante Nabou. In fact, one could go so far as to describe their behaviour as subversive, colluding with men to maintain the status quo which is heavily slanted towards men and their desires, instead of supporting those women who are prepared to take a stand on issues that ultimately affect all women, such as polygyny. This novel highlights that it is up to the younger, more educated, less traditional generation of women to try to make a difference. Indeed, the Family Code of 1972 goes some way to improving the lot of women and it should be noted that many African countries even today do not possess such a legal framework.

And Jacqueline's experience?

> noire et Africaine, elle aurait dû s'intégrer, sans heurt, dans une société noire et africaine, le Sénégal et la Côte d'Ivoire ayant passé entre les mains du même colonisateur français. Mais l'Afrique est différente, morcelée. Un même pays change plusieurs fois de visage et de mentalité du Nord au Sud ou de l'Est à l'Ouest. Jacqueline voulait bien se sénégaliser, mais les moqueries arrêtaient en elle toute volonté de coopération" (SLL. p.82).

Bâ takes this opportunity to issue a warning to all those who paint Africa with broad brush strokes of one colour – it is a multi-cultural, multi-racial melting pot and that applies to each individual country. Being black and African, therefore, does not automatically mean instant assimilation into another African country, nor does being black with African roots, as Rosélie finds out in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*. Bâ stops short of saying it is the women who are not welcoming, but it would be the female members of her in-laws who dictate Jacqueline's reception and she is sick not just because of Samba Diack's infidelities, but also as a result of the whole ambiance in which she has to live.

All these examples seem to indicate a collusion of women to reinforce the very structures of male dominance that one would have expected they would rail against, which would confirm one of the general theses proposed by Obioma Nnaemeka: that the oppression of women is not simply a masculinist flaw as some feminist analyses claim but that it also entails woman-on-woman violence that is often the outcome of institutionalized, hierarchical female spaces that make women victims and collaborators in patriarchal violence[514] with the proviso that violence in this novel is not physical, but rather emotionally damaging. Bâ is highlighting the: "urgent need for women – even those disadvantaged in some ways – to acknowledge their responsibility for the maintenance and perpetuation of racist, classist, and sexist

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[513] Attias-Donfut, Claudine, ' Entre traditions et modernité: les incontournables aînés' in *Vieillir en Afrique*, ed. by Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Rosenmayr, Léopold, Paris: PUF (1994) p.35.
[514] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.19.

ideologies"[515]. This, of course, requires a radical re-think on cause and effect by women in Senegal and, one suspects, as education improves, changes in thinking will follow.

However, even the educated Ramatoulaye herself does not always display all the attributes of sisterly love. Whilst Farmata, her griote neighbour, a: "compagne d'enfance, par la fréquentation de nos familles" (SLL. p.130) who: "alors qu'elle était une jeune fille, déjà attachée à mes pas comme une ombre" (SLL. p.155), believes that: "nos sorts sont liés. Ton ombre me protège" (SLL. p.123), Ramatoulaye keeps her at arm's distance, tolerating her presence but not treating her as a friend. Is this simply because, as she tells Aïssatou: "nos points de vue divergeaient sur tout" (SLL. p.149), or does it have more to do with class and caste? Or is it, as Shaun Irlam suggests, that Ramatoulaye maintains a tetchy relationship with orality and the older traditions of oral culture because in writing to Aïssatou, she is privileging a: "literate orality, mediated through writing, over an illiterate one"[516] with the implication that Farmata represents the uncouth and the primitive.

Ramatoulaye's response when she sends Farmata as messenger to Daouda Dieng is illuminating in two ways. First, instead of sending a verbal message, which would have been the traditional way, she sends a written note which Farmata obviously cannot read, thus she is still the traditional messenger, but she is not party to the message. Second, with regard to her attitude towards Farmata where: "pour la première fois, j'avais recours à Farmata et j'en étais gênée. Elle? Elle jubilait, ayant rêvé à ce rôle depuis notre jeunesse. Mais j'agissais toujours seule; elle n'était jamais intervenante dans mes problèmes, seulement informée, comme une «vulgaire connaissance» se plaignait-elle" (SLL. p.126). That they were not equals is evident in their relationship, and Bâ's choice of words demonstrates this, thus: "Farmata *osa*" (SLL. p.150, my italics) to suggest to Ramatoulaye that she question her daughters as to the pregnancy revealed by the stones Farmata threw for her.

Bâ's own views on the caste system and how it was perceived at the time of writing *Une si longue lettre* by the society in which she lived reveals just why she depicted Aïssatou suffering at the hands of her mother-in-law. She believed that: "ce n'est pas avec nous qui sommes une génération charnière que ce problème [des castes] trouvera une solution définitive. [...] Nous subissons des pesanteurs sociales au niveau de nos parents qui sont encore vivants. Je compte davantage sur les jeunes pour que ce problème soit aboli"[517]. She agreed with the interviewer that she would not accept her daughter's marriage to a young man who was a member of a caste:

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[515] Dubek, Laura, 'Lessons in Solidarity: Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ on Female Victim(izer)s' in *Women's Studies*, 30:2, April 2001, p.201.
[516] Irlam, Shaun, 'Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*: The Vocation of Memory and the Space of Writing" in *Research in African Literatures*, 29:2 (1998), p.87.
[517] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14.
http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

> si je le faisais, j'aurais les haros de toute ma famille, même si profondément je suis contre la ségrégation des castes. Il y a la force du sang, la force des liens familiaux. Je suis obligée de me plier aux exigences du groupe. Si j'ai ma fille qui marie son enfant avec un casté, ce n'est pas moi qui viendrai l'en dissuader. Je ne trouverais pas la même attitude indifférente chez mes parents[518].

Thus, whilst there is no doubt that: "friendship between two women is presented as a source of stability and strength and is diametrically opposed to the fleeting and fickle nature of heterosexual love"[519], there is also no denying the novel is replete with examples of the *lack* of woman-on-woman solidarity which is perhaps not surprising if one considers the disparate group of women depicted in this novel, separated by class, by wealth, by education, by ambition, even by race in the case of Jacqueline – there is, therefore, not one category of 'women' but many, and: "de ce fait, ces femmes se retrouvent [...] dans des situations qui font ressortir leur solidarité avec les hommes"[520].

[518] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

[519] Hitchcock, Nicki, " 'Confidently Feminine'? Sexual Role-Play in the Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Ibnlfassi, Laïla & Hitchcott, Nicki, Oxford: Berg (1996), p.148.

[520] Mianda, Gertrude, 'Le Féminisme postcolonial et *Le Deuxième Sexe*: rupture ou continuité? in *Le Deuxième Sexe: une relecture en trois temps, 1949-1971-1999*, ed. by Coderre, Cécile & Tahon, Marie-Blanche, Montreal: Remue-Ménage (2001), p.156.

2.8 "Les belles-mères"

No discussion of female solidarity in this novel and depiction of older women could possibly exclude the mother-in-law. Aïcha Lemsine has a perfect description in *La Chrysalide*[521] of the metamorphosis of some types of married women in Algeria as they grow older, and this would apply equally to at least two of the mothers-in-law depicted in *Une si longue lettre*:

> ces femmes devenaient à leur tour des belles-mères implacables, imbues de leur autorité et des principes rigides de la «famille»; oubliant ce qu'elles avaient connu dans leur jeunesse: sévérité du beau-père, de la belle-mère tyrannique et la cohorte des belles-sœurs et beaux-frères malveillants[522].

Une si longue lettre is, as we have seen, a book of contrasts and there are few more striking that the contrast between Ramatoulaye, who is, lest we forget, also a mother-in-law (her eldest daughter Daba having married Abdou, and her second daughter, Aïssatou due to marry the father of her unborn child, Ibrahima Sall) and her friend Aïssatou's mother-in-law, Tante Nabou and her co-wife's mother, la Dame Belle-Mère. Once a pioneer, always a pioneer, thus Ramatoulaye is the positive face of mother-in-lawness whereas the other two are the negative ones – the West African equivalent of witches around the cauldron muttering incantations to harm their rivals. If they conform to the image of the stereotypical middle-aged crone which was how middle-aged women were wont to be depicted on occasions in the past, at least in Western literature, then perhaps this serves as further proof that there are cultural similarities as well as differences throughout the world.

Whilst Ramatoulaye's mother-in-law merits only a mention in her reminiscing, it is not a flattering portrait, but Ramatoulaye knows how to handle her:

> sa [Modou] mère passait et repassait, au gré de ses courses, toujours flanquée d'amies différentes, pour leur montrer la réussite sociale de son fils et surtout, leur faire toucher du doigt sa suprématie dans cette belle maison qu'elle n'habitait pas. Je la recevais avec tous les égards dus à une reine et elle s'en retournait, comblée, surtout si sa main emprisonnait le billet de banque que j'y plaçais adroitement. Mais à peine sortie de la maison, elle pensait à la nouvelle vague d'amies qu'elle devait prochainement épater (SLL. pp.44-45).

However, Aïssatou's widowed mother-in-law is a different matter. A princess: "une Dioufène, Guélewar du Sine" (SLL. p.40) and: "Tante Nabou pour nous et Seynabou pour les autres" (SLL. p.55), she is the archetypal wicked mother-in-law (so renowned in Western fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White) plotting her daughter-in-law's downfall – with a twist, that of the caste system. She also serves to

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[521] Lemsine, Aïcha, *La Chrysalide: chroniques algériennes*, Paris: des Femmes (1995).
[522] ibid., p.199.

represent the values of the rural Senegal in which she was brought up where one can see: "la survie des traditions" (SLL. p.58) contrasting with the far more modern urban world of Dakar to which she moved on her marriage, and by extension, she sees her battle with Aïssatou thus as: "Tante Nabou constatait la vulnérabilité des êtres face à l'éternité de la nature. Par sa durée, la nature défie le temps et prend sa revanche sur l'homme" (SLL. p.57). The dice is cast, she will prevail in time over her daughter-in-law – and, it has to be admitted, ultimately she succeeds and achieves her aim. Born into royal blood and thus imbued with a sense of destiny rooted in the past, she is incapable of embracing the future since: "elle vivait dans le passé sans prendre conscience du monde qui muait. Elle s'obstinait dans les vérités anciennes" (SLL. p.55). Thus she feels threatened by the new Senegal, bringing with it the blurring of social boundaries and the potential disintegration of the age-old caste system. Widowed early and having brought up her children on her own, she dotes on her only son, Mawdo, and: "du haut de sa noblesse déchue" (SLL. p.46), she carefully plots her revenge on Aïssatou, la Bijoutière, whom he has dared marry against her wishes, thus exemplifying: "l'image de la mère s'oppose à celle de l'epouse, toujours venue d'ailleurs, toujours suspecte de trahison"[523]. Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir could have been describing Tante Nabou when she wrote: "à ses yeux les valeurs sont toutes faites, elles procèdent de la nature, du passé: elle méconnait le prix d'un libre engagement. Son fils lui doit la vie; que doit-il à cette femme qu'hier encore il ignorait?"[524].

Given the strength of Tante Nabou's feelings, her daughter-in-law must have been a thorn in her side at all times, and she would be constantly reminded of Aïssatou's improved status as a result of the marriage since: "greeting behaviour has a special place among the Wolof of Senegal, and well illustrates the link between language and social identity [...]" as: "a person's social identity is involved in every greeting"[525]. As Susan Stringer points out: "social status confers or denies power"[526] which is true whether you are born into a particular social milieu, are co-opted, or have to buy your entrance ticket, and Ramatoulaye finds being treated the same as Binetou and her mother by Modou's sisters during the mourning ceremonies very irritating as: "elles célèbrent, avec la même aisance et les mêmes mots, douze et trois maternités. J'enregistre, courroucée, cette volonté de nivellement qui réjouit la nouvelle belle-mère de Modou" (SLL. p.17). Just as, in fact, Aïssatou's mother benefited from her daughter's marriage to Mawdo, another irritant for Tante Nabou who saw Aïssatou's mother: "prendre des rondeurs et mieux s'habiller" (SLL. p.54).

So Tante Nabou takes the long view. Determined to ensure the royal bloodline, she decides on a visit to her younger brother at Diakhao, in rural Senegal, birthplace of her ancestors where she is welcomed

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[523] Paulme, Denise, 'La mère dévorée, ou «tuons mes mères!» Analyse d'un conte africain' in *Vieillir en Afrique*, ed. by Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Rosenmayr, Léopold, Paris: PUF (1994), p.183.
[524] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.471.
[525] Crystal, David, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge: CUP (1987), p.40.
[526] Stringer, Susan, *The Senegalese Novel by Women*, New York: Peter Lang (1999), p.41.

royally and where: "elle puisa force et vigueur dans les cendres ancestrales remuées" (SLL. p.59). Putting her plan into action, she asks her brother for one of his daughters to help her in her old age and promises him: "je ferai de cette enfant une autre moi-même" (SLL. p.60). Patiently, she waits for the years to pass for this child, Nabou, to come of age, during which time she nurtures her, educating her – yet not too much, after all: "en vérité, l'instruction d'une femme n'est pas à pousser" (SLL. p.62), therefore a midwife would be the ideal profession[527] – training her, or rather: "lui enseignait que la qualité première d'une femme est la docilité" (SLL. p.61), and, of course, making sure she is aware of her royal origins. As befits her allegiance to the old traditions, story-telling or: "cette éducation orale" (SLL. p.91) plays a major role in the child's indoctrination:

> c'était surtout, par les contes, pendant les veillées à la belle étoile, que Tante Nabou avait exercé son emprise sur l'âme de la petite Nabou, sa voix expressive glorifiant la violence justicière du guerrier, sa voix expressive plaignait l'inquiétude de l'Aimée toute de soumission. Elle saluait le courage des téméraires; elle stigmatisait la ruse, la paresse, la calomnie; elle réclaimait sollicitude pour l'orphelin et respect pour la vieillesse. Mise en scène d'animaux, chansons nostalgiques tenaient haletante la petite Nabou. Et lentement, sûrement, par la ténacité de la répétition, s'insinuaient en cette enfante les vertus et la grandeur d'une race (SLL. pp.90-91).

Finally, when she judges the time right, she plays on her only son's sense of duty by emphasising the shame that will befall her if he refuses his uncle's daughter in marriage – a lie, of course, since Mawdo's uncle knows nothing of his sister's plans for his daughter.

The result of Tante Nabou's years of scheming and calculation is that she manages to reassert her matriarchal power over her son, rid herself of her lowly-bred daughter-in-law and reinstate the status quo in the caste system, as well as ensure that royal blood will flow again through her grandchildrens' veins: «le sang est retourné à sa source» as Ramatoulaye predicts the griots will sing about Tante Nabou's children. Eva Rueschmann underlines the fact that in a polygamous society, where the relationship between husband and wife is not exclusive and women have little power, the relationship between mother and son is all the more tenacious and powerful and that it is only through her children that a mother can exercise any kind of control[528]. Thus Mawdo takes a second wife, ostensibly to please his mother, and Aïssatou, faced with sharing her life with a co-wife, takes the only option open to her, as Ramatoulaye reminds her: "tu choisis la rupture, un aller sans retour avec tes quatre fils" (SLL. p.64). As the last line reads in the letter Aïssatou leaves for Mawdo: "je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom. Vêtue du seul

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[527] An interesting choice of occupation since according to Claudine Attias-Donfut only menopausal women could be midwives in traditional Toucouleur society. Was Bâ using Nabou's profession to show how traditions were changing? Attias-Donfut, Claudine, 'Introduction' in *Vieillir en Afrique*, ed. by Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Rosenmayr, Léopold, Paris: PUF (1994), p.37.

[528] Rueschmann, Eva, 'Female Self-Definition and the African Community in Mariama Bâ's Epistolary Novel *So Long a Letter*' in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*, ed. by Brown, Anne E. & Goozé, Marjanne E., London: Greenwood Press (1995), p.13.

habit valable de la dignité, je poursuis ma route" (SLL. p.65), although as Nwachukwu-Agbada points out, that dignity she talks about is neither traditional nor Islamic; it is Western and new, whereas Mawdo has reneged on the Western principles of matrimony by reverting to tradition and Islam[529].

Although the origins (from a family of: "ndols[530], d'une extrême pauvreté" SLL. p.76) of Dame Belle-Mère are diametrically opposed to those of Tante Nabou, she is just as destructive in her machinations, although more open and upfront about her ambitions. As Daba explains to her mother, this is: "une femme qui veut tellement sortir de sa condition médiocre et qui regrette tant sa beauté fanée dans la fumée des feux de bois, qu'elle regarde avec envie tout ce que je porte; elle se plaint à longueur de journée" (SLL. p.71). Just like Tante Nabou, she sees her daughter as a commodity; Binetou is young and beautiful and if an older man is besotted with her and wants to marry her, and, of course, is willing to pay any price, then the whole family will benefit, financially and socially, and she will be: "nouvellement entrée dans la bourgeoisie citadine par le mariage de sa fille" (SLL. p.21). From a Western viewpoint, this is an unusual scenario: we are accustomed nowadays to reading about trophy wives, but those beautiful young women who marry much older men for security and riches are almost certainly making their own decisions and it would be uncommon to find a meddling mother in the background. Perhaps the nearest the West can get to this situation is in the worlds of sport and film where pushy parents are often accused of not having the best interests of their children at heart but attempting to live life through their children as well as being attracted by the financial benefits and vicarious prestige.

Dame Belle-Mère would be aged between forty and fifty, possibly fairly close in age to Ramatoulaye since Binetou and Daba are in the same class, but, age apart, the two women have little in common, although since they were both first wives, and Dame Belle-Mère had been neglected by her unfaithful husband, one would have thought that perhaps she would have hesitated before encouraging Binetou to marry Modou. Indeed, Daba has the last word when stripping the parvenus from their house and possessions after Modou's death when she wonders: "comment une femme peut-elle saper le bonheur d'une autre femme? Tu ne mérites aucune pitié" (SLL. p.132). Ramatoulaye comments that Daba is like all the young, without pity and Cham reads into this scene that: "respect for elders, one of the central pillars of any society, runs the risk of becoming a casualty of the process of abandonment"[531]. Yet in the modern world, elders presumably have to earn respect rather than be entitled to it by right.

It would be easy to criticise the actions of Dame Belle-Mère, yet it is important to appreciate that she was not born with the same privileges as Ramatoulaye. Critics regularly point out that care must be taken not

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[529] Nwachukwu-Agbada, J.O.J., 'One Wife be for One Man: Mariama Bâ's Doctrine for Matrimony' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 37:3, Autumn 1991, p.569.
[530] Wolof. The translation equates to 'poor people'.
[531] Cham, Mbye Baboucar, 'The Female Condition in Africa: a Literary Exploration by Mariama Bâ" in *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 17:1 (1984-85), p.47.

to attribute a Western value system, and more especially a Western feminist analysis, to a novel written by an African living in Africa about Africa. Eva Rueschmann, to cite just one, makes the point that: "the question of the usefulness of Western feminism for African women remains to be considered. Is not the African woman once again being defined by an Other, this time by the white, educated, middle-class feminist?"[532] Yet surely *Une si longue lettre* is a novel written by an educated, middle class Senegalese woman from a wealthy family about the experiences of the educated middle-class (and Senegalese aristocracy) in a country with an active caste system where the vast, uneducated and illiterate majority can only dream of achieving that status and all the luxury and benefits that it would convey. When your home, if you are lucky, is a: "baraque branlante, tapissé de zinc et de couvertures de revues où se côtoyaient pin-ups et publicités" (SLL. p.94) like Dame Belle-Mère's former residence, it would be a strange person indeed who would not covet others' luxury lifestyles.

Thus, although Ramatoulaye shows herself in many ways to be a compassionate, caring woman, or rather mother, there is no hint of any comprehension on her part as to why Dame Belle-Mère: "une mère en furie, qui hurle sa faim et sa soif de vivre" (SLL. p.77) seizes this opportunity to improve her life and status, even if she has to sacrifice her daughter's youth to achieve an easier old age for herself, hence Ramatoulaye sees Binetou simply as: "un agneau immolé comme beaucoup d'autres sur l'autel du «matériel» (SLL. p.77). Whilst it is Ramatoulaye, a fictional character, who is voicing these sentiments "from an elite perspective"[533], I cannot deny there is an implied criticism of the author who was also from a privileged background when I write that I do feel that it is easy to be patronising about people's desire for material wealth if you have it, and they do not.

However, even taking into account the desperation to escape the poverty trap that could have led Dame Belle-Mère to such extreme behaviour, there is no doubt that the two girls, Binetou and Nabou, are traded as commodities, being mere pawns in the clutches of the more calculating older women. Indeed, Tante Nabou is described as having: "exercé son emprise sur l'âme de la petite Nabou" (SLL. p.91), which emphasises the supernatural aspect of her dominance of her niece. For her part, Binetou gives in to her mother's tears when she pleads with her daughter: "de lui «donner une fin heureuse, dans une vraie maison» (SLL. p.71) and so sacrifices not only her youth, but also her future since she leaves school before her baccalauréat in order to marry Modou. Nabou is luckier in that although her aunt did have ulterior motives for taking her from her family[534], she made sure Nabou had an adequate education and a fulfilling occupation as a midwife before presenting her to Mawdo as his second wife.

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[532] Rueschmann, Eva, 'Female Self-Definition and the African Community in Mariama Bâ's Epistolary Novel *So Long a Letter'* in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*, ed. by Brown, Anne E. & Goozé, Marjanne E., London: Greenwood Press (1995), p.6.
[533] Sarvan, Charles Ponnuthurai, 'Feminism and African Fiction: the Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34:3, Autumn 1988, p.457.
[534] Not an uncommon practice for relatives to bring up nieces/nephews.

2.9 Solitude

The theme of solitude is one that reoccurs in the majority of midlife texts. Ramatoulaye knows two types of solitude. First, there is the solitude more akin to loneliness, occasioned by Modou's abandonment of his wife five years before his death, when she finds herself suddenly metaphorically alone, that is, without a companion and helpmate, since with twelve children she is hardly in a strict state of solitude, and secondly, Ramatoulaye experiences the real solitude imposed on her by the death of her husband for which the Islamic[535] religion demands a period of mourning, thus: "je vis seule dans une monotonie que ne coupent que les bains purificateurs et les changements de vêtements de deuil, tous les lundis et vendredis. [...] Les murs qui limitent mon horizon pendant quatre mois et dix jours ne me gênent guère. J'ai en moi assez de souvenirs à ruminer" (SLL. p.25). It is in this state of solitude where she is alone with her thoughts and memories and deprived of communication with the outside world that: "je ne peux m'empêcher de me ressouvenir" (SLL. p.55) and she starts writing to Aïssatou.

Obioma Nnaemeka highlights the fact that Ramtoulaye is disrupting the culturally designated Islamic space of silence and exclusion in order to "speak" (write),[536] although given Ramatoulaye's deep, if ambivalent, respect throughout the novel for her religion, despite being the victim of Koran-approved polygyny, her silent outpourings seem less a deliberate gesture of disrespect for Islamic traditions, and more a practical means of keeping her sanity and exploring her emotions whilst effectively obeying the rules of confinement. Frieda Ekotta points out that: "confinement in all its multifarious forms relates to a traumatic paralyzing space that Freud has called das unheimliche"[537]. Deprived of normal means of communication, therefore, Ramatoulaye writes her way out of her trauma and confinement.

It is important to make the point here that this period of enforced solitude for the purposes of mourning is, in fact, an artificial situation in that Ramatoulaye is not completely alone, since the reader is aware that she is, even at this time, in the midst of her large family – when, for example, Ousmane brings her Aïssatou's letter and Ramatoulaye calculates: "demain, c'est bien la fin de ma réclusion" (SLL. p.133). No doubt she has been relieved of her day-to-day responsibilities for her children by other members of her family, but one must presume that she is still functioning as a mother in this state of mourning within the confined space of her own four walls, although not as a woman, in the wider sense of her existence in the outside world. This solitude serves to reinforce one of the key elements of her internal crisis which has nothing to do with being a mother, and everything to do with being a woman, since, as I will show in the

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[535] Islam was introduced into Senegal in the eleventh century. In 2005, it is estimated that circa 94 per cent of the population is Muslim.

[536] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.17.

[537] Ekotta, Frieda, 'Language and Confinement in Francophone Women Writers' in *L'Esprit Créateur*, 38:3, Fall 1998, p.73.

next section, Ramatoulaye has to come to terms with the fact that one of the reasons for Modou's second marriage was because she no longer appealed to her husband and he wanted a younger woman. As a result, she has been living on her own, effectively as a single woman but with no right to enter into a relationship with another man, for the five years since he left her. Midlife therefore raises the spectre of a permanent loneliness since: "la solitude, c'est la porte ouverte à l'humiliation dès lors qu'elle est associée à la maturité ou à la vieillesse, c'est-à-dire susceptible d'être perçue comme un statut durable et non plus comme une position d'attente"[538].

Ramatoulaye's solitude when Modou left her for Binetou was also heightened since Aïssatou, whose own crisis had occurred three years earlier, had already branched out into her new life and was not there in person to offer succour. The two women developed different strategies for dealing with their pain and loneliness. For Aïssatou, alone and bringing up four young children, it was above all books that were her salvation, as Ramatoulaye reminded her: "plus que ma présence, mes encouragements, les livres te sauvèrent. Devenus ton refuge, ils te soutinrent" (SLL. p.66). However, they also gave Aïssatou more than comfort, as Ramatoulaye remembers: "ils [les livres] te permirent de te hisser. Ce que la société te refusait, ils te l'accordèrent: des examens passés avec succès te menèrent toi aussi en France. L'École d'interprétariat, d'où tu sortis, permit ta nomination à l'ambassade du Sénégal aux États-Unis. Tu gagnes largement ta vie" (SLL. p.66). It was this positive action on her part which helped Aïssatou towards her new identity, towards her independence away from her previous status as the Other, thus: "tout sujet se pose concrètement à travers les projets comme une transcendance, il n'accomplit sa liberté que par son perpétuel dépassement vers d'autres libertés"[539].

For Ramatoulaye, the cinema is her lifeline and first step towards her own independence. Bravely venturing out on her own, she discovers a new strength in herself, whilst simultaneously discovering the reality of being a middle-aged woman, alone:

> Je me débarrassais de ma timidité pour affronter seule les salles de cinéma; je m'asseyais à ma place, avec de moins en moins de gêne, au fil des mois. On dévisageait la femme mûre sans compagnon. Je feignais l'indifférence, alors que la colère martelait mes nerfs et que mes larmes retenues embuaient mes yeux. Je mesurais, aux regards étonnés, la minceur de la liberté accordée à la femme" (SLL. p.99).

Going alone to a cinema for a woman such as Ramatoulaye was obviously an unusual sight in Dakar in the seventies in that people stared at her and were astonished that she dared venture out on her own to such a place. Here is, of course, an obvious cultural difference: in the mid-seventies, there may well have been

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[538] Heinich, Nathalie, *États de femme: L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale*, Paris: Gallimard (1996), p.323.
[539] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1999), p.31.

places in the West where a single middle-aged woman would feel uncomfortable, but a cinema would not be one of them. It is perhaps difficult for Western women to comprehend the lack of freedom accorded to women in a society where even the young have limited freedom – Ramatoulaye obviously feels quite progressive when she reveals that: "je laissais mes filles sortir de temps en temps. Elles allaient au cinéma, sans ma compagnie; elles recevaient copines et copains" (SLL. p.143).

Ramatoulaye finds companionship and education in all the different genres of the films she sees: "je puisais en eux des leçons de grandeur, de courage et de persévérance. Ils approfondissaient et élargissaient ma vision du monde, grâce à leur apport culturel. J'oubliais mes tourments en partageant ceux d'autrui" (SLL. p.99) and in the long and lonely evenings, when she finds herself missing her conversations with Modou, she discovers solace in the radio, a modern version of the traditional fireside tales and songs: "les mélodies nocturnes berçaient mon anxiété. J'entendais les messages des chants anciens et nouveaux qui réveillaient l'espoir" (SLL. p.101). Yet there is a significant difference between the traditional songs and those emitted via the radio – the traditional songs were a shared, communal, often participatory experience, whereas radio is, by its very nature, a solitary experience even if hundreds or thousands of people are listening to the same broadcast. There is a distance between the speaker and the listener and there can be no interaction. It cannot be a coincidence, therefore, that both Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye find relief in books, cinema and radio: all peopled with characters, yet all one step removed from reality, and all effectively solitary pursuits, although the cinema does at least offer the possibility of collective laughter in the audience, or a shared sharp intake of breath.

Is it, therefore, this solitude as a result of: "the sudden death of Modou that leads his widow to a strenuous effort to renegotiate herself and her identity through the act of writing"[540], a reaction which her earlier state of abandonment had not prompted in her? Is it simply that having the time and space without distractions makes this introspection possible? Or is it the more profound fact that, despite having lived apart for five years and despite any evidence to the contrary, she still felt herself in some way under Modou's protection as long as he was alive, she still belonged to someone, and that his death forced her to accept the unpleasant truth that she was now truly alone, even if she had been, in reality, alone for the past five years. It is certainly Modou's death, rather than his marriage to Binetou, which acts as the catalyst propelling Ramatoulaye towards self-discovery, and it is the writing of this letter to Aïssatou which crystallises her emotions since: "une crise est un moment aigu et pénible dans une phase d'évolution, mais elle implique aussi un mouvement dynamique vers une autre situation plus paisible"[541].

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[540] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, 'Lettre sénégalaise de Ramatoulaye: Writing as Action in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.9.
[541] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil, (1981), p.57.

Ramatoulaye's writing is not only cathartic, in its sense of purifying the abject, but it serves a dual purpose wherein she: "at once wants to escape her solitude and suffering, but also welcomes the opportunity to talk about her pain and grief in so long a manner"[542]. Her imposed solitude creates a welcome private space where she can write uninterrupted, and where her 'dialogue' can be unbroken. If she was able to have a face-to-face conversation with Aïssatou, imagine the discontinuity which is an implicit part of a conversation between two or more people, and if she had had to write more than one 'longue lettre', this flow of consciousness would be broken. I do not believe that Ramatoulaye meant any disrespect to Islam by using this period of enforced solitude profitably to put her own mind in order – after all, through no fault of her own, Modou had effectively been dead to her for five years, and with twelve children to care for, such a prolonged period of respite from the requirements of daily life at this time in her life was best used wisely.

[542] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, 'Lettre sénégalaise de Ramatoulaye: Writing as Action in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.10.

2.10 "L'Hiver de son âge"

> "By their very nature, aging and the life course involve change. If people's lives remained unaltered, there would be no social aging but only that which is strictly biological"[543]

If Ramatoulaye had been aware of the above observation, she may have been more prepared for the change in her life when Modou married a girl less than half her age. If Ramatoulaye is a victim of anything or anyone in this story of her life, she is a victim of social and cultural ageing and she realises she is far from being the only casualty as:

> je comptais les femmes connues, abandonnées ou divorcées de ma génération. J'en connaissais dont le reste de jeunesse florissante avait pu conquérir un homme valable qui alliait situation et prestance et que l'on jugeait «mieux, cent fois mieux que le partant». La misère qui était le lot de ces femmes régressait à l'envahissement de leur bonheur neuf qui changeait leur vie, arrondissait leurs joues, rendait brillants leurs yeux. J'en connaissais qui avaient perdu tout espoir de renouvellement et que la solitude avait mises très tôt sous terre (SLL. p.79).

Ramatoulaye seems to be suggesting here that men are what makes life worthwhile for women and that the alternative, solitude, means an early death. Yet Aïssatou manages to survive, apparently without a man, as Ramatoulaye writes: "tu évolues dans la quiétude, commes tes lettres me le disent, résoluement détournée des chercheurs de joies éphémères et de liaisons faciles" (SLL. p.66), although the implication is that this is because so far she has only encountered men without serious intentions.

Although it was unlikely to be a consolation at the time, Aïssatou did at least have the satisfaction of knowing that Mawdo's second marriage was not provoked by anything she had done, or not done, and that had his mother not interfered, Mawdo would not have looked elsewhere. Even Ramatoulaye admits that: "ton départ l'avait bien ébranlé. Sa tristesse était bien évidente" (SLL. p.67). Mawdo does appear to be rather a weak character, in thrall to his mother, yet it is perhaps presumptious of a Western reader to criticise a son for showing respect for his mother when his culture obviously expects that of him. However, Ramatoulaye does not have the same consolation. Modou chose to leave her and showed no compunction whatsoever. What had provoked Modou's departure? Clearly he was no longer in love with Ramatoulaye. As she admits to herself: "je n'étais donc pas trompée. Je n'intéressais plus Modou et le savais. J'étais abandonnée: une feuille qui voltige mais qu'aucune main n'ose ramasser, aurait dit ma grand-mère" (SLL. p.100). Yet she received no explanation from Modou himself, just platitudes conveyed by a third party. However, there is empirical evidence to support his behaviour.

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[543] Pearlin, Leonard, I., 'Discontinuities in the Study of Aging' in *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Hareven, Tamara, K. & Adams, Kathleen, J, London: Tavistock Publications (1982), p.64.

Odile Journet and André Julliard carried out research in the Soninke and Toucouleur societies in Senegal and reported that:

> le contexte de la polygamie fait du vieillissement des femmes une expérience douloureuse : «Quand la première est fatiguée et vieillie par ses grossesses, le mari va en chercher une plus "fraîche"...», nous dit une épouse toucouleur. Une femme soninke explique qu'«il y a des hommes qui abandonnent carrément leur femme lorsqu'elle est vieille. Ils ne passent même plus la nuit avec elle, ils restent avec les plus jeunes. Ces premières sont malheureuses, mais elles ne disent rien. Elles restent parce qu'elles ont des enfants. Elles attendent qu'ils grandissent et qu'ils aient quelque chose, alors, ce jour-là, elles seront plus heureuses»[544].

Thus, it appears clear: Ramatoulaye, worn out by twelve pregnancies, her job and all that caring for a large family entails, was simply too old to interest Modou. In *La Chrysalide*, set in Algeria and first published in 1976, Aïcha Lemsine tackles similar issues to Bâ through her main protagonist, Khadidja, and she uses the term: "«ayant mangé ses enfants dans son ventre». C'était une expression courante pour désigner moqueusement une vieille fille ayant dépassé l'âge d'avoir des enfants"[545]. Was this how Modou saw Ramatoulaye? Was she marginalised because of her age? As Nwachukwu-Agbada points out:

> what Bâ means is that a woman is biologically worn down as she fulfills her marital responsibilities and therefore cannot bargain should there be a cleavage in the relationship. But she does not put it this way; she employs morals founded on Western precepts to pass value judgments on the men who fall short of them"[546].

Whilst I do believe that it is clear, if not emphasised, in the novel that age is at the root of Ramatoulaye's abandonment by Modou, it is also true that Bâ makes evident that she believes the men have reneged on the monogamous lifestyle they presumably embraced by marrying for love in accordance with Western tradition.

What is interesting, however, is that unlike many novels written by African men and women dealing with older women which refer openly to the fact that: "when no longer fertile, women no longer serve a purpose in a patriarchal, androcentric world"[547], there is no reference at all in this text to this being the reason why Modou married a much younger woman. Although Binetou did have three children in her five years of marriage to Modou, Ramatoulaye's version of events is that Modou became infatuated with the young woman. With Modou: "le loup dans la bergerie" (SLL. p.96) dyeing his hair, keeping to a strict diet, trying to keep up with the young dancers in the nightclubs, the implication in *Une si longue*

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[544] Journet, Odile & Julliard, André, 'Le van des grands-mères' in *Vieillir en Afrique*, ed. by Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Rosenmayr, Léopold, Paris: PUF (1994), p.207.
[545] Lemsine, Aïcha, *La Chrysalide: chroniques algériennes*, Paris: des Femmes (1995), p.185.
[546] Nwachukwu-Agbada, J.O.J., 'One Wife be for One Man: Mariama Bâ's Doctrine for Matrimony' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 37:3, Autumn 1991, p.572.
[547] Gannon, Linda R., *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.9.

lettre seems to be, therefore, in a neat twist of the conventional, that it was Modou, the man, who was suffering a midlife crisis, not Ramatoulaye, the woman. Ramatoulaye has a fascinating description of Modou, desperately trying not to appear too old in the face of Binetou's extreme youth: "Modou s'essoufflait à emprisonner une jeunesse déclinante qui le fuyait de partout: pointe disgracieuse d'un double menton, démarche hésistante et lourde au moindre souffle frais. La grâce et la beauté l'environnaient" (SLL. p.93) and: "la taille douloureusement prise dans ses pantalons qui n'étaient plus de mode, Binetou ne manquait jamais l'occasion d'en rire méchamment" (SLL. p.93). This caricatural portrait of Modou is at odds with how (African) men see themselves where: "a woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified" – as a character (Nigerian male) pontificated in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*.[548].

There is, however, another explanation for the absence in the text at this juncture of Ramatoulaye's age, or infertility, and this could be attributed to the fact that Ramatoulaye is quite simply not defining herself according to patriarchal standards but seeking an answer outside that framework.

Physically, she is aware that she cannot compete with the fresh beauty of a young woman in her prime, as we are given the only real description of Ramatoulaye in the book – a self-portrait of course – in a: "privileged visual moment: self-reflection in the mirror"[549] where Ramatoulaye takes a break from writing her self, to view her abject[550] self, the woman and the mother:

> l'éloquence du miroir s'adressait à mes yeux. Ma minceur avait disparu ainsi que l'aisance et la rapidité de mes mouvements. Mon ventre saillait sous le pagne qui dissimulait des mollets développés par l'impressionnant kilométrage des marches qu'ils avaient effectuées, depuis le temps que j'existe. L'allaitement avait ôté à mes seins leur rondeur et leur fermeté. La jeunesse désertait mon corps, aucune illusion possible! (SLL. p.80)

What Ramatoulaye sees in her mirror and what a Western woman of the same age would see is striking in its cultural differences. A Western woman of fifty would almost certainly be preoccupied with what one can describe as the superficial signs of biological ageing: wrinkles, sagging skin and greying hair, whereas Ramatoulaye sees only the toll that a hard physical life and multiple births have taken on her body. Indeed, up until the shock of her husband leaving her for a younger woman, Ramatoulaye probably had not even given her age much consideration other than to welcome the onset of the menopause as bringing freedom from childbirth. It is, in fact, women in our Westernised cultures, overly obsessed with the value placed on youth and beauty, who do not appreciate the feeling of liberation that the menopause can cause in women of non-Westernised cultures with their emphasis on large families. In a recent study

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[548] Emecheta, Buchi, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann Educational Books (1979), p.71.
[549] Brooks, Peter, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1993), p.14.
[550] Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press (1982).

on the perceptions and attitudes of Nigerian women regarding the menopause[551], 95.5 per cent of the 676 post-menopausal women interviewed considered it a normal physiological manifestation of the ageing process, and for 71.13 per cent of the women interviewed, sexual life ended with the menopause. The angst often associated with menopause in the Western world was not a feature of their lives.

Representations of the body by female African writers did not really appear until a decade after Bâ's novel. As Odile Cazenave points out:

> le passage d'une étape à l'autre s'est fait à travers une provocation systématique, opérant sur deux temps: le choix au départ de personnages féminins en marge de la société (l'étrangère, la prostituée, la femme folle) qui, de par leur marginalisation, étaient en quelque sorte autorisées, sinon justifiées à une plus grande liberté de parole qui faisait qu'à leur tour, ces protagonistes pouvaient aborder des questions plus larges touchant à la situation de l'Afrique postcoloniale; que par l'exploration de zones considérées jusque là comme taboues ou de l'ordre du trivial – écriture du corps, du désir, de la sexualité, des rapports entre femmes, entre mère et fille [...] les romancières de la nouvelle génération ont fait bouger les normes du roman[552]

Thus, it is quite understandable that in Bâ's two novels there are few references to ageing, as that would no doubt be considered trivial. The difference in age between Ramatoulaye and Binetou is emphasised by the choice of words used to describe Binetou, who is described as: "l'enfant", or "l'agneau", both terms usually associated with innocence. With regard to sexuality, in some societies including the Toucouleur (Tante Nabou's tribe. We do not know Ramatoulaye's tribe): "la fin de la période fertile va de pair avec l'adoption de nouveaux types de comportement: grande piété, extrême réserve à propos des relations avec leur mari (les rapports sexuels ne sont pas procrits, mais il serait honteux de laisser transparaître leur existence)"[553] thus, being virtually taboo explains why any discussion of sexuality or female desire in *Une si longue lettre* is restricted to brief references concerning Ramatoulaye's young co-wife or her daughters – the next generation. There is just a hint or rather a criticism of the appropriation of Western criteria of beauty when Ramatoulaye writes à propos the wearing of trousers by her daughters: "je jugeais affreux le port du pantalon quand on n'a pas, dans la constitution, le relief peu excessif des Occidentales. Le pantalon fait saillir les formes plantureuses de la Négresse, que souligne davantage une cambrure profonde des reins" (SLL. p.142) and the young Aïssatou's desire to keep a narrow waist could be said to follow the Western fashion of what is considered beautiful rather than the African one.

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[551] Adekunle, A.O., Fawole, A.O., Okunlola, M.A. 'Perceptions and Attitudes of Nigerian women about the Menopause' in *Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 20:5, September 2000, p.525.
[552] Cazenave, Odile, 'Vingt ans après Mariama Bâ, nouvelles écritures au féminin' in *Africultures*, 35, February 2001, p.8.
[553] Journet, Odile & Julliard, André, 'Le van des grands-mères' in *Vieillir en Afrique*, ed. by Attias-Donfut, Claudine & Rosenmayr, Léopold, Paris: PUF (1994), p.200.

Yet, cultural differences or not, indeed male or female, the end result is that youth and beauty are increasingly becoming seen as the holy grail. However, for Ramatoulaye and probably Jacqueline, it is their age that is the determining factor as to whether they are: "méprisées, reléguées ou échangées, dont on s'est séparé comme d'un boubou usé ou demodé" (SLL. p.80), whereas for Aïssatou it was her caste. Whatever positive slant one likes to put on the process of ageing, it has to be admitted that no one ever wrote: "méprisée, reléguée ou échangée" about an eighteen year old (at least not with regard to their age, because of course one can be scorned, relegated or exchanged at any age for a variety of other reasons). Another factor is, of course, particularly in the culture in which this novel is set, that it is the males who are able to 'mépriser, reléguer ou échanger' which simply enhances their feelings of superiority and emphasises the women's feelings of powerlessness, because in this novel, it is is the middle-aged men who act and the middle-aged women who are seen as passive – at least in the first instance.

However, by sounding a warning note to all other women of a similar age, Ramatoulaye is fulfilling a sisterly duty – if this can happen to me, it can also happen to you – and she follows her warning with an instruction on how important it is, particularly as you grow older, not to be weighed down by distress should such a disaster befall you too:

> pour vaincre la détresse quand elle vous assiège, il faut de la volonté. Quand on pense que chaque seconde écoulée abrège la vie, on doit profiter intensément de cette seconde, c'est la somme de toutes les secondes perdues ou cueillies qui fait les vies ratées ou réussies. Se muscler pour endiguer les désespoirs et les réduire à leurs justes proportions! Quand on se laisse mollement pénétrer par l'amertume, la dépression nerveuse guette. Petit à petit, elle prend possession de votre être (SLL. pp.80-81).

One could question whether Ramatoulaye is following her own advice to the letter here, as there is no doubt that at some stages in *Une si longue lettre* she appears to be taking almost a perverse pleasure in wallowing in her distress: "et je m'interroge. Et je m'interroge. Pourquoi? Pourquoi Modou s'est-il détaché? Pourquoi a-t-il introduit Binetou entre nous?" (SLL. p.107). Interpreting her distress as part of the cathartic process of therapy – the need to examine everything in the minutest detail before being able to accept what has happened and move on – would seem an obvious explanation. However, that would be to ignore the fact that whereas in the past when polygamous marriages were often arranged by the families and the couple had little say in their choice of partner, such marriages actually were seen to have some advantages for women in that they provided a strong basis for female solidarity and friendship, in that: "since marriage was not based on Western romantic illusions of love"[554] there was less likelihood of jealousy and competition. However, Ramatoulaye's marriage was based on Western romantic illusions of love, therefore she would be far less accepting of a co-wife sharing her husband and her life. Seen in this

[554] Toman, Cheryl, 'At the Heart of African Francophone Women's Writing: A rencontre essentielle with Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury', in *The French Review*, 77:6, May 2004, p.1108.

light, Ramatoulaye's anguish is more comprehensible – she would have reacted the same whatever her age, and whoever the co-wife was – the age of the co-wife would therefore be irrelevant in this scenario.

It is appropriate here to insert a striking quotation from an interview with Mariama Bâ, in which her own views on polygamy are revealing:

> une femme n'accepte jamais la polygamie par gaîté de cœur. C'est le cas de Ramatoulaye. Les femmes qui acceptent la polygamie sont contraintes. [...] C'est contraintes par les hommes, par la société, par la tradition, que la femme vit en polygamie. Une femme de mon âge qui approche de la cinquantaine peut accepter la polygamie. Quand par exemple on perd son mari ou qu'on est divorcée d'un certain âge, il est difficile de trouver un conjoint de son âge, libre. Pour ne pas terminer solitairement ses jours, on peut en sacrifiant son idéal, avoir un compagnon. C'est sur ce plan seulement que la polygamie est peut-être défendable[555].

Yet her protagonist, who is d'*un certain âge*, is resolved not to sacrifice her ideals and refuses to enter into a polygamous marriage, even if that means she may spend the rest of her life alone.

However, following Ramatoulaye's intense period of introspection, and notwithstanding her age, she comes through her trials victorious, as I examine in detail in the following section. After all, although *Une si longue lettre* opens with a death, it ends with a regeneration, that of Ramatoulaye herself as: "c'est de l'humus sale et nauséabond que jaillit la plante verte et je sens pointer en moi des bourgeons neufs" (SLL. p.165). There is nothing new in this analogy with mother nature – Colette, to cite just one example, used it to wondrous effect in her menopausal tour de force, *La Naissance du jour* and here there is Ramatoulaye's sensual evocation when she recalls:

> le passé renaît avec son cortège d'émotions. Je ferme les yeux. Flux et reflux de sensations: chaleur et éblouissement, les feux de bois; délice dans notre bouche gourmande, la mangue verte pimentée, mordue à tour de rôle. Je ferme les yeux. Flux et reflex d'images; visage ocre de ta mère constellé de gouttelettes de sueur, à la sortie des cuisines; procession jacassante des fillettes trempées, revenant des fontaines (SLL. p.12).

This is an (exotic to Western readers), African version with its references to green mangoes, wood fires and heat, recalling all the senses – taste, sight, hearing, touch and smell, while simultaneously, of course, being a memory of her past, her childhood with its happy, innocent, simple pleasures – a telling contrast to the problems she faces in middle-age.

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[555] Interview with Mariama Bâ by Alioune Touré Dia, 'Succès littéraire de Mariama Bâ pour son livre *Une si longue lettre*', published in *Amina 84*, November 1979, pp.12-14. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINABaLettre.html.

Bâ is writing, however, not only at an age where she may well have been undergoing a change in her own body – which applies equally to her main protagonist – but also at a time of incredible change in her homeland – so Ramatoulaye's rebirth encompassing a new way of thinking at this change in her life, or should that be during her change of life, can also be read as a metaphor for the significant changes in Senegal which Bâ/Ramatoulaye experienced at first hand, from a childhood under the colonial power through independence to the present day (of the novel, that is, 1979), twenty years after that independence. As Ramatoulaye emerges from the shadows a stronger woman, she wants to see Senegal, and more particularly Senegalese women, do the same: "quatre femmes, Daouda, quatre sur une centaine de députés. Quelle dérisoire proportion" (SLL. p.114), as she chides her old friend and suitor, Daouda Dieng, member of the National Assembly:

> mais, Daouda, les restrictions demeurent; mais Daouda, les vieilles croyances renaissent; mais Daouda, l'égoïsme émerge [...] Presque vingt ans d'indépendance! À quand la première femme ministre associée aux décisions qui orientent le devenir de notre pays? (SLL. p.115)

Keith Walker skilfully links Ramatoulaye's menopausal state with that of the process of decolonization, using the reasoning of certain traditions which treated both menopause and decolonization as disabilities, and the fact that both are considered as transitional watershed experiences:

> both menopause and colonial independence involve the transition from one state to another. Menopause, as a state, is viewed as regression, decline, atrophy, shrinkage, disturbance, the negation of reproduction, and as such entails a dramatic change in the identity of the female subject. The move to colonial independence also involves a shift in the identity of the colonized subject[556].

Whilst few, at least in the Western world, would disagree that the menopause is considered in our times to be a transitional watershed experience, there may be some hostility regarding the negativity of Walker's comments, yet he is far from alone in reporting that some see: "the modern creation of menopause as a problem and a loss/lack rather than a gain of physical maturity and female cultural wisdom"[557], yet what is HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) if not an attempt, using artificial means, to replace the oestrogen that a woman's deficient body no longer produces at this time in her life?

Walker goes on to write:

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[556] Walker, Keith L., 'Postscripts: Mariama Bâ, Epistolarity, Menopause, and Postcoloniality', in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.249.

[557] Campioni, Mia, 'Revolting Women: Women in Revolt' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul A., Rothfield, Philipa & Daly, Jeanne, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.78.

> to qualify the postcolonial condition as menopausal is to admit a consciousness of the ambiguities in the experiences of struggle for decolonization and independence: it is to view emergent nationhood as a prolongation of trauma and pain, as temporary loss and disablement and deferral of full blossoming [558].

The failures of the two marriages (which Ramatoulaye is at pains to emphasise started out as beacons of hope for the future, where the two couples, breaking away from tradition, were representative of all that was good and forward-thinking in the new Senegal) supports Walker's thesis. Following on from this analogy, however, the fact that the novel finishes with a regeneration in Ramatoulaye herself encourages the idea of life after the menopause, and the possibility of new life through her daughter's pregnancy, as well as the example of a marriage of equality with Daba and her husband, leads one to suppose that Bâ was full of hope for the future of her homeland, and that, in fact, its success had been simply deferred. Cyril Mokwenye[559] points out that the fact that Ramatoulaye decided to stay in her marriage rather than follow Aïssatou's escape route demonstrates her belief in marriage as an institution, which, in turn, could be read as an analogy for Senegal as a newly independent country – the fundamentals are right. A note of caution is sounded, however, with Walker's use of the word 'ambiguities' since independence does not necessarily of itself mean financial independence and Daouda Dieng admits that to provide all the infrastructure that the electorate are expecting: "il faut de l'argent, une montagne d'argent, qu'il faut trouver chez les autres en acquérant leur confiance" (SLL. p.117).

Following this reading of the novel, therefore, it is implicit in the text that the path would not be easy; there is no automatic, direct route to a successful transition and there would be obstacles on the way, yet with a positive attitude, all could be overcome. In the text, Ramatoulaye, wrapped up in her own problems and those of her younger children, is oblivious to the signs of her daughter's pregnancy, thus: "je ne devinais rien du drame" (SLL. p.153). She is unaware also that her younger children are smoking, and, it has to be said, did not spot the signs of Modou distancing himself (thus giving the lie to Ramatoulaye's belief that she and Modou had the perfect marriage). It takes the persistent determination of Farmata the griote, an intermediary, to draw Ramatoulaye's attention to young Aïssatou's pregnancy.

Ramatoulaye's daughter Aïssatou is still at school and unmarried, but she is of the new generation. Whilst she is aware of the distress she would cause her mother: "la gravité de son acte ne lui échappait pas dans ma situation de veuve récente qui succède à mon état d'abandonnée" (SLL. p.152), the fact of her pregnancy is: "sans aucun regret!" (SLL. p.152). In Grahame Greene's words: "there is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in"[560]. This is that defining moment for

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[558] Walker, Keith L., 'Postscripts: Mariama Bâ, Epistolarity, Menopause, and Postcoloniality', in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.249.

[559] Mokwenye, Cyril, 'La polygamie et la révolte de la femme africaine moderne: une lecture d'«*Une si longue lettre*» de Mariama Bâ', in *L'Afrique Littéraire*, 65-66 (1982), p.62.

[560] Greene, Graham, *The Power and the Glory*, London: Penguin (1995), p.12.

Aïssatou and also, as a consequence, for her mother, and Ramatoulaye rises, calmly but almost majestically to the challenge of supporting her daughter since: "sa vie et son avenir constituaient un enjeu puissant qui démolissait les tabous et imposait à mon cœur et à ma raison sa supériorité sur tout" (SLL. p.153). After all, as Sarvan points out, there is perhaps no greater shame in a Muslim society than for a young, unmarried girl to become pregnant[561]. It is easy here to see the analogy between the challenges to be faced by the young Aïssatou in overcoming the prejudice she is sure to face from the 'old guard', challenges she will, however, be able to overcome with the help and support of her mother and her partner, and those facing Daouda Dieng and his fellow politicians in, for instance, involving more women in the political future of their country, as he says: "je ne suis d'ailleurs pas seul à insister pour changer les règles du jeu et lui inoculer un souffle nouveau" (SLL. p.116) – thus it is also up to women to embrace the future and the opportunities it offered. Reading further between the lines, there may, indeed, be a subtle, implied criticism of the older Aïssatou, in that she chose to run away from her problems and start again far away from Senegal, rather than stay and fight her battles on home territory.

The griote Farmata, in her forties, represents the old guard, the traditional Senegalese woman, as she expects tears, anger and threats from Ramatoulaye when she learns of the out-of-wedlock pregnancy, but Ramatoulaye knows that life is changing and that she needs to embrace the future rather than cling to the past as: "à ce moment, je sentis ma fille se détacher de mon être, comme si je la mettais au monde à nouveau. Elle n'était plus sous ma protection. Elle appartenait davantage à son ami. Une nouvelle famille naissait à mes yeux" (SLL. p.158). It would be difficult, therefore, not to agree with Keith Walker's reading of the close links in the novel between coming through the menopause and the rebirth of the Senegalese nation.

[561] Sarvan, Charles Ponnuthurai, 'Feminism and African Fiction: The Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34:3, Autumn 1988, p.461.

2.11 How far the horizon?

The notion of time in a novel has exercised far greater minds than my own over the years. How to express time is a conundrum and whilst Bâ was successful in covering the first three days of the period of mourning, we are suddenly propelled to the fortieth day, with little, if any, idea of how Ramatoulaye's thought processes had evolved during that time, although we are now fully briefed on the relevant histories. Presumably, her outburst then at her brother-in-law, Tamsir's, proposal of marriage, or should that be statement of intent, implies that after five years of learning to live on her own without Modou, and then forty days of seclusion after his death, she has come to terms with her new persona, that at the age of fifty, she knows who she is. Deborah Plant writes: "by speaking for herself she moved from a state of psycho-spiritual non-existence to one of existence, of being. Prior to her abandonment, Ramatoulaye saw herself defined as Modou's wife, or the mother of her twelve children, or teacher to her pupils. She lived on the periphery of her own life, always trying to please and placate others"[562] as evidenced by her generous accommodation towards her sister-in-laws, her mother-in-law and her father-in-law, as well as Modou as she reminds Aïssatou: "tu peux témoigner que, mobilisée nuit et jour à son service, je devançais ses moindres désirs" (SLL. p.106). It is only now, therefore, that Ramatoulaye recognises, belatedly, that : "j'ai donné sans compter, donné plus que je n'ai reçu" (SLL. p.106).

Certainly, when Tamsir proposes marriage Ramatoulaye is not afraid of speaking out this time: "ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades" (SLL. p.109), in contrast with her controlled behaviour on the day the Imam, Tamsir and Mawdo came to advise her of Modou's marriage when her real feelings were cloaked in the platitudes of politeness. At that time, Ramatoulaye was, in effect, colluding with the patriarchal value system under which she lived. On this occasion, she is firmly denouncing that control over her life, and her courage should not be underestimated, since: "le lien qui l'unit à ses oppresseurs n'est comparable à aucun autre"[563]. With this outburst, Bâ is ensuring she is: "making visible the "invisible woman", or audible, the mute, voiceless woman, the woman who only exists as tangential to man and his problems"[564], since: "her cry, in fact, revealed the lie of other women's existences"[565].

It is interesting to note here the similarities with Mathilde de la Vallée, Mireille's mother in *Un chante écarlate*. Mathilde is a white, upper-class, middle-aged French woman whose daughter falls in love with,

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[562] Plant, Deborah, 'Mythic Dimensions in the Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *Research in African Literatures*, 27.2 (1996), p.106.
[563] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, I: Les faits et les mythes*, Paris: Gallimard (1999), p.19.
[564] Davies, Carole Boyce, 'Introduction' in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. by Davies, Carole Boyce & Graves, Anne Adams, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (1986), p.15.
[565] Erickson, John, 'Women's Space and Enabling Dialogue in Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*' in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.305.

and marries Ousmane and goes to live with him in Senegal. When Mireille refuses to give up Ousmane, she becomes estranged from her family. Unlike *Une si longue lettre*, *Un chant écarlate* has many narrators and focalizers, yet Mathilde is silent; she has no direct speech, which reinforces her total invisibility. She is incapable of standing up to her husband after: "trente années où [elle] n'avait eu aucune pensée propre, aucune initiative, aucune révolte, trente années où elle n'avait fait que marcher où on la poussait, trente années où acquiescer et applaudir avaient été ses lots [...]" (CE. p.120). As a mother, like Ramatoulaye, she feels her daughter's pain, but unlike Ramatoulaye, she cannot overcome her years of inertia to find the strength to support Mireille against the wishes of her husband. Bâ uses her to make the point that, if they allow themselves to be, all women can be subjugated by men and that if a white middle-aged woman cannot break her silence, how much more surprising and innovative that makes Ramatoulaye's behaviour.

This time for Ramatoulaye it is she who is the subject: "je regarde Tamsir droit dans les yeux. Je regarde Mawdo. Je regarde l'imam. Je serre mon châle noir. J'égrène mon chapelet. Cette fois, je parlerai" (SLL. p.109) – a perfect example of Sartre's theory on *le regard*: "dans le regard qu'il porte sur moi, l'autre affirme sa subjectivité et sa liberté et me transforme en objet"[566]. In Ramatoulaye's diatribe: "elle s'attache à mutiler, à dominer l'homme, elle le contredit [...]. Mais elle ne fait par là que se défendre; [...] l'existant que l'on considére comme inessentiel ne peut manquer de prétendre rétablir sa souveraineté"[567]. As Beauvoir writes, since: "la société codifiée par les hommes décrète que la femme est inférieure: elle ne peut abolir cette infériorite qu'en détruisant la supériorité virile"[568].

This is effectively Ramatoulaye's 'coming-of-age' moment as: "le regard est l'instrument premier de l'interaction, sans lequel aucun marqueur d'identité ne peut agir"[569], and she neatly and unequivocally turns the tables on Tamsir as she forcibly reminds him: "tu oublies que j'ai un cœur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on se passe de main en main" (SLL. p.109) – in other words, I am my own person. "In the search for equality, defining one's identity to oneself and to the world plays a crucial role"[570] and by speaking out in this manner, Ramatoulaye is announcing to the world that she has discovered who she is and how she expects to be treated from now on. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that Mawdo, who by tradition also has a right to marry Ramatoulaye, has enough sensitivity to anticipate how his proposal would be received and does not open himself up for that humiliation, proving, perhaps, that he has learnt something from his divorce.

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[566] Quoted by Slama, Béatrice, 'Colette: un écriture subversive?' in *Genre-Sexe-Roman: de Scudéry à Cixous*, ed. by Heymann, Brigitte & Steinbrügge, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang (1995), p.86.
[567] Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe, II: L'expérience vécue*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.644-655.
[568] ibid., p.644.
[569] Heinich, Nathalie, *États de femme: L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale*, Paris: Gallimard (1996), p.333.
[570] Merini, Rafika, *Two Major Francophone Women Writers: Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar*, New York: Peter Lang (1999), p.5.

Tamsir's proposal is also a subversion of the norm in a patrilineal society which uses the ancient rule of the levirate – widow's remarriage to the dead husband's sibling[571] – the primary purpose of which is to beget children on behalf of the dead man. Tamsir already has three wives and many children whom he cannot support without his wives all working to supplement the family income, therefore Tamsir's proposal – to a woman in her midlife years – is motivated not by love, duty or the desire for children, but by the enticing prospect of Ramatoulaye's relatively comfortable financial status.

What Ramatoulaye has realised is that during her 'thirty years of silence', she, and other women of her generation, were denied respect. After twenty five years of marriage, what respect did Modou show his wife in choosing as a co-wife a girl the same age as his eldest daughter, and, worse, his daughter's best friend? Indeed, what respect did he show his daughter? Thus Daba rages: "romps, Maman ! Chasse cet homme. Il ne nous a pas respectées, ni toi, ni moi" (SLL. p.77). He did not even respect his wife enough to inform her, as Islam demands, that he was taking a co-wife, instead sending others to impart the unwelcome news. Likewise, Samba Diack's behaviour when he: "ne prenait pas la peine de cacher ses aventures, ne respectant ni sa femme ni ses enfants" (SLL. p.82) and, of course, there was Mawdo, who, given a choice between upsetting his mother, or his wife, chose not to upset his mother: "alors, tu ne comptas plus, Aïssatou. Le temps et l'amour investis dans ton foyer? [...] tu ne comptas plus, pas plus que tes quatre fils" (SLL. p.63). Part of Aïssatou's pain would have been the total lack of respect shown to her by her mother-in-law as well as her husband, because, after all: "une bijoutière, peut-elle avoir de la dignité, de l'honneur?" (SLL. p.63). Aïssatou's inferior status not only vis-à-vis the male, but also vis-à-vis all the members of Mawdo's family was thus confirmed.

If Ramatoulaye does marry again, she has made it clear that she will only accept the position of first wife; life might be a series of compromises but on this particular point, Ramatoulaye will not compromise. She was prepared, albeit deeply reluctantly, to accept the position of second wife to Modou, but her five years of unofficial independence have given her an insight into her own value. In fact, the five years between Modou's marriage to Binetou and his death are rather glossed over in Ramatoulaye's reminiscences. Perhaps each day, each week, each month merged into each other while she brought up his twelve children on her own and after all, this is not a "récit du quotidien". However, Bâ's descriptions of the everyday problems that Ramatoulaye as a mother has to face serve to show the reality of motherhood[572], rather than the idealised version that male writers used to convey in their texts, although there is never a hint that Ramatoulaye rejects motherhood; on the contrary: "l'amour maternel me soutenait. Pilier, je devais aide et affection" (SLL. p.101). As Larrier points out, Bâ offers a varied perspective on motherhood (and mothering), showing that it is not limited to caring for a child, but is a lifetime commitment that involves

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[571] Sokolovsky, Jay, 'Culture, Aging and Context' in *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, ed. by Sokolovsky, Jay, Westport, Conn., London: Bergin & Garvey (1997), p.2.
[572] For a truly realistic harsh view of African motherhood as victimhood, see Emecheta, Buchi, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann Educational Books (1979).

many stages[573]. As Ramatoulaye says: "on est mère pour aimer, sans commencement ni fin" (SLL. p.153).

Thus, despite accepting that she is "vieux jeu" (SLL. p.144), disapproving of smoking, alcohol and the wearing of trousers for women, Ramatoulaye knows that she has to move with the times. If: "les mères de jadis enseignaient la chasteté", then: "les mères modernes favorisent les «jeux interdits»" (SLL. p.161). After the surprise of Aïssatou's pregnancy, in a society where girls are expected to be virgins when they marry, Ramatoulaye reluctantly accepts that she needs to speak to her younger daughters about sex, yet she also wants them to know it is important to value their bodies and that sex without love is not the way forward for a happy, healthy life. Aïssatou's out-of-wedlock pregnancy also serves to represent the new generation – each generation has different obstacles to overcome. For Ramatoulaye, it was marrying against her parents's advice; for Aïssatou it will be giving birth in secret whilst still at school and before being married.

Significantly, it is having to deal with her children on her own, having to be solely responsible for them, that catapults Ramatoulaye into becoming the sort of forward-thinking woman she had imagined in her youth that she would be. It also signifies that in taking on Modou's duties as well as her own, she is thus taking on the male role in the family, perhaps answering the question she posed to Daouda Dieng: "quand la société éduquée arrivera-t-elle à se déterminer non en fonction du sexe, mais des critères de valeur?" (SLL. p.116).

At the age of fifty, it is extremely unlikely that Ramatoulaye will have more children, so her vivid memory of the birth of Aïssatou where: "je la revis, nouvellement jaillie de mes flancs, gigotant dans ses langes roses, son menu visage fripé sous les cheveux soyeux" (SLL. p.153) has an added poignancy. Her children are not just "the family" in general; she takes pleasure in describing each of them, as from the youngest to the oldest they are all individuals, with different needs. It is all part of the self-realisation process that Ramatoulaye has undergone. Had Modou not strayed, Ramatoulaye would not be the woman she is today. His departure has forced her to approach her life differently, and she embraces the challenge, thus: "in living through Modou Fall's abandonment of the family and his failure to provide for them financially, Ramatoulaye is paradoxically empowered"[574].

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[573] Larrier, Renée, 'Reconstructing Motherhood: Francophone African Women Autobiographers' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.195.

[574] Androne, Mary Jane, 'The Collective Spirit of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter'* in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.42.

Thus it is apt that it is only late in the narrative that we learn Ramatoulaye's name, spoken by Daouda Dieng, her second suitor, come to ask for her hand in marriage for a second time. Is this because it is only now that she knows who she is, that she is allowed to be named? Or was she speaking for all betrayed women previously, and thus had to stay anonymous? Or is it because this is the first time we see her being treated with respect? Certainly this is the first occasion that we see Ramatoulaye in what amounts to an equal relationship, sparring verbally with another person, a male: "Ah, la joie d'avoir en face de soi un interlocuteur, de surcroît un amoureux!" (SLL. p.116), talking politics, and more particularly debating the role of women in political life. It is also the first time that we see a spark of coquetry: "je donnais un ton taquin à mon propos, tout en roulant mes yeux. Éternel féminin, même dans le deuil, tu points, tu veux séduire, tu veux intéresser!" (SLL. p.114), perhaps because this confrontation brings back memories of when she was young, fresh from her studies, full of hope for the future of her country and for herself.

Yet, despite being, as Farmata, the griote describes her: "vieille et chargée de famille" (SLL. p.126), Ramatoulaye rejects Dieng's proposal, which was, interestingly, made and rejected for essentially the same reason: "on n'oublie jamais son premier amour" (SLL. p.112). Thus whilst she may have been Dieng's first love, Modou was hers and therefore, although she holds Dieng in great esteem, she still does not love him (and for Ramatoulaye, love is a prerequisite of any relationship). The second reason she gives for turning down his proposal is that he is already married with children, and, given the pain Ramatoulaye suffered when a co-wife was forced upon her, she is compelled to write: "abandonnée hier, par le fait d'une femme, je ne peux allègrement m'introduire entre toi et ta famille" (SLL. p.128). Interestingly, striking a blow for the possibility of friendship between man and woman, even Daouda Dieng, presented as a worthy, sensitive man, is not interested in such a relationship with Ramatoulaye; to her offer of friendship, therefore, he can only reply: "«Tout ou rien. Adieu.»" (SLL. p.129).

For Ada Uzoamaka Azoda, Ramatoulaye's rejection of Daouda Dieng shows that: "even in middle age with many of her options narrowed to almost nothing, she still chose to dwell on the level of ideals"[575] and she writes that at the end of Ramatoulaye's seclusion: "she finds it in herself to forgive Modou, yet does not wish to pick up her [sic] pieces by starting a new relationship"[576]. I would actually question that assumption as Ramatoulaye writes openly about love and happiness, stating that: "je ne renonce pas à refaire ma vie. Malgré tout – déceptions et humiliations –, l'espérance m'habite" (SLL. p.165) and she admits to Aïssatou that she is searching for happiness. The implication is clear – that if she could find love again, then she would not hesitate to marry again: "l'amour, si imparfait soit-il dans son contenu et son expression, demeure le joint naturel entre ces deux êtres" (SLL. p.164). This is an encouraging sign, and evidence of a real change in Ramatoulaye, as after her abandonment by Modou, and weighed down by

[575] Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, 'Lettre sénégalaise de Ramatoulaye: Writing as Action in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (2003), p.12.
[576] ibid., p.12.

family responsibilities, when even Farmata urged her to go: "«l'adage dit bien que le désaccord ici peut être chance ailleurs. Pourquoi es-tu incrédule? Pourquoi n'oses-tu pas rompre?»" (SLL. p.79), she was not brave enough to leave and take her chances elsewhere.

However, with Daouda Dieng, it is Farmata again who does not hesitate to point out that at fifty years old: "tu piétines ta chance [...] tu parles d'amour au lieu de pain. Madame veut des sautillements dans le cœur. [...] Toi, si fanée, qui veux choisir un mari comme une fille de dix-huit ans (SLL. pp.129-130). Yet, Ramatoulaye is being true to herself – and courageous, after all she is aware that: "mes charmes s'étaient évanouis avec les maternités, le temps, les larmes" (SLL. p.131) as she admits: "je me refusais une fois de plus à la facilité pour mon idéal. Je rejoignais ma solitude qu'une éclaircie avait illuminée un instant" (SLL. p.130).

At the end of Ramatoulaye's period of mourning, as she asks herself: "fin ou commencement?" (SLL. 133), there is a pleasing symmetry as she learns that her dear friend Aïssatou will be with her on what will be her first day of freedom from confinement, particularly as she has chosen to extend her period of time-off, presumably from her teaching job, so they will have time together. As she counts the physical cost of her period of seclusion: "les soucis m'ont ridée; ma graisse a fondu. Je tâte souvent des os là où se gonflait la chair", she knows: "l'important ne sera pas sur nos corps en présence" (SLL. p.134) it is rather what binds the two friends together, the ties of their longstanding friendship as she wonders: "réunies, ferons-nous le décompte de nos floraisons fanées ou enfouirons-nous de nouvelles graines pour de nouvelles moissons?" (SLL. p.134).

2.12 Conclusion

"la vie est un éternel compromis" (SLL. p.135)

For Ramatoulaye, the ending of *Une si longue lettre* is undeniably positive. With the last words: "tant pis pour moi si j'ai encore à t'écrire *Une si longue lettre*..." (SLL. p.165) and the enigmatic ellipsis, Ramatoulaye seems to be implying that by not settling for second-best with any of her suitors, there are possibly many more trials and tribulations ahead to be shared with her best friend, yet she is not downhearted. Despite being aged fifty, and first abandoned by her husband and then widowed with eleven children left to support and a first grand-child on the way, it is encouraging to note that, unlike Aïssatou, who has her freedom and her independence, but at a price as she seems to have settled for life on her own: "sous la carapace qui te raidit depuis bien des années" (SLL. p.165), Ramatoulaye does not consider she is too old for love, and has not given up on the prospect of finding happiness again, thus proving the truth of the observation: "loss of some beauty doesn't entail other losses – doesn't, for example, mean that a woman will never be loved..."[577]. Interestingly, there is a similarity here with Rosélie in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, studied in the next chapter, who also decides at the end of her life-review that she will embrace life as a single person, whilst not ruling out future relationships.

For Ramatoulaye, happiness equates to love in an *complementary* relationship with a man she loves and who loves her, an ideal she thought she had found with Modou, thus: "j'appelais ardemment, de toutes mes forces disponibles, un «autre» qui remplacerait Modou" (SLL. p.101) and she waxes lyrical over the perfect partnership:

> S'aimer! Si chaque partenaire pouvait tendre sincèrement vers l'autre ! S'il essayait de se fondre dans l'autre ! S'il assumait ses réussites et ses échecs ! S'il exhaussait ses qualités au lieu de dénombrer ses défauts ! S'il réprimait les mauvais penchants sans s'y appesantir ! S'il franchissait les repaires les plus secrets pour prévenir les défaillances et soutenir, en pansant, les maux tus! (SLL. p.164)

I have highlighted the word "complementary" above because many critics have assumed, incorrectly, that Ramatoulaye is preaching equality in a relationship, when her actual words are: "je reste persuadée de l'inévitable et nécessaire *complémentarité* de l'homme et de la femme" (SLL. p.164, my italics) and this conveys the very premise of African feminism, which is that man and woman are considered each other's complement[578]. Toman quotes Calixthe Beyala who refers to this African brand of feminism as:

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[577] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, (1997), p.81.

[578] Toman, Cheryl, 'At the Heart of African Francophone Women's Writing: A rencontre essentielle with Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury', in *The French Review*, 77:6, May 2004, p.1104.

"féminitude – très proche du féminisme mais divergente dans la mesure où elle ne prône pas l'égalité entre l'homme et la femme, mais la différence égalitaire entre l'homme et la femme"[579].

At the same time, Ramatoulaye places inestimable value on her relationship with Aïssatou, which is as intense and loving as if Aïssatou were her lover: "tu seras là, à la portée de ma main, de ma voix, de mon regard" (SLL. p.133), someone whose: "mots caressants qui me décrispent" (SLL. p.133) have been a lifeline for Ramatoulaye over the recent years. As Ramatoulaye has come to the end of her long journey of reminiscences, Aïssatou has made the long journey from the United States of America to support her friend and, as females united, even though they have chosen different routes, they face the future together, just as they did as children all those years ago, thus proving the truth of Ramatoulaye's words: "tu m'as souvent prouvé la supériorité de l'amitié sur l'amour. Le temps, la distance autant que les souvenirs communs ont consolidé nos liens et font de nos enfants des frères et des sœurs" (SLL. p.134).

However, all this positive emotion should not distract the reader from the fact that by the end of the letter, although Ramatoulaye may feel herself to be a new woman, en route to a new stage in her life, this is not brought about through her own actions. Unlike Aïssatou who took active, radical steps to change her life, Ramatoulaye could be considered a "passive-doer". If Modou had not died, her life would presumably have carried on much as the previous five years where she had adapted successfully, to her credit, to life as a single parent by learning to drive, for example, and having to take sole financial and moral responsibility for her children. However, she would not have divorced Modou, and would still be known officially as Modou's first wife, as now, of course, she is known as his widow. Lest I appear too critical of Ramatoulaye's behaviour, it is important to appreciate that she is merely subscribing to a culture for women that has been recognised since classical times as Foucault points out: "moderation [enkrateia]"[580] was imposed on women by: "leur statut de dépendance à l'égard de leur famille et de leur mari et leur fonction procréatrice[581]. Aïssatou would appear to be the exception, therefore, not Ramatoulaye.

Although *Une si longue lettre* deals implicitly with the issue of women's choice (as Irène d'Almeida[582] points out, words such as "choix", "voulu", "décision" abound in this novel), it is important to be aware that up until Modou's death, Ramatoulaye had made just two major choices in her life and neither of those was as a result of the forty days of introspection following Modou's death when she wrote her letter to Aïssatou. Her choices were, first, to marry Modou, against her parents' wishes, and secondly, not to leave when Modou took a second wife when, as she knew: "la décision finale m'appartenait" (SLL. p.78)

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[579] Toman, Cheryl, 'At the Heart of African Francophone Women's Writing: A rencontre essentielle with Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury', in *The French Review*, 77:6, May 2004, p.1104.
[580] Self-control.
[581] Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité II: L'usage des plaisirs*, Paris: Gallimard (1984), p.113.
[582] d'Almeida, Irène Assiba, 'The Concept of Choice in Mariama Bâ's Fiction' in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. by Davies, Carole Boyce & Graves, Anne Adams, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (1986), p.161.

yet she chose not to take "la digne solution" (SLL. p.88), to the great surprise of everyone, including her family, her children, even Modou and Mawdo.

However, it could be argued, as indeed she did herself, that to accept the situation and stay was the easier option, if not emotionally, then practically with twelve children to support. It was certainly far easier than the route her friend Aïssatou chose to take, since in Senegal women adopt the status of their spouses, therefore on marrying Mawdo, Aïssatou had left her lowly caste of artisans. Aïssatou's decision to divorce Mawdo thus: "demonstrates a rejection of the polygamous tradition and an awareness of the self as an individual, rather than as a component in a family or social grouping"[583]. Aïssatou quite clearly wanted to put space between not just Mawdo and his family, but the community as a whole which she felt was party to the betrayal – it would have been impossible for her to have stayed. But Ramatoulaye is not Aïssatou and her friend: "respectueuse de mon nouveau choix de vie" (SLL. p.88), did nothing to dissuade her from following her chosen course, and Ramatoulaye, despite the fact that there was obviously collusion between Modou and his brother and close friends, chose to focus her anger on Modou and his new mother-in-law, rather than the wider circle.

Fundamentally then, at the end of *Une si longue lettre*, and despite signs of change waiting in the wings, Ramatoulaye is still the same person she was at eighteen. She even rejects Daouda Dieng's marriage proposal for the same reason as she had the first time all those years ago. That is not to belittle the Ramatoulaye of eighteen who was privileged to be part of the exciting, new generation: "premières pionnières de la promotion de la femme africaine" (SLL. p.36), yet, ironically, she and Aïssatou and their female contemporaries may well have been highly educated and thus able to enjoy good jobs and all the material benefits that resulted from them, but presumably they did not see it as their duty to help the new Senegal become an equal democracy. They talked the good fight, but left the action to the menfolk, then criticised the government for the lack of women in the National Assembly. Daouda Dieng, for all the respect he has for Ramatoulaye, is openly criticising her and her contemporaries when he says: "la femme ne doit plus être l'accessoire qui orne. [...] Il faut inciter la femme à s'intéresser davantage au sort de son pays. Même toi qui rouspètes, tu as préféré ton mari, ta classe, les enfants à la chose publique" (SLL. pp.116-117).

Thus, despite all the aspirations of their headmistress and their own early rhetoric, and despite holding down good jobs as primary school teachers, their marriages saw both Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou effectively conforming to tradition, living in the same patriarchal society, subjected to the same rules as before: "nous subissions, différemment, les contraintes sociales et la pesanteur des mœurs" (SLL. p.44). Indeed, apart from one paragraph exalting the profession of teacher, there is very little detail given of the

[583] Hitchcock, Nicki, " 'Confidently Feminine'? Sexual Role-Play in the Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Ibnlfassi, Laïla & Hitchcott, Nicki, Oxford: Berg (1996), p.146.

women's professional lives and Ramatoulaye on a number of occasions preaches the value of what she calls "femmes au foyer" (SLL. p.119), although she is very up-to-date when she laments: "la femme qui travaille a des charges doubles aussi écrasantes les unes que les autres, qu'elle essaie de concilier. Comment les concilier? Là réside tout un savoir-faire qui différencie les foyers" (SLL. p.45). Thus, it took their husbands' actions to jolt both women out of their easy complacency, with the men's manipulation and distortion of the Islamic right for a man to take another wife bringing about the collapse of their marriages.

In the same way, Ramatoulaye does not change as a result of her period of seclusion, despite agonizing over the future of her country and what the future holds for women – and that is all women, not just Senegalese:

> Les irréversibles courants de libération de la femme qui fouettent le monde ne me laissent pas indifférent. Cet ébranlement qui viole tous les domaines, révèle et illustre nos capacités. Mon cœur est en fête chaque fois qu'une femme émerge de l'ombre. Je sais mouvant le terrain des acquis, difficile le survie des conquêtes: les contraintes sociales bousculent toujours et l'égoïsme mâle résiste. Instruments des uns, appâts pour d'autres, respectées, ou méprisées, souvent muselées, toutes les femmes ont presque le même destin que des religions ou des législations abusives ont cimenté. (SLL. pp.163-164)

However, despite no doubt seeing herself as the woman emerging from the shadows after her period of mourning, she comes to no life-changing conclusion at the end of her letter of introspection.

What happens, therefore, in the course of *Une si longue lettre* is that, during her liminal phase, Ramatoulaye conducts a life review, to use a gerontological term – a retrospective analysis of one woman's life in the society in which she lives, a reassessment of why she, and all the other women who are part of her story, made the choices they did and what the consequences were of those choices. As Ramatoulaye herself says: "chaque femme fait de sa vie ce qu'elle souhaite" (SLL. p.161), although that may be rather ungenerous given women's limited freedom to act in that society. After all, if Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye, both educated women married to professional men, suffered in the ways that we have seen, what chance have the vast majority of Senegalese women, still largely uneducated at that time, to change their lives?

By the end of the letter, Ramatoulaye has come to terms with what has happened in the first fifty years of her life and the very fact that at the age of fifty Ramatoulaye still believes she has choices in her midlife period can only serve to posit her as a positive role-model for her generation, or, as Obioma Nnaemeka writes: "what is important is not whether these agents survive their insurrection or are crushed by it; what

is crucial is the fact that they choose to act"[584]. After all, Ramatoulaye did make clear to Tamsir when she refused his clumsy, arrogant marriage proposal: "tu ignores ce que se marier signifie pour moi: c'est un acte de foi et d'amour, un don total de soi à l'être que l'on a choisi et qui vous a choisi" (SLL. pp.109-110) and, in an authorial aside to Aïssatou she writes, in parentheses: "j'insistais sur le mot choisi" (SLL. p.110).

What is certain is that Ramatoulaye now feels able to move on, to face the future positively, and, hopefully, find love again in a monogamous marriage, but, however empowered she now feels (and she has certainly regained her confidence and values herself as a valid human being with rights and opinions of her own, as Tamsir can attest to), she, and her contemporaries, are now part of the older generation: "nous sommes ceux du passé, «déphasés ou dépassés», «croulants», peut-être" (SLL. p.136).

Thus, the deep-seated changes that Senegal needs to embrace seem unlikely to come now from Ramatoulaye and her contemporaries, whatever high hopes they had at the outset when:

> nous étions tous d'accord qu'il fallait bien des craquements pour asseoir la modernité dans les traditions. Écartelés entre le passé et le présent, nous déplorions les «suintements» qui ne manqueraient pas... Nous dénombrions les pertes possibles. Mais nous sentions que plus rien ne serait comme avant. Nous étions pleins de nostalgie, mais résolument progressistes" (SLL. p.43).

The changes will also not come from their parents' generation who could not make the necessary adaptations, nor would it be realistic to expect them to. As Daouda Dieng is well aware, change takes time: "ce n'est pas simple de développer un pays. Plus on est responsible, plus on le sent" (SLL. p.117). Yet it is interesting that Ramatoulaye does not reply directly to Daouda Dieng's comments upon her lack of political activity. Does he succeed in planting a seed in her mind, in awakening her political conscience, dormant for so many years? After all, in her youth: "beaucoup d'entre nous ralliaient le parti dominant, lui infusant du sang nouveau. Être productif dans la mêlée valait mieux que se croiser les bras ou s'abriter derrière des idéologies importées" (SLL. p.54). Athough she is referring to socialism when she says: "le brèche qu'il a ouverte n'est pas négligeable et le Sénégal offre un visage nouveau de liberté retrouvée" (SLL. p.121) it would not be too fanciful to interpret her comments as referring to herself as well as Senegal and it may well be that as Rebecca Wilcox writes: "by including this chapter [Ramatoulaye's meeting with Daoda Dieng] entwining Ramatoulaye's political interests and her self-identification at a crucial point in her healing process – she has just begun to regain her voice after years of silent suffering – Bâ seems to hint to her reader that Ramatoulaye's ideals may lead her to further

[584] Nnaemeka, Obioma, 'Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins" in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.4.

activism in the future"[585]. If this is the case, then this would be confirmation of Keith Walker's thesis, that: "the identity and the discourse of the menopausal woman and the postcolonial subject are experienced as altered and enabled: both are ultimately experienced here as emancipation from subjugation"[586].

Whether Ramatoulaye becomes politically active or not, it is, however, up to her generation to lay the foundations on which the next generation can build, and without a model to follow – as she says: "l'Afrique est différente, morcelée. Un même pays change plusieurs fois de visage et de mentalité, du Nord au Sud ou de l'Est à l'Ouest" (SLL. p.82) – it will not be an easy process to forge a new, individual identity for Senegal, steering a route between traditional mores and Western values which may not be appropriate but are undeniably pervasive. Yet, in effect, that is what Ramatoulaye's search for herself creates: "a newly found sense of identity that stems from a blending of traditional and modern elements"[587]. It will be Ramatoulaye's children and their childrens' children who will need to continue the hard work put in by the Daouda Diengs of Senegal, as Ramatoulaye does not hesitate to point out to her offspring: "demain, mettez au pouvoir qui vous voulez, qui vous convient. Ce sera votre choix qui dirigera ce pays and non le nôtre" (SLL. p.135), and it is each generation's task to raise their children to understand their duties and responsibilities. Once again, it is this mature reflection of a woman in her midlife years that validates this perspective, although, of course, the path she has chosen does tend to confirm the stereotype of ageing women whose focus are their children and the need to pass on information to the next generation, yet perhaps that stability answers the needs of a developing country.

What Ramatoulaye has come to understand through her period of introspection is that there is a difficult balance to strike between modernity and tradition as: "notre société actuelle est ébranlée dans ses assises les plus profondes, tiraillée entre l'attrait des vices importés, et la résistance farouche des vertus anciennes" (SLL. pp.135-136) and therefore some things are going to take a long time to change since: "on ne vient pas facilement à bout des pesanteurs millénaires" (SLL. p.136).

Ramatoulaye is, of course, the perfect case study for this dilemma and serves to represent the clash between the old and the new, or rather between the spiritual and the materialistic, and the struggle to maintain a balance. Sarvan views Ramatoulaye as a paradox, a conservative in revolt. She may endorse the European headmistress's exhortation to leave the bog of superstition, custom, and tradition, but a part

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[585] Wilcox, Rebecca, 'Women and Power in Mariama Bâ's Novels' in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. by Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, (2003), p.133.

[586] Walker, Keith L., 'Postscripts: Mariama Bâ, Epistolarity, Menopause, and Postcoloniality' in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota (1996), p.252.

[587] Mortimer, Mildred, *Journeys Through the French African Novel*, London: James Currey (1990), p.145.

of her remains cautious, conservative, and "patriotic"[588]. I see Ramatoulaye as a model for women of her particular class and generation. Being involuntarily catapulted into single parenthood, she was forced to disengage from the traditional ways to become a modern and responsible woman, whilst at the same time deciding to stay within the cadre of the African family and Islam, (although exercising her right not to accept certain tenets of both). Thus although she is still the same person and holds the same ideals, circumstances have forced her to forge a new identity for herself: "inventant sans modèle des comportements discrètement originaux"[589] – as she looks to Aïssatou to participate: "à la recherche d'une voie" (SLL. p.165). Ramatoulaye thus becomes a metaphor for Senegal itself, and indeed the continent of Africa as a whole.

In conclusion, and leaving the political future of Senegal aside, Mariama Bâ's chef d'œuvre serves as a triumphant riposte to the type of male African writing which was: "un discours sur et non par la femme, [...] ce discours contribue également à l'élaboration d'un mythe de la femme colonisée, à la fois belle, passive, maternelle, et érotique"[590]. At fifty, Ramatoulaye is past beauty, at least in its most recognised form which is contingent upon youth, and there is no hint of eroticism. There is no doubt that she is guilty of being passive, but there are signs at the end that she has broken free of that yoke and her modern version of maternalism is to be admired. Odile Cazenave sees Mariama Bâ's short œuvre as contributing to the breaking of the silence around women in Africa where: "la prise de parole et le regard de femme sur les femmes, constituaient une étape nécessaire à une meilleure connaissance de soi, elle-même prémisse à une écriture à portée plus large, reconnaissant la place de la femme dans la société, dans le monde, dans son siècle"[591]. I would go further and add that by having a protagonist aged fifty, past her child-bearing years, a new dimension has been added to portrayals of women in Africa.

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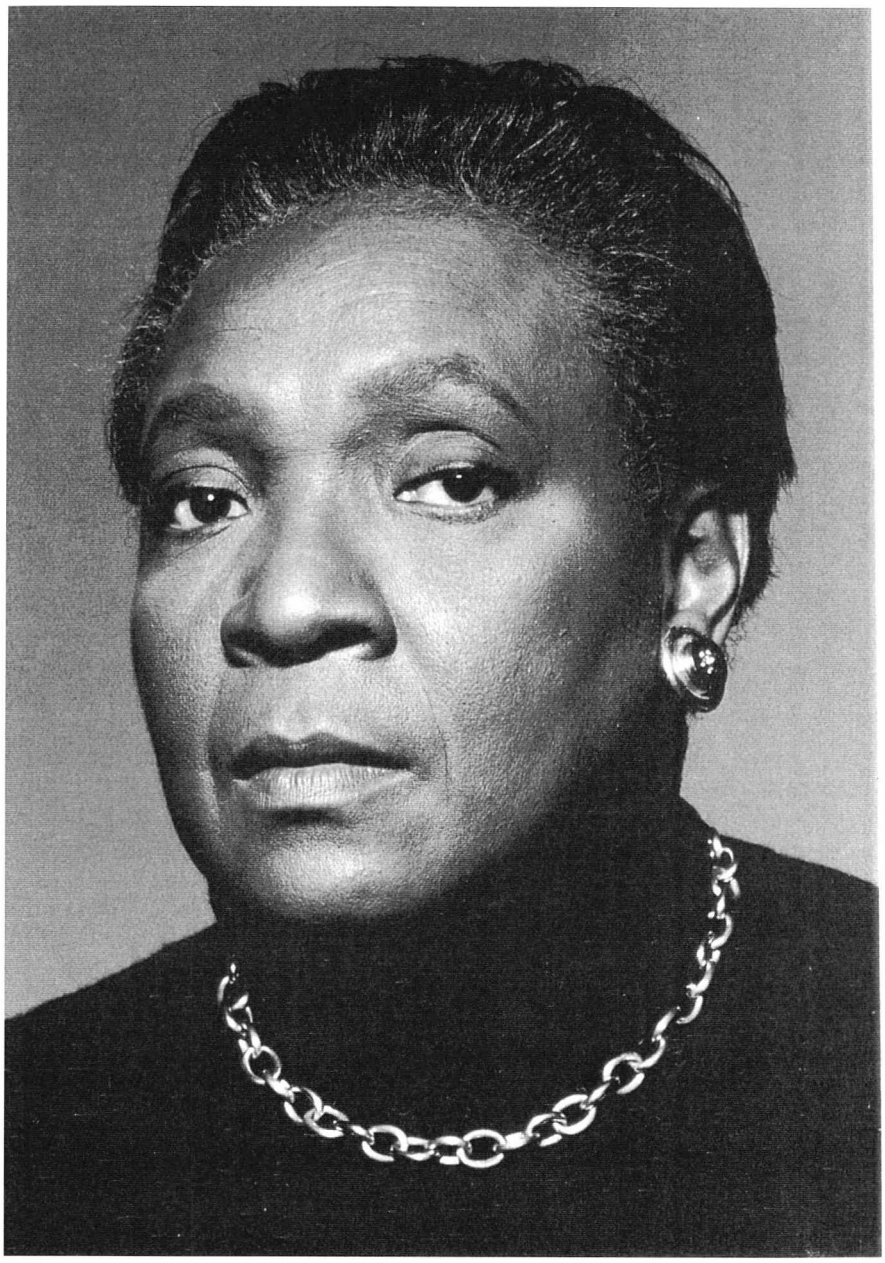
[588] Sarvan, Charles Ponnuthurai, 'Feminism and African Fiction: The Novels of Mariama Bâ' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34:3, Autumn 1988, p.459.
[589] Brahimi, Denise & Trevarthen, Anne, *Les femmes dans la littérature africaine*, Paris: Karthala & Ceda (1998), p.76.
[590] Brière, Eloïse, A., 'Editorial: Nouvelles écritures féminines: 1. La parole aux femmes' in *notre librairie*, (special issue), 117, April-June 1994.
[591] Cazenave, Odile, 'Vingt ans après Mariama Bâ, nouvelles écritures au féminin' in *Africultures*, 35, February 2001, p.9.



CHAPTER 3

MARYSE CONDÉ

"Comment sourire à ce qui ne vous voit pas? Invisible woman" (HFC. p.192)

3.1 Maryse Condé and the origins of *Histoire de la femme cannibale*

Maryse Condé[592] is not only a writer of international stature, an established incumbent of the literary canon[593] known for her novels, plays, short stories, essays, anthologies, children's literature and critical works, but she is also a lecturer, public speaker, activist and one-time politician[594]. Condé (who was called, presciently, 'la petite Colette noire' by her sisters[595] when young) started her literary career as a playwright with *Dieu nous l'a donné* published in 1972, but it was her first novel *Hérémakhonon* (1976) (which was, according to Condé: "le canard boîteux de la famille car il n'a eu aucun succès"[596] being neither understood, nor well received at the time[597]) which announced: "the provocative arrival of a new author on the literary scene"[598]. Condé has stayed true to her literary ambitions: "I wish to be the kind of person everybody is fed up with"[599] she told Taleb-Kyhar in an interview in 1991, and: "très tôt une anti-conformiste"[600], she has also long been recognised as a 'politically incorrect' writer[601].

Condé's latest novel, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003), tells the history/story of Rosélie Thibaudin, a middle-aged Guadeloupian living in Cape Town who suddenly finds herself in the centre of a murder-mystery. Given that this concerns her long-term partner, Stephen Stewart, the fall-out from the murder investigation results in the gradual unravelling of their twenty year relationship and the revelations

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[592] A full biography can be found in Appendix F.
[593] Albeit a relative newcomer, given that Christiane Makward and Odile Cazenave could write in 1988: "literary francophone women do not exist in the canon." Makward, Christiane & Cazenave, Odile, 'The Others' Others: "Francophone" Women and Writing' in *Yale French Studies*, 75 (1988), p.190.
[594] Condé stood as an Independent candidate in Guadeloupe in 1992, but resigned before the election.
[595] Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., 'An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove' in *Callaloo*, 14:2, Spring 1991, p.349.
[596] Clark, VèVè, A., '"Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989, p.118.
[597] Originally published by 10/18 in Paris in 1976, the novel was abandoned by its editor after two years and then reissued as a new edition with a new preface and new title: *En Attendant le bonheur (Hérémakhonon)*, Paris: Seghers (1988).
[598] Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, Summer 2000, 74:3, p.526.
[599] Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., 'An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove' in *Callaloo*, 14:2, Spring 1991, p.360.
[600] Clark, VèVè, A.,'"Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989, p.92.
[601] By, amongst many others, Hewitt, Leah Dianne, 'Condé's Critical Seesaw' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.641.

regarding Stephen's homosexuality leave the reluctant Rosélie no option at this mid-way point in her life but to carry out a life-review, re-examining the choices she has made along the way.

This chapter, therefore, concludes the trilogy of authors with their different viewpoints on a woman's midlife years by focusing on this example of the midlife progress novel[602] which sees Rosélie finally 'coming of age' and taking responsibility for her life. Given that Condé's novels always operate on a number of different levels, one could say that on a micro-level the novel is concerned with Rosélie's search for identity and independence, first as an autonomous human being, not dependent on men, and secondly, as a Guadeloupian living in exile and needing to reconcile herself with that exile which, on a macro-level, equates to Guadeloupe's search for its true identity[603] as it struggles still to come to terms with its cultural heritage[604]. With regard to Condé herself, one can also see a progression in her work as her ideas and beliefs change over the years. In her earlier novels, her protagonists sought but failed to find their roots in the Africa of their ancestors; in 1986 she then "made peace" with Guadeloupe[605] when: "ce retour au pays était un vieux rêve qui se réalisait enfin"[606], and her next tranche of novels shared this sentiment, and now in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* there is, ultimately, a sense that home can actually be anywhere so long as you are at peace with yourself. Given that this novel was published when Condé was aged sixty-six, one can interpret this as being a notion that requires maturity in years to understand and appreciate. With regard to ageing, Condé wrote: "je pense que le vieillissement ajoute une dimension. Plus d'intuition, de sagesse, une forme de communication plus intime"[607] – something perhaps demonstrated most clearly in her autobiographical *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* (1999).

Whilst Rosélie's general passivity and even apathy finds echoes in two of the other novels reviewed in this thesis, and given that, independent of her own volition, it also takes a crisis to force her to address major issues in her life, the conclusion of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* is rewarding in that, after much

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[602] Condé had already featured a middle-aged Guadeloupian male as protagonist in a novel – Spéro Jules-Juliette in *Les derniers rois mages* (1992). Spéro, also an artist, married for twenty years to an African-American and living in the USA, undergoes a male midlife crisis as he contemplates an apparently wasted life.
[603] Guadeloupe has been in French possession since 1635. It became a DOM (Département français d'Outre-Mer) in 1946, but since the French Constitutional Reform of 2003, the DOMs have become DROM (Département et région d'Outre-Mer).
[604] Prior to the ninth century, Guadeloupe was settled by Pacific Indians from Venezuela. In the ninth century, Caribbean Indians decimated the Pacific Indians and the island was called Karukera (island of the beautiful waters). Guadeloupe was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493. He called it 'Guadalupe' meaning vierge noire. The subsequent extermination of the native population meant the island had to be repopulated in order to provide labour to work in the sugar plantations, and it was this that led to the introduction of slavery. In 1635 the island fell under French rule and in 1642 the slave trade started. In 1794 the French Revolution instigated the abolition of the slave trade, only for it to be reestablished in 1802 by Napoleon under the influence of his wife, Josephine de Bauharnais (de la Pagerie), who was the daughter of a rich Martinican colonist. Slave trade in Guadeloupe was finally abolished in 1848 and Indians were then imported, and paid, to carry out the work of the former slaves.
[605] Clark, VèVè, A., '"Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989, p.132.
[606] ibid., p.104.
[607] Condé, Maryse, in a personal email communication dated 4 April 2005.

introspection, there is evidence of real progress having been made and painful lessons learnt. An important feature of this learning curve is the element of self-rescue, which was also evident in Ramatoulaye's 'coming of age' experience. Despite the use of obvious similes correlating rebirth with Spring in nature's cycle, these: "heroines are not born again, instantaneously rescued. But the plots do show them rescuing themselves from situations of radical depletion"[608]. As Gullette points out, these women do survive, cope with, or resist whatever batters them[609].

This novel marks a return for Condé to the African continent and, it is safe to say, she will not win any awards from the South African Tourist Board with her depiction of Cape Town[610], yet having lived in South Africa as well as being a frequent visitor I can testify to the gritty realism of the portrayal. As Condé has said: "I write for myself but also to provoke people, to force them to accept things they don't want to accept and to see things they don't want to see. I think this need to upset people prevails in all my books"[611]. She believes the role of the writer is to be: "the critical eye, the critical conscience"[612] and in *La parole des femmes*, she asks: "n'est-ce pas le plus beau rôle d'un écrivain: inquiéter?"[613] Leah Hewitt neatly encapsulates Condé's ethos: "elle est du genre "risque-tout", se plaisant à défier "les gens bien pensants"[614], and she points out that: "Condé's is a tricky balancing act in which the stakes are high: always prodding her audiences, she walks the line between nihilism and militancy"[615]. This is perhaps best illustrated in this novel with the sentiments expressed through Simone, one of the minor characters (but based on a real-life person that Condé met in Cape Town) who:

> osait porter un jugement très négatif sur Nelson Mandela l'intouchable. À l'en croire, son influence n'avait pas permis au peuple sud-africain de se purger de ses frustrations et de renaître, baptisé de sang neuf sous le soleil. Voir Fanon: théorie de la violence. – Un jour, ça va péter. [...] Les Blancs se jetteront sur les Noirs. Les Noirs sur les Blancs (HFC. p.61).

It is these 'détails concrets', to borrow Roland Barthes's term, the real people, the real places, which lend substance to this story of midlife angst – although, of course, they also serve to date the novel quite precisely. It is a snapshot of a certain moment in time – both Rosélie's and South Africa's. Through the

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[608] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia (1997), p.82.
[609] ibid., p.82.
[610] She is not shy, either, of offending both the British and the French in this novel.
[611] Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.30.
[612] Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., 'An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove' in *Callaloo*, 14:2, Spring 1991, p.360.
[613] Condé, Maryse, *La parole des femmes: Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française*, Paris: L'Harmattan (1979), p.77.
[614] Hewitt, Leah, 'Rencontres explosives: les intersections culturelles de Maryse Condé' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.46.
[615] Hewitt, Leah Dianne, 'Condé's Critical Seesaw' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.642.

eyes of her middle-aged protagonist, Condé describes the reality of living in multi-racial South Africa today, a decade after its seismic but miraculously bloodless shift from apartheid to achieving democracy in 1994. Yet Condé's Cape Town is a world away from the usual guidebook depictions of a sunny, friendly city, guarded by its benevolent Table Top mountain with its tablecloth of cloud. Instead, she paints a picture of a dark city surviving on its daily diet of fear, mistrust and violence[616] where political apartheid[617] has inevitably been superseded by economic apartheid – a far cry from the romantic image of Mother Africa so dear to earlier West Indian writing which persisted in seeing: "an idealized image of Africa as a lost paradise for the black diaspora"[618]. Yet, always controversial, the West African settings for Condé's first two novels, *Hérémakhonon* and *Une Saison à Rihata* were not utopian either – newly independent, thus freed from the tyranny of their white colonial masters, they had merely plunged straight into different tyranny under black dictatorships. South Africa is simply a powerful, contemporary setting, a nation coming to terms with its fractured past, whilst simultaneously attempting to forge a new identity – just like Rosélie. It is also a nation with a profoundly black face, a black face which, despite being in the significant majority[619], is strangely often still invisible – just like Rosélie. Finally, it is also a nation coming of age, learning to accept its past so that it can move on to a different future – just like Rosélie.

By choosing a middle-aged, female protagonist, Condé ensures that issues such as sexism, feminism and ageism as well as, of course, racism (this is, after all, a novel primarily concerned with racial identity and the meaning of difference) are all integrated in this explosive setting, and since that setting is of such symbolic significance in this novel and is so bound up in Rosélie's realisation that in reconstructing her identity she has to face up to her problems before being able to move on with her life – a crucial part of her 'rite of passage' – it is worth elaborating further on Mandela's 'Rainbow Nation', since for Condé: "identities are wrapped up in place, figuratively as one's 'place' in the world, and geographically"[620]. In an interview with *Le Figaro* published on 23 June 2003, Condé revealed why she chose South Africa, and more particularly, Cape Town for the setting of *Histoire de la femme cannibale*:

> avant de découvrir le pays, je croyais aux images mythiques Mandela, De Klerck (sic), à la coexistence pacifique et retrouvée. Or l'Afrique du Sud est le pays le plus violent du monde. Il y a une sorte de haine sous couvercle; tout bout dans une marmite bien close. Le Cap est une ville effrayante. Pour la première fois de ma vie, j'ai eu peur en tant que Noire. Tout est fait pour vous exclure. Les Noirs

[616] Following Mayor Guiliano's successful example in New York, zero-tolerance policing has been embraced, with varying degrees of success, in South Africa. It has proved relatively successful in the CBD (Central Business District) of Cape Town and in the former CBD of Johannesburg.
[617] A system of separation on racial grounds instigated by the National Party when it came to power in 1948. For example, the Population Registration Act No.30 in 1950 where babies were identified and registered at birth as belonging to one of four distinct racial groups. This Act was repealed in 1991.
[618] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, 'From Liminality to a Home of her Own? The Quest Motif in Maryse Condé's Fiction' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.551.
[619] The official results of the 2001 Census revealed a population of 44.8 million people, with an ethnic split of 79 per cent black, 9.6 per cent white, 8.9 per cent coloured and 2.5 per cent Indian.
[620] McHugh, Kevin E., 'Three Faces of Ageism: Society, Image and Place' in *Ageing and Society*, 23, (2003), p.169.

> détestent les Blancs, et inversement, ce qui n'exclut pas une terrible violence au sein même de la communauté noire. La société fonctionne sur une peur permanente, là-bas. [...] En Afrique du Sud, je ne savais pas qui j'étais. Je me suis liée avec la femme du consul de France[621], noire elle aussi, et nous sommes allées porter des jouets dans des crèches. J'ai eu le sentiment que les infirmières nous prenaient pour des usurpatrices. Qui étaient donc ces femmes qui avaient assez de loisirs pour porter des jouets? Nous étions des Noires qui avaient pris un masque et une vie de Blanches. La perception que les autres ont de vous est un piège. Elle déforme sa propre vision et on ne sait plus qui on est[622].

Rosélie does not express herself in such sophisticated tones, but one can easily imagine that she is expressing Condé's own feelings when she muses: "jamais elle ne s'était sentie plus niée, exclue, reléguée au loin à cause de sa couleur" (HFC. p.46). In an interview with Catherine Dana in 1983[623], Condé affirmed: "l'engagement c'est raconter des histoires que vous ressentez profondément, des problèmes que vous ressentez profondément et qui peut-être vont permettre à d'autres personnes de se retrouver et de s'éclaircir elles-mêmes" and in an interview with Françoise Pfaff, Condé admitted that what interests her are cultural encounters and the conflicts and changes that come from them[624]. South Africa ten years after democracy is, therefore, tailor-made for Condé as the writer obviously engaged with the country's problems and Leah Hewitt makes the point that: "Condé's critical inquiry reconsiders political assumptions and cultural identities, what is taken for granted on all sides of cultural, racial and sexual divides"[625]. South Africa, where allegiances and alliances are in constant flux and where: "dans ce pays, tout le monde en déballait, des cocasses, des ridicules, des rocambolesques, plus abracadabrantes les unes que les autres" (HFC. p.20), exemplies this perfectly.

Perhaps in her choice of Cape Town for the setting of this novel, Condé also saw a connection between the black population of South Africa[626], newly freed from the yoke of apartheid, and the slave population of the West Indies when they were released from the yoke of slavery. A further link between the two is that they could both be considered as belonging to that group of countries who are sometimes 'first world', sometimes 'third world', where modernity and tradition often make uncomfortable bedfellows. What is certain is that South Africa with its mixed race culture can be read as a metaphor for the world in general –

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[621] Rosélie and Simone in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* carried out exactly the same exercise obviously based on Condé's real-life experience.

[622] *Le Figaro*, 23 June 2003. Interview by Clémence Boulouque with Maryse Condé: 'Maryse Condé: Les Voix collectives n'existent pas, c'est un leurre'.

[623] Dana, Catherine, 'Entretien avec Maryse Condé' in *Africultures*, 35, February 2001, p.20.

[624] Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.29.

[625] Hewitt, Leah Dianne, 'Condé's Critical Seesaw' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.641.

[626] Humans have occupied South Africa for at least two million years, but it was Bartholomew Diaz, a Portugeuse explorer, who was the first European to set foot there in Mossel Bay in 1488. European settlement of South Africa began in earnest in the seventeenth century with Dutch settlers brought there by the Dutch East India Company in mid 1600s. The Company gave clear instructions that the indiginous population was not to be enslaved and the first slaves were brought in from Madagascar and Mozambique, and later from Angola and West Africa. Some of the indiginous population was unofficially enslaved by groups of Voortrekkers in the mid 1900s.

how everyone, regardless of colour, creed or race, needs to learn how to live together and, of course, with its racial mix of blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians, it serves as a parallel to the mix of races found in Condé's own Guadeloupe: "there is no racial unity in any definition of the Caribbean, since throughout the islands there are whites, Blacks, yellows, and every shade in between"[627] and she goes on to emphasise that: "the construction of a Caribbean identity, therefore, is caught up in many contradictions"[628]. Madeleine Cottenet-Hage makes the valid point that: "dans les îles où descendants d'Africains, Indiens, Syriens, Européens cohabitent, seule l'idée de communauté culturelle permet d'envisager l'avenir de manière positive et de venir à bout des vieilles oppositions duelles noir/blancs. C'est pourquoi elle [Maryse Condé] situe ses romans presque toujours dans l'espace qu'elle habite"[629].

Christopher Miller highlights the fact that Condé's enigmatic Africa, which is at first a myth to be exploded in her earlier novels such as *Hérémakhonon* (meaning "Wait for happiness" in Malinke) and *Une Saison à Rihata* (based in part on the author's real-life experiences of military abuse in Guinea in the early 1960s when she lived there with her first husband), gradually becomes a continent to study, to criticize, and to explain[630], as in the epic *Ségou*. She admitted in her interview with Taleb-Khyar that: "Africa helped me to discover I am not an African"[631] but she needed to make the journey to learn that truth. Her foray into the very real world of modern-day South Africa is much further along this continuum. Indeed, whilst *Une Saison à Rihata* has the atmosphere of an African novel, *Histoire de la femme cannibale* feels Westernised, as does Rosélie herself, representing the modern face of the French Caribbean. However, the fact that this fictional story is so firmly anchored in such a real place lends real authenticity to the tale – after all, as Renée Larrier reminds us: "histoire in French is defined as story as well as history"[632] – as does the fact that Condé admitted, à propos the autobiographical "je" of Rosélie, her protagonist, that: "j'ai voulu mêler directement mes souvenirs et mes expériences[633] au cheminement de cette héroïne qui est un peu moi, mais n'est pas moi"[634]. Despite this admission, it is important to accept that personal insights will be limited as Condé: "est bien de la race de ces écrivains pour qui le recours à l'écriture est

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[627] Condé, Maryse, 'Unheard Voice: Suzanne Césaire and the Construct of a Caribbean Identity' in *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*, ed. by Newson, Adele S. & Strong-Leek, Linda, New York: Peter Lang (1998), p.61.

[628] Guadeloupe has a population which is 90 per cent black or mulatto, 5 per cent white and the remaining 5 per cent is made up of East Indians, Lebanese and Chinese. http://www.cia.gov

[629] Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine, '*Traversée de la Mangrove*: Réflexion sur les interviews' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), pp.163.

[630] Miller, Christopher, L., 'After Negation: Africa in Two Novels by Maryse Condé" in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press (1996), p.179.

[631] Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., 'An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove' in *Callaloo*, 14:2, Spring 1991, p.356.

[632] Larrier, Renée, *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (2000), p.107.

[633] As an example, Condé raised her first husband's son by his first wife, as did the fictitious Fiéla in this novel.

[634] Condé, Maryse, 'J'ai quitté mon île' – interview dated 03 April 2003 with Tristan Malavoy-Racine for *Voir* on the occasion of the 2003 International Literary Festival of Montreal.

un masque qui permet de dire sans se trahir. Maryse Condé n'aime pas livrer ses états d'âme"[635]. Nevertheless, this novel could be considered as belonging to the hybrid genre of fictional autobiography, constituting: "a complex mixture of fiction, truth or reality or both, memory, and history"[636].

Into this maelstrom of repressed and not-so-repressed anger in modern-day Cape Town, Condé introduces Rosélie, another of her female characters with wanderlust, in voluntary exile from her island of birth and drawn towards the continent of her forbears. Arriving in Africa with Salama Salama three years earlier: "elle avait fait le voyage avec enthousiasme, croyant s'embarquer pour la grande aventure" (HFC. p.26), thus revealing certain similarities with Véronica of *Hérémakhonon* for whom Africa was the Dark Continent, and Marie-Hélène of *Une Saison à Rihata* who: "avait gardé intactes les convictions de sa jeunesse quand [...] elle rêvait d'une Afrique libre et fière qui montrerait la voie aux Antilles, entraînerait l'Amérique noire dans son sillage" (USR. p.54). Rosélie is, however, despite her naivety, far more *au fait* as to who would lead whom in the dawn of the twenty-first century, although she suffers from a similar regrettable dependency on men and similar angst:

> peut-être son rêve d'un monde où les différences seraient abolies reflétait-il son dénuement? Trahissait-il un désir d'aligner tout le monde sur la même tabula rasa qu'elle? Elle avait perdu ses parents et sa terre, aimé des étrangers qui ne s'exprimaient pas dans sa langue – d'ailleurs, possédait-elle une langue? –, dressé sa tente dans des paysages hostiles (HFC. pp.264-265).

Yet Rosélie's visits to Africa, first with a Jamaican, Salama Salama, and then with an Englishman, Stephen, were accidental side-effects of blindly following the men she loved, unlike Véronica and Marie-Hélène who deliberately journeyed to Africa in search of their roots and found: "la source mais nous avons cru que nous trouverions une patrie alors que ce n'est pas une patrie"[637] and thus were sadly disappointed – a disappointment for which, as Alexander[638] points out, Condé blames the Pan-Africanist movement and Négritude for instilling in the minds of Caribbean peoples that all blacks are the same and that Africa is "home":

> It was naïve, simplistic and overly idealistic to assume that African countries, just liberated from the yoke of colonization, and facing so many problems and subject to so many pressures from the imperialist powers, could provide the model we were looking for. We expected to be welcomed by the Africans with open arms and seen

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[635] Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine, '*Traversée de la Mangrove*: Réflexion sur les interviews' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), pp.158-159.

[636] Alexander, Simone A. James, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, Columbia, London: University of Missouri Press (2001), p.42.

[637] Clark, VèVè, A., '"Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989, p.116.

[638] Alexander, Simone A. James, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, Columbia, London: University of Missouri Press (2001), p.98.

> as long-lost brothers and sisters. We expected them to help us in our struggles while theirs were still raging. But this was not possible[639].

Yet ironically, given that: "contre son gré, il [Stephen] l'avait amenée dans ce pays exécrable [South Africa]" (HFC. p.109), it is Rosélie who chooses ultimately to settle there (albeit South Africa, not the Africa of her distant roots). Thus the: "roots and routes trope [...] manifested through a roving 'I'"[640] so prevalent in earlier novels is still current in Condé's more recent work (although it was subverted in her novel *Desirada* (1997)[641]). With regard to *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, one could consider that South Africa is a half-way house – for Rosélie it satisfies, instinctively, some unacknowledged desire to return to her ancestors' roots since it is African by virtue of being at the Southern tip of the African continent, yet it is a curiously Westernised Africa. This could, therefore, be interpreted as representing a progress of sorts by illustrating: "the evolution of the Caribbean people: from a secluded, easily classifiable community to a nomadic people, creating a world of its own wherever it finds itself"[642]. Indeed, Condé has admitted[643] that as at least five of her books have turned to the past, she believes she has paid her debt to the history of her place of birth, and as: "un peu une étrangère"[644] to Guadeloupe, she believes the distance helps to distance her from all the myths of the past.

Histoire de la femme cannibale is, to borrow Annabelle Rea's expression, a "roman-enquête", a variation on the detective story written by female authors where the interest is not so much in the crime itself but in: "l'interrogation de la société représentée par le microcosme où se passe l'action"[645]. Thus Stephen's mysterious murder results in two parallel lines of enquiry – the official police one to find his murderer and Rosélie's, which hinges more on the murder victim, and what she discovers gradually forces her to examine not only Stephen's inner recesses and the world with which he surrounded himself, but also her own. Mirroring South Africa's surprisingly successful Truth and Reconciliation Commission[646], Rosélie

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[639] Condé, Maryse, 'Pan-Africanism, Feminism, and Culture' in *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, ed. by Lemelle, Sidney J. & Kelley, Robin, D.G., New York: Verso (1994), p.59.

[640] Larrier, Renée, 'A Roving "I": "Errance" and Identity in Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* ' in *L'Esprit créateur*, 38:3 (1998), p.88.

[641] Marie-Noelle, the representative of the third generation of Caribbean women, is brought up in Paris but migrates to the USA.

[642] Condé, Maryse, 'O Brave New World'. Keynote address at the joint meeting of the Comparative Literature Association and the African Literature Association, Austin, Texas, March 1998, quoted in *Research in African Literatures*, 29:3, Fall 1998, p.3.

[643] During a reading at the University of London on 24 March 2004 (personal notes).

[644] ibid.

[645] Rea, Annabelle, M., 'Le Roman-enquête: *Les Fous de Bassan*", un modèle pour "*La Traversée de la Mangrove*"? in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: À propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte*, Actes du Colloque sur l'œuvre de Maryse Condé, organisé par le Salon du Livre de la ville de Pointe-à-Pitre (Guadeloupe), 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.128.

[646] It was established in 1995 to investigate political crimes committed during the apartheid era (1 March 1960 to 16 May 1994) and its three committees dealt with human rights violations, reparations and amnesties. The aim was to promote reconciliation in South Africa's divided society through truth about its dark past. It completed its work in 1998.

operates her own version as she searches out the truth by revealing the illusion of love which had sheltered her for so many years. This, in turn, leads to her freedom after she reconciles herself not to Stephen, the one who ostensibly did her harm, but to herself, as the one who allowed that harm to happen – the willing victim.

In a novel full of twists and turns, perhaps the most important twist for a Condé character in search of her identity is that at the end, once all the dust has settled and the sordid truth of Stephen's death has finally surfaced, Rosélie comes through: "l'expérience existentielle malheureuse que vivent des héroïnes très actuelles"[647] and makes the decision to stay in her adopted country, at least for the time being, rather than flee home to the French West Indies. Writing in 1995 on Condé's novels, Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa said:

> for so long as a person continues to want to exist elsewhere and as someone other than who she is, that person remains absent and voiceless. We need to own both our legacy and our space in order to be. Condé's protagonists seem to progress towards this conclusion, eventually acquiring the consciousness of a Caribbean identity wherever they happen to find themselves geographically[648].

I find it interesting that I do not see much evidence in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* of Rosélie acquiring "the consciousness of a Caribbean identity"; indeed that aspect is strangely absent once Rosélie has exorcised the demons concerning her long absence from Guadeloupe which was connected with her feelings of guilt towards her mother's illness and death. Rather, Rosélie finds her own mature identity, formed by all her life experiences to date, and there is no doubt that the end of the novel sees her attaining: "a voice as well as a presence"[649]. She is, finally, happy in herself and where she has chosen to live.

Whether Rosélie will stay in Cape Town is unknown obviously, but it would be unusual for one of Condé's characters to put down roots – as one of her lovers, Faustin, jokes: "tu es comme les nomades. Ton toit, c'est le ciel au-dessus de ta tête" (HFC. p.265), and as the narrator admits: "ceux qui naissent et vivent en métropole portent un nom. On les appelle des «négropolitains» ou des «nègzagonaux». Avoir un nom, c'est déjà exister. Les roches qui roulent par le monde et n'amassent pas de mousse n'en ont même pas. On les appelle «nomades»" (HFC. p.108). Condé herself admitted in an interview: "I believe now that it's this wandering that engenders creativity. In the final analysis, it is very bad to put down roots. You must be errant and multifaceted, inside and out. Nomadic"[650].

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[647] Antoine, Régis, 'Maryse Condé: Le romantisme de la désillusion?' in *Rayonnants écrivains de la Caraïbe: Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Anthologie et analyses*, ed. by Antoine, Régis, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, (1998), p.161.
[648] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, 'From Liminality to a Home of her Own? The Quest Motif in Maryse Condé's Fiction' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.562.
[649] ibid., p.562.
[650] Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.28.

Rosélie is also aged fifty, hence my particular interest, although this is not a novel about a woman with concerns about her chronological age. There is, therefore, no angst regarding any visible signs of ageing. Rosélie is, in fact, at ease with her body and is relaxed about her sexuality. She may be fifty, but she is a sexual being and is not short of willing partners and Condé is to be congratulated on depicting a mature woman having sex (the circumstances of which preclude me from writing 'making love'), proving this is not just the preserve of the young[651]. In 1970, Simone de Beauvoir made a point that is still valid over thirty years later: "ni l'histoire ni la littérature ne nous ont laissé de témoignage valable sur la sexualité des femmes âgées. Le sujet est encore plus tabou que la sexualité des vieux mâles" [652]. So the fact that Rosélie and Faustin, two people in their midlife years, not married to each other, have a relationship apparently based predominantly on sex *à la jeunesse* is, of itself, revealing – their ages are irrelevant in this regard. Yet Rosélie's age is all important because she has come to a crossroads in her life. Through a series of flashbacks, the reader learns that Rosélie is an innocent abroad, both metaphorically and literally, a naïve drifter through life who finally receives a rude awakening in her midlife years and is forced, by circumstances, with her whole world imploding around her, to examine for the first time who she was, who she is, and who she wants to be, as well as where she wants to be, and with whom.

As with Ramatoulaye, it is the death of her partner, and, more importantly, the circumstances leading to his demise and Rosélie's discovery of his double life which act as the catalysts for forcing through the changes in her life, she who used to believe: "je vis en parasite. Je ne possède ni carrière. Ni fortune. Ni biens matériels. Ni biens spirituels. Ni présent. Ni avenir" (HFC. p.63). Yet despite all Rosélie's negativity, it transpires that not only is she a medium with healing hands, but more importantly, she is also an artist who: "ne pouvait s'empêcher de peindre. Peindre comme un forçat à la chaîne" (HFC. p.58) and the implication at the end of the novel is that now she has finally decided to stand on her own two feet, without a man to make decisions on her behalf, her new-found self-belief will shine through her art, and instead of being known as: "Rosélie, Stephen's partner" or: "Rosélie, the medium, also an artist", she will become: "Rosélie, the artist, also a medium".

Condé succeeds, not for the first time in her novels, in making her main protagonist rather an unsympathetic character. "Elle revendiquera [...] un certain réalisme dans sa peinture et plus énergiquement encore le liberté de l'imaginaire à créer des portraits de femmes même antipathiques, ou négatifs mais conformes à une certaine réalité"[653]. This is a high risk strategy given that although the

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[651] There is an interesting comment in Condé's autobiographical *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* when she reports the opinion of the headmistress at her mother's school on learning that her mother was pregnant with Condé at the age of forty three: "dans son for intérieur, celle-ci estimait qu'à quarante ans passés, avec un mari déjà vieux-corps, on ne fait plus l'amour. C'est bon pour les jeunesses", p.20.

[652] Beauvoir, Simone de, *La Vieillesse*, Paris: Gallimard (1970), p.371.

[653] Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine, '*Traversée de la Mangrove*: Réflexion sur les interviews' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), pp.168.

murder-mystery element of the story and its topical political setting capture the imagination, Rosélie's general apathy and the part she plays in her own predicament preclude one from fully taking her side – and therein lies Condé's skill of course. Where is it written that protagonists have to be sympathetic characters? Yet Rosélie's rite of passage proves fascinating, and, like *Une si longue lettre*, it has distinct elements of liminality in that while there is a definite progression from the separation phase, via the liminal phase, to final reincorporation into society as a 'changed' persona, the novel depicts Rosélie largely in the central, liminal phase. Whilst I am not sure one can ever reach a resolution as such in midlife novels, indeed I do not believe that is their aim, hence the use of the term 'progress novels', there has to be light at the end of the tunnel and as Margaret Gullette points out, the 'progress' such novels convincingly model is that it feels better to be older than younger[654]. This seems certainly to be the case with Rosélie who, in finally 'growing up', has found her confidence and her independence which necessitated first coming to terms with the past, which, in turn, gave her 'permission' to move on to a hopefully positive future.

[654] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia (1997), p.86.

3.2 Who is Rosélie Thibaudin?

"plus braves que moi, mes aînées, toutes seules, sans un homme à leurs côtés" (HFC. p.221)[655]

If by the end of *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, Rosélie has reassessed her life and understood some of the mistakes she made along the way, as well as arrived at some understanding of who she is and what is really important to her, the picture that unfolds from the start of the novel is of a woman who is, metaphorically and physically, lost – or rather, lost without Stephen, her partner of twenty years. At the age of fifty, she appears to have no identity that she can call her own, coupled with feeling, throughout her adult life, that she is invisible to the vast majority of people she meets or even just passes in the street, which she turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy by often behaving as if she were invisible.

So who is Rosélie? Is she: "Rosélie Thibaudin, médium. Guérison de cas reconnus incurables" (HFC. p.18)? Is she "fille de Rose et Élie"? Or is she, even more anonymously: "une négresse à demeure rue Faure" (HFC. p.19)? According to the sensationalist local media, she is the companion of the modern day Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde who used to introduce her as: "ma femme", and even in N'Dossou, the residents of 'La Liberté' recognised her only as Salama Salama's companion, thus: "ils avaient maintes fois admiré l'arrivante, mais oui c'est elle, non, je te dis, au côté de Salama Salama, célèbre chanteur de reggae" (HFC. p.32). It is as if she does not believe she is worthy of appearing in her own right – proven, of course, by the fact that she has spent her life continually deferring to someone else, or, to be more precise, to the men in her life. It is as if, in exile from her homeland and therefore her roots, she actually does not know who she is, thus she is, in turn: Rose and Élie's daughter, Rose's assassin, Salama Salama's companion, Stephen's partner, Ariel's lover, Faustin's temporary bed-partner. Even in her latest incarnation as a medium, dressed 'authentically' in a: "boubou brun sombre à empiècement brodé jaune d'or. Mouchoir de tête assorti" (HFC. p.27), she is actually acting out a role in a setting that is carefully calculated with its artifacts to set the appropriately mystical tone.

Rosélie reveals herself and her story gradually throughout the novel in a series of flashbacks, triggered by an event, a sight, a memory, a feeling or simply by a wish to escape from a present which is too traumatic to handle. Thus, the sight of her skin in the mirror: "aussi soyeuse qu'au temps d'enfance quand sa maman répétait en la mangeant avec des baisers: – Quelle peau de velours satin!" (HFC. p.12) prompts the first reference to her childhood in Guadeloupe where we learn how she came by her unusual name: "fille de Rose et Élie" (HFC. p.13) – marking the child out as different from the start with her: "prénom absurde" (HFC. p.13). The bestowing of this hybrid name may well imply the: "réincarnation familiale [...] dans la transmission au nouveau-né de prénoms du parent"[656], but it also has the no doubt unintended

[655] This refers to one of Rosélie's most precious possessions - a photograph of twenty female Guadaloupians landing at Ellis Island in 1932

[656] Morin, Edgar, *L'homme et la mort*, Paris: Seuil (1970), p.126.

effect of denying the child her own distinctive identity. Thus, the seeds are sown at birth for Rosélie's identity crisis.

The reader is introduced to Rosélie in her 'separation' phase, three months after she has buried her long-term partner, Stephen, although at first all we know is that she is alone and not sleeping at night with: "le nez collé contre la cloison parce que le vide derrière son dos la terrifiait" (HFC. p.12). "Le vide" refers, of course, to Stephen and the loss of his physical presence, but, in a wider sense, refers to the world outside Rosélie's bed. However, a bed usually represents a symbol of security, a haven of peace, but not for Rosélie, despite rolling into a fœtus position to try to replicate the safety of the womb. The fact that she is terrified by this "vide" reveals to us immediately her dependency on Stephen, reinforced subtly by a reference to the fact that it was he who had chosen the furniture in the bedroom, whose strange shapes at night provoke, in turn, a memory of going on safari in KwaMaritane where Rosélie was frightened by the animals who metamorphosed from sleeping beauties during the day into wild animals at night, which she then likened to the white men she saw everywhere in the park stalking game: "pas sa faute si elle souffrait du complexe des victimes et s'identifiait à ceux qui sont poursuivis" (HFC. p.14).

In the first three pages of this novel, therefore, we are provided with enough information to start painting a picture of Rosélie – native of Guadeloupe, now living in Cape Town, South Africa; ambivalent about her childhood; not in the first flush of youth with: "sa figure ravagée qui affichait que la traversée déjà longue avait été rude, si rude" (HFC. p.12); dependent upon Stephen, her white partner, now deceased, and suffering from a belief that she is one of life's victims – all of which could equally describe the French West Indies and its battle with its identity and place in the world, still officially and legally dependent on France, its white dominant partner. In *La civilisation du bossale: Réflexions sur la littérature orale de la Guadeloupe et de la Martinique* (1978), Condé reveals the depressing opinion that Caribbean culture is a culture of dependency since: "the entire history of the Caribbean can be placed under the sign of dependency"[657]. Through the personal history of Rosélie therefore: "one can retrace the evolution of her [Condé's] ideas on the question of identity both at the collective and the personal level, the latter being inextricably linked to the former" as Condé seeks to unravel: "the system of relationships which define Caribbean existence"[658]. Rosélie's current identity crisis has much to do, therefore, with her generation's lack of cultural identity, demonstrated at Hildebrande's wedding celebrations, when, listening to the guests': "affirmations de vibrant chauvinisme, Rosélie se sentait les mains vides. Rien dans sa culture ne lui donnait l'envie de se battre bec et ongles" (HFC. p.264).

The emotional turmoil of the protagonist in her moment of crisis is also confirmed in the first few pages through the distinctive narrative style of the novel with its constant temporal and spatial shifts. In

[657] Cited by Shelton, Marie-Denise, 'Condé: the Politics of Gender and Identity' in *World Literature Today*, Autumn 1993, 67:4, p.718.
[658] ibid., p.717.

addition, there are occasional confusing switches of narration, often in mid-sentence, from the omniscient, third person narrator to the "je" of Rosélie when she interrogates herself: "est-ce que j'ai dormi cette nuit?" (HFC. p.12). Rye & Worton[659] point out that conventional definitions of genre no longer retain their hold and one can now see the distinction between first-person and third-person narration being dissolved by several writers. I would suggest that this novel is representative of this merging of first and third person narration where narrative clarity is occasionally sacrificed on the altar of authenticity. However, the additional lack of linear narrative also serves to reveal the unravelling of the threads of memory which are far from linear, being incomplete fragments thrown up out of sequence. Condé said in an interview that: "memory is something totally disorganized; there's no rule, there's no order. It comes from all corners, and builds up, and you have to find meaning in the complexity of things"[660]. In this novel, therefore, we are witness to the incoherence of Rosélie's jumbled memories as she attempts to unravel the mystery of Stephen's death which has the unforeseen consequence of leading to the unravelling of his (double) life.

For someone needing to get in touch with their inner child, South Africa, as I have already mentioned, is possibly not the ideal country to attempt such a task, but perhaps Rosélie, who is, after all, being forced to effect a change in her life, needed to be in such a dynamic place which is, despite almost insurmountable difficulties, enthusiastically embracing this incredible period of transformation. Indeed, Wylie makes the point that Condé is amongst a small group of writers who seem to feel the need:

> to go beyond simple dualities like black/white, male/female, or First World/Third World to examine the swarming multiplicity of realities, situations, positions in the vast panoply of the social world, where many nations, many cultures, many religions, many personality types clash and try to harmonize[661].

However, life in Cape Town is not without its challenges for Rosélie. South Africa may be, post-Apartheid, officially multi-racial, but old habits die hard, and on her own with no Stephen by her side, Rosélie becomes more invisible in this country than she felt she had been in New York, the cosmopolitan melting pot of all nationalities and colours *par excellence*. Thus, even in her own home in Faure Street, Rosélie becomes invisible and unimportant, witness the well-meaning neighbours who rallied around at the news of Stephen's death to take control of the funeral arrangements and: "mine de rien, elles l'éradiquaient. Elles la rejetaient à la périphérie d'une vie dont pendant vingt ans elle avait cru occuper le centre" (HFC. p.94). Or, walking alone past a cinema queue, she realises: "ils ne tourneraient pas la tête

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[659] Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), p.9.

[660] Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., 'An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove' in *Callaloo*, 14:2, Spring 1991, p.357.

[661] Wylie, Hal, 'The Cosmopolitan Condé, or Unscrambling the Worlds' in *World Literature Today*, 67:4 (1993), p.763.

dans sa direction. Elle n'irritait plus, elle ne choquait plus. Elle était redevenue invisible. Triste choix! Exclusion ou invisibilité!" (HFC. p.47). Alongside Stephen, she used to suffer agonies from the looks they received as a mixed-race couple, or more particularly that she received: "pour être silencieuse, l'hostilité des adolescents à son endroit avait été palpable, tranchante comme le fil d'un rasoir" (HFC. p.107), yet now, walking alone, literally and metaphorically, she has reverted to being invisible simply because she is black – one of a cast of millions in a country where the whites may be in a serious minority, yet are still perceived by many to be the dominant race.

Rosélie also feels alone and alienated. Yet she had felt just as alienated in New York. So where does she feel she belongs? She is, in fact, suffering from a feeling of not belonging anywhere, nor to anyone now that Stephen is dead. She may not be a refugee in the sense of one who has no choice but to flee and cannot return home, but she feels she is in exile all the same and, worse, she is in triple exile: from Guadeloupe, from her family and, at least while she was Stephen's partner, from her race. She is also full of bitterness at Stephen for having brought her to this city and then abandoned her, she who has no idea how to stand on her own two feet. Her sense of being alone in the world is palpable. Yet Rosélie has always been a loner, thus it is perhaps not surprising that female solidarity is conspicuous only by its virtual absence in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*. In N'Dossou, Rosélie had, briefly, been friends with a group of women and had discovered: "les fous rires, les calembours, les farces et attrapes qui avaient manqué à sa jeunesse, trop grave, solitaire" (HFC. p.33), but when she told them she was moving in with "un Blanc", the news was met with: "un silence incrédule" (HFC. p.34). Thereafter shunned by the women: "un sentiment de culpabilité la torturait qui ne devait plus la laisser en paix. On aurait dit que, de manière irréversible, elle avait coupé des liens dont elle ignorait elle-même la nature et la ténacité" (HFC. p.34).

If Rosélie has few friends – or at least few who stay the course – it transpires that this is because once they dare criticise Stephen to her face, that usually signals the end of the friendship, or, like Simone in Cape Town, the friendship lasts only as long as the husband's diplomatic posting. Dido is the exception, although that relationship is slightly ambiguous given that Dido is a paid employee, and, of course, although Dido made it obvious that she did not like Stephen, she never openly voiced her criticism to Rosélie. Crucially, of course, just as occurred with Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre*, no one thinks, or dares, to enlighten Rosélie as to Stephen's true nature. The person Rosélie appears to have been closest to is Amy, her Jewish friend in New York:

> auprès d'elle, elle retrouvait la sensation oubliée d'être une personne, un être humain, unique, singulier, peut-être créé à l'image de Dieu. Elle n'était plus invisible woman. Amy s'intéressait à elle, à sa peinture, à ses espoirs, à ses manques. En courant dans les allées du parc, Rosélie lui dévoilait ses blessures, les éternelles, les purulentes, les jamais cicatrisées. Amy, qui venait de confier sa mère [...] à une pension pour le troisième âge et n'avait pas le courage de lui rendre visite, pouvait la comprendre puisqu'elle vivait l'enfer qu'elle avait vécu autrefois (HFC. p.194).

Amy's colour and religion appear to be relevant only inasmuch as they serve to demonstrate that true friendship transcends race, class or creed, although one wonders whether the fact of being Jewish meant that Amy shared and understood the stigma of exclusion. Yet even Amy, who frequently criticised Stephen quite openly, stopped short of revealing the truth to Rosélie.

Thus, we are introduced to Rosélie and her identity crisis. Alone, alienated and invisible in Cape Town, in emotional and economic turmoil after Stephen's death and forced to become a medium to survive, Rosélie cannot help feeling bitter at being, as she calls it, abandoned once again by a man, this time in middle age – at least the last time, twenty years ago: "sa chair n'était pas encore triste!" (HFC. p.22). Does that mean that if she had been younger, she would have returned to prostitution to survive? Certainly, her options could probably be considered much reduced in that regard given her age. Thus, this time around, whilst Dido has arrived at a solution to solve her immediate cashflow problems, Rosélie still has issues to resolve. Should she return home, even though her parents are both dead, and even though she is not sure if she can call Guadeloupe her home after so many years away? Yet how can she leave Stephen alone? She feels she owes it to him to stay close which is, on the surface, a remarkably unselfish reason to stay in a country where she feels so unhappy, although, ungenerously, it is easy to read this as simply avoiding having to make a real decision on her future. However, gently encouraged by the Inspector in charge of the murder investigation to go over in minute detail Stephen's life to see if she can throw any light on the motives for his brutal death, she is forced to analyse their life together and, reluctantly at first, she is gradually drawn deeper into the investigation. Yet this process is ultimately cathartic. Unable to hide behind anyone else's decisions made on her behalf, she comes to realise that her future lies in her own hands and, eventually, she understands that: "the only opinion that can be important is her own. She wants to be liberated from all the constructions others make of her. [...] She wants to be free"[662].

[662] Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, 73:3, Summer 2000, p.523.

3.3 Rosélie – the willing victim?

> "Mme Hillster continua à condamner ces femmes aveugles qui ne méritent pas le nom de victimes" (HFC. p.213)

If, at first sight, Rosélie appears to be, and to see herself, as a victim in this sorry tale – not in the sense of being physically harmed but in the sense of being tricked or duped, treated as a second-class citizen, or just generally put-upon – then she is a victim largely of her own making. I use the adverb 'largely' reservedly since with regard to the painful episodes she experienced as a result of discrimination against her colour it is hard to disagree with her observation, even at the start of the third millennium, that: "sur cette planète, il n'est pas de femme noire qui un jour ou l'autre n'ait été doublement humiliée à cause de son sexe et de sa couleur" (HFC. p.64) – to which I would add: "et à cause de son âge et de sa beauté" – since being young, beautiful and black (or white) tends to provoke a different response to being old, faded and black (or white), particularly if you are a woman. In fact, Dido, her maid and companion, has a clearer, if perhaps rather simplistic understanding of the problem when she rebukes Rosélie: "toi, tu vois partout le racisme! Ce n'est pas du racisme, ça! C'est parce que tu es une femme qu'on te traite comme on te traite! Les femmes, blanches, noires, jaunes, métisses, c'est le cul du monde!" (HFC. p.74).

Living with a white partner therefore increases Rosélie's already present feelings of inferiority, since although she is far from invisible on the arm of Stephen, he, being both white and male, is always perceived to be the dominant one, thus the black/white opposition in this relationship reinforces the traditional binaries of hierarchy – superior/inferior, strong/weak – and, after the first startled or even shocked glances from passers-by, Rosélie, being both black and a woman, always returns to obscurity. Of course, the binary opposition, white versus black, has particular resonance in both the West Indies and South Africa in view of their colonial history. As Frantz Fanon, born in Martinique in 1925, pointed out in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) the categories of black and white depend on each other as neither can exist without the other and they came into being at the moment of imperial conquest[663].

Rosélie certainly sees herself as a victim because of her colour, and, without condoning for one moment the very real damage that human beings can cause to each other on account of the colour of one's skin on a scale that rises from personal slights up to full-scale genocide and terrorism, after twenty years with Stephen, Rosélie still seems to be sensitive on this matter, thus: "toutes les têtes se levèrent et Rosélie retrouva, comme un habit familier pour un temps écarté, oublié, l'hostilité méprisante de dizaines de pairs d'yeux. Un Blanc avec une pute cafrine" (HFC. p.312). It is, of course, in this scenario at the end of the novel with Manuel and in all such similar scenarios that she experienced at Stephen's side, not her colour per se that is the problem (nor the gazer's colour for that matter), rather it is the issue of a mixed couple

[663] Poulos, Jennifer, 'Frantz Fanon' Spring 1996, http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Fanon.html.

since: "le couple mixte est un vin fort pour tempéraments robustes. Que les faiblards s'en abstiennent" (HFC. p.315). Rosélie is, therefore, not only the invisible woman as she frequently describes herself vis-à-vis the whites as a result of her colour, as for example the behaviour of her neighbour Mrs Schipper demonstrates: "comme à l'accoutumée, elle regarda au travers de Rosélie. Cet aveuglement volontaire durait depuis quatre ans" (HFC. p.117), she is also made to feel: "lépreuse et pestiférée" (HFC. p.55) by Stephen's mother. Even worse perhaps, she is also persona non grata for those of her own colour, since they consider she has betrayed her Race by living with a white man. Rosélie is thus perceived to be in violation of one of the key tenets of Negritude, that of an active solidarity among the black people[664] – the movement may be considered passé, but the sentiments are still alive and well.

However, given that the novel is set in South Africa where, until very recently, the races were kept strictly segregated[665] and mixed couples would attract all the condemnation of the law[666] and society, it would be unrealistic to expect people's attitudes to change overnight. Passing a law may change a situation with immediate effect but there is no corresponding switch in a person's brain to change the habits of a lifetime. *Histoire de la femme cannibale* is clearly stated to be a novel, yet Condé dedicates this particular book to her husband, Richard Philcox, who happens to be English and white, and it would be naïve to imagine that Condé does not have some experience akin to Rosélie's to draw on in writing this histoire. Indeed, in an interview on the occasion of the 2003 International Literary Festival of Montreal, she confirmed vis-à-vis her marriage: "on me reproche constamment [cette union], confie-t-elle. On me la reproche en Guadeloupe, on me la reproche aux États-Unis. Les gens me le reprochent. Il faut expliquer que, d'accord, je suis mariée à un Blanc, mais que cela ne veut pas dire que je sois complètement aliénée"[667]. Given this admission, it would be interesting to learn if she and her husband experienced more hostility as a couple in South Africa than in other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, it is not just at Stephen's side that Rosélie feels alienated. Jan de Louw, owner of the Cape vineyard where Dido grew up, had taken to his bed in 1994: "jurant qu'il ne saurait voir son bien-aimé pays aux mains d'un Cafre" (HFC. p.100). On his deathbed some nine years later, the sight of Rosélie, a black woman, in his bedroom is enough to stir up the last vestiges of his hatred: "ce regard la plaqua, rigide, contre le mur. Il lui semblait qu'il la renvoyait à d'anciennes places, à des maîtres, à agiter des éventails de plumes de paon pour chasser les mouches et refraîchir leurs épaules en sueur. Couchée,

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[664] Condé, Maryse, 'O Brave New World'. Keynote address at the joint meeting of the Comparative Literature Association and the African Literature Association, Austin, Texas, March 1998, quoted in *Research in African Literatures*, 29:3, Fall 1998, p.2.

[665] The Group Areas Act No.41 of 1950 decreed different residential areas for different races.

[666] The Immorality Act No.5 of 30 September 1926 prohibited extra-marital intercourse between whites and blacks in South Africa, extended by the Immorality Amendment Act No.21 in 1950 to include coloureds and Asians. Both Acts were repealed in 1957. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act No.55 of 8 July 1949 prohibited marriages between whites and members of other racial groups and was repealed in 1985.

[667] Condé, Maryse, "Maryse Condé – Identité multiple" – interview dated 29 March 2003 with Caroline Montpetit for *Le Devoir* on the occasion of the 2003 International Literary Festival of Montreal.

jambes écartées, chair à plaisir du Maître" (HFC. p.105). It is a look confirming the observation that: "the gaze may [...] be a vehicle for an implicit judgement of its object"[668]. Rosélie certainly interprets it as representing Jan's judgement of her, a black woman, a symbol of all that he hates and fears, and it actually makes her want to kill him, or at the very least compel him to lower his eyes.

Rosélie is, however, certainly no stranger to such looks – from her first meeting with Stephen: "les passants, nombreux [...] leur avaient décoché les premiers de ces regards qui, dès lors, n'allaient plus les lâcher. Hostilité et mépris!" (HFC. p.25) and her normal response is either to flee, whether from Death Valley in California to Los Angeles, or simply to hide herself away in the apartment in New York for months at a time, or even just to eat her meals on a tray in her room rather than join Stephen and his academic friends – all actions which merely serve, of course, to confirm her invisibility and designate her as an outsider.

Yet this impulse to hide herself away does not just manifest itself vis-à-vis her colour. Even in N'Dossou, when she stayed with Salama Salama's family: "la majorité des gens trouvait Rosélie sombre, renfermée, prompte à se retirer au fond de son appartement quand des visites débarquaient" (HFC. p.218). Rosélie obviously lacks self-confidence, and envies those like Stephen who: "était à l'aise avec lui-même, satisfait d'être ce qu'il était" (HFC. p.113), a quality Faustin also possesses, yet one: "qui lui faisait si cruellement défaut" (HFC. p.113). Thus, at Hildebrand's wedding to which she is invited, courtesy of her friendship with Dido, an occasion where she is amongst friendly faces (albeit mostly Afrikaans speakers, a language which she had not mastered): "malgré les sourires, elle se sentait terriblement isolée" (HFC. p.266). It is small wonder, therefore, if the combination of lack of self-confidence and the sense of being marginalised means Rosélie continually reverts to: "une position d'«outsider», en retrait, s'observant de loin"[669]. This sensation of being *de trop*, an object first of curiosity, derision or even hatred, and then instantly forgotten or ignored, can presumably find its origins in the colonial history of the West Indies: "on pourrait citer une multitude d'exemples montrant que, à un degré ou un autre, sous une forme ou une autre, le héros romanesque est avant tout un étranger, soit qu'il vive sur un sol qui n'est pas le sien, soit qu'il se sente lui-même étranger à tout ce qui l'entoure"[670]. Rosélie is witness to the truth of this statement – a stranger abroad, she also feels a stranger at home and once: "le lien est rompu, l'homme n'est plus nulle part en situation d'autochtonie, et vit donc dans l'insécurité permanente"[671].

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[668] Majumdar, Margaret, A., 'The Subversion of the Gaze: Shérazade and Other Women in the Work of Leïla Sebbar' in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), p.198.
[669] Tervonen, Taina, 'Les traîtresses de la race: Leone Ross, Maryse Condé et Leïla Aboulela secouent les clichés du couple interracial' in *Africultures*, 55, 24 June 2003, http://www.africultures.com.
[670] Paravy, Florence, 'L'altérité comme enjeu du champ littéraire africain' in *Les champs littéraires africains*, ed. by Fonkoua, Romuald & Halen, Pierre, Paris: Karthala (2001), p.214.
[671] ibid., p.214.

Why is Rosélie portrayed as a willing victim? Where is her backbone? Is this how Condé sees her fellow country(wo)men? Given Condé's views on Guadeloupe and its position in the world in relation to its 'marâtre' France, it is easy to see Rosélie's hopelessness as a metaphor for Caribbean political and cultural weakness: "la société guadeloupéenne est encore trop frileuse, hostile aux négropolitains comme elle les appelle moqueusement, hostile à tous ceux qui vivent au loin, à tout ce qui vient d'ailleurs. Elle est hantée par cette notion dangereuse: l'authenticité"[672]. That is why Rosélie gains so much satisfaction from watching repeatedly the film of Euzhan Palcy, Rue Cases-Nègres because: "la miséricorde d'Euzhan Palcy lui donnait chaque fois ce qu'elle ne possédait pas: une réalité" (HFC. p.60) when she would love to cry out to everyone: "regardez ! Je me tue à vous le dire. La Guadeloupe, La Martinique, cela existe en vrai ! On y vit. On y meurt. On y fait des enfants qui se reproduisent à leur tour. On prétend y posséder une culture qui ne ressemble à nulle autre: la culture créole" (HFC. p.60).

How do she and Simone, the consul's wife originally from Martinique, recognise each other as being fellow West Indians? "La question est d'importance. Les Caribéens sont dotés d'un instinct, pareil à celui des autres espèces menacées, en voie de disparition" (HFC. p.60). It is not just Rosélie, therefore, who has a poor self-image. She comes from a group of islands that constantly has to shout to make itself heard and which tends to merge into one in the eyes of the world since: "quand on reste à sept mille kilomètres de chez soi, les DOM se confondent. Guadeloupe, Guyane, même combat" (HFC. p.81). Condé herself has no time for the expression 'francophone'[673]. In this novel, the night guards like Deogratias are: "en majorité des francophones qui mangeaient le pain noir de l'exil, ayant perdu leur terre, leur langue, leurs coutumes, et s'essayaient aux dures sonorités d'un idiome étranger" (HFC. p.225) and to be recognised as a francophone is to be recognised as being able to hail from any number of places, with no real cultural identity save the fact that one can speak French, as Dido's clumsy ignorance regarding Faustin's origins proves: "c'est un francophone de je ne sais trop quel pays. Congo? Burundi? Rwanda? En tout cas, un des trois" (HFC. p.19). For Dido: "les mots «Guadeloupe, département d'outre-mer» ne signifiant pas davantage pour elle que pour le reste du monde, elle considérait Rosélie comme une Française" (HFC. p.74). Rosélie speaks perfect French and had studied in Paris, *n'est-ce pas*? Therefore, she must be French and that means she must come from mainland France, *l'hexagone*. Few people that Rosélie meets are even aware of the existence of her island in the French West Indies and that in itself denies Rosélie a distinctive, instantly recognisable identity.

So, hailing from an island that she feels few people would be able to locate on a map, perhaps it is understandable that whether alone or by Stephen's side, Rosélie lacks the self-confidence to walk the

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[672] Condé, Maryse, in an interview with Lisa Pignot for *La revue Médianes* (1999), p.3, www.culture-developpement.asso.fr/J_arch/archives/conde.php.

[673] Condé wrote an interesting article entitled: 'Du bon usage de la francophonie', 9 March 2001 (http://www.frenchculture.org/education) wherein she describes three types of francophonie: "francophonie accidentelle"; "francophonie fétichiste ou religieuse" and "francophonie tragique". She describes her own brand of francophonie as "francophonie mosaïque".

streets with her head held high, proud of who she is and who she represents – because, in reality, she does not know who she is, nor who she represents, nor where she belongs. Variously described in the novel by those she meets as a "pute", "sorcière", "médium", "magicienne", and met with disbelief when introduced as Stephen's "femme" or as an artist, how could she have a sense of self? How could she believe in herself if people such as the American couple they meet on holiday, Lisa and Richard: "produits de siècles de racisme et d'exclusion du Noir" are: "incapables de regarder Rosélie dans les yeux, de se comporter avec elle comme avec un autre être humain" (HFC. p.124)?

Race issues aside, Rosélie's real sense of being a victim is, however, to do with her relationships with men and it runs concomitantly with her lack of self-worth and self-belief, together with a general apathy about life and a willingness to place her future in her partners' hands, thus: "Rosélie se garda de tout commentaire, elle qui se refusait à juger, à condamner, à questionner" (HFC. p.84). After all: "pourquoi chercher à découvrir la face que les êtres nous cachent? Connaître la vérité: de là vient le malheur" (HFC. p.213). Rosélie is fearful of life itself: "j'ai peur des autres humains, du monde, de la vie, de la mort. De tout, quoi!" (HFC. p.107). She feels that she has been let down by the men in her life: "ainsi, sauf Ariel, les hommes de sa vie, Salama Salama, Stephen, à présent Faustin, l'avaient d'une manière ou d'autre larguée sans ménagement. Elle aurait aimé savoir ce qu'il y avait en elle pour susciter tant de désinvolture. Elle revenait sur des épisodes de sa vie qu'elle avait occultés. Toutes ces plaies qui s'infectaient sous la croûte!" (HFC. p.216).

However, it is pertinent to question the nature of Rosélie's relationships with men – they may well have been relationships, but they were far from being partnerships. Why did Rosélie reject not only motherhood but also marriage? Although Stephen had asked her to marry him, she felt he was only going through the motions for the sake of making her future more secure. Her refusal to have Salama Salama's children – a refusal which stigmatised herself in the eyes of his family and brought disgrace on Salama Salama himself – meant he had had no problem in abandoning her for a teenage bride who was pregnant on their wedding day, and Faustin was already married with children and studiously avoided providing her with any personal details concerning his life. In short, Rosélie was a useful accessory to these men in her role as sexual partner, yet true intimacy and love seem to be lacking in all her relationships, an apparent case of: "sexuality without sensuality" to quote Robert McCormick[674] – is this another consequence of her parents unhappy marriage? In addition, she was not privy to her partners' other lives – because it was not just Stephen who led a double life, although his may have been the most duplicitous. This feeling of being an extra in life, of being further excluded, can only have added to Rosélie's lack of self-esteem, taking as a definition of self-esteem that it is a: "sociopsychological construct that assesses an individual's

[674] Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, Summer 2000, 74:3, p.525.

attitudes and perceptions of self-worth"[675]. Thus she who felt she belonged to: "l'espèce des perdantes. Des losers" (HFC. p.206) acted in such a way as to encourage others to see her in that light.

At thirty years old and discarded for a teenage bride by Salama Salama, Rosélie put her trust in Stephen: "qu'elle avait cru son sauveur. Bien à tort, puisqu'il l'avait abandonnée aux mains de Faustin qui l'abandonnait à son tour" (HFC. p.220). The use of the verb 'abandon' is instructive, since: "it programmes the judgement of the reader"[676] against the men in favour of Rosélie. One of its definitions is: "cease to support or look after (someone)"[677] and the example given in the dictionary is of a mother abandoning her child. Of course, Rosélie may well subconsciously blame her mother for abandoning her as a child – not that she was literally abandoned, but owing to Rose's enormous size and the fact that she rarely if ever left the house, she may have struggled to fulfil all the roles that a mother is supposed to play in her daughter's upbringing. Yet, why the use of this verb to describe the actions of the men in her life? Is Rosélie not a grown, mature woman? Does she have to depend on a man for her survival, both economic and emotional? Or has she: "so perfectly internalized the abandonment plot"[678] not only of her mother towards her, but, even more importantly, of her mother's gradual abandonment by her father over the years, something which Rosélie witnessed every day of her childhood, that she simply expects history to repeat itself with the men in her life. Emotionally, as we have seen, Rosélie is far from mature, and economically, she has always lived off men in some form or other. Thus, on Stephen's untimely demise, it is left to Dido to point out that being a career artist does not bring with it any obvious means of supporting oneself, particularly as Rosélie is not gifted in promoting her works of art to those with money to pay for them, and it is left to Dido in her guise as Rosélie's surrogate mother to come up with the idea of Rosélie earning her living as a medium: "sans Dido, elle en serait toujours à se chercher" (HFC. p.29).

Therefore, strip away the niceties and it comes down to the fact that in return for a roof over her head or the means to survive or even just a companion to help her forget her pain, Rosélie provided sex – willingly of course, there is no suggestion of coercion at any time. Her body is a commodity, even if she uses it as such subconsciously – and if she chooses to believe that: "les fonctionnaires de N'Dossou ne comptaient pas" (HFC. p.294) when she turns, briefly, to prostitution after being abandoned by Salama Salama, that is simply another example of Rosélie misleading herself, not to mention a potent symbol of her alienation from society, and her home – after all, she would hardly have become a prostitute had she been in Guadeloupe, within reach of family strictures. She may well not have had many 'official' lovers, but

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[675] McMullin, Julie Ann & Cairney, John, 'Self-esteem and the Intersection of Age, Class, and Gender' in *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18:1, February 2004, p.76.
[676] Rye, Gill, 'Lost and Found: Mother-daughter Relations in Paule Constant's Fiction' in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), p.67.
[677] *The New Oxford Dictionary of English.*
[678] Ladimer, Bethany, *Colette, Beauvoir, & Duras: Age and Women Writers*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1999), p.200.

when she tries to convince herself that: "pour moi, le sexe n'a jamais été prouesse ni performance. Il a toujours rimé bêtement avec amour" (HFC. p.294), she is serving up yet another healthy portion of self-delusion. As Nesbitt points out, Condé works to describe the illusory spells subjects weave around themselves, and to rend their veil, which is unquestionably a violent gesture in and of itself[679], so the reader should not be surprised at the murder of Stephen and the gradual shattering of Rosélie's illusions – it is painful, but it has to happen to enable Rosélie to move on.

However, despite Rosélie's insistence on the fact that the men in her life tend to abandon her – another illusion necessary to bolster up the image she holds of herself – the facts are not quite so clear-cut. After all, as a victim of murder, Stephen does not deliberately abandon her, and she shows so little interest in Faustin's career that she can hardly complain if he takes his pleasure and leaves. Whilst Stephen was, no doubt, as Dido observes: "un égoïste, un despote. Il t'empêchait d'être toi-même" (HFC. p.159), Rosélie allowed this to happen, she: "qui avait la déplorable habitude d'être intimidée par toute volonté plus forte que la sienne" (HFC. p.62) has to admit that: "elle ne s'opposait jamais à Stephen" (HFC. p.151). It has taken her all these years to come to the realisation that she has to take responsibility for her own life, and, just like Bâ's Ramatoulaye, she is forced into so doing by the death of her partner – if their partners had not died, then it is safe to assume that their lives would have carried on exactly the same. How apt that in both cases the moment of epiphany is occasioned by a death, which is, of course, the ultimate separation and final abandonment, thus "le cycle de la vie humaine s'inscrit dans les cycles naturels de mort-renaissance"[680].

[679] Nesbitt, Nick, 'Stepping Outside the Magic Circle: The Critical Thought of Maryse Condé' in *The Romanic Review*, 94: 3-4 (2003), p.392.
[680] Morin, Edgar, *L'homme et la mort*, Paris: Seuil (1970), p.123.

3.4 Rosélie and her relationship with Stephen

There are none so blind as those who do not wish to see[681]

The extent of Rosélie's problems regarding her relationships with men, as well as her self-delusion with regard to her twenty-year partnership with Stephen, is illustrated by observations such as: "en fait, alors que Rosélie et Stephen s'accordaient sur tout, il n'existait entre Salama Salama et Rosélie, à part le haschische [...] que des points de friction" (HFC. p.219) – those being that Salama Salama resented Rosélie's painting, seeing it as a rival; she hated his music, reggae, to the extent of not even supporting him by attending his concerts and, finally, he adored children and she did not. Whereas, of course, Rosélie and Stephen agreed on everything – or did they? In his study after his death:

> elle posa les mains à plat sur le bois, repassant dans sa tête ces années qu'elle avait toujours considérées comme heureuses. Stephen et elle ne se disputaient jamais. Elle le laissait tout décider, tout ordonner, tout résoudre. À son avis, il faisait pour le mieux. Dès la rencontre au Saigon, les rôles avaient été distribués et n'avaient plus varié. Il était le Maître nageur. Elle était la Naufragée. Il était le Chirurgien. Elle était l'Opéré du cœur. Un lien de Reconnaissance doublait celui de l'Amour (HFC. p.278).

If Salama Salama had been Rosélie's first love – they had been together for three years after their meeting in Paris and she had followed him to Africa, to N'Dossou, where they had lived for a further three years – then Stephen was the hook on which she hung her life for twenty years. Stephen used to recall how she had appeared to him at their first meeting in the bar 'Au Saigon': "tu avais l'air tellement perdue, tellement vulnérable que je me suis senti par comparaison paisible et puissant" (HFC. p.30). However, by having ceded all power to Stephen, which Rosélie was aware she had done since: "il la savait angoissée s'il s'attardait trop longtemps loin d'elle, même en plein jour. [...] Pourtant, [...] elle le sentait heureux de son pouvoir" (HFC. p.93), it could be said that the couple had agreed on everything since Rosélie always acquiesced in Stephen's decisions.

As Rosélie relives her life with Stephen, she reveals, perhaps inadvertently, many points of difference between them. For example: "elle qui détestait les livres"[682] (HFC. p.117) since primary school had always felt: "que cette part de sa vie la rejetait. Elle était de trop. L'attention distraite pour sa misérable personne le détournait de préoccupations plus hautes" (HFC. p.233) and for this reason, as well as for the more prosaic one that she had once been mistaken for a maid at one of Stephen's soirées, she did not take part in his life in academia, whether in New York or Cape Town:

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[681] Old English proverb. First attributed to John Heywood (1546).
[682] Is there an association here with Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* (1623), for whom books were the enemy? Not forgetting that Shakespeare's 'Caliban' is an anagram of cannibal.

> Rosélie accompagnait rarement Stephen aux réceptions du département. Fromage et vin blanc bon marché dans des gobelets de carton. Très rarement aux parties chez ses collègues, braais et vin blanc de meilleure qualité. Jamais lors de ses virées dans les clubs de jazz de Waterfront, bourbon Jack Daniel's et cacahuètes salées. Elle s'enfermait dans son atelier quand il recevait (HFC. p.129).

Rosélie also did not share Stephen's taste in music: "Stephen et elle avaient des goûts opposés, lui n'écoutant que du jazz et des opéras de Verdi qu'elle détestait pareillement" (HFC. p.117), and likewise: "la vie en plein air, le tourisme ne l'avaient jamais intéressée. C'est Stephen qui, aux moindres jours de congé, l'avait traînée, maussade, à travers les parcs nationaux, sur les plages, dans les montagnes, dans des campements" (HFC. p.97). There was, however, one matter on which they did agree: "le plus important pour un couple. Ils se souciaient peu d'un héritier" (HFC. p.57) since Stephen believed: "que les seules créations valables sont celles de l'imaginaire" (HFC. p.57).

Thus, few interests in common, what was the attraction? Was it simply at first, as for Condé herself when she met Richard Philcox in Senegal, the fact of being foreigners together in Africa?[683] What is certain is that Stephen was also alienated from his roots – from his family, from England, from France – to the extent that Rosélie knew he would prefer to be buried in Cape Town, his adopted home, rather than be sent back to rest in the family tomb. Stephen seemed to imply that Rosélie gave his life purpose: "si je te perds, mon existence redeviendra ce qu'elle était avant toi; une désolation. Je n'avais rien à moi. Je vivais au travers d'autres hommes. Comme un Indien tupinamba, je dévorais leur foie, leur rate, leur cœur" (HFC. p.161), yet, of course, that was exactly what he did to Rosélie, since he could not help himself belittling her and undermining what little self-confidence she possessed: "tu sais, tu n'y arriveras pas seule" (HFC. p.139). Yet by treating her in that way, Stephen justified his behaviour, thus proving Gilligan's point that: "in relationships of permanent inequality, power cements dominance and subordination, and oppression is rationalized by theories that "explain" the need for its continuation"[684].

Interestingly, with reference to Condé's first novel, *Hérémakhonon*, Murdoch sees the role of Veronica's lover Ibrahima Sory as being to interdict Veronica's desire; an inhibitor rather than a mediator[685] and surely in this novel Stephen is also an inhibitor. He is also possessive, always introducing Rosélie as: "ma femme, Rosélie" at the same time: "l'attirant à lui d'un grand geste possessif" (HFC. p.122), although, of course, another interpretation is that, as an exhibitionist, he enjoys the frisson of disapproval such a gesture elicits from strangers faced with this mixed race couple, and no doubt enjoys watching Rosélie's discomfort:

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[683] Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.17.
[684] Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1982), p.168.
[685] Murdoch, H. Adlai, 'Divided Desire: Biculturality and the Representation of Identity in *En attendant le bonheur*' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.587.

> elle soupçonnait Stephen de se repaître des réactions que son introduction produisait. S'en remémorer au lit lui servait de bouée contre le naufrage sexuel. S'accrocher à ces souvenirs émoustillait un exercice qui, à force, aurait pu devenir routinier, le dotant d'un goût d'interdit, voire de perversité et de vice" (HFC. p.123).

That memories bear false witness is a tenet of this story – after all, Rosélie's memories of her relationship with Stephen always stop short of revealing the truth of their life together – she might remember certain aspects, but always chooses not to delve deeper, a natural protection mechanism, until at the end: "sous ses paupières serrées, elle voyait défiler une succession d'images. Le pire, c'est de tenter de se représenter ce qu'on ignore. De faire surgir une vérité rapiécée ainsi qu'une photo déchirée dont on a recollé les morceaux" (HFC. p.306). In fact, despite living with Stephen for twenty years, she only knows his "image officielle" (HFC. p.230) – as, indeed, does the reader since, like Modou in *Une si longue lettre*, he is not directly present in the text at any stage. Marianne Bosshardt points out that: "le motif de «l'enfant non-aimée», voire «non-désirée» est un motif répandu dans l'œuvre romanesque de Condé"[686] and, despite having met his mother, Rosélie is unaware that Stephen felt he had been unloved as a child. She does not know that: "sous ses airs tranquilles, il haïssait Verberie et était profondément affecté par la séparation de son père et de sa mère, par cette impression qu'aucun d'eux ne tenait à lui" (HFC. p.230). She realises that: "elle ne savait ni qui il avait courtisé, ni qui il avait désiré. [...] Elle n'avait pas la moindre idée de sa vie à N'Dossou avant qu'elle débarque chez lui" (HFC. p.231). Condé does not seek to condone Stephen's subsequent behaviour, but by providing these albeit brief details relating to his childhood, there is the inference that perhaps he is, in his own way, also a victim. Françoise Vergès makes the point that in Condé's œuvre, there is: "une reconnaissance de l'importance des passions, du fait que l'on ne peut diviser le monde en bourreaux – les Blancs, les coloniaux, les maîtres, les hommes – et en victimes – les Noirs, les esclaves, les colonisés, les femmes"[687].

It is interesting to surmise just why Rosélie shows so little interest in the men in her life. Perhaps just as she is not seen as important enough for others to care about – and certainly her strangely detached behaviour could provoke such a reaction – she also does not care about them enough. The question is what is it in Rosélie which causes her to behave in that way? Perhaps a lifetime of living on the margins of society has resulted in her acquiring a defensive shield and over the years she has learnt to survive within a very narrow band of emotions. It could also have its roots in her childhood, as I will examine next.

Rosélie's need of Stephen is complicated in that the very strength she admires in him: "sans l'avouer, Rosélie était plutôt fière de Stephen. Il avait refusé le rôle de figurant dont elle se contentait si souvent.

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[686] Bosshardt, Marianne, 'Maryse Condé: *Désirada* ou l'ironie du sort' in *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante*, ed. by Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine & Moudileno, Lydie, Paris: Ibis Rouge (2002), p.154.
[687] Vergès, Françoise, 'Labyrinthes' in *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante*, ed. by Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine & Moudileno, Lydie, Paris: Ibis Rouge (2002), p.185.

Il avait refusé l'invisibilité et forcé l'Autre à prendre sa mesure" (HFC. p.200) could be used by him to undermine her confidence, thus subtly reinforcing her reliance on him, thus: "elle avait cru que Stephen lui ferait don de cette force qu'il possédait à en revendre. Au lieu de cela, sa présence, sa protection, avait paradoxalement sapé le peu de confiance qu'elle avait en elle. Puis, brusquement, il l'avait laissée seule. Le reproche, sournois, insidieux, lui aigrit le cœur" (HFC. p.80). Of course, where there is strength, there is weakness, and whilst Rosélie plays down her own strengths and highlights her perceived weaknesses, she only mentions Stephen's virtues and his strengths, seemingly much less aware of his weaknesses, one of which will eventually prove to be the catalyst for his fatality, and, of course, it serves her purposes to focus only on his strengths since that gives her permission to be weak. After all, whose need is the greater in this relationship? Perhaps there is a benefit for Stephen in that he feels stronger as part of a couple – he feeds off Rosélie's weakness. Interestingly, as masseuse, she is in a position of power, although she seems unaware of this. She is the dominant one while her patients, male or female, are submissive under her hands.

Florence Paravy writing about contemporary African literature points out that its historical origins can be found in the colonial situation: "elle est née d'un certain type de rencontre avec l'autre, l'étranger, une rencontre brutale, marquée par l'oppression et l'exploitation."[688] Paravy could be writing about Rosélie's meeting with Stephen, she from a former European colony, he from one of the major colonising countries – *l'autre*, the stranger, a brutal association marked by oppression and exploitation. After all, Stephen is a bully and a prize manipulator. Whilst Mrs Hillster is quite blunt when she says to Rosélie: "il faisait des gens ce qui lui plaisait; il les manipulait"[689]. Surtout vous" (HFC. p.151), Rosélie cannot pretend it is the first time she has been told that. Ariel, her lover in New York, for one: "la suppliait de ne pas confondre ceux qui l'adoraient avec ceux qui se servaient d'elle comme d'un paravent" (HFC. p.185) and her Jewish friend, Amy, had not held back when she said: "– dévorée pour dévorée, je préfère l'être par mes enfants. Voulait-elle dire qu'elle était dévorée par Stephen?" (HFC. p.189).

However, even once Rosélie knows the extent of Stephen's betrayal, she is obsessed with finding out whether the twenty years they had spent together had been a total sham. She needs to know whether he had ever loved her or if those declarations of love had also been part of the deception. She is tormented by questions to which she can never find the answers – Stephen in death is as much a mystery to her as Stephen in life had been. Lydie Moudileno points out that: "ce refus de la transparence se traduit par une

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[688] Paravy, Florence, 'L'altérité comme enjeu du champ littéraire africain' in *Les champs littéraires africains*, ed. by Fonkoua, Romuald & Halen, Pierre, Paris: Karthala (2001), p.213.

[689] Shades of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* again, or Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1968)? A diluted form of literary cannibalism? For Stephen, read Prospero – both obsessed by books; both of a patriarchal nature – and Caliban (the cannibal, i.e. Rosélie: "this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" Act V, Scene I, l. 275) was Prospero's oppressed slave, although Shakespeare's Caliban was of unknown racial origins and has been played by both black and white actors. In Césaire's Caribbean version, the black Caliban's final speech could be Rosélie speaking to Stephen, or the colonised addressing the coloniser (see Appendix G).

écriture où domine le mode interrogatif"[690] and the text is replete with questions as Rosélie asks them not just of herself, but of all his acquaintances, yet always stops short of forcing the answers. If, deep down, she has always known the truth about Stephen, then she has also been prepared to accept that aspect of his character so long as it did not impinge on their lives together – for the sake of stability in her own life, she colluded in his secret life by making sure she never found out about it, because once out in the open, it would have meant the end of their relationship and her security.

In this respect, one could draw a parallel with polygamous marriages, for example, Ramatoulaye and her non-acceptance of Modou's polygyny. For women, a major part of the problem with polygyny is the fact that they have to accept another woman in their husband's life. From the date of his second, third or fourth marriage, the wife/wives have to share their husband, and have to accept that they are not his only love, hence the familiar refrain that co-wives are inevitably rivals and thus enemies. Certainly part of Ramatoulaye's anguish was the thought of sharing her husband after twenty years of what she thought was a perfect marriage and part of Rosélie's agony is in learning that Stephen's love was not exclusive to her. Similarily, both women had to face the fact that their respective men had chosen younger partners. Perhaps, therefore, even more painful for Rosélie at the age of fifty is the realisation that Stephen desired Bishupal, his young male lover and the catalyst in his murder, because of: "sa beauté, sa grâce, toute son attraction juvénile" (HFC. p.307) which, incidentally, as Peter Brooks points out, confirms the status of the young male body as the measure of beauty, as per the homosexual ideal of Greek civilization[691]. And is not Bishupal's vitriol similar to that of a younger co-wife who resented sharing her husband – after all, Bishupal was in a privileged position compared to Rosélie as he knew of Rosélie's existence.

Finally, is it too fanciful to see in Stephen's death some kind of warning to Rosélie? A black woman should not be sleeping with a white man – in the eyes of many, this is an unnatural union[692]. The fact that the novel is set in South Africa where such a relationship would have ended in a prison sentence for both partners only a relatively short time ago lends substance to this argument, and, in any case, how could a black Caribbean woman consider sleeping with a white male representative of one of the old colonising countries? Indeed, in some eyes even today: "elle qui pactisait avec l'oppresseur" (HFC. p.202) would be considered a whore for such an act.

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[690] Moudileno, Lydie, 'La qualité de l'amour chez Maryse Condé' in *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante*, ed. by Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine & Moudileno, Lydie, Paris: Ibis Rouge (2002), p.136.

[691] Brooks, Peter, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1993), p.16.

[692] The technical term is: "miscegenation (the sexual union of different races, specifically whites with negros). As some critics have argued, fear of miscegenation stems from a desire to maintain the separation between civilized and savage, yet that binary masks a profound longing, occluding the idea of the inevitable dependence of one on the existence of the other". Taken from Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth & Tiffin, Helen, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, London: Routledge (2000), pp.142-143.

3.5 Rosélie and the parent/child relationship

"couvée par sa mère, jalouse et possessive" (HFC. p.59)

Midlife generally being considered a time of reflection which invariably leads one to remember one's childhood and one's parents, it is not surprising that: "des fois, surgissaient des souvenirs de son enfance" (HFC. p.293) in Guadeloupe and Rosélie's first recollection is revealing: "qu'elles étaient loin, ces années-là! À croire qu'elles n'avaient jamais existé. C'est vrai, l'enfance est un mythe, une fabrication sénile des adultes. Moi, je n'ai jamais été enfant" (HFC. p.13). It is also generally considered that before being able to move on in life, one looks for answers in the past, so it is not surprising that, at this time of introspection, Rosélie summons up memories of her childhood and parents.

It is also not unusual that Rosélie should remember her parents at this time in particular since a period of mourning tends to reawaken memories of previous mourning experiences. Indeed, Condé's own views on the genesis of *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* are illuminating in this regard. In an interview with Robert McCormick in 2000, she reveals that the text, the first in which she speaks autobiographically about her youth, represents her response to the loss of her son who had recently died (her eldest child and only son, Denis). Unable to write fiction for almost a year, writing became therapy and the focus of *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* was her relationship with her mother[693]. For Rosélie, in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, Stephen's death, which represents the loss of: "a "love object" in psychoanalytic terms"[694] is just the latest in a series of losses and if: "identity and loss are closely intertwined in a number of ways"[695], it is little wonder that Rosélie is suffering from a loss of sense of self at this time. Likewise, in a novel concerned with betrayal, it is perhaps natural that Rosélie relives the guilt she feels still over how she treated her mother in her old age when: "les vacances la ramenaient de plus en plus rarement en Guadeloupe, où elle ne pouvait plus supporter la vue de Rose, baleine blessée à mort, clouée à sa couche" (HFC. p.54).

What is perhaps surprising is the extent of Rosélie's child-like behaviour that is revealed as the novel progresses, as well as her unquestioning acceptance of her dependency on Stephen. Some of the reasons for this have their origins in the manner of her upbringing, although there is much that is left unsaid, hence the importance of memories in midlife fiction where they: "thicken a character's life, justify it, explain

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[693] Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, Summer 2000, 74:3, pp.525-526.
[694] Robson, Kathryn, 'Virtual Reality: The Subject of Loss in Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* and Régine Detambel's *La Chambre d'écho*' in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41:1 (2004), p.3.
[695] Rye, Gill, *Reading for Change: Interactions between Text and Identity in Contemporary French Women's Writing (Baroche, Cixous, Constant)*, Bern: Peter Lang (2001), p.21.

her identities"[696]. Condé believes in: "the preeminence of the family nucleus and the constant need to define yourself in terms of that nucleus"[697] and the fact that Rosélie's close family circle has disintegrated and that she feels she has little in common with her extended family in Guadeloupe may also have contributed to her rather aimless meandering over the years, as she has nothing against which to define herself.

It may seem rather an obvious tactic to blame one's pattern of behaviour on one's parents, yet it is clear that the roots of Rosélie's dependency on Stephen, and in fact on all the men in her life appear to stem from her childhood. Only child of Rose and Élie, her parents:

> n'arrêtaient pas de remercier le bon Dieu pour leur enfant si douce, si gentille, seule consolation dans le naufrage de leur couple. Sans Rosélie, depuis longtemps, ils se seraient séparés. Mais, dans notre famille, pas d'enfant du divorce. Une petite fille a besoin pour grandir d'un papa et d'une maman, même s'ils s'injurient quotidiennement (HFC. p.159).

What a burden to place on a child; to be responsible, just by existing, for her parents relationship, as well as no doubt bearing the guilt for being, perhaps, the cause of her mother's ballooning weight, since: "à dater de ses vingt-six ans, de la naissance de sa fille, la maladie, sournoise et souveraine, avait triomphé" (HFC. p.16) as Rose was restricted first to a wheelchair for sixteen years and then bed-ridden for twenty-three years until her death aged sixty-five – an extremist version of the *mère sacrificielle*. Rosélie was therefore imbued with a sense of being *de trop* right from the outset and, despite having a large extended family, she always felt: "dans ma famille, personne ne veut de moi" (HFC. p.40). Interestingly, the description of Condé's own conception left her with similar emotions. Born eleven years after her brother Guy, when her mother was aged forty-three and her father sixty-three, her birth was unplanned, and every time she heard the story of how she had become her mother's: "petit bâton de vieillesse", she experienced the feeling: "je n'avais pas été désirée"[698].

For Rosélie, the idea that she felt she was responsible for her mother's weight problem is given further credence by the references to the fact that it was she, as a baby, who, whilst suckling, drained the lifeblood out of her mother: "j'aime l'horreur. Je crois que dans une vie antérieure j'ai fait partie d'une portée de vampires. Mes canines longues et pointues ont perforé le sein de ma mère" (HFC. p.58) and:

> je vais me réveiller blottie contre l'ample poitrine de Rose, le goût du lait de son sein dans ma bouche, l'odeur chaude de sa peau m'enivrant. Ce n'est pas à moi que cela

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[696] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia (1997), p.86.
[697] Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.128.
[698] Condé, Maryse, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance*, Paris: Robert Laffont (1999), p.12.

> arrive. Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait pour mériter pareil calvaire? Qu'est-ce que j'expie? Toujours la même faute. Il n'y a pas de pardon pour les filles assassines (HFC. pp.281-282).

Thus, if Rosélie does indeed have the power to harm others, even if that power only exists in her imagination, then perhaps she feels instinctively that she needs to render herself powerless in order not to hurt anyone again, hence her subordination in her relationship with Stephen.

Whilst her parents had monumental arguments, Rosélie was the opposite:

> jamais une parole plus haute que l'autre. Jamais un refus d'obéir, une révolte. Pas de crise de pré-adolescence, encore moins d'adolescence. [...] La maîtresse de dessin surtout se plaignait: «Il faut voir ses compositions libres. Des horreurs. L'autre jour, elle a dessiné une femme, jambes écartées d'où coulait une fontaine de sang. J'ai crié: "Bon Dieu, c'est quoi ça?" Elle m'a répondu: "C'est un viol." J'ai demandé, en colère: "Tu as déjà vu des viols, toi? Ces qualités de choses-là ne se font pas dans notre pays." Elle m'a répondu: "Moi, on me viole tous les jours." Et quand j'ai crié en rage: "Ne dis pas des choses comme ça! Qui te viole?" Elle m'a répondu tout tranquillement: "Mon papa, ma maman, tout le monde"» (HFC. p.160).

Even in adolescence, therefore, or perhaps especially in adolescence when emotions are heightened, Rosélie saw herself as an (uncomplaining) passive victim, or perhaps deliberately made herself into one as a reaction to feeling guilty about her mother and also as a means of identifying with her mother, thus the pattern was set for her future behaviour, confirming that: "the ways in which infantile conflicts are dealt with, psychically, determine our relations with others throughout life"[699]. As she later muses: "l'effrayant est qu'on ne refait jamais sa vie. Le malheur comme le bonheur sont des habitudes que l'on forme en naissant et dont on ne se défait jamais" (HFC. p.223) and it is this negative, accepting attitude which she has to fight against when trying to rebuild her life.

Her relationship with Rose was ambiguous, like most mother/daughter relationships, at least in literature. When Rosélie remembers her childhood, she sees herself as a pawn in the power struggle between her parents. Rose being virtually a prisoner in her bedroom, suffocating literally in her own flesh and metaphorically in her own space, it is not surprising that, in turn, she suffocated Rosélie, who was treated by her mother rather as a hot-house plant, a precious jewel not to be contaminated by the outside world, thus: "Rose pour qui rien n'était assez beau pour sa fille" (HFC. p.33). This is, in itself, a form of oppression, even if the motives are pure and, of course, in keeping with the novel's title, possessiveness can be seen as one end of a continuum which ends in cannibalism. As Condé said: "chacun sait que la personnalité ne s'affirme que peu à peu chez l'enfant, qu'il se définit largement par rapport au regard de

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[699] Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, 'Introduction', in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), p.18.

l'autre, surtout s'il sagit [sic] d'un adulte dans un position dominante"[700]. Thus, apart from family contacts, the young Rosélie led a solitary life with no friends, once again setting the stage for her behaviour in later life. Although her parents were madly in love when they married, with Rose a virtual invalid from Rosélie's birth and presumably becoming gradually desexualised, Élie soon turned to the local whores and Rose, whose: "poigne sur les rênes de ce foutu cheval arabe qui cabre et rue à fantaisie n'avait jamais été ferme" (HFC. p.15) was left marooned in an ever-burgeoning sea of flesh, leaving Rosélie with a feeling of failure – she who was supposed to be the link binding her parents together, was the cause of them drifting apart, thus: "ai-je mis du soleil dans la vie de mes parents? Sûrement pas" (HFC. p.247).

Now, however, in her new role as medium caring for others, Rosélie is able to assuage her guilt over her neglect of her mother – a guilt she was endowed with at a very young age and which has permeated the very core of her being. Over the passage of time, Rosélie's homeland and her mother have blended into one, an example of: "la métaphore de la terre-mère"[701] – here an ironic twist on the cliché of mother Africa, and, indeed, Condé herself has admitted à propos Guadeloupe that at one stage in her life: "l'île n'avait aucun sens pour moi sans la présence de ma mère"[702]. If Rosélie is in exile from mother Guadeloupe, it is, however, an exile she has chosen and one she does not wish to reverse, nor indeed feels she can reverse, notwithstanding the fact that her mother is dead, thus: "rentrer dans l'île comme dans le ventre de sa mère. Le malheur est qu'une fois expulsé on ne peut plus y rentrer. Retourner s'y blottir. Personne n'a jamais vu un nouveau-né qui se refait fœtus" (HFC. 246). Shades here of Marie-Hélène in *Une Saison à Rihata* who experiences similar sentiments. Cilas Kemedjo points out that the: "métaphore utérine, désir de retourner dans le ventre maternel ou alors quête de la mère comme référence d'une stabilité identitaire, revient de manière constante dans les écrits romanesques de Maryse Condé"[703]. He sees the fact that Marie-Hélène's mother is dead in *Une Saison à Rihata* as the reason she is not able to return to Guadeloupe because:

> retourner à la Guadeloupe ne signifiait guère pour Marie-Hélène que retourner vers sa mère. L'île et la mère étaient la même chose, utérus clos dans lequel blottir sa souffance, yeux fermés, poings fermés, apaisée par la pulsation du sang. Mais la mère était morte. Alors la douleur de l'avoir perdue à jamais, [...] se changeait en haine de l'île, à présent stérile, matrice désertée qui n'envelopperait plus de fœtus (USR. p.77).

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[700] Condé, Maryse, *La parole des femmes: Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française*, Paris: L'Harmattan (1979), p.13.
[701] Morin, Edgar, *L'homme et la mort*, Paris: Seuil (1970), p.136.
[702] Clark, VèVè, A., '"Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989, p.132.
[703] Kemedjo, Cilas, 'Les enfants de Ségou: Murailles en miettes, identités en dérive' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.38.

If their mothers were alive, then this desire to return to the mother could symbolise a desire to be reborn. However, given that both their mothers are dead, Cilas believes that this exile with no possibility of return: "fait écho à l'arrachement primordial des esclaves trois siècles plus tôt"[704] and that rebirth by symbolically returning to the mother's womb is therefore not possible. He suggests that, adrift in the world, Marie-Hélène (and the same could be said of Rosélie) is searching for: "un point d'ancrage pouvant servir d'alternative sécurisante au lieu antillais"[705] which she hopes to find in the Africa of her ancestors, serving as a: "mère aussi, proche par l'espoir et par l'imaginaire" (USR. p.77). Like her literary predecessor, therefore, Rosélie also seems to be searching for somewhere, outside of Guadeloupe, that she can call her own. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi posits another argument, suggesting that the desire to go back to the mother's womb embodies the refusal to grow and assume responsibility[706] and it appears that in Rosélie's case, both arguments are valid. In years to come, it is interesting to speculate on how writers will have to revisit this metaphor, given that, as a result of medical advances: "the fœtus has to an increasing extent come to be understood as a separate being, and the unity between women and fœtus is therefore disintegrating"[707] – or perhaps that is exactly what Condé is suggesting here.

Unlike Marie-Hélène and unlike Condé herself[708], Rosélie does at least have the comfort, or ease of conscience, of having been present, albeit only just in time, at her mother's actual demise and once she has made peace with her guilt at feeling responsible for her mother's illness as well as for having abandoned Rose in her last years, she is able to accept that home does not necessarily have to be where she was born which, in turn, releases her, albeit at the age of fifty, to finally step out into the world as an independent being and to move on with her life:

> brusquement, la pensée d'un adieu au Cap la déchirait. Elle s'apercevait qu'à son insu des liens l'amarraient à cette ville, des liens qu'elle n'avait jamais noués avec aucun autre endroit. Même celui de sa naissance. Libérée par magie de ses peurs, elle s'aventurait par les rues, se repaissant de cette beauté insaissable et arrogante, tellement particulière (HFC. p.298).

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[704] Kemedjo, Cilas, 'Les enfants de Ségou: Murailles en miettes, identités en dérive' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.38.

[705] ibid., p.39.

[706] Mudimbe-Boyi, Elisabeth, 'Narrative "je(ux)" in *Kamouraska* by Anne Hébert and *Juletane* by Myriam Warner-Vieyra' in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press (1996), p.135.

[707] Lie, Merete, 'Science as Father? Sex and Gender in the Age of Reproductive Technologies' in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:4 (2002), p.393.

[708] Condé revealed in her interview with VèVè Clark that whilst at the Sorbonne, instead of going home for the summer vacation in 1956, she chose to go to Rome and Florence with a girlfriend and thus: "je venais de manquer les derniers instants de ma mère. Ce fut pour moi très difficile à supporter émotionnellement". Clark, VèVè, A., '"Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989, p.98. Although in the autobiographical *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, Condé says that her father refused to let her come home that summer because of her poor examination results, p.152.

It is important in Rosélie's self-renewal that she comes to terms with both: "the father and mother figures resident in [...] the subconscious, her repository of personal memories"[709]. Hating what pain her father's unfaithfulness and feckless behaviour caused her mother, she took Rose's side in life, and when her father died, mid-coitus, at the age of eighty, barely six months after her mother's death, she refused to go to Guadeloupe for his funeral since: "son temps de deuil était fini! Elle en avait assez de broyer du noir! Surtout, elle s'avouait que son père n'avait jamais compté pour elle" (HFC. p.174)[710]. Élie had always had grand plans for Rosélie. He: "se mettait en colère quand il la voyait perdre son temps à peinturlurer, au lieu de réviser ses maths, d'étudier les sciences en vue du baccalauréat. À défaut d'une avocate, il aurait voulu d'une fille économiste. Aucun Guadeloupéen ne peut se vanter d'une fille économiste à la Banque mondiale" (HFC. p.42). We are not privy to Élie's thoughts on how his daughter turned out, but from Rosélie's point of view, because of her mother's illness, she was deprived of a model for her later life. However, paradoxically, this may have made it easier to turn away from Guadeloupe and to look elsewhere for happiness, as she is part of the generation who make their own rules and have to learn from their own mistakes, however clichéd that sounds. However, as Rosélie now realises, despite her best efforts to distance herself from her roots, Stephen has repeated Élie's behaviour and she has become as much a victim as her mother had been, thus: "en dépit des apparences, ma vie ressemble à celle de Rose. Toutes les vies de femmes se ressemblent. Cocues, humiliées quand elles ne sont pas abandonnées. Simplement, à la différence d'Élie, et de tant d'autres, Stephen y a mis les formes" (HFC. p.288), only this time around, of course, the oppressor was white, supporting Condé's belief that: "there are victims and oppressors in both camps"[711].

Given her childhood, therefore, perhaps it is not surprising that Rosélie, as an adult, was subconsciously searching for a parent-figure replacement and in Stephen she seemed to have found the perfect man who would love and protect her. After all: "Stephen vous aimait infiniment, n'en doutez jamais. [...] Tous ceux qui l'ont connu, qui l'ont approché, le savent. Il parlait sans arrêt de vous. Il se faisait beaucoup de souci. Il disait que vous étiez hypersensible, une écorchée vive. Il ne songeait qu'à vous protéger" (HFC. p.313):

> Rosélie se demandait par quel miracle elle trouvait grâce à ses yeux. Les premiers temps, elle tremblait, pareille à un cancre lors d'une interrogation, convaincu qu'il finira par lasser l'examinateur. Ce moment elle l'avait attendu en vain pendant vingt ans. Son indulgence, sa patience ne s'étaient jamais démenties. Elles l'avaient tenue au chaud. Comme un bébé prématuré qui ne quitte jamais sa couveuse (HFC. p.82)

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[709] Pratt, Annis, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Brighton: Harvester Press (1982), p.140.
[710] Further parallels with Condé's life: in an interview with Clark, Condé revealed "je n'avais rien à dire sur mon père. [...] C'était un homme avec qui j'avais très peu en commun", Clark, VèVè, A., "'Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île": une interview de Maryse Condé' in *Callaloo*, 12:1, Winter 1989,p.108.
[711] Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.20.

Stephen had been, as Manuel Desprez confirmed, a man who indulged Rosélie's whims and absolved her from any wrong-doings, and she has to admit that: "il m'avait toujours tout pardonné, à moi qui n'étais pas sans reproche; à moi qui n'en suis pas, je peux te l'avouer, à ma première infidélité" (HFC. p.175). Stephen had not tried to influence her painting but instead: "il se bornait à exprimer son approbation. Pourquoi avait-elle toujours l'impression qu'il se comportait comme un papa poule?" (HFC. pp.43-44) and he had known how to comfort her, soothing her brow as a mother would soothe her child's. "Stephen la veillait, l'entourait de ses bras, les nuits où le remords la saisissait, tenace, vivace comme au premier jour. Il n'etait jamais ni las ni excédé. Il la faisait boire quand elle était fiévreuse de remords, lui épongeait le front, lui embrassait les mains, assurant: – Tu n'as rien à te reprocher" (HFC. p.165). Thus, for example, after Rosélie's brief fling with Ariel in New York, a fling of which Stephen had been well aware: "Rosélie s'effondra dans les bras de Stephen qui une fois de plus ne lui adressa pas un mot de reproche" (HFC. p.183) – just as a parent would forgive a wayward child. Indeed, "sa mansuétude" (HFC. p.175) is one of the words used to describe Stephen – and surely the word 'leniency' has overtones of an authority figure handing down his judgement, a feature of the "dominant paternalism"[712] which Stephen exhibited towards Rosélie. It is interesting, although the text is vague on this point, that Rosélie did not appear to have actually left Stephen whilst she was conducting her affair with Ariel, thus ensuring her security blanket was still firmly in place, albeit a little ragged around the edges.

Whilst the need for a father-figure replacement may have been subconscious, Rosélie was not unaware of the parent/child aspect of their relationship, nor the damage caused by not facing up to reality, although they seem ephemeral concepts that she grasps occasionally, then allows to drift away rather than confront them – which would, of course, have upset the status quo, thus:

> à des moments, un sentiment de culpabilité l'écrasait. [...] À d'autres, ses pensées prenaient un tour complètement différent. Elle se demandait de quelles frustrations, jamais avouées, ballots de linge sale repoussés, jour après jour, dans un coin du Moi, elle se vengeait. En fin de compte, Stephen avait-il été son bienfaiteur? Partager ses jours, vivre dans son ombrage lui avait peut-être causé un dommage considérable, lui interdisant de devenir adulte (HFC. p.135).

In this ambiguous relationship Rosélie also played at being the mother occasionally, such as when her friend Simone accused Stephen of always stealing the limelight at any social event: "Rosélie accueillait ces reproches avec indulgence. Un peu comme une mère admet les petits travers de son garçon" (HFC. p.72) and, of course, the need to reassure Stephen that he was her best lover obviously has its roots in the maternal, replicating as it did the reassurance she used to "docilement" give Rose when her mother asked: "Qui tu préfères? Ton papa ou ta maman? (HFC. p.293).

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[712] Murdoch, H. Adlai, 'Divided Desire: Biculturality and the Representation of Identity in *En attendant le bonheur*' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.584.

Stephen apart, Rosélie does appear to present a general aura of childlike vulnerability that invokes in others a need to protect her. Thus, Dido, "mère maquerelle" (HFC. p.316) fulfils the function of surrogate mother – a caring confidante – albeit another dominant personality, since: "Rosélie n'avait pas coutume de s'opposer à Dido, ni à personne, d'ailleurs" (HFC. p.224) and together with Raymond, Faustin's friend, the two of them, although just good friends: "ressemblaient à des parents comblés qui n'espéraient plus rien pour leur fille déjà montée en graine" (HFC. p.223). Later when, following Faustin's lead, Raymond vanishes from their life, Inspector Lewis Sithole fills not only the space in Dido's heart and in her bed – because Dido is far from the desexualised figure of Rose in her later years – but also the vacant position of father-figure to Rosélie, as: "seuls Dido et Lewis Sithole étaient fidèles, aux petits soins" (HFC. p.306). Gilligan makes the point that: "the image of women arriving at mid-life childlike and dependent on others is belied by the activity of their care in nurturing and sustaining family relationships"[713], but for Rosélie, having no children to nurture and an ocean away from having to sustain any family relationships, one can see how she has arrived at midlife childlike and dependent on others. The challenge for her is how to break out of this comfortable position.

[713] Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1982), p.171.

3.6 Rosélie and her "doubles"

Where to start? The whole novel is infused with mirror images, doubles, repeated patterns of behaviour. These serve a dual purpose: Rosélie can hide behind them, allowing the pattern of repeated behaviour to carry her along in life, which it has done for all her adult years, or she can interrogate them and try to learn from them, hoping to read the truth that she is unable to confront full-face. As such, they play an important role in the identity crisis she has been propelled into through Stephen's death. However, the novel is rather like a game of Snakes and Ladders – just when you think Rosélie is making progress, she slips and ends up even further from the end. She sees parallels in every walk of life: Jan and Sofie at Lievland follow each other into death on the same timescale as did Rosélie's parents, thus: "à croire qu'un cordon ombilical relie les époux, plus puissant que celui qui unit une maman à son enfant. Lui ne souffre pas d'être coupé" (HFC. p.295); Sofie waits until her son, Willem, arrives from Australia and she can gaze on him one last time before dying – just like Rose on her deathbed waiting patiently for Rosélie to arrive; and, as an example of a racist parallel, Simone, her one-time friend in Cape Town, a consul's wife born in Martinique, is also, just like Rosélie, a victim of racism being: "systématiquement niée, ignorée. Sous son propre toit, à ses recéptions, les convives ne lui adressaient pas la parole. À celles des autres, elle était reléguée en bout de table" (HFC. p.64).

The most significant "double" (I use the term advisedly as Fiéla is not a true double, perhaps rather a sounding-board, or a projection) to whom Rosélie feels irresistibly drawn is Fiéla "l'inconnue" (HFC. p.89), a fifty year old local woman accused of murdering her husband and possibly cannibalising his body or at the very least using it in satanic rites, whose sensational trial is running simultaneously with the search for Stephen's murderer. Jacques Catteau suggests that: "le double est partie intégrante de l'être. Il naît [...] d'une crise d'identité"[714], which would certainly seem an appropriate reason for Fiéla's appearance in Rosélie's life at this time. As she says: "Fiéla, tu t'es installée dans mes pensées, mes rêves. Pas gênante pour un sou. Discrète comme une autre moi-même. Tu te caches derrière mes actions, invisible, pareille à la doublure de soie d'un vêtement" (HFC. p.97). Andrew Blaikie makes the point that maintaining a sense of self is an interactive process[715], thus in her time of crisis Ramatoulaye had recourse to writing to her best friend, a process normally considered interactive because it is implicitly understood to be reciprocal, and in this novel, it could be Rosélie's subconscious that is seeking out Fiéla at this stressful stage in her life, someone with whom to have an internal dialogue.

Fiéla's photograph is on all the front pages of the local newspapers and it is this grainy newspaper face to which Rosélie feels so drawn:

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[714] Catteau, Jacques, 'Le Double ou l'asymétrie ennemie' in *Le Double, l'ombre, le reflet: Chamisso, Dostoïevski, Maupassant, Nabokov*, ed. by Lévy-Bertherat, Déborah, Paris: Opéra (1996), p.27.
[715] Blaikie, Andrew, 'The Secret World of Subcultural Aging: What Unites and What Divides?' in *Cultural Gerontology,* ed. by Andersson, Lars, London: Auburn House (2002), p.103.

> la cinquantaine. D'aspect pas plus diabolique qu'une autre. Même l'air assez doux, voire timide. Maigre comme un hareng saur, ce qui soulignait ses traits anguleux, ordinaires. Seule étrangeté, les yeux. Malgré la mauvaise qualité du cliché, ils forçaient l'attention. [...] Elle a mon âge. Elle n'est pas belle. Elle pourrait être moi (HFC. p.88).

Rosélie sees Fiéla as a twin: "cette descendante des cannibales" (HFC. p.107), like herself a passive (at least until the alleged murder of her husband) victim of men and a comparable lost soul. At a time in her life when she feels all alone, abandoned, and adrift in the traditional mourning period, Rosélie cannot help but feel there is a link between the two women – Fiéla[716] on the margins of society because of the horror of which she is accused, Rosélie on the margins of society because of Stephen and the mystery behind his murder, and both on the margins of society because of the colour of their skin, as well as being exposed in the voracious media as objects for general, albeit transitory, consumption.

Rosélie empathises with Fiéla's situation, married to Adriaan for twenty-five years, and feels she can relate to how Fiéla must have felt when Adriaan was attracted to her, since with Salama Salama: "elle s'était découverte convoitée, désirée, précieuse" (HFC. p.216) – the stereotypical view of woman as desirable object.

> Fiéla, tu n'avais pas d'amies. Comme moi. Tu te contentais des plantes de ton herbier. Tu as rencontré Adriaan un dimanche au temple. Il était très différent de toi. Toujours à blaguer. Il t'a fait rire. Il a regardé ton corps. Pour la première fois, un homme s'intérressait à toi. Je sais ce que c'est. Tu as été transportée. N'empêche que deux ans après votre mariage, il a donné un ventre à la fille de la voisine. Martha, une gamine de quinze ans. Tu as souffert le martyre, mais tu n'as rien montré. Tu as pris le bébé, Julian. Tu l'as élevé. Tu en as fait un homme dans la mesure de ton possible (HFC. p.144).

Yet it is this same child, Julian, now a young man of twenty-two, who has accused Fiéla of murdering her husband, his father, and storing his flesh in her refrigerator.

Of course, the exotic possibility of cannibalism or satanic rites is a gift to the media which revels in hyping-up the drama, inciting the public to hatred akin to the witch hunts of earlier centuries. Condé here: "attaque la haine et la bigoterie; elle reconnaît le caractère destructeur du préjugé"[717]. So Fiéla is suspected of being, at the very least, a witch. As Rosélie comments: "ce n'était pas nouveau. Est-ce que

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[716] Did Condé borrow the name Fiéla from a popular Afrikaans book *Fiela se Kind* written by Dalene Matthee, first published in 1985, and translated into English as *Fiela's Child*, New York: Knopf (1986) and made into a film in 1987? Set in 19th century South Africa, a coloured woman, Fiela, raises a white child as her own for nine years until he is taken away to live in a white family. Fiela is powerless in face of all the bureaucracy as the boy grows up confused, seeking his true identity.

[717] Wilson, Elizabeth, 'Sorcières, sorcières: *Moi, Tituta, sorcière... Noire de Salem*, révision et interrogation' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.113.

les femmes n'ont pas toujours été accusées d'être des sorcières? L'histoire remonte au temps longtemps! Pour l'Europe, au Moyen Âge" (HFC. p.212). Fiéla, Simone, and Rosélie herself all serve as examples for groundless prejudice, based almost certainly on fear of the unknown. Leah Hewitt believes that: "si Maryse Condé montre bien qu'il n'y a pas d'essence noire, blanche ou féminine, elle montre également que les préjugés qui nourrissent les stéréotypes perpétuent les injustices, les inégalités, le racisme et le sexisme"[718] – and I would again add ageism to this list of stereotypes.

If left to a kangaroo court, Fiéla would have been tried, convicted and hung before a witness had been found to speak in her defence. However, whilst the truth about Stephen's death is eventually revealed, albeit by third parties not Rosélie, Fiéla commits suicide in jail taking the truth about her husband's murder to the grave. 'Language is power' may be a cliché, but while: "Rosélie resta sans voix" (HFC. p.146), blocked (in)voluntarily within herself, Fiéla chooses silence – never speaking during the trial which finds her guilty (albeit with a reduced sentence owing to mitigating circumstances concerning Adriaan's behaviour). Does her silence represent the silence of her race at the atrocities committed before and during apartheid? Or is it more specifically a representation of the traditional silence of the black woman? Florence Paravy supports this interpretation in stating that: "ce mutisme total [...], ainsi que l'absence de toute analyse psychologique de la part du narrateur font qu'il n'est pas tant la représentation littéraire d'un individu, que l'emblème d'une époque"[719]. Or does Fiéla's silence also represent Rose's silence at Élie's painful infidelities whilst she lay a prisoner in her room; after all, Rose had had a beautiful voice when young which had gradually become silenced as she suffered increasingly from Élie's behaviour? Or does it represent Rosélie's own silence concerning the truth about Stephen's secret life?

Yet if Fiéla had spoken out, she could have revealed the truth – or perhaps it was, like Stephen's, too shocking to be revealed. Through displacement onto Fiéla, projecting her own unhappiness onto her supposed double, Rosélie gradually forces herself to go beneath the veneer of her own life to seek out what is hidden under many layers. However, just as Fiéla, "curandera comme moi" (HFC. p.142) stubbornly keeps silent counsel, being: "une grande gaule de femme, comme moi, la figure énigmatique, comme moi, se préparant à ajouter son nom à la liste déjà longue des folles et des sorcières. Nul ne saurait jamais la vérité" (HFC. p.271), so Rosélie stubbornly refuses to let the truth out.

Thus Rosélie imagines Fiéla to be a carbon-copy of herself with the same characteristics, the same upbringing, both childless:

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[718] Hewitt, Leah, 'Rencontres explosives: les intersections culturelles de Maryse Condé' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.55.

[719] Paravy, Florence, 'L'altérité comme enjeu du champ littéraire africain' in *Les champs littéraires africains*, ed. by Fonkoua, Romuald & Halen, Pierre, Paris: Karthala (2001), p.216.

> Fiéla, tu t'es installée dans mes pensées, mes rêves. Pas gênante pour un sou. Discrète comme une autre moi-même. Tu te caches derrière mes actions, invisible, pareille à la doublure de soie d'un vêtement. Tu as dû être comme moi, une enfant solitaire, une adolescente taciturne. Ta tante qui t'a recueillie te disait une ingrate. Tu n'avais pas d'amies. Tu ne retenais pas l'attention. Les garçons passaient sur toi sans te regarder, sans s'occuper de ce que tu brûlais d'envie de leur offrir (HFC.p.97).

Both being described as 'sournoise', Rosélie is able to sympathise with Fiéla: "c'est vrai, tu ne te confiais pas puisque tu n'intéressais personne. Je connais ce problème pour l'avoir expérimenté. À quoi bon parler si personne ne vous prête attention?" (HFC. p.208). Even Mrs Hillster can see the similarities between Fiéla and Rosélie, using Fiéla's case to provoke Rosélie's own curiosity about Stephen's murder, positing the theory that: "Fiéla aurait mis au jour un secret épouvantable concernant Adriaan et l'aurait tué. Quel secret? Qu'est-ce qui peut pousser une épouse au meurtre de son mari?" (HFC. p.212).

Rosélie's anguish is particularly acute since although Stephen is dead, the mysterious circumstances of his death preclude her from mourning his loss appropriately. Similar to those whose loved ones go missing which means the mourning process cannot be completed, Rosélie is suspended in time: "waiting to find out one way or another what has become of the missing other"[720]. Rosélie even dreams of Fiéla, transported to Guadeloupe, where: "il semblait à Rosélie qu'elle voyait sa sœur jumelle, séparée d'elle à la naissance et retrouvée cinquante ans plus tard comme dans un mauvais mélo" (HFC. p.237) and when, in her dream, Rosélie asks Fiéla why she had murdered her husband, she replies reproachfully: "tu me le demandes? Tu me le demandes? [...] J'ai fait cela pour toi! Pour toi!"[721](HFC. p.237). Is this an example of the 'double' being: "l'émanation du désir refoulé"[722] – that is, the 'double' can do what the other would like to do but cannot? As Condé said in a recent interview: "dreams are an extremely important dimension of West Indian culture. Dreams always make us think. What do they mean? What are they telling us?"[723] Yet Rosélie is seemingly unable, or unwilling, to interpret her dreams, and it is only in the face of the overwhelming evidence uncovered by Inspector Sithole that she is forced to confront the unpalatable truth:

> en ce qui concernait Stephen, au fin fond d'elle-même, dans cette part de soi où jamais la lumière de la vérité ne s'aventure, elle devait s'avouer qu'elle avait

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[720] Robson, Kathryn, 'Virtual Reality: The Subject of Loss in Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* and Régine Detambel's *La Chambre d'écho*' in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41:1 (2004), p.7.

[721] André Thevet, a sixteenth century Franciscan monk who travelled to Brazil wrote à propos cannibals that in every case, the recourse to cannibalism may be understood as reparation for a sexual misdemeanour, usually adultery, thus a form of primitive justice. Lestringant, Frank, *The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne*, trans. by Rosemary Morris, Cambridge: Polity Press (1997), pp.83-84.

[722] Catteau, Jacques, 'Le Double ou l'asymétrie ennemie' in *Le Double, l'ombre, le reflet: Chamisso, Dostoïevski, Maupassant, Nabokov*, ed. by Lévy-Bertherat, Déborah, Paris: Opéra (1996), p.36.

[723] Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, Summer 2000, 74:3, p.524.

> toujours su qui il était. D'ailleurs, le premier jour, ne l'avait-il pas prévenue, mine de rien, à sa manière désinvolte et joueuse? – je n'aborde jamais les femmes. Elles me font trop peur. Simplement, elle avait choisi d'ignorer l'évidence. Heureux ceux qui ont deux yeux pour ne rien voir. [...] Elle avait refusé de payer le prix terrible de la lucidité (HFC. p.279).

To emphasise the mirroring of the two women, at the same time as the truth about Stephen is starting to unfold, there is a sensational twist in Fiéla's trial where, just as Mrs Hillster foretold, it becomes Adriaan who: "était suspecté d'avoir mené une double, voire une triple ou quadruple vie" (HFC. p.271) forcing Rosélie once again to interrogate, silently, Fiéla:

> toi au moins, tu connais le chemin tracé devant tes pieds. Moi, il me semble qu'un précipice m'attend où je vais sombrer sans jamais me relever. Dis-moi. À moi, tu peux tout confier, pourquoi est-ce que tu as tué Adriaan? Quel était son crime? tu lui avais pardonnné la première fois quand il a donné un ventre à Martha, la petite voisine. Ce nouveau crime était-il pire? Tes avocats suggèrent-ils la vérité? Qu'est-ce qu'il te cachait encore et encore et qu'en fin de compte tu as découvert? (HFC. p.272)

It cannot be a coincidence that it is the very next day that Rosélie finally admits to herself what she has always known, deep down, about Stephen, and dares to challenge Dido to admit that she, like everyone else, has also known, thus: "à présent, les deux histoires se mêlaient dans sa tête. Où commence la mienne? Où finit la sienne?" (HFC. p.272). However, the fact that Rosélie breaks her silence, whereas Fiéla goes silently to the grave, shows a progression in behaviour between the two women and is also proof that Rosélie is starting to exhibit signs of independence.

Once Rosélie admits the truth to herself, Fiéla has served her purpose, therefore there is no need for Rosélie to follow Fiéla into death. Rosélie is stunned to learn that Fiéla has committed suicide in prison: "tu semblais n'avoir plus besoin de moi. Tu avais gagné en fin de compte. Explique-moi. Pourquoi as-tu revendiqué un châtiment que les hommes ne t'ont pas infligé? T'estimais-tu coupable? Ou est-ce que tu n'avais plus le cœur à vivre? Comme moi" (HFC. p.291), yet in reality it is Rosélie who has no more need of Fiéla.

The guilt that Rosélie feels about abandoning Fiéla is a projection of the guilt and shame she is experiencing with regard to Stephen – that she allowed herself to be so blind for so long and, as a result of this (in)voluntary blindness, she thus colluded in the maintenance of the facade that protected their relationship and which allowed Stephen to carry on behind her back for so many years. A blindness that she embraced to cover up her own inadequacies and insecurities. How much she colluded and why is a matter of speculation. After all, on their very first night Stephen admitted: "je n'aborde jamais les femmes" (HFC. p.279). Did he see something in Rosélie that would allow him to continue his double life behind the veneer of respectability? Her aura of victimisation, perhaps? Her need for security which he

could provide and for which she would be prepared to turn a blind eye? Likewise, was Rosélie attracted to Stephen because of his homosexuality, or rather bisexuality? After her experience with Salama Salama, perhaps she reasoned that it would be less painful to be rejected for another man as it would indicate not a fault in herself but an extra need of her husband's that no woman could provide.

Like Fiéla, Rosélie toys with the idea of suicide, but never with any real conviction – it is not so much that life is so appealing, rather that suicide is not an easy way out for someone who has never taken responsibility for her own actions – no doubt if Stephen had been around to offer her a pill, her path towards suicide would have been eased. Thus, as Fiéla departs from Rosélie's world – both literally and metaphorically since Fiéla has to die in order for Rosélie to be reborn – Rosélie has to learn to stand on her own two feet, to question her own actions and to take her own decisions. She is, finally, starting on the road to independence.

3.7 Rosélie – a woman in her midlife years

At the start of this novel there is one of the very few descriptions of Rosélie, as she contemplates her reflection in a tarnished dressing-table mirror, seeing:

> ses cheveux ras, jaunissant par places, les traits au fusain dessinés sur son front couleur terre de Sienne, ses yeux obliques, au-dessus de flaques de peau molle, sa bouche serrée entre deux tranchées, en un mot, sa figure ravagée qui affichait que la traversée déjà longue avait été rude, si rude (HFC. p.12).

Not a particularly appealing nor flattering picture, but it sets the tone for the novel, already implying a certain element of self-pity. However, as the novel progresses, we realise that, like Ramatoulaye, neither Rosélie's physical appearance nor her chronological age feature as anxieties in her life, proving Gullette's observation that: "in midlife progress novels, the face and body are never used as the sinister index of aging that the culture teaches us to read"[724]. Thus Rosélie could be said to be challenging: "the universality of Western notions about women and aging"[725] since there is none of the angst à la Simone de Beauvoir or Elsa Triolet regarding the physical signs of ageing and what that means to a woman in her midlife years and in addition, although she may have many emotional problems, one thing appears certain – she is happy in and with her body and, moreover, with the concept of herself as a sexual being.

Condé's female protagonists have never shied away from revealing their sexual appetites, witness her portrayal of Véronica in *Hérémakhonon* which, at the time of publication, was rather a surprise to those readers accustomed to having to read between the lines where sex and women were concerned in African or Caribbean writings[726], and Tituba has a powerful, sexual presence in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... noire de Salem* (1986). Rosélie continues this tradition, with Condé giving us a frank appraisal of what sex and desire mean to a woman in her midlife years. Rosélie is on the cusp of menopause, although once again the word itself is never mentioned, but implicit in the fact that she is aged fifty is the fact that she is now past childbearing age. If a central transition in the female life course is from the childbearing to the nonchildbearing stage of life which can be defined as the onset of middle age[727], for Rosélie at least, the change of life on which she is about to embark at the end of the novel has nothing to do with her physical

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[724] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia (1997), p.81.

[725] Sacks, Karen Brodkin, 'Introduction: New Views of Middle-Aged Women' in *In Her Prime: New Views of Middle-Aged Women*, ed. by Kerns, Virginia & Brown, Judith K., Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1992), p.2.

[726] In her 1983 essay 'Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer', Condé confirmed that: "sexuality is another taboo in West Indian literature", *Yale French Studies: 50 Years of Yale French Studies, Part 2*, ed. Porter & Waters (2000), p.163 (originally published in Vol.83, 1993).

[727] Kerns, Virginia, 'Female Control of Sexuality: Garífuna Women at Middle Age' in *In Her Prime: New Views of Middle-Aged Women*, ed. by Kerns, Virginia & Brown, Judith K., Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1992), p.95.

body, and everything to do with her mind-set. For Rosélie then, as for Ramatoulaye: "menopause [...] is not a socially significant transition point"[728].

Since Salama Salama introduced Rosélie to the joys of sex, she has enjoyed an apparently robust and regular sex life. Indeed, one could say that it was sex that brought her to Africa and enticed her back as she followed her various lovers. J. Michael Dash [729] cites the following passage by Julia Kristeva, where:

> s'arracher à sa famille, à sa langue, à son pays, pour venir se poser ailleurs, est une audace qu'accompagne une frénésie sexuelle: plus d'interdit, tout est possible. Peu importe si le passage de la frontière est suivi d'une débauche ou, au contraire, d'un repli peureux. Toujours l'exil implique une explosion de l'ancien corps[730].

Written some fifteen years before *Histoire de la femme cannibale* it certainly appears to be describing Rosélie's behaviour. She may not have had many partners (her brief foray into prostitution in N'Dossou apart), but sex is a fundamental part of her life, although for her, unlike Véronica in *Hérémakhonon*, there is no: "quest for self-realization through sexual freedom"[731]. After the initial heady days of passion with Stephen, she was content at night to:

> retrouver à la même place le ponton ferme et réconfortant du corps de Stephen. L'amour n'était plus un corps à corps d'où ils sortaient exténués et suants. C'était une promenade plaisante et sans surprise dans un jardin familier (HFC. p.111).

Not being cut out, ironically, for the subterfuge of adultery, her one indiscretion in her twenty years with Stephen was a passionate love affair: "en songeant à lui, tout son être fondait" (HFC. p.185) with a handsome young man called Ariel[732], director of an Art Centre in New York. Rosélie had just ventured back into society after retreating into a zombie-like state for nearly a year after her mother's death, obviously overwhelmed by the: "complex feelings of desire, guilt, and horror that a mother's death arouses in a child – of any age"[733], during which time Stephen had nursed her back to health: "grâce à lui, elle s'aventurait à nouveau sans béquilles dans l'existence" (HFC. p.175), when she met Ariel – un coup de foudre – and embarked on an affair that lasted until he was arrested. On his release from jail, Ariel tried desperately to get in touch with Rosélie, but she decided, very reluctantly, since she was obviously

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[728] Lambek, Michael, 'Motherhood and Other Careers in Mayotte (Comoro Islands)' in *In Her Prime: New Views of Middle-Aged Women*, ed. by Kerns, Virginia & Brown, Judith K., Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1992), p.78.

[729] Dash, J. Michael, 'Vital Signs in the Body Politic: Eroticism and Exile in Maryse Condé and Dany Laferrière' in *The Romanic Review*, 94:3-4 (2003), p.312.

[730] Kristeva, Julia, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, Paris: Fayard (1988), p.47.

[731] Dash, J. Michael, 'Vital Signs in the Body Politic: Eroticism and Exile in Maryse Condé and Dany Laferrière' in *The Romanic Review*, 94:3-4 (2003), p.313.

[732] Surely another borrowing from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – Ariel was a spirit of artistic creativity, albeit musical in the play.

[733] Marks, Elaine, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (1973), p.100.

still very much in love with him, that she had already caused too much pain to Stephen. This behaviour is, of course, symptomatic of the child/parent relationship of Rosélie and Stephen already analysed. It is as if Rosélie, the naughty child, had transgressed, but had come back to the family fold and been forgiven. The fact that Stephen took her back without argument should, surely, have rung some alarm bells for Rosélie. This was the behaviour of a parent or guardian, not a lover, or, alternatively, the behaviour of someone who had his own secrets and was prepared to be magnanimous to suit his own purposes.

However, Rosélie's relationship with Ariel does pose some interesting questions regarding her character and her needs. Rosélie's first sight of Ariel was at one of Stephen's soirées where Stephen: "virevoltait autour d'un inconnu qu'il désirait manifestement charmer et inclure dans la foule de ses admirateurs" (HFC. p.176). However, as soon as Stephen heard that Rosélie had agreed to teach at Ariel's Art Centre, Ariel suddenly became: "un personnage ambigu. On ne savait pas s'il allait à voile ou à vapeur" (HFC. p.180). Was Stephen jealous because Ariel had chosen Rosélie and not him? Can one see here another clue for Rosélie as to Stephen's own true predilections? Indeed, does the fact that Rosélie was so strongly attracted to Ariel who obviously appealed to both sexes indicate something in Rosélie that seeks out a particular type of man? The fact that Stephen was so destroyed by this relationship would seem to bear this out, since he obviously feared that Ariel was a genuine threat. Could it, in fact, even have been Stephen who was behind the police raid? Whatever the truth of the matter, Rosélie did appear to have enjoyed a genuinely passionate sexual relationship with Ariel and believed herself to have been head-over-heels in love with him.

It is, however, a client, Faustin, some three months after Stephen's murder, who reintroduces Rosélie to the heady delights of passionate sex. He turns up on her doorstep uninvited and: "tandis qu'il l'examinait d'un air critique, elle fut consciente de l'image qu'elle offrait: un pantalon de velours à côtes tout bosselé, un chandail troué aux coudes, pas de maquillage, et se gourmanda. Quel homme dans son bon sens pouvait-il s'intéresser à elle?" (HFC. p.110), yet at the same time she is aware that after her first meeting with him: "tout au long des derniers jours, ce désir incongru, inadmissible, s'était caché derrière l'amertume, le chagrin, l'impatience causées par les événements quotidiens" (HFC. p.110). Not only does Faustin reacquaint Rosélie with sexual desire at a time when she is feeling alone and resentful of life, but the very fact of his colour serves to help Rosélie feel comfortable in her own skin again – encompassing both "le bien-être moral" and "le bien-être physique"[734].

Faustin's appearance in Rosélie's life at that time is, therefore, opportune. Alone in the world at fifty years old, far from 'home' wherever that may be, with a roof over her head but little income, to be then desired by a man at least reassures Rosélie that life still holds some pleasures, and, as they make love: "avec la rage de deux collégiens sur le divan de cuir grenat du salon" (HFC. p.112), she realises it is:

[734] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.117.

"bouleversant d'éprouver ces sensations, ces sentiments. Oubliés depuis si longtemps qu'elle croyait ne les avoir jamais éprouvés. Sa vie n'était donc pas finie?" (HFC. p.112)

Of course, equating the pleasures of sex with the belief that her life is not yet over means that Rosélie is in danger of believing that her life only means something if she is in a sexual relationship. In Antoine's words: "le «good fuck», «faire l'amour en paix», est-il la seule assurance pour sortir de la négativité? Si les rêves s'éteignent, la relation des corps demeure-t-elle la valeur sûre?"[735] For Rosélie, a sexual relationship means there has to be a man involved, but, in no way a bra-burning feminist, there has never been any sign of an equal partnership with her men. Condé's own views on this are revealing. Although she does not appear sure whether she is a feminist or not[736] she believes, as did Bâ, in the complementariness of men and women:

> Am I a feminist? I am not sure. I do believe in that old West Indian and West African tradition: if a woman is not associated with a man in a harmonious way, her life is not complete. I do believe that a man has to be somewhere in your life. Of course, he has to be an equal partner. He mustn't be in your life to debilitate you, to suppress your voice, or to prevent you from expressing yourself. But I do believe that without him, life is not fulfilled[737].

Bethany Ladimer believes: "there is clearly a privileged relationship between aging and sexuality, and in particular between aging and female sexuality: both are culturally constructed, but both are simultaneously chosen and assumed according to an individual's view of herself/himself"[738]. Rosélie's views regarding her sexuality seem not to have changed since her first major relationship; thirty years on, up to and including Faustin, her sexual behaviour appears the same and her ageing thus irrelevant – because she herself has not changed. After all, Rosélie has lived her life dependent on men to provide for her – is Faustin one more man in the continuum? Given that he is married with two children, although separated from his wife, and given that he is only in South Africa 'on business' and disappears from Rosélie's life for days or even weeks at a time, the omens are not good – this is not a man on whom one can depend, as Rosélie is aware when she asks herself: "qu'est-ce que j'attends de cet homme-là? Je n'en recevrai pas plus que je n'en reçois présentement. Du plaisir, un peu, disons même beaucoup. Et c'est tout" (HFC. p.142). In his defence, Faustin does invite her to join him in Washington, and this may well be a genuine invitation, yet so low is Rosélie's self-esteem that she assumes this is another brush-off

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[735] Antoine, Régis, 'Maryse Condé: Le romantisme de la désillusion?' in *Rayonnants écrivains de la Caraïbe: Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Anthologie et analyses*, ed. by Antoine, Régis, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, (1998), p.169.

[736] As she admitted to Françoise Pfaff: "I have been asked this question a hundred times, and I don't know what it means exactly, so I must not be a feminist". Pfaff, Françoise, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press (1996), p.29.

[737] Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., 'An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove' in *Callaloo*, 14:2, Spring 1991, p.358.

[738] Ladimer, Bethany, *Colette, Beauvoir, & Duras: Age and Women Writers*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1999), p.32.

and makes no attempt to take him up on his offer. This is, however, another rather ill-matched pair. Apart from being sexually compatible, their communication is purely on a superficial level. Faustin is not interested in Rosélie's painting – he pays only one visit to Rosélie's studio which thereafter he calls Bluebeard's chamber – and Rosélie is not interested in, and consequently knows nothing of his life. In short, once again she drifts into a sexual relationship and it drifts away from her.

Dido fears that Rosélie will be hurt again, despite Rosélie's claim that whatever anyone thinks she is not a silly young girl and: "le cœur n'avait rien à voir à l'affaire" (HFC. p.116). However, as Dido points out wisely: "les femmes ne savent pas séparer le sexe du cœur. Toi, moins qu'aucune autre" (HFC. p.116). Dido is proved correct, of course. When Faustin sends word that he has to delay his departure to Washington for six months owing to a trip to Indonesia, Rosélie feels doubly betrayed as she wonders why Faustin has been so determined to have her since:

> les blessures cicatrisent à vingt ans. Elles s'infectent et purulent indéfiniment à cinquante. [...] Faustin s'en était pris à elle, déjà si fragile, si malportante. On ne tire pas sur une ambulance. Elle oubliait le plaisir qu'il lui avait donné, l'impression qu'elle avait eue de recouvrer la jeunesse, de recommencer la vie et, par instants, croyait le haïr (HFC. p.265).

Hating him or not, there is no denying that Rosélie's relationship with Faustin does at least rejuvenate her (Dido thinks she looks ten years younger, a compliment you could never pay a teenager), as:

> faire furieusement l'amour dans pareil cadre, sur ce lit sans confort, en creux et bosses, rendait à Rosélie la bienheureuse verdeur de sa jeunesse avec Salama Salama quand ils se cachaient de la concierge à cause de leurs arriérés de loyer. Elle avait alors l'impression que, bouclant la boucle, elle était ramenée à la case départ (HFC. p.135).

Rosélie is apparently aware, therefore, that sexuality is socially constructed, meaning the definition of sex, the appropriate timing, the ages between which one should engage in sex, are essentially determined by the morals, values, beliefs and politics of the current culture[739] yet her behaviour and reactions prove that, in her case at least, such a construct has little basis in reality, although if Sokolovsky's observation is true, that: "most women know the script laid out in their particular society for the woman in midlife"[740], Rosélie's lack of status in any society or culture means she is free to make her own rules.

When Mrs Hillster reprimands her: "pensez à vous qui êtes encore jeune. Vous pouvez refaire votre vie" (HFC. p.150), Rosélie is astounded: "Encore jeune, moi? J'ai l'impression d'avoir passé mille ans. Je

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[739] Gannon, Linda R., *Women and Aging: Transcending the Myths*, London: Routledge (1999), p.110.
[740] Sokolovsky, Jay, 'Culture, Aging and Context' in *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, ed. by Sokolovsky, Jay, Westport, Conn., London: Bergin & Garvey (1997), p.9.

suis un arbre dont les cyclones ont rompu toutes les branches, dont les grands vents ont charroyé toutes les feuilles. Je suis nue, je suis dépouillée" (HFC. p.150). Rosélie may well be severely damaged by Stephen's murder which leaves her, as she feels so strongly, all alone in the world, and Faustin's apparently easy dismissal of their brief relationship no doubt compounds those feelings of solitude, but he does succeed in making her feel desirable and in taking her out of herself. In fact, Faustin does Rosélie a favour. Passively following him to Washington would simply be repeating her previous mistakes and means she would not take the time to examine what she really wants out of life, which also means not allotting her painting the time and energy and commitment it requires, because she is aware that in Washington, her painting would become just a hobby.

Faustin is, in fact, the weakest characterisation in the novel. He fulfils a purpose in the plot, but is not really fleshed-out. Yet perhaps the very fact that he is only in Rosélie's life for a matter of a few weeks signifies that, in midlife, everything, including relationships, are necessarily speeded-up, and there is no time to waste. Luckily, Rosélie manages to ignore the bitter Bishupal's rather stereotypical, ageist view that a woman's life is finished at fifty – appreciating, of course, that it is impossible for an eighteen year old to imagine a life after fifty – but that does not mean such a cruel comment does not have the power to hurt.

What is evident in Rosélie's encounters with the opposite sex is precisely the pre-eminence of the word 'sex'. Dido may be concerned about Rosélie losing her heart to Faustin, but love does not appear to have entered into the equation. In fact, cliché or not, Rosélie appears to be a stranger to love. Even when she moved in with Stephen in N'Dossou, her words were revelatory: "à croire que c'était l'Amour" (HFC. p 27). If the ideal relationship is considered to be one where love and desire are synonymous, Rosélie's experiences seem, rather, to exemplify the chasm that can exist between love and desire. Is this yet another legacy from the painful confusion of Rose and Élie's marriage?

Then there are Rosélie's descriptions of men – she is very aware of their physicality, as in this description of Anthony Turley, a sculptor: "pas une once de graisse. Rien que du muscle. Le crâne rasé, poli comme un miroir, une boucle d'or, mutine, à l'oreille gauche, un rire fréquent aux accents de clarinette (HFC. p.204) and their desirability: "il flottait autour de lui une aura d'infinie séduction. Comme il était tentant de s'imaginer nue, vissée entre les piliers de ses cuisses!" (HFC. p.207). The men become subjects of her desire, and by viewing them as such, she subverts the gaze, traditionally the appropriation of women by men, which in Rosélie's case is further distinguished by the fact that she views the men through the eyes of an artist, as evidenced by this description of Ariel :

> [...] beau. D'une beauté qui n'était le propre d'aucun peuple en particulier comme si toutes les variétés de l'humain s'étaient harmonieusement combinées pour le créer. La peau d'un brun aux reflets de cuivre, une épaisse chevelure noire bouclée ou grenée, les sourcils fournis, arcs parfaits au-dessus des yeux. Ah! les yeux, ces

> fenêtres de l'âme, lumineux, largement ouverts quoiqu'un peu mourants (HFC. p.176).

Even Manuel: "un Blanc. Grand, un peu ventru, une belle tignasse noire, des yeux gris, des joues hâlées" (HFC. pp.310-311), the potential lover she puts on hold at the end of her story, is assessed quite frankly in terms of his desirability: "pas de doute, ce quinquagénaire bien entretenu, trois heures par semaine de gymnastique à Équinoxe, une heure de marche à pied quotidienne, de la natation, devait bander à la perfection et ferait un excellent amant" (HFC. p.314).

So for Rosélie, a woman with sexual desires, the fact of being fifty seems to be significant only as a marker of time; there is little angst about what it signifies to many women, certainly many Western women, with its connotations of ageing and fading looks. There is, of course, the occasional wistfulness at time passing and how much time she has wasted. She is apparently not overly concerned with her appearance and she certainly does not consider herself a feminine-type of woman, thus: "les femmes? Quand Raymond parlait des femmes, Rosélie ne savait si elle comptait dans cette espèce. Elle hésitait à se reconnaître dans ces êtres fantasques, aux désirs inexplicables et incontrôlés, prêts à dépenser des fortunes en maquillage Fashion Fair, lingerie fine, parfumerie" (HFC. p.221). However, for a woman with so little self-esteem and self-belief, the one area she appears to be comfortable with is her body and one can only assume she exudes a certain sex appeal since she is not short of admirers.

Although there is, ultimately, much to despair about in Rosélie, her positive attitude towards her age does her credit and one can see in her (albeit probably temporary) refusal of Manuel's charms at the end of the novel that she is adjusting her view of herself and her behaviour, including her sexuality, to suit her own needs at this particular time in her life. If that means living independently of men, that is a sacrifice she realises she is prepared to make to take on a new, full-time role in life, one that privileges self-definition, something Rosélie has always lacked – the role of artist.

3.8 Rosélie and her art

"Bref, elle se retrouvait, à cinquante ans, illustre inconnue" (HFC. p.139)

Where does Rosélie's art spring from? Its roots, like her own, can be found in her childhood, and Rosélie's recollection is that it was not anyone or anything which inspired her to start painting, it was simply a compulsion:

> un enfant n'a pas de vocation. Il veut peindre. Un point, c'est tout. C'est son caprice et sa liberté. Elle était entrée en peinture comme une novice en religion. Sans deviner ce qui l'attendait. Le doute. Les peurs. La solitude. Le travail harassant. Le manque d'argent et d'estime de soi. La quête de reconnaissance (HFC. pp.163-164).

It is interesting to note that it is only when Ariel expresses a real interest in her art and persuades her to teach in his Art Centre, that Rosélie shows a spark of independence. Why? Is it simply that she is powerfully attracted to him or is it because he genuinely admires her work? Normally Rosélie would shy away from teaching, after all, as Stephen points out helpfully: "elle n'avait pas qualité à le faire" (HFC. p.179), but: "c'était l'aube d'une vie nouvelle" (HFC. p.178), appropriately enough in a city: "en fête de printemps" (HFC. p.180) and remembering her mother singing in her beautiful voice, she knows that a new Rosélie is being born, one who will be strong, beautiful and: "parée pour l'aventure" (HFC. p.178). I see in this episode an early clue that, even if she does not exhibit the necessary strength of character at this stage in her life, it will be through her art that she will, eventually, see a way to free herself from her passivity.

True to her non-confrontational nature: "Rosélie ne contredit pas Stephen, mais agit à sa guise" (HFC. p.180) and although she exhibits no ability as a teacher, thus proving Stephen correct, she: "tolérait tout, n'imposait rien and ainsi libérait la créativité" (HFC. p.182) and she is also a great listener. Without Ariel's arrest, forcing their love affair and her teaching to come to an end, who knows how far this dash for independence may have gone. Interestingly, in keeping with the ambiguity of this whole relationship, the text is unclear as to whether Rosélie continues to paint during the nine months or so of her affair, or whether she feels no need for her own art being so preoccupied with both teaching and Ariel. If one chooses the second interpretation, then that would imply that for Rosélie, painting normally fulfils a need not fulfilled in her normal life, whether to do with her relationships with men or her status in society.

How important is Rosélie's art to her? We know that: "elle ne savait rien d'autre que peindre" (HFC. p.18) and, more compellingly, that: "elle ne pouvait s'empêcher de peindre" (HFC. p.58). An indifferent pupil at school, and a reluctant student of law in Paris: "elle n'avait jamais su se servir des mots" (HFC. p.182). Thus, there are no in-depth discussions of literature with Stephen and his colleagues, nor lively

debates with Faustin and Raymond on world politics, and if Stephen is frequently accused of taking centre stage at a dinner party, Rosélie is happy for him to do so, after all, what could she contribute: "rien. Je n'en pense rien. Je n'en pense rien puisque je n'y connais rien. Je ne connais rien à rien. Je ne sais que peindre" (HFC. p.57). Of course, by not communicating verbally, she is simply reinforcing her status as silent observer, and an outsider. She shares this tendency with Marie-Hélène in *Une Saison à Rihata*; neither woman makes any effort to integrate into society, thus confirming the opinion of others that they are outsiders. Not that Rosélie is incapable of communicating with others, but her means of expressing herself is via the (silent) medium of her hands not her voice: through massage she can relieve another's pain and distress and through her painting she can communicate her deepest emotions.

It is, in fact, only when she is painting in her studio, her refuge from the world, her equivalent of Virginia Woolf's 'a room of one's own', alone for hours or even days at a time, that she ceases to anguish about who she is, where she is going, what she is doing and becomes totally immersed in her work, whilst also enabling her to distance herself from "les regards" of others. Rosélie's studio can be seen, therefore, not only as her sanctuary, but as the source of her creativity, metaphorically as well as literally, since: "the enclosed space [...] functions as a maternal metaphor: it is, in its enclosure, a womblike space providing security, calm, and intimacy"[741] – its intimate aspect exemplified by the fact that she hardly hesitates before inviting Ariel into her sanctuary, yet keeps everyone else at arm's length. That space is also of such importance to her that she insists on having her own studio wherever she happens to be and however difficult it is to achieve, such as: "l'atelier qu'elle s'était aménagé au fond de la concession, entre la case à eau et la resserre aux provisions" (HFC. p.219) in Salama Salama's family compound.

In the immediate present, however, the avenue of escape that painting offers Rosélie is not available to her as she is unable to start painting again until she has: "mettre de l'ordre en moi" (HFC. p.277) and it is interesting to note that when she takes refuge in her studio, she first opens the windows, and then closes the shutters, as if to emphasise the enclosed space, which also implies her looking inwards to try to find the solution – a real sign of progress in her self-analysis.

Rosélie's art is creation in its rawest, most basic form. It is primitive art, wild and savage – what other sort of art could a *femme cannibale* produce? This verbally inarticulate woman expresses herself in this: "mise en abyme de la création" – acts of creation without words[742] – via: "corps démembrés, moignons, yeux crevés, rates, foies éclatés" – an array of frightening subjects all painted in the same monochrome

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[741] Mudimbe-Boyi, Elisabeth, 'Narrative "je(ux)" in *Kamouraska* by Anne Hébert and *Juletane* by Myriam Warner-Vieyra' in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. by Green, Mary Jean et al., Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press (1996), p.134.

[742] Rea, Annabelle, M., 'Le Roman-enquête: *Les Fous de Bassan*, un modèle pour *La Traversée de la Mangrove*?' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: À propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte*, Actes du Colloque sur l'œuvre de Maryse Condé, organisé par le Salon du Livre de la ville de Pointe-à-Pitre (Guadeloupe), 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.135.

browns, greys, blacks, whites and reds of a deep coagulated blood hue. She who has never had a child, and at the age of fifty is now never going to have a child, gives birth instead to her works of art. There is nothing new, of course, in viewing the creation of a piece of art, whether literature, painting, a piece of music, the choreography of a ballet or the designing of an inspirational building, for instance, as 'giving birth' to something new, precious, unique, but the metaphor tends to lose its validity after that stage, certainly in Rosélie's case, as although she nourishes her art in its gestation period, once she has finished the painting, she wants nothing more to do with it.

> Une fois de plus, le doute l'envahit. Que valait le fruit de tant d'efforts? Aussi longtemps qu'elle était occupée à choisir, puis mélanger les couleurs, à appliquer la peinture à traits larges ou retenus en se repaissant de son odeur vivifiante, ses yeux ne voyaient rien, hormis ce carré blanc que son imaginaire peuplait et métamorphosait au fur et à mesure. Elle n'entendait rien, hormis la rumeur de ce monde qui maturait en elle. Un bonheur l'habitait, comparable sans doute à celui d'une femme dont le fœtus remue au fin fond de sa chair. Cependant, une fois les eaux perdues et la délivrance survenue, elle se détachait de sa création. Plus grave, elle la prenait en grippe comme une marâtre qui rêve de jeter son nouveau-né dans une décharge publique, enveloppé ou non d'un sac en plastique. Alors, pourquoi continuait-elle de peindre? Parce qu'elle ne pouvait faire autrement (HFC. pp.126-127).

Given Rosélie's suspicion that it was her birth that was responsible for her mother's illness, together with her experience of being (s)mothered, it is perhaps not surprising that Rosélie avoids motherhood herself: "depuis petite, la maternité l'écœurait: les ventres ballons ronds ou pointus comme des obus des tantes, cousines, parentes de toutes sortes, perpétuellement grosses dans leurs marinières commandées tout exprès en France" (HFC. pp.55-56) – or is Rosélie exhibiting rare signs of a feminist tendency here? Escaping maternity for so many years must mean that Rosélie has actively taken precautions – no passive behaviour in this instance – unless, of course, she is sterile, like many of Condé's earlier protagonists. Or does she use her gifts as a sorcière? As she explains to Cheryl: "disons que, d'abord, je n'ai pas voulu de la maternité. Puis que la maternité n'a pas voulu de moi quand peut-être j'aurais voulu d'elle. Des fois, je l'avoue, j'ai rêvé d'un fils qui serait à la fois mon frère et mon amant" (HFC. pp 247-248) – once again proof of the ambiguity within Rosélie and interesting in that she does not want to reproduce herself, as her mother reproduced her. As Woodward writes: "reciprocity, mutuality, continuity – all are implicit in the notion of generational identity"[743], therefore, by choosing not to have children, Rosélie is re-affirming her distance from her family in Guadeloupe. She is rewriting the script; not only has she left the island and is living with a white man, but she has turned her back on the traditional role of motherhood, because for Rosélie, sex is just recreation rather than procreation – it is now not just an ocean which separates her from her roots.

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[743] Woodward, Kathleen, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1991), p.107.

Almost every time her paintings are mentioned, they are compared to children in some way, thus, in the quasi husband/wife, father/mother or even brother/sister relationship of Stephen and Rosélie (is she thinking of Stephen when she thinks of a male child who would be her brother and her lover?) it is Rosélie who produces the paintings, but, having the utmost difficulty in finding a title for them, she leaves it to Stephen to name them: "elle désignait ses toiles 1, 2, 3, 4 ou A, B, C, D, laissant à Stephen le soin de les baptiser" (HFC. p.18) – a further example of Rosélie willingly allowing Stephen to take control over her life and also, by abdicating the role of naming to her partner, it allows him to exercise his own creativity whilst simultaneously reinforcing his sense of power. It serves also as further proof of Rosélie's voicelessness in this relationship and in life generally. After all, the title of a work of art guides the viewer to a first interpretation, one that the viewer assumes is the artist's own choice and is thus an important feature of the overall impression. Yet, paradoxically, she resents any interference from Stephen with regard to exhibiting or selling her work, despite the fact that her own attempts are invariably failures, thus proving the truth of Lydie Moudileno's suggestion that Condé uses unsuccessful artists in her work to reveal their inability to represent their community[744].

What is interesting is that with Stephen's disappearance from her life, Rosélie's compulsion to paint also vanishes: "l'officiant n'étant plus là pour les cérémonies de baptême, elle n'enfantait plus" (HFC. p.125) – the use of the noun 'l'officiant' lending even more authority to Stephen's status in her life.

> Mais Dieu dans ses voies impénétrables avait peut-être mis fin à la torture. Stephen disparu, elle n'était plus rien. Une masseuse, un médium, une curandera, appelons cela comme on voudra! «Rosélie Thibaudin, guérison de cas incurables». En même temps, illogique, la perte de son don l'anéantissait. Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child (HFC. p.127).

Whatever the rationale, while Rosélie is in a state of shock following Stephen's sudden death, she is unable to paint. When she takes refuge in her studio, it is:

> sans jeter un seul regard à ses toiles maussades, attristées comme des filles que leur maman ignore. Elles l'interrogeaient silencieusement: est-ce que nous ne comptons plus pour toi? Tu sembles l'ignorer, nous sommes le sang qui te donne la force, le sang qui irrigue ton cœur et chacun de tes membres. Si tu ne peins plus, tu ne vis plus. Quand reviendras-tu vers nous? (HFC. pp.271-272)

The answer, of course, lies in her paintings and:

> Ses toiles lui faisaient grise mine. Nous sommes lasses d'attendre, se plaignaient-elles. Nous ne t'avons rien fait. Est-ce que tu ne sais pas que si tes hommes te

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[744] Moudileno, Lydie, 'Portrait of the Artist as Dreamer: Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove* and *Les Derniers Rois Mages*' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.626.

> trahissent, les uns après les autres, nous, nous n'en ferons jamais autant? Nous te serons toujours fidèles (HFC. p.303).

It is, therefore, only when Rosélie has comes to terms with Stephen's death and is able to move on with her life by realising what is truly important to her and finds the strength to put her art before her men, that she will feel ready to paint again.

This interpretation is given further weight by the introduction into the novel of patient no.12, Judith Bartok, eight years old, who was raped repeatedly by a gang of men – a terrifying ordeal which has left the child mute for a year and frightened of anyone's touch. It is the powerful gift of Rosélie's healing hands which gives Judith back her life. As Rosélie soothes the trembling body, she gradually succeeds in giving the child back the power of speech, whilst simultaneously reliving not only Judith's experience which robbed the child of her innocent childhood but perhaps also reliving her own childhood experiences which so damaged her. A defining moment in Judith's rehabilitation comes when she shows Rosélie her paintings and reveals that she wants to be a painter just like Rosélie when she grows up, thus these: "dessins lumineux réalisés avec cette liberté de formes et de couleurs qu'on asssocie à l'insouciance de l'enfance. [...] Ces dessins signifiaient que son imaginaire s'était purifié. Elle était guérie. Elle avait pu survivre à son passé sans garder de cicatrices indélébiles" (HFC. p.145).

Recognition from a child. Affirmation of Rosélie's identity as an artist. The satisfaction that she has done something worthwhile and that, although childless herself, perhaps she has made a contribution to the future generation. This achievement could surely be the response to the question: "qu'avait-elle accompli, elle, dont puisse se glorifier la Race?" (HFC. p.131) that Rosélie has posed herself many times, particularly when exposed to those terrifyingly efficient African-American women who: "l'avaient mieux que quiconque convaincue de ses manques en la mesurant subtilement à une aune pour elle impossible à atteindre: celle des matrones, poto-mitan, des civilisations de la diaspora" (HFC. p.131).

Interestingly, in either being sterile, or at least believing herself to be sterile, and childless, Rosélie is in good company with many of Condé's earlier heroines, and indeed with many other Caribbean women writers' heroines, as Condé points out in *La parole des femmes*. She suggests that while these writers may not be strident feminists, their protest is more nuanced: "elle s'exprime surtout par le refus de la maternité. En effet, si toutes les héroïnes [...] parlent de leur mère, leur accordent une place exceptionnelle dans leur vie, elles n'enfantent pas elle-mêmes"[745]. While she proffers a number of reasons for this absence including: "le rejet inconscient ou conscient des images traditionnelles et dominantes"[746], Rosélie's childlessness, representative of women like her, appears more likely to be:

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[745] Condé, Maryse, *La parole des femmes: Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française*, Paris: L'Harmattan (1979), p.44.
[746] ibid., p. 45.

> a sort of cultural sterility. Since they don't know who they are, since they aren't educated about their own identity, how can they give life to another being? It's an emblematic sterility. It doesn't really involve the body. I believe it's a question of spiritual anguish; thus, they cannot communicate or give life to another being[747].

If this is so, then this incident with Judith signals that Rosélie is beginning, like her patient, to show signs of being cured as she has been able to communicate deeply with another human being and it marks the realisation that once one has come to terms with an event, however distressing, it is time to move on, to come out of the impasse and to start creating again. Rosélie might not have been able to cure herself completely of the apparently indelible scars left by her own childhood experiences, but if a child of eight who has experienced such unspeakable horror could manage to survive and come through to the other side, then so could Rosélie. It is finally time for her to grow up.

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[747] Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, Summer 2000, 74:3, p.527.

3.9 Conclusion

C'était l'aube d'une vie nouvelle (HFC. p.178)

For Rosélie to move on in life, to move towards reincorporation into society, the final stage in her rite of passage, the truth has to come out. As Rosélie admits to Dido, she does not know whether she knew about and accepted Stephen's double life, rather she simply buried the reality so deep inside herself that she did not have to confront it. Lisa Pignot suggests à propos Condé's writings that perhaps it is: "la part du dit et du non-dit qui a façonné sa statue intérieure" being so much a part of her childhood and relating to: "cette chose tapie qu'elle a senti des années durant chez ses parents, mélange de tabou et de gêne pour lui expliquer ce que sont l'esclavage et l'oppression"[748]. One can certainly see the same elements 'du dit et du non-dit' in Rosélie's make-up. The truth, finally, does not come, therefore, from Rosélie, nor Stephen's friends or acquaintances who are equally committed to silence, but from Inspector Sithole, who finally brings his investigations to their inevitable conclusion.

Rosélie is, therefore, eventually forced into acceptance of the reality of Stephen's secret life, yet perhaps the fact that deep-down she knew the truth saves her from being destroyed by the news when it is finally revealed. She has, however, one final ordeal to overcome when she learns, courtesy of the media, that Stephen was forced to leave N'Dossou for reasons of a similar homosexual nature, and that their abrupt departure from New York after seven years was to escape a prison sentence for Stephen as a result of a minor bringing charges against him. The discovery (or confirmation) of his long-term betrayal does finally cause her to sink into a depression as she contemplates life without her crutch. Gilligan makes the point that if midlife brings an end to relationships, to the sense of connection on which she [the woman] relies [...], then the mourning that accompanies all life transitions can give way to the melancholia of self-deprecation and despair[749]:

> la douleur, la honte s'étaient abattues sur elle, la ravageant, obscurcissant ses certitudes. Il fallait qu'elle se reprenne en main, qu'elle voie clair en elle-même. Désirait-elle vraiment quitter Le Cap? Pour aller où? Retrouver quoi? L'indifférence de Paris? Le désert de Guadeloupe? Qui était-elle? Qui voulait-elle être? Un peintre? Un médium? Elle finissait invariablement par se désespérer de sa vie saccagée (HFC. p.303).

While the truth may have been gradually working itself up into her consciousness during the long investigation, Rosélie has tried hard to deny its existence because her acknowledgement of Stephen's duplicity would mean the end to all her illusions since: "certains affirment que le bonheur n'est jamais

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[748] Condé, Maryse, in an interview with Lisa Pignot for *La revue Médianes* (1999), p.3, www.culture-developpement.asso.fr/J_arch/archives/conde.php.
[749] Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press (1982), p. 171.

qu'une illusion. Alors, pourquoi en vouloir à Stephen Il me l'a donnée, cette illusion, pendant vingt ans" (HFC. pp.288-289) thus: "tous mes souvenirs, toutes mes certitudes sont bouleversés comme après un ouragan" (HFC. p.288). However, Rosélie needs to confront the truth about Stephen if only because: "as you tell the secrets of others and violate family codes, you separate yourself from their power over you, even as you return to them in memory"[750]. Thus, if acknowledging Stephen's secret enables Rosélie to break free from his influence, the crisis also forces reminiscences on her which compel her to face up to secrets from her childhood, which, unadmitted until then, have also paralysed her growth into maturity. A successful rite of passage experience should see the participant learning to think in new and innovative ways[751], and by putting the past behind her, Rosélie is announcing to the world that she has come through that stage.

Yet Rosélie is still not ready to face the future as: "l'heure n'avait pas sonné où elle serait capable de réexaminer sa vie. [...] Quand poindrait l'aube de ce salut? Elle ne voyait devant elle que la traversée d'un marécage de douleurs" (HFC. p.289). She: "reconstructs imaginatively"[752] leaving Cape Town now there is nothing to retain her and returning to Guadeloupe because: "quelle sera ma vie si je reste ici? se demanda lucidement Rosélie. Un puissant désir se déploya, claqua comme une voile au vent, l'entraîna. Le sang, asssure-t-on, n'est pas de l'eau" (HFC. p.267) and she bathes in the image of what she dreams she might find on her return, yet almost immediately she discovers that, without realising it: "des liens l'amarraient à cette ville, des liens qu'elle n'avait jamais noués avec aucun autre endroit. Même celui de sa naissance" (HFC. pp.297-298). As Ernest Pépin points out, in Condé's work: "on trouve [...] la conscience d'appartenir au monde tel qu'il est, d'être relié malgré tout à des communautés plurielles et d'avoir à lutter, là où l'on est, pour donner du sens à sa vie"[753]. Attentive readers will have noticed the beautiful simile comparing Rosélie with the *arbre du voyageur*. Inspector Sithole gave Rosélie a present – a musenda with salmon pink flowers[754] – which he planted for her under the *arbre du voyageur*[755] – the fan-shaped tree that Rosélie loves so much in the front garden because it reminds her of her childhood. Thus, under the tree associated with travellers, a new tree, native to the West Indies, is putting down its roots in South Africa.

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[750] Miller, Nancy K., 'Memory Stains: Annie Ernaux's Shame' in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 14:1 (1999), p.48.

[751] Andrews, Ken, 'The Wilderness Expedition as a Rite of Passage: Meaning and Process in Experiential Education' in *Journal of Experiential Education*, 22:1, June 1999, p.9. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3907/is_199906/ai_n8874063

[752] To borrow Robert McCormick's descriptive terminology in Condé, Maryse, '*Desirada* – a New Conception of Identity', interview with McCormick, Robert H. Jr. in *World Literature Today*, Summer 2000, 74:3, p.525.

[753] Pépin, Ernest, '«Un écrivain-continent»' in *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante*, ed. by Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine & Moudileno, Lydie, Paris: Ibis Rouge (2002), p.42.

[754] The botanical name of musenda is *mussaenda erythrophylla*. Its vernacular name is *Sang des Achanti* – in honour of the Ghanean people called Achanti, founders of a powerful kingdom in the eighteenth century and imported into the West Indies during the slave trade.

[755] The botanical name of *arbre du voyageur* is *Ravenala madagascariensis*, symbol of *dépaysement* tropical in its native Madagascar, beloved of thirsty travellers because it captures water in the base of its leaf stem.

Thus, in spite of all this angst regarding her origins, and the turmoil stirred up by the relevations concerning Stephen, Rosélie finally triumphs – or so we are led to believe. And if, at the start of her tale: "elle ne savait où aller" (HFC. p.107), and if she later asks herself: "qu'est-ce qu'elle faisait au Cap parmi des gens qui ne lui ressemblaient pas?" (HFC. p.243), it turns out, ironically, that as a result of experiencing the force of Jan de Louw's hatred for her or rather what she represented to him, she realises that: "Jan lui avait ouvert les yeux. Avoir résidé, semaine après semaine, dans cet ancien quartier aux esclaves, au flanc de la maison des Maîtres, signifiait qu'elle fermait les yeux sur le passé, qu'elle l'entérinait, qu'elle l'absolvait" (HFC. p.108). Dido's mother, still living in the tawdry former slaves' quarters at Lievland, might be happy to stay subjugated at least in appearance (her ancestors were slaves brought over from Madagascar to work on the Lievland estate), but Rosélie suddenly realises that apathy is ugly, as well as disrespectful to those whose memories she carried deep inside of her, and she discovers that: "opening one's eyes, looking at the world, is the first step to knowledge"[756].

This is not Rosélie's only lesson. Brenda, Chris Nkosi's young wife, teaches her a more poignant one. Heavily pregnant, living in a shack without electricity in a shanty-town in Hermanus, the resilient Brenda has created a business selling flowers cut out of old tins to tourists. Full of admiration, Rosélie realises that Brenda is giving her: "une leçon de courage. Ses fleurs naissaient au cœur du ghetto, au cœur de la misère, au cœur de la laideur de la vie" (HFC. p.257). Rosélie may have her problems, but she needs to put them into perspective. If, in the midst of so much poverty and adversity, Brenda can find it in herself to be creative, to rise above her surroundings, and in so doing, help the family finances, why is Rosélie still wallowing in self-pity? More importantly, is Rosélie right to see a symbol in Brenda's goodbye kiss? The two women are unable to communicate verbally, but does Brenda's spontaneous gesture represent: "le symbole de sa réintégration" (HFC. p.258), identification as one of their own after years of living as an outsider? Cilas Kemedjo suggests that for Condé's characters: "l'identité n'est pas choix de l'ascendance africaine ou antillaise. Elle est acceptation et maîtrise de toutes les données de son être biologique, social, géographique et culturel"[757]. It is only now, therefore, that Rosélie begins to come to terms with her life and can start to build a new one.

Yet in Africa, with all the movement across borders, voluntarily in search of work or involuntarily as a result of wars, famine, political unrest, as Rosélie herself points out, almost everyone from Deogratias, her guard, to Faustin, her lover, is in some kind of exile and has an 'embroidered' history to a greater or lesser degree. The streets of Johannesburg are a melting pot of languages and nationalities, particularly evident

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[756] Majumdar, Margaret, A., 'The Subversion of the Gaze: Shérazade and Other Women in the Work of Leïla Sebbar' in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), p.199.

[757] Kemedjo, Cilas, 'Les enfants de *Ségou*: Murailles en miettes, identités en dérive' in *L'Œuvre de Maryse Condé: à propos d'une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Actes du Colloque, 14-18 mars 1995), Paris: L'Harmattan (1996), p.41.

in the numerous craft markets that dot the city, and this is true to a lesser extent in Cape Town, where in Greenmarket in the city centre and particularly in the various craft markets up and down Long Street, not far from Rosélie's home in Faure Street, the different nationalities and their flags are proudly proclaimed on brightly coloured signs enticing visitors to enter their exotic emporia. This may well be why, in the final analysis, Rosélie decides to stay in Cape Town since she compares her life to:

> une de ces couvertures qu'elle avait achetées aux Amish, lors d'une visite en Pennsylvanie: mosaïque de tissus de textures différentes, toujours de coloration peu lumineuse. Coton brun, les années à N'Dossou; laine grise, les jours à New York; feutrine violette, l'existence au Cap; velours noir depuis la mort de Stephen. Seule exception, la soie écarlate du séjour au Japon (HFC. p.86).

South Africa is a mosaic of different races, cultures, colours, creeds and languages, therefore what better place for a nomad to settle down after a lifetime of wandering aimlessly through four continents. There is a paradox here in the concept of place which is an essential part of the reincorporation stage of the rite of passage: the multi-cultural chaos that is South Africa today still in a state of flux mirrors the confused state of transition which Rosélie has been working through since Stephen's death, yet in the final analysis, it is this same multi-cultural community to which Rosélie feels that she now belongs and in which she can find her place[758].

Condé herself says:

> le rapport à la terre d'origine n'est sans doute pas le même pour des gens de ma génération et pour ceux qui ont précédé. Pour mes parents, par exemple, il était naturel de grandir, de vivre, d'avoir des enfants et de mourir en Guadeloupe. Aujourd'hui, nous voyageons, le monde nous appartient. La quête identitaire, en ce qui me concerne, a mené parfois loin de la terre natale![759]

In fact, Rosélie does have a place to go to, a refuge in Guadeloupe, somewhere she could call her own, as she has just been advised that she has been left a house by one of her aunts in Barbotteau. Yet, apart from the practical fact that she does not have the funds to buy the air ticket, emotionally she is far from able to state that she wants to settle down in Guadeloupe, and, of course, in these days of mass tourism, the Guadeloupe of the twenty-first century has changed from that of her childhood, it is no longer a place of refuge from the world. When she and Stephen decamped to Saint-Bart to escape the stifling family rituals after Rose's funeral: "ils ne furent pas dépaysés. Où se terraient les autochtones? L'île pullulait d'Américains, des Caucasiens, quelques rares Africains-Américains" (HFC. p.172) No need for Guadeloupians to seek the New World, the New World has come to them.

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[758] Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, Wangari, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, New York: Peter Lang (1996), p.15.

[759] Condé, Maryse 'J'ai quitté mon île' – interview dated 03 April 2003 with Tristan Malavoy-Racine for *Voir* on the occasion of the 2003 International Literary Festival of Montreal.

However, nature working its usual miracles in tales of rebirth, the scent of the roses in the garden and the aroma of the sea awake Rosélie's senses and: "elle ressentait l'ivresse involontaire d'être en vie" (HFC. p.305), and with it the desire to gain control over her environment. What she is beginning to appreciate is that: "toute situation de changement contraint à des abandons, des pertes, des «deuils». Dans certain cas, pas de regrets parce que les éloignements, la fin d'une tâche, une disparition libèrent le temps, l'attention, le cœur"[760]. Proof indeed that Rosélie has just experienced a transitional phase in her life.

Ironically, given Rosélie's history with men, it is a man who, indirectly, forces Rosélie to take the initiative for once. Manuel Desprez, a colleague of Stephen's at the university, offers her lunch and sympathy. He also, more importantly, suggests a trip to Cadix – is he going to be just another in a long line of Rosélie's men? "Ce Manuel s'offrait à la consoler et de la trahison de Stephen et de celle de Faustin" (HFC. p.314), yet Rosélie has, finally, turned a page in her life since she realises that: "tous ces sauveurs providentiels ne la sauvaient pas. Ils ne faisaient que la détourner d'elle-même. Ils ne faisaient que la détourner de ce qui aurait dû être l'essentiel de ses préoccupations. Sa peinture" (HFC. p.314). She realises, belatedly, that if she had not met Salama Salama, Stephen or even Faustin, then: "sans doute, elle se serait concentrée sur elle-même. Elle n'aurait pas relégué sa création au rang de hobby, ne mettant jamais ses jours en péril. Elle se serait battue, bec et ongles, pour la parachever, l'imposer" (HFC. p.314). In this rare moment of clarity, Rosélie realises that she has compromised her own needs in favour of her relationships to such an extent that she has become disconnected from herself and her ambitions[761].

Rosélie therefore makes a momentous and instantaneous decision. She will not go with Manuel to Cadix, a tryst which would be, no doubt: "prélude à une nouvelle histoire de cœur, de sexe ou des deux qui, à plus ou moins brève échéance, se solderait par une désillusion. Encore une" (HFC. pp.314-315). She appreciates now that, at the age of fifty, she has lost too much time and: "brusquement, son futur lui apparaissait, voie droite, chemin tout tracé, pour les années qui lui restaient à vivre" (HFC. p.315). Rosélie realises that not only does she want to live but, even more importantly, that she wants to live in Cape Town: "cette ville, elle l'avait gagnée. Elle l'avait faite sienne en un mouvement inverse de ses ancêtres dépossédés d'Afrique, qui avaient vu surgir, tel un mirage à l'avant des caravelles de Colomb, les îlots où ils feraient germer la canne et le tabac de leur re-naissance" (HFC. p.315).

This decision to stay in her adopted country shows a visible progression in the behaviour of Condé's heroines, since Marie-Hélène in *Une Saison à Rihata*, for example, never feels at home in an (unspecified)

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[760] Thiriet, Michèle & Képès, Suzanne, *Femmes à 50 ans*, Paris: Seuil (1981), p.202.

[761] Rye, Gill, 'Lost and Found: Mother-daughter Relations in Paule Constant's Fiction' in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*, ed. by Rye, Gill & Worton, Michael, Manchester: Manchester University Press (2002), pp.75-76 – in her footnote no. 3, Rye refers to Carol Gilligan's work on 'disconnection' in particular Lyn Mikel Brown & Carol Gilligan, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology & Girls' Development, Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1992.

African country: "qu'elle n'avait jamais fait sien"[762]. She went there with her husband Zak to find her roots, and ended up entering middle age a confused, unhappy woman who considered Zak: "à la fois sa victime et son bourreau" (USR. p.34). Rosélie was, at one time, in danger of following her down this route, but circumstances have conspired to shake her out of her apathy. A combination of Jan's look of hatred, Brenda's kiss of acceptance, Judith's recovery, Stephen's betrayal, Manuel's desire, Fiéla's example, Dido's support and laying the ghosts of her childhood have all conspired to give Rosélie a sense of self, a belief in her abilities and a feeling of being at peace with herself whilst at the same time becoming aware of what her next step should be.

Rosélie has realised that her future lay in her art and: "je n'userai plus mon cœur à l'amour" (HFC. 315). Yet, like Ramatoulaye, she has not renounced men for good. Faustin reintroduced her: "à l'amour, au plaisir, comme une gamine de seize ans qui en est à son premier partenaire de lit. Pour moi peut-être, c'est le dernier" (HFC. p.140), but whilst rejecting Manuel's offer of a trip abroad, the text suggests that she has not rejected Manuel himself, therefore Faustin will not be her last partner. Bishupal may have mocked Rosélie with his cruel words alluding to her age: "vous, c'est fini" (HFC. p.309), but she knows that: "la vie d'une femme n'est jamais finie. Il se trouve toujours des hommes pour l'aider à continuer son chemin" (HFC. p.314) – an ambiguous statement which, whilst a positive thought for anyone fearing that a woman's sexual life ends at fifty, could also imply, less positively, that men are necessary to enable women to achieve in life. However, despite Manuel's physical attractiveness, Rosélie does, at least, pass up the immediate opportunity of another sexual relationship, giving rise to the hope that she has finally begun: "to perceive her own body as a material entity that exists for itself"[763] and to realise that her identity does not have to depend on a significant other. Indeed, it may well be that during this 'change of life', it could be her body: "giving her to understand that there is life after the "proper" female existence of always being reduced to nothing but a body/sex, and that she is "coming to her senses" in going beyond this narrow corporeality to find a knowledge of her own"[764].

Sex apart, therefore, what Rosélie has rejected is her habit of blindly following a man, which means she has broken the pattern which in the past has led to her abandonment by men. In future, as she says firmly to Manuel, finally finding her own voice after decades of silence, just like Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre*, and drawing a line in the sand with the past determined by "l'autre" on one side and the future to be determined by herself on the other side, independent of any male input: "je ne veux faire qu'à ma

[762] Condé, Maryse, *Une Saison à Rihata*, Paris: Robert Laffont (1997), p.170.
[763] Robson, Kathryn, 'Virtual Reality: The Subject of Loss in Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* and Régine Detambel's *La Chambre d'écho*' in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 41:1 (2004), p.13.
[764] Campioni, Mia, 'Revolting Women: Women in Revolt' in *Reinterpreting Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, ed. by Komesaroff, Paul & Rothfield, Philipa, New York, London: Routledge (1997), p.79.

volonté" (HFC. p.316). Perhaps, through her own experiences and the fatal example of Stephen's love triangle, she has finally realised the truth of Foucault's observation that: "elle [la sexualité] apparaît [...] comme un point de passage particulièrement dense pour les relations de pouvoir: entre hommes et femmes, entre jeunes et vieux"[765]. She has realised that she needs independence of mind and body in order to enable her to achieve satisfaction: "in a world in which creativity and desire are subjected to the urgencies of constructing a cultural identity"[766]. Thus, by accepting that she can make a home in South Africa and that she is, for the first time, happy in her own skin and with her own decisions, she is on the way to constructing her own cultural identity, one that is unique to her. Her 'cultural sterility' à la Condé, is at an end; she can finally create a work of art that has a name.

Rosélie may not have reconstructed herself yet, but she has taken the first steps by speaking out and breaking the silence that used to pervade her very being. "Feminism asserts that finding a voice and, more importantly, being heard is esssential for a women's [sic] autonomous identity to develop"[767]. In the first instance, being heard by yourself is a significant step and it is fair to say that Rosélie has, finally, at the age of fifty, become aware of where her freedom might lie and she has found the strength from within to achieve her independence. For one who has spent a lifetime shrinking into the background and hiding from the frankly insulting gazes of "l'autrui", she has taken inspiration from Fiéla, a *femme cannibale* like herself, who stood her ground and kept her own counsel, and therefore forged her own identity – albeit that by keeping silent and allowing the media to describe her as a 'cannibal', Fiéla acquiesced in this depiction of herself as a savage and a non-Westerner[768].

As Margaret Gullette points out, the past has to be borne in order that the present might be different[769], thus once Rosélie has liberated herself from the past, she naturally feels free to paint again, to start afresh – and not the abstract art of her past, but a portrait, showing a progression into representational art. As Rosélie has assuaged the guilt she felt about abandoning her mother, and, by extension, Guadeloupe, and as Fiéla has been instrumental in enabling her to confront her demons, what could be more natural than to paint Fiéla – or is it a self-portrait? In either case, it clearly represents Rosélie opening herself up to an exploration of the self, another sign that she has entered a new phase in her life. Hurrying back alone to her studio, realising that she is best able to: "achieve selfhood through a creative solitude"[770],

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[765] Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard (1976), p.136.
[766] Moudileno, Lydie, 'Portrait of the Artist as Dreamer: Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove* and *Les Derniers Rois Mages*' in *Callaloo*, 18:3, Summer 1995, p.634.
[767] Hitchcott, Nicki, *Women Writers in Francophone Africa*, Oxford: Berg (2000), p.9.
[768] The etymology of the word 'cannibal' is assumed to be derived from the Carib Indians of the Bahamas, called in Columbus's time 'caribales' or its origins could be from Romany, in which it means 'the black man' and Romany derives from Sanskrit, therefore the etymology of Kali-baan's name could be dark-skinned man associated with the black goddess Kali.
[769] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia (1997), p.86.
[770] Pratt, Annis, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Brighton: Harvester Press (1982), p.126.

Rosélie: "sentait se réveiller en elle l'impatiente clameur de ses entrailles se préparant à l'enfantement" (HFC. p.317) and she draws a pair of eyes on a blank canvas, the eyes of Fiéla which had revealed an inner strength and self-belief which never faltered during her trial, thus: "pour ces yeux-là, le monde alentour ne comptait pas. Seul importait ce qui bouillonnait à l'intérieur et dont nul n'avait conscience" (HFC. p.317).

Fiéla will live again through Rosélie's painting: "où le regard tellement impénétrable soutenait le sien" (HFC. p.317) and, by virtue of seeing herself through Fiéla's eyes in the painting, symbolising her own eyes, rather than through the eyes of the 'other', represented here by Stephen and all the other men in her life, Rosélie will be able to formulate her own identity. The title is instructive, 'Femme cannibale', as, of course, is the fact that Rosélie chooses it herself. Condé herself said: "the claim to a cannibal identity forms part of any poetical self-birth or parthenogenesis"[771] and by choosing not to follow Fiéla's route, Rosélie is enacting Suzanne Césaire's famous statement: "la poésie martiniquaise sera cannibale ou ne sera pas" where:

> cultural cannibalism invokes a mode of relating to the world that refuses destructive confrontation. [...] cultural cannibalism renews rather than destroys the culture it absorbs and transforms. European and African cultures do not cease to exist when they are cannibalized in the New World. Instead, they extend their compass – revalued, transformed, and renewed in novel cultural contexts[772].

Rosélie's culture is an amalgam of her identity, a rich mixture of her ancestral African heritage and her Guadeloupian forebears, together with what she has assimilated in fifty years of living in a variety of different cultures. For Rosélie, the future is now bright. No existential angst about reaching midlife for her. Her creativity, along with her confidence, is surging. At fifty, therefore, Rosélie finally comes of age.

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[771] Condé, Maryse, 'Unheard Voice: Suzanne Césaire and the Construct of a Caribbean Identity' in *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*, ed. by Newson, Adele S. & Strong-Leek, Linda, New York: Peter Lang (1998), p.64.

[772] Nesbitt, Nick, 'Stepping Outside the Magic Circle: The Critical Thought of Maryse Condé' in *The Romanic Review*, 94:3-4 (2003), p.400.

CONCLUSION

Toril Moi wrote that in choosing a project, we shape our own identity, and create a position from which to interpret the world[773]. My project chose me, in effect, some six or seven years ago when changes in my body alerted me to the fact that I could no longer harbour any illusions regarding my real or imagined age. Simultaneously, and fortuitously, I realised that as a result of my age and therefore my lived experience, my interpretation of Colette's *La Naissance du jour* differed significantly from that of younger students, thus enabling me to adopt a position of privilege and stimulating a fascination with the whole topic of female ageing as represented in literature, and in particular the period around a woman's midlife years. I also realised that, as a result of undergoing the menopause:

> women writers of a certain age have an unique advantage over their male counterparts: this is the last of the fields on which only they can write from personal experience and it is a very rich field – which makes it all the more extraordinary how few women writers actually even make reference, however obliquely, to this significant period in their life, let alone write about it[774].

However, I must re-emphasise at this juncture that none of the writers studied in this thesis mentions the menopause directly. They do, nevertheless, make explicit the fact that their protagonists are either aged fifty or are in their midlife years[775], therefore it is reasonable to assume that age has at least some significance in their narratives. Throughout my research, however, I heeded Anne Wyatt-Brown's warning of being aware of the danger of focusing too intently on gerontological issues, which could result in a distorted reading of the texts[776], but, as I hope I have shown, sophisticated novels such as these are always concerned with much more than simply the depiction of age[777], and their authors manage to weave issues of age with a wide variety of societal concerns including war, politics, life course reviews, loneliness, friendship, racism, memory and reminiscence, sexuality, body image, mortality, power relations and patriarchy, intergenerational conflicts, support and creativity.

I realise, however, albeit belatedly after reading Margaret Morganroth Gullette's latest work *Aged by Culture*[778] published in 2004, that by focusing on midlife ageing, or, to use her terminology, by concentrating on 'slice-of-life studies', I am committing the very sin she is preaching so forcefully against,

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[773] Moi, Toril, *What is a Woman?*, Oxford: OUP (1999), p.459.
[774] Barnes, Linda, *Colette's Rite of Passage*, MA thesis, University of Kent, (2001), p.2.
[775] With the exception of Triolet's *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* whose heroine is older.
[776] Wyatt-Brown, Anne M., 'Literary Gerontology comes of Age' in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, ed. by Cole, Thomas, R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.334.
[777] Rooke, Constance, 'Old Age in Contemporary Fiction: A New Paradigm of Hope' in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging,* ed. by Cole, Thomas, R., van Tassel, David D. & Kastenbaum, Robert, New York: Springer Publishing (1992), p.253.
[778] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Aged by Culture*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press (2004).

as she sees: "fragmentation of the life course as one giant-sized enemy"[779] in the fight to modernise age theory and raise age consciousness to a new level. If the content of my thesis thus breaks all her rules, I feel at least personally vindicated in that she admits that even a mature age critic writes at any given moment out of only one age location, one generation, one historical experience of aging[780].

Whilst acknowledging Gullette's obviously superior knowledge and experience in this field, but taking into consideration my extensive research and reading around this subject over the last few years, I defend my decision in this thesis to focus on female ageing in midlife as represented in French literature across generations, races and nationalities in selected works by Elsa Triolet, Mariama Bâ and Maryse Condé. Gullette's battle, and like her I see it as a battle yet to be won, is to reveal to us all – men, women, children – how we are aged by culture, and although there can be no denying the truth of her propositions, her book is aimed firmly at the American market in tone, style and content. This does not mean it cannot be relevant to my studies, but whilst keeping in mind her overall message, I feel at liberty to dispense with many aspects which do not transfer so easily across oceans, let alone languages, generations and nationalities.

Thus, whilst ever heedful of Gullette's message to avoid perpetuating misrepresentations of ageing, I maintain that there is value to be had from this so-called narrow focus. Despite the fact, therefore, that she has moved on from extolling the virtues of the midlife progress novel, I believe that there is still space for midlife studies[781] to privilege this stage in a person's life course, and in particular this transition phase in a woman's life. Like it or not, we are not yet sufficiently advanced to view with complacency, or, worse, ignore, this still mysterious, albeit occasionally troublesome, period in a woman's life course and whilst there may be an abundance of clinical, psychological or gerontological research underway, the

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[779] Gullette, Margaret Morganroth, *Aged by Culture*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press (2004), p.193.

[780] ibid., p.194.

[781] Midlife has recently become fashionable, judging by the amount of research being carried out. EMAS (European Male Ageing Study) involving 3,200 men in eight European countries (including the United Kingdom, not including France) is currently in progress to help clarify whether any clinical conditions exist which are specific to men in their midlife, similar to the woman's menopause. It is the largest-ever study of ageing in men in the world. In the USA, MIDMAC, an interdiciplinary research group of thirteen scholars, was established in 1989: "to study a little known period in the life span: middle age". I quote from their website: "Purpose and Origins: Midlife – the years between 30 and 70, with 40 to 60 at its core – is perhaps the least studied and most ill-defined of any period in life. It abounds with changing images and myths – the "midlife crisis", the "change of life", the "empty nest syndrome", and many more. But we have little documentation and less understanding of what really happens, biologically or psychologically, during this extended period of time. The primary objective of the Network on Successful Midlife Development is to identify the major biomedical, psychological, and social factors that permit some people to achieve good health, psychological well-being, and social responsibility during their adult years. To do this the Network must first develop an empirical basis for documenting and understanding what happens during these years, and compare it with the images of midlife held by men and women across a variety of ages and cultures". To this end they carried out a national survey starting in 1995, MIDUS, involving 7,189 English-speaking adults in the USA with an age range of twenty-five to seventy-four. A follow-up survey, MIDUS 2 is planned for 2005, involving the same participants ten years on. http://midmac.med.harvard.edu/

average person is hardly aware of this and, instead, gains knowledge and reassurance from friends, the media and literature. Literature has a role to play in both reflecting and creating a culture's values[782]. Let us celebrate that fact.

I chose to present Triolet, Bâ and Condé in chronological order and, as expected, one can see a natural progression in how these three authors elected to depict ageing and its ramifications in their novels, a progression commensurate with the era and circumstances in which they were writing. However, although a cursory analysis might define their respective works as depicting 'ageing as decline', 'the transitional phase' and the 'progress novel', my detailed readings led me to discover not only some rather obvious similarities and differences along the lines anticipated, but also a world of nuances and subtleties only revealed on close textual analysis. I realised, therefore, that to search for similarities and differences would be far too simplistic, and that what I could also provide would be a new way of looking at their novels through the filter of ageing which would serve to illuminate some hitherto hidden aspects of their work.

Interestingly, given the obvious truth of Leonard Pearlin's observation quoted at the start: "there is not one process of aging, but many; there is not one life course that is followed, but multiple courses"[783], the fact that there are more obvious similarities on display than differences is rather surprising. Chronological age is understandably a factor in all of the novels under review, but it is worth observing that these particular novels quite simply would not work so well if the protagonists were a different age, leading to the inevitable conclusion that these authors deliberately intended to feature, to a greater or lesser degree, their protagonists' midlife years. Thus, Triolet's middle-aged heroine in *Mille regrets* represents physiological decline and the consequences, for a woman with (very) low self-esteem, of the loss of her youth and beauty. Her identity is defined clearly, therefore, through the embodiment of age. *Le Cheval roux*, a far more complex, allegorical novel, plays, at the micro-level, with the inter-relationship of physical appearance and identity in midlife, and can be read as an attempt by Triolet to find meaning in both her life, and, at a macro-level, life in general in the troubled times in which she was living. *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*, on the other hand, is a beautifully written 'last-gasp' novel of fragmented reminiscences of an older woman which succeeds in portraying the certain mood which one associates with the approach of death and is, poignantly, Triolet's last novel. Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* features Ramatoulaye and, off-stage, Aïssatou, two women aged fifty dealing, in different ways, with their particular cultural nemesis, or scourge of women – the sexist theme of polygyny; and Condé's Rosélie is forced, at the age of fifty, to undertake a life review (which, being an artist could make *Histoire de la*

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[782] Baum, Roselie Murphy, 'Work, Contentment, and Identity in Aging Women in Literature' in *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, ed. by Deats, Sara Munson & Lenker, Lagretta Tallent, Westport CT: Praeger (1999), p. 89.

[783] Pearlin, Leonard, I., 'Discontinuities in the Study of Aging' in *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Hareven, Tamara K. & Adams, Kathleen, J., London: Tavistock Publications (1982), p. 63.

femme cannibale a *Künstlerroman*) a process which leads her to examine the choices she has made in her past and results in her finally taking control of her life and branching out into independence, much like the country in which the novel is set – South Africa.

A curious feature of all of the novels is the naming, or non-naming of their heroines. Triolet's heroine in *Mille regrets* remains anonymous throughout – the implication being that she is representative of every woman undergoing a similar crisis[784]; the protagonist in *Le Cheval roux* is first called Eve, an ironic nod towards the mother of us all, and then becomes Elsa Triolet herself, and the woman at the heart of *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* is simply 'une femme', very close to the end of her life. Bâ's Ramatoulaye is only named, in admiration by her former suitor, near the end of the novel, after she has taken a stand not only against male supremacy and tradition by refusing to lower her gaze whilst simultaneously speaking out against her brother-in-law, but also against religious construction of authority and in so doing, appropriating male power by taking control of her life. Finally, Rosélie in *Histoire de la femme cannibale* owes her name to the merging of her parents' names, Rose and Élie, hence implying she has lacked independence from the very start of her life, a burden it has taken her fifty years to shed, and interestingly, one she was only able to deal with after the death of both her parents and her domineering partner.

Common to all the novels is a crisis[785]. Each of the middle-aged protagonists faces a turning point in their life, at this particular stage in their life, and surprisingly, as it seems such an extreme reaction[786], they all contemplate suicide at some stage, although only one apparently succeeds, interestingly the woman with the least support. It cannot be a coincidence that these women, in their midlife years, all undergo some transformation in this transitional period. How the authors handle their heroines' crises conforms to the time and the circumstances in which they are writing. What is significant is that each crisis provokes, to a greater or lesser degree, a life review, yet that life review is triggered by an event in the protagonist's life, rather than by the protagonist herself, the implication being that women have to be forced out of their passivity to confront issues which would otherwise rest dormant and undisturbed. Once provoked, however, the protagonists all grow in stature to meet that challenge – with the exception of Triolet's unnamed heroine in *Mille regrets*, who fails to grasp the hand of friendship when offered and prefers to struggle, and ultimately die, alone.

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[784] Interestingly, the principal female protagonist in Simone de Beavoir's *L'Âge de discrétion* (designated a monologue) is also called simply 'la femme' representing all women of her age and in her condition.

[785] The etymology of the word 'crisis' is of interest. In the present day it has negative connotations, meaning a time of intense difficulty or danger, a time when a difficult or important decision must be made, the turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death), whilst it is derived from the Greek *krisis* 'decision', from *krinein*, 'decide' (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998).

[786] Relationship problems and depression are cited as two of the main reasons why women commit suicide, with abusive relationships and HIV infection high on the list. Figures from the USA confirm that adults aged over sixty-five commit 18 per cent of suicides with risk highest amongst recently divorced or widowed persons.

This leads onto another common feature (it may be stating the obvious, but it is significant) – these women are all on their own. For different reasons, (with the exception of Rosélie), none of them is in a partnership at the time of the crisis, which in itself, provokes the crisis. Results from the MIDUS study (see footnote no.781) show that men and people who are married or outgoing reported more positive and less negative emotions than women and single or shy people. So being both women and effectively single, the omens are not good for these protagonists. The real question is whether they are all actually deliberately written to reflect society norms. In the case of Bâ, it is on record, as cited previously, that she intended her novels to have a didactic intent; she wanted to expose the practice of polygyny and show her fellow countrywomen how to stand up for themselves. Triolet also wanted to reflect society, while Condé has always considered that as writers: "nous écrivons d'abord pour nous rendre le monde compréhensible et si nous y parvenons, peut-être aidons-nous aussi nos lecteurs"[787].

Equally significant is the fact that these female characters all have help, to a greater or lesser degree. Whilst alone in a partnership-sense, they are not expected to handle such an emotional time on their own, and the help does not come from their mothers, who are either dead or absent in the texts (which opens up an intriguing line of enquiry with regard to the current interest in mothers and daughters' relationships in literature), but from male or female friends[788] or children, and often unexpectedly. This may well be why Triolet's unnamed heroine has to die; M. Oléonard's offer of friendship is presented as ambiguous, and, isolated from family and friends, it is the very absence of any genuine support which results in the presumed inevitability of Madame X's death. *Le Cheval roux* offers intergenerational friendship together with, in the final chapter, the utopia (if living under the threat of death from radiation can be described as utopia) of successful community living in Switzerland, as well as the intriguing but unlikely, (if the crisis faced by the protagonist is read at a macro-level as a metaphor for the crisis facing the world at the time of the Cold War), friendship between an American and a Frenchwoman – France and the USA have never been natural bedfellows, *plus ça change*.

Ramatoulaye has a wealth of support, as one would expect from her cultural environment. Most obviously from her best friend Aïssatou, with whom she reminisces in "imagined companionship"[789] since an ocean separates them, thus: "je t'invoque. Le passé renaît avec son cortège d'émotions" (SLL. p.12), and her eldest daughter Daba, but also, indirectly and more unlikely, Ibrahima Sall, young Aïssatou's future husband who starts to take on the role of man of the house, and, in her fashion, and in keeping with tradition, Farmata, the family griote. Aïssatou is uncritical, supporting Ramatoulaye emotionally in whatever action she decides to take, but also providing practical aid such as the car. Daba is, perhaps

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[787] Condé, Maryse, 'la race n'est pas primordiale'. Interview with Elisabeth Nunez on 29 April 2002. http://www.grioo.com/info2.html

[788] Psychologists would no doubt say this proves the point often made that men and women differ because women invariably have support networks, people in whom they can confide, whereas men feel uncomfortable in sharing confidences and are emotionally less open as a result.

[789] Woodward, Kathleen, 'Telling Stories', Doreen B. Townsend Center Occasional Papers, 9 (1997), p.10.

befitting the younger generation, very proactive, taking over her mother's role with regard to the younger children where possible, and, together with her husband: "ils avaient mené les débats pour la répartition des biens de Modou" (SLL. p.131). Ramatoulaye's relationship with Farmata is ambiguous and certainly not equal, yet the griote is always on hand, offering advice and assistance and can be counted on in her own way.

Condé's Rosélie, on the other hand, is portrayed as a loner. As a child, apart from cousins, Rosélie did not have friends, courtesy of an over-protective mother. Living in Cape Town after the death of Stephen, Rosélie thinks she is alone in world, with only Dido, her maid-cum-friend and Deogratias, the night guard. Dido is a mixture of surrogate mother, friend and confidante, and plays a crucial role in Rosélie's rehabilitation. In truth, Rosélie is not a sympathetic character. As a reader, it is hard to empathise with her situation, given her character, and one can understand why she is is portrayed as having few friends. In addition, of course, by allowing Stephen to manipulate her, she endangers the few potentially successful relationships she has, with Fina and Amy for example, who ultimately cannot compete with Stephen's malevolent influence. Through the character of Dido, female solidarity is on show in this novel, but the implication is that until Rosélie learns to love herself, no one will love her.

The enclosed space, a common trope, is also prevalent in these novels: Virginia Woolf's proposition that women need a 'room of their own' finds resonance in these novels. Triolet's heroine in *Mille regrets* lives alone in a tiny, barely furnished room with all the privations of war rationing, where she dies as a result of gas poisoning[790] – by choice or accident is left tantalisingly unclear, but, unlike the others, her room does not prove to be a safe haven. Ramatoulaye is cloistered during her period of mourning where she has the time and the space to meditate, through the medium of writing, on her past, present and future, and Rosélie can only be herself when she paints, alone, in her various studios around the world, and then, after Stephen's death for a period of time, in effect, her period of mourning, she shuts herself away from prying eyes, building up the resolve to find out the truth about his murder, a process which also turns out to be cathartic for her.

With regard to the dissimilarities between these novels, they do appear to be related to differences in culture. Triolet's stereotypical depiction of a woman's body in decline, for instance, belongs to the era in which it was written, as well as representing the author's well-known fears regarding her own ageing. That is not to say that women writers do not write like that nowadays, but they are rare, and risk the

[790] Published in 1942, in the midst of the Second World War, was the choice of death by gas poisoning a reference to the death of millions of Jews in Hitler's gas chambers? Given that Triolet was Jewish, of Russian origin with contacts abroad and that the war with Russia started in 1941, it would seem possible. However, apart from Poland where death camps were apparently known to exist in 1941, although no one knows how widely that knowledge was disseminated, most deaths by gas chambers did not start until mid-1942. Was Triolet prescient, or, as is more likely, did she choose a method of dying accidentally that had become commonplace and widely reported owing to the restrictions on gas usage in place at the time?

critical opprobrium of, say, Gullette et al. That said, I venture to suggest that culture plays a role here also, as it is only seven years since Gallimard published Paule Constant's *Confidence pour confidence*[791] which won Constant, then aged forty-four, the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1998. This is a novel which, for all its irony[792] and despite, or perhaps because of being set in America, does not shrink from portraying *la condition féminine* (including mention of the physical and socio-cultural aspects of the menopause) of four women aged fifty or thereabouts who are not universally upbeat about the prospect of ageing into the next decade. Perhaps it takes a French woman to break the taboos. To cite just one example from the text:

> l'âge mur [...] c'est quand le feminin débandé s'étale, gonfle, prend du ventre, des hanches, des seins, c'est quand le féminin se révolte et déborde. Les femmes en ont honte comme au moment de la puberté quand leur chair pousse de partout. Elles ne grandissent plus, elles grossissent. Elles se plaignent de ne plus rentrer dans rien, elles s'étonnent d'avoir pu porter des vêtements si étroits, mais leurs corps étrécis par la mode retrouvent leur volume naturel.
>
> Aurore cherchait le sens du mot mûr: à point, passé, blet. Mûr était un beau concept, la perfection, l'aboutissement. Je ne suis pas comme elles, je n'en suis pas encore là, se disait Aurore. Je veux être verte, dure, âcre, acide, je ne veux pas de cette maturation. Je veux être insoupçonnable, une fleur sèche, un bouton avorté. L'enfant en elle refusait de grandir et d'écouter ces histoires de femmes au gynécée"[793].

In an interview with *Lire* in 1998, Constant admitted: "si le roman est un brin féroce, c'est que j'ai décidé de ne pas farder la réalité. Vieillir, c'est lourd à porter, contrairement à ce que d'aucuns prétendent en nous racontant que les femmes restent belles et intactes et qu'elles vivront encore des passions folles à soixante ans passé"[794]. Quite a refreshing attitude.

The ageing female body in Bâ's novel, on the other hand, barely merits a mention. Despite the fact that Ramatoulaye's age is, effectively, the catalyst that precipitates the crisis whereby Modou takes a much younger second wife, the text – in common with other francophone and anglophone writing of that era from the African continent – respects the culture, influenced heavily by religion, and does not dwell on the body, nor the physical signs of ageing. The only comment in that regard is to draw attention to the fact that Ramatoulaye's body is battle-weary, bearing the scars expected from the numerous childbirths and daily physical toil which represented life for most women in Senegal (and Africa generally) at that time.

In total contrast, Condé's Rosélie is an early twenty-first century construct. Revelling in her sexuality – no slide into asexual old age for her – fighting off lovers, with a host of problems to overcome, she simply

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[791] Constant, Paule, *Confidence pour confidence*, Paris: Gallimard (1988).
[792] We meet the four women the day after the 'Colloque féministe des Sorcières de Middleway'.
[793] ibid., p.226.
[794] Constant, Paule: 'Entretien avec Catherine Argand', April 1998, *Lire* 264 in *Les grand entretiens de LIRE: (October 1975-January 2000)*, ed. by Assouline, Pierre, Paris: Omnibus (2000), p.1360.

does not see her age as one of those problems. Maryse Condé herself said, in a private communication[795], that: "je crois, et Simone de Beauvoir, l'a prouvé dans *La Vieillesse*, la sexualité n'a que peu de rapports avec l'âge biologique. Elle est fonction du temperament de chaque femme. Je crois que chez Rosalie elle est encore très importante" and she made the valid point: "que la sexualité varie en fonction de société puisque chaque société imprime aux femmes une éducation différente".

However, there is a paradox at work, whereby although the physical body does not feature prominently in either Bâ's novel or Condé's, all three novelists allude to the fact that woman is treated as a commodity by man and it is her body that is the commodity, which, in turn, is linked to the woman's lack of self-esteem. Triolet's unnamed protagonist in *Mille regrets* cannot see a value in herself now that her youth is over and her beauty fading. She cannot perceive herself as other than a package holding no appeal to customers now that her wrapping is starting to become a little frayed around the edges and can only see herself left on the shelf, which seems preferable to her than the only other option seemingly available, that of 'tarting herself up' in ridiculous, inappropriate garb. She has absolutely no sense of self-worth.

Ramatoulaye's problem is exacerbated by Modou's judicial use of polygyny, under cover of which, and despite twenty-five years of marriage and twelve children, he is apparently able to discard her, without a second thought, for a newer model, following which, to add insult to injury, under guise of the ancient right of Levirate[796], his brother Tamsir just assumes that he can add Ramatoulaye to his collection of wives. Ramatoulaye's problem is not that she has no sense of self-worth; on the contrary, as a young woman she had a firm idea of herself, it is just that, believing she was in a happy, sharing partnership, she became complacent and passive over the years, but at no time did she ever see herself as a commodity to be bartered or traded – that view was purely in the eyes of the male beholders.

Rosélie, on the other hand, has always lacked self-esteem. The life review she undertakes following the shock of Stephen's murder underlines how she has always been treated as a commodity by men, and, in fact, welcomed their protection. She is passive in a different sense to Ramatoulaye. It is almost a relief to her to be relieved from taking responsibility for her own life. Even after Stephen's death, she has one false start with her brief relationship with Faustin before finally realising that it is up to her to choose how to live her life and that she can do it with, or without, men.

General similarities and differences apart, it is apposite here to examine the conclusions reached in each of the three chapters, starting with the works by Elsa Triolet who is, I believe, an underrated author. This

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[795] Personal email dated 4 April 2005.

[796] The Levirate is a traditional practice whereby a deceased husband's relative, usually his brother, marries his widow. Most commonly practised when there were no children from the first marriage. It appears in *The Bible* in Deuteronomy Ch.25, v.5-10. These days it is considered one of the factors in transmission of AIDS. Although Senegal is one of the success stories in Africa in the fight against AIDS, women and adolescents form the majority of those affected by the virus.

may be as a result of some inconsistency in the standard of her work, or simply to the fact that her era is (currently) out of fashion, and unlike Colette, for example, her work is not free from ideologies which means it has a tendency to become dated quickly. There are a handful of researchers, mostly French, specialising in her œuvre, yet her best work contains an incredibly rich seam of treasures still to be explored in depth, and her fascinating life and the times in which she lived offer intriguing possibilities for reading her life through her work, or indeed her work through her life. Through reading her novels, her journals and correspondence, one gains the sense that one key reason for Triolet writing even from an early age was to fill an emotional void – jealous of her beautiful sister and her success with men, separated later from her Russian roots, always that feeling of being in exile in France and, although remarkably discreet on the subject, not always happy in her marriage with Aragon.

Mille regrets, on the surface a stereotypical portrait of a lonely woman fearing the consequences of the loss of her youth and beauty, bears striking resemblances with the short story collection *La femme rompue* of Simone de Beauvoir, yet with none of the self-deception of Beauvoir's protagonists, and I believe that Colette's Julie de Carneilhan or Marco of *Le Képi* would also recognise themselves in this type of writing. This is a harrowing depiction of female bodily decline, a view of women as commodities and what happens when they are past their sell-by-date; a statement on female subordination and lack of self-esteem – a classic example of Gullette's 'aged by culture' – and a tale that would, one assumes, be unlikely to be written at the start of the twenty-first century, certainly in the Western world. It is of its time, and reflects its time, as well as the well-documented, personal feelings of the author. However, that said, and politically incorrect it may be, but I challenge any woman (and man?) not to admit to feeling some dread at the sight of the first wrinkle – Triolet just extrapolates that feeling, some would say over-zealously and to an absurd extreme. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that nowadays we know, thanks to Gullette et al., that ageing is primarily a cultural fiction, that knowledge does not necessarily empower us to overcome those feelings of loss. Why can we not admit that we regret the passing of our youth and looks? Life might be great after fifty, but it will definitely be a different great, and some of that so-called great might need to be sugar-coated with a mega dose of spin, particularly if the age-defying creams do not meet our expectations or the manufacturer's hype.

The second novel of Triolet's that I studied, *Le Cheval roux*, is, despite some shortcomings as a novel, a stunning piece of semi-allegorical, post-humanist literature. Triolet features herself as Eve – the ultimate symbol of womanhood on the one hand, yet, as a result of her mutilation courtesy of the bomb, also not a woman, and paradoxically, also, courtesy of her age, not capable of being the: "mother of all living"[797].

[797] *The Bible*, Genesis, Ch.3, v.20.

All signs of ageing, and indeed identity[798], obliterated – the extreme case of cosmetic surgery gone wrong – thus apparently ageless[799], Triolet can pass, anonymously at first, as her younger self, whilst also serving as the wider representation of broken and suffering humanity. In this post-apocalyptic world which, despite possessing an Eve is at the opposite end of the spectrum from matriarchal Eden where nature serves as a lost place of nurturance[800], we realise we are in the world after Eve succumbed to the serpent's guile and partook of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, thus opening the doors to death. Here, man's desire to create and use a nuclear bomb is likened to the forbidden fruit – the doors to hell have been opened.

In the novel, ideological differences such as age, class, gender, even sex have either been immediately deconstructed in the aftermath of the bomb, or, as for example in the artificial social gathering at the houseparty in the Swiss hotel, are, despite attempts to reinforce them, in the process of being deconstructed in the countdown towards death. Triolet appears to be saying that it is your basic humanity which gives you the right to attempt to survive, not who you were in the old life which no longer exists and thus a new humility is born, in that all the survivors are powerless, thus effectively in the subordinate (female) position of old.

This is, moreover, a novel about relationships, about helping one another, female and male solidarity and friendship between generations, nationalities, races and even potential enemies. It is also an exposé on authorial creativity. If: "creativity provides an important source of self-discovery and self-creation"[801], through the mise-en-abyme stories within the novel, we can see Triolet, faced with her own mortality, working through her ideas of temporality, the future and ageing. Although their construction can seem confusing, they are a useful adjunct to the main body of the novel, which, despite its doomsday scenario and the inevitable death of the heroine, is ultimately hopeful about the future of the human race.

Although ostensibly having nothing to do with the midlife years, I decided to include *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* to emphasise the point that, after all: "aging only has meaning in the context of death"[802]. It is a beautifully written, gentle novel, and after the brutality, vis-à-vis ageing, of *Mille regrets* and *Le Cheval*

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[798] The "bog girl" from Yde, 1st century, whose body was on show in an exhibition entitled "The Mysterious Bog People" at the Museum of Science & Industry in Manchester in early 2005 was described in an interview on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour on 27 April 2005 as: "having her own identity back" after Professor Richard Neave of Manchester University carried out facial reconstruction in 1992, nearly a hundred years after her body was found.

[799] Even if one's face is taken as one's identity, and faces show the most visible signs of ageing, bodies obviously age as well.

[800] Segal, Naomi, *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French récit*, Manchester: Manchester University Press (1988), p.202.

[801] Wyatt-Brown, Anne, M., 'Introduction: Aging, Gender, and Creativity' in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, ed. by Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. & Rossen, Janice, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1993), p.3.

[802] Onyx, Jenny, 'Reflections on Death/A Celebration of Aging' in *Revisioning Aging: Empowerment of Older Women*, ed. by Onyx, Jenny, Leonard, Rosemary & Reed, Rosslyn, New York: Peter Lang (1999), p.219.

roux, it seemed appropriate to conclude that particular chapter with this calm acceptance of the end of a life. In addition, with its heavy emphasis on memories through dreams, it also demonstrates the ability of writing to serve as reminiscence, a feature generally attributed to start around middle age, going on into deep old age. As the narrator of *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* drifts in and out of sleep, she finds her reality in her dreams and reminiscences rather than in the dinner party she is attending. The other guests are shadowy entities, whereas the persons who people her dreams have substance. Dreams are, of course, not memories, inasmuch as remembering is a conscious act, and dreaming is an unconscious one, yet it is generally agreed, first suggested by Freud[803], that dreams must be based on memories. The importance of the dreams to the narrator of *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube*: "has to do with a sense that the meaning of death is to do with the meaning of one's life"[804]. The narrator needs to remember key episodes of her life, to see where they fit into the great scheme, before being able to give herself permission to pass on.

Although reminiscences in *Le Rossignol se tait à l'aube* serve to soothe the protagonist's path towards a peaceful death, they can also be seen as generative and restorative in the recalling of familiar past events[805] and that is certainly the case with the reminiscences of Ramatoulaye and Rosélie, where recall of the familiar past is a comfort, enabling them to move on in life. This 'comfort' aspect of reminiscences is even more pertinent in *Le Cheval roux* when, listening to her young companions recalling the past, Triolet realises that: "leurs paroles reconstruisaient autour de moi le monde défunt. Il en devenait presque palpable" (CR. p.295) and her own story-telling becomes a key factor in keeping up their spirits: "– Merci, Elsa, dit Michel à voix basse. On va y penser, y rêver. – Ça aide, dit Camille" (CR. p.308), thus proving the value of: "reminiscence as a mood that binds people together"[806].

Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* is one of the success stories of its era. Propelled into the international forum by winning the Noma prize, it is a remarkable short novel which lends itself to a multitude of interpretations. Reading it as a rite of passage novel allows us to see Ramatoulaye undergoing a ritual in her midlife years which is more commonly associated with young people, but which perfectly meets the demands of her circumstances, covering the period of separation in a liminal place, marked by symbolic and physical stripping, followed by the period of liminality which Ramatoulaye uses profitably to reassess her life through writing to Aïssatou, and finally, the start of reintegration into a new life. Although it appears initially that Aïssatou was braver than Ramatoulaye when she chose to escape to the new world, there is a subtle condemnation of her behaviour in the way Bâ gently mocks her modernity and approves of Ramatoulaye's faith in the traditional ways, and, in fact, both women were silent in their moments of crisis: Aïssatou left her husband without a word, leaving just a letter, and in her passivity, Ramatoulaye

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[803] Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated from the German *Die Traumdeutung* by James Strachey, ed. by James Strachey, assisted by Alan Tyson, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1976).
[804] Onyx, Jenny, 'Reflections on Death/A Celebration of Aging' in *Revisioning Aging: Empowerment of Older Women*, ed. by Onyx, Jenny, Leonard, Rosemary & Reed, Rosslyn, New York: Peter Lang (1999), p.226.
[805] Woodward, Kathleen, 'Telling Stories', Doreen B. Townsend Center Occasional Papers, 9 (1997), p.3.
[806] ibid., p.1.

withheld both language and action[807] until after Modou's death, thus: "recounting her story is the final step in her will to break the *silence*"[808].

Wills points out that women in postcolonial Senegal are finding that, in the modern situation of aggressive economic violence, the traditional system of compensatory status guarantees them neither the respect of their husbands, nor food for their family, nor schooling for the children, nor any of the other material supports their silence would have earned them in earlier times[809]. Silence is, therefore, no longer golden and women must learn to speak out, since to be invisible and unheard means that one has zero impact on society. As a former school teacher, Bâ knew the value of leading by example. A close reading of the novel also reveals fissures in the assumed sisterhood of women, supposedly united against patriarchal domination, together with differences according to class, something to which Bâ herself was not immune. Yet ultimately, the novel is an affirmation of life's possibilities and the importance of the choices that one makes. Ramatoulaye can also be considered a role model as, courtesy of her soon-to-be-born first grandchild, she moves into the traditional grandmother role considered appropriate for a woman of her age and status, yet manages to integrate certain features of modern-day life and acceptance of different standards of behaviour and a new morality. There are also hints in the text that she may reactivate her youthful interest in politics, thus blending modernity and tradition in her later life – a construction of mature womanhood which would disrupt the cultural norm of the times.

If Bâ preaches empowerment for women via Ramatoulaye's trials and tribulations, Condé's Rosélie vacillates her way to gaining control of her life. The novel is the story of a search for identity, since Rosélie has passed through life as the invisible woman with a black skin but a colourless personality. Locating the novel in South Africa is a master-stroke, since this is the ultimate racial stewpot, constantly simmering but somehow, against all the odds, starting to coalesce into its own unique identity. This is where Rosélie finally realises that home, the opposite of exile, lies within herself and that feeling a stranger in Guadeloupe, New York, South Africa or England is missing the point. She is not seeking a physical place where she can be happy; happiness comes from within and once she has recognised this, she can put down roots anywhere. Discovering this coincides with finally understanding, at the age of fifty, that she does not have to conform to other people's expectations, or even her own, as, after a lifetime of dependence on men, she confounds herself with her refusal of a relationship with Manuel at the end of

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[807] Wills, Dorothy Davis, 'Economic Violence in Postcolonial Senegal: Noisy Silence in Novels by Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall' in *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*, ed. by Lashgari, Deirdre, London: University Press of Virginia (1995), p.162.
[808] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi, 'Calixthe Beyala's "femme-fillette": Womanhood and the Politics of (M)Othering' in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Nnaemeka, Obioma, London: Routledge (1997), p.108.
[809] Wills, Dorothy Davis, 'Economic Violence in Postcolonial Senegal: Noisy Silence in Novels by Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall' in *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*, ed. by Lashgari, Deirdre, London: University Press of Virginia (1995), p.162.

the novel. As Condé herself said[810]: "le livre se termine sur une aventure qu'elle refuse, parce qu'elle ne veut plus jouer le jeu de la séduction", although there is a hint in the text that this may be just a postponement of a relationship, thus celebrating the fact that, aged fifty, Rosélie is a fully functioning sexual woman, the only woman in all the novels under review to admit to a sex life. The conclusion of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* proves the truth of the observation that this type of literature confirms that: "women are very much living in the present and pursuing new goals and self-realization"[811] and the fact that Rosélie is middle-aged makes that even more uplifting.

With regard to future research in this field, I consider that some of the current generation of French writers who have already achieved critical acclaim offer tantalising possibilities for extending this line of enquiry. Interesting work has already been carried out on Marie Redonnet's triptych of novels (*Splendid Hôtel*, *Forever Valley* and *Rose Mélie Rose*) whose world has been aptly described as: "Beckettian in the sense that everything in it is breaking down, dying, withering away"[812]. Jordan Stump who translated the triptych described the unnamed (again) narrator of *Splendid Hôtel* as "eternally menopausal"[813], whose disintegrating hotel sinking into the advancing, fetid swamp can be read as a metaphor for the narrator who suddenly realises: "je ne suis plus toute jeune"[814] as she, and her two elder sisters, age as rapidly as the dilapidated hotel. Indeed, there are similarities here with Marguerite Duras's *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* where, unnamed yet again, "la mère", "une vieille cinglée", repeatedly tries and fails to hold back the invading waters from devouring her concession, and, by extension, her life.

I feel that Chantal Chawaf's work could also prove rewarding with regard to ageing, in particular her novels *Issa*, *Landes* and *Le Manteau noir* whose protagonists are all older women in search of their past, and I await with much interest some literary acknowledgement of this stage of Annie Ernaux's own life (although, of course, age and even the menopause have appeared in her work via her numerous and varied representations of her mother; for example, in *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, she wrote: "elle est ma vieillesse et je sens en moi menacer la dégradation de son corps, ses rides sur les jambes, son cou froissé..."[815]). For a writer who once said: "quant au corps féminin, dans sa spécificité (règles, jouissance), j'ai consciemment voulu en parler dans *Les armoires vides*, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, *La femme gelée*"[816], and who has written so eloquently on abortion, childbirth, bringing up children, inequality in marriage, sex, passion and death, she is surely missing an opportunity to write on the

[810] Personal email dated 4 April 2005.
[811] Baum, Roselie Murphy, 'Work, Contentment, and Identity in Aging Women in Literature' in *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, ed. by Deats, Sara Munson & Lenker, Lagretta Tallent, Westport CT: Praeger (1999), p.92.
[812] Fallaize, Elizabeth, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (1993), p.24.
[813] Redonnet, Marie, *Hôtel Splendid*, translated by Jordan Stump, University of Nebraska Press (1994), p. vii
[814] Redonnet, Marie, *Splendid Hôtel*, Paris: Minuit (1986), p.28.
[815] Ernaux, Annie, «*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*», Paris: Gallimard (1997), p.36.
[816] Boehringer, Monika, 'Entretien avec Annie Ernaux' in *Dalhousie French Studies*, 47, Summer 1999, p.165.

menopause and a woman's midlife years, although she believes, apparently, that *La femme gelée* deals with problems of midlife, even though the narrator is only in her late twenties at the end of the novel.

I also feel that the acclaimed work of the young Belgian writer Amélie Nothomb would prove rewarding if read through the filter of ageing, inasmuch as there is frequently a: "failure to achieve womanhood"[817] for her heroines. Anorexia nervosa eventually leads to the cessation of the menses, thus maintaining an eternally pre-pubescent body, and this is a topic she explores in *Robert des noms propres*[818] and also her latest book, interestingly not described as a novel, *Biographie de la faim*.[819]

Finally, there is, of course, the burgeoning field of gay bodies lacking role models in literature. Ageing for gay men is seen as particularly devastating for relationships. As early as their late twenties they start to fear they will be passed over for younger bodies, to which can be added the premature ageing caused by AIDS, where time is accelerated[820] as Hervé Guibert wrote so memorably: "l'étonnement et la douleur, la rage et la tristesse d'un homme de trente-cinq ans dans lequel s'est greffé le corps d'un vieillard"[821].

However, whilst the ageing body in literature is coming out of the shadows, there is a distinct lack of any reference to cognitive decline in ageing. An interesting study is currently in progress at Cambridge University where a team of scientists have been studying the scans, the preserved brain sections and clinical case notes of Iris Murdoch, together with her novels. The study was provoked by a newspaper article claiming that the famous author, winner of the Booker prize in 1978 for *The Sea, the Sea*, suffered writer's block after her last novel, *Jackson's Dilemma*, published in 1995 four years before her death, had received poor reviews. Tests analysing word frequency, word length, familiar words as opposed to less-used ones and the imageability of words, syntax and verb structure all reveal that the final stages of Alzheimer's disease were clearly taking its toll on Murdoch's writing ability whilst she was working on her last book, resulting in a more restricted vocabulary and greater repetition of words. Encouragingly, however, the scientists do believe there is the chance that an intellect of exceptional pre-morbid quality, and a lifetime's engagement with intellectual work, may either protect against cognitive deterioration or enable it to be masked. I have quoted here at length from an article published in May 2005, which concluded with a quote from *Jackson's Dilemma*, where Murdoch writes her illness into her

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[817] Fallaize, Elizabeth, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (1993), p.161.
[818] Nothomb, Amélie, *Robert des noms propres*, Paris: Livre de poche (2004).
[819] Nothomb, Amélie, *Biographie de la faim*, Paris: Albin Michel (2004).
[820] One must be careful with how one approaches accelerated ageing. There is an extremely rare genetic disease (currently only circa forty known cases in the world today) called Hutchinson Gilford Progeria Syndrome that accelerates the ageing process to about seven times the normal rate, thus a child of seven has the body of a fifty year old, and children rarely live beyond their early teenage years. The mutant gene causing this disease has recently been identified, although no cure exists for those who suffer from it. It has come to the general public's attention in Great Britain as a result of a follow-up Channel 5 television programme on 9 May 2005 on seven year old Hayley Okines: "The Child who's older than her Grandmother".
[821] Guibert, Hervé, *Le protocole compassionnel*, Paris: Gallimard (1991). Back cover.

book as her main character says: "my power has left me, will it ever return, will the indications return? Have I simply come to the end of my task? At the end of what is necessary, I have come to a place where there is no road"[822]. This is a fascinating study which opens the door to representations in literature on the effects of ageing on the mind.

In conclusion, even if, in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, Rosélie goes boldly into the future aged fifty, there is no denying that, whether culturally formed or not, ageing has negative connotations, leading as it inevitably does towards thoughts of mortality. Successful ageing[823] is therefore in some ways an oxymoron, yet by embracing a negative concept in a positive manner, it seeks to redefine ageing for the twenty-first century and literature has a role to play in communicating that concept. Successful ageing is realism, accepting that ageing is a fact of life. The key factor is how we choose to age. These novels show that life, and ageing, are about choices, accepting that you can shape your life depending on the choices you make, which in turn means accepting responsibility for your life, taking control. Whilst this is also a feature of other age groups, it has particular resonance for those in midlife, when socio-cultural factors specific to that age-group come into force. I believe, and I hope I have demonstrated by reading these novels through the filter of ageing, that it has even more resonance for women in midlife, when consciously, or sub-consciously, and courtesy of the uniqueness of the female body, they undergo such a significant period of transition.

[822] Cornwell, John, 'Lessons from a Tragedy', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, May 15, 2005.
[823] Coincidentally, the title of the Tizard Lecture given by Professor G Clare Wenger on 23 May 2003 at the University of Kent as part of the Open Lecture Series.

APPENDIX A

Population growth rates for Senegal 1950-2050[824]

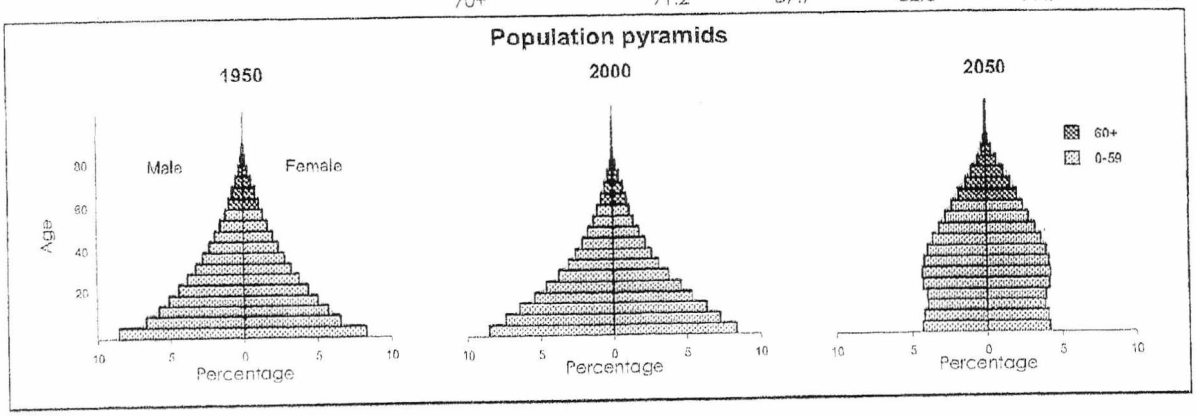
World Population Ageing 1950-2050

Senegal

Indicator	Age	1950	1975	2000	2025	2050
Population (thousands)						
Total	Total	2 499.7	4 805.8	9 420.5	16 510.8	22 711.3
	0 - 14	1 039.6	2 154.2	4 175.8	5 920.4	5 536.6
	15 - 59	1 322.6	2 426.4	4 848.8	9 675.1	14 683.6
	60 - 64	51.5	89.1	160.4	354.9	878.6
	65 - 69	39.2	63.7	116.6	261.5	666.7
	70 - 74	26.1	40.6	73.1	170.2	477.2
	75 - 79	13.9	21.5	33.7	86.6	282.9
	80 - 84			10.1	33.0	132.2
	85 - 89			1.9	7.9	43.7
	90 - 94	6.8	10.3	0.2	1.0	8.9
	95 - 99			0.0	0.1	1.0
	100+			0.0	0.0	0.1
Female	Total	1 249.2	2 406.0	4 723.5	8 282.5	11 431.0
	0 - 14	513.3	1 072.7	2 067.6	2 925.0	2 737.0
	15 - 59	662.2	1 212.9	2 437.8	4 852.4	7 350.6
	60 - 64	27.2	46.7	85.9	189.0	458.2
	65 - 69	21.1	34.0	65.1	144.3	356.1
	70 - 74	13.9	22.0	41.7	97.2	262.2
	75 - 79	7.6	11.9	18.8	50.0	159.3
	80 - 84			5.4	19.3	76.1
	85 - 89			1.0	4.6	25.6
	90 - 94	3.9	5.9	0.1	0.6	5.3
	95 - 99			0.0	0.1	0.6
	100+			0.0	0.0	0.0
Male	Total	1 250.5	2 399.8	4 697.0	8 228.3	11 280.3
	0 - 14	526.3	1 081.5	2 108.2	2 995.4	2 799.6
	15 - 59	660.4	1 213.6	2 411.1	4 822.8	7 333.0
	60 - 64	24.3	42.4	74.4	166.0	420.4
	65 - 69	18.1	29.7	51.5	117.2	310.6
	70 - 74	12.2	18.6	31.5	73.0	215.0
	75 - 79	6.3	9.6	14.9	36.6	123.6
	80 - 84			4.6	13.7	56.1
	85 - 89			0.9	3.3	18.1
	90 - 94	2.9	4.4	0.1	0.4	3.5
	95 - 99			0.0	0.0	0.4
	100+			0.0	0.0	0.0
Percentage in older ages						
Total	60+	5.5	4.7	4.2	5.5	11.0
	65+	3.4	2.8	2.5	3.4	7.1
	80+	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.8
Female	60+	5.9	5.0	4.6	6.1	11.8
	65+	3.7	3.1	2.8	3.8	7.7
	80+	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.9
Male	60+	5.1	4.4	3.8	5.0	10.2
	65+	3.2	2.6	2.2	3.0	6.4
	80+	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.7
Ageing index		13.2	10.5	9.5	15.5	45.0
Broad age groups (percentage)	0 - 14	41.6	44.8	44.3	35.9	24.4
	15 - 59	52.9	50.5	51.5	58.6	64.7
	60+	5.5	4.7	4.2	5.5	11.0
Median age (years)		19.2	17.5	17.6	21.9	30.6
Dependency ratio	Total	81.9	91.0	88.1	64.6	45.9
	Youth	75.7	85.6	83.4	59.0	35.6
	Old Age	6.3	5.4	4.7	5.6	10.4
Potential support ratio		16.0	18.5	21.3	17.9	9.7
Parent support ratio		0.5	0.6	0.3	0.6	1.7
Sex ratio (per 100 women)	60+	86.5	86.9	81.5	81.2	85.4
	65+	84.8	84.5	78.3	77.2	82.2
	80+	75.8	73.8	85.8	70.9	72.5

Senegal

Indicator	Age	1950-1955	1975-1980	2000-2005	2025-2030	2045-2050
Growth rate (percentage)	Total	2.3	2.8	2.5	1.6	1.1
	60+	1.0	2.7	2.5	3.9	3.9
	65+	1.0	2.8	2.7	4.2	4.2
	80+	1.5	3.3	3.1	5.8	5.4
Total fertility rate (per woman)		6.7	7.0	5.1	2.8	2.1
Life expectancy (years)						
Total	Birth	36.5	44.1	54.3	64.7	71.6
	60	..	..	13.5	16.2	18.3
	65	..	..	10.3	12.6	14.5
	80	..	..	3.4	4.8	5.8
Female	Birth	37.5	46.3	56.2	66.5	73.8
	60	..	..	14.4	17.0	19.2
	65	..	..	10.8	13.1	15.1
	80	..	..	3.4	4.8	5.9
Male	Birth	35.5	41.8	52.5	62.8	69.5
	60	..	..	12.6	15.4	17.4
	65	..	..	9.7	12.1	13.8
	80	..	..	3.5	4.8	5.7
Survival rate (percentage)						
Total	60	..	..	56.3	72.9	83.4
	65	..	..	48.4	65.9	77.6
	80	..	..	11.0	24.3	36.9
Female	60	..	..	60.7	76.5	87.1
	65	..	..	54.2	70.8	82.4
	80	..	..	13.2	27.7	41.8
Male	60	..	..	52.0	69.3	79.9
	65	..	..	42.8	61.1	72.8
	80	..	..	8.8	20.9	32.0
		1950	1970	1990	2000	2010
Labour force participation (percentage)						
Total	65+	54.0	52.6	42.5	40.5	38.7
Female	65+	29.1	28.5	27.9	27.6	27.3
Male	65+	83.2	81.1	59.3	55.2	51.6
		1980	1990	2000	2005	2010
Illiteracy rate (percentage)						
Total	60 - 64	93.6	90.5	86.9	85.1	80.3
	65 - 69	94.9	92.3	89.2	87.3	85.6
	70+	96.0	93.8	91.2	89.6	87.6
Female	60 - 64	99.0	97.7	95.4	94.0	90.1
	65 - 69	99.5	98.4	96.5	95.4	94.0
	70+	99.9	99.0	97.7	96.5	95.4
Male	60 - 64	87.7	82.8	77.1	74.9	69.0
	65 - 69	89.6	85.4	79.9	77.1	74.9
	70+	91.2	87.7	82.8	79.9	77.1



[824] The Population Division, DESA, United Nations: World Population Ageing 1950-2050, http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/pdf/178seneg.pdf

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APPENDIX B

Jaques's speech from *As you like it*

Jaques

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel,
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Shakespeare, William, *As You like It*, Act II, Scene VII, v.140-166. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by Craig, W. J., London: Henry Pordes (1987).

APPENDIX C

Florence's views on the menopause

Views of Florence Dunywa of the Xhosa tribe, aged forty-seven, mother of three children, who has lived in Johannesburg, South Africa as a maid for eighteen years with the same family, regarding her attitude and expectations concerning menstruation and the menopause:

Menstruation

During the years that women menstruate, it is very inconvenient in their culture as menstruation has to be kept 'secret' from the men, who are not allowed to be aware that it is happening, nor see any evidence, such as sanitary towels.

Menopause

Florence does not believe she is menopausal yet. On the one hand, she is looking forward to being relieved of the monthly inconvenience, but on the other hand, she is anticipating her health to deteriorate and her normal aches and pains to become much worse.

She believes that her health will deteriorate because she thinks that the body is somehow cleansed by shedding blood each month. She knows that pregnant women have a lot of medical complaints and she believes this is because they have stopped bleeding, causing all the 'bad stuff' to accumulate inside the body. Elderly women, too, have all sorts of physical things go wrong for the same reason.

Florence is fairly ignorant regarding the physical changes she can expect to experience around the menopause. She does not have any friends who are older than her, and her mother and her aunts never mentioned anything about their 'change of life', so no one has ever spoken to her about it before this interview.

She regularly has bad headaches and it was only when asked whether they always occurred just before her period, that she realised that the two events could be connected. She also gets hot flushes, but says that these are as a result of her high blood pressure (for which she is on heavy medication), and she did not realise that night sweats and hot flushes could be related to the menopause.

Florence's blood pressure is a problem. She is very overweight, circa 120 kg., but steadfastly resists the doctor's advice to lose some weight and take some aerobic exercise. She says she has 'common teeth'

which cannot bite foodstuffs like salad, and her knees are too sore to walk to the shops. Interestingly, she has no problem in grinding up chicken bones with those same teeth, and swallowing them, nor did she have a problem chewing on stones from the garden when she was pregnant.

Whereas a Western woman believes these days that the menopause is something that we can manage and deal with in a positive way, Florence's attitude is one of resignation, based on ignorance and apathy.

It is difficult to educate Florence on this subject, as her understanding of how the body works is very primitive, and she has no comprehension, for instance, of what hormones are, or how they may be involved. Any attempt at an explanation tends to be met with deep suspicion and often total disbelief.

Interview carried out on my behalf by Val Child in Johannesburg, 1 August 2004.

APPENDIX D

The historic female body

With regard to practical knowledge of the physical body, Katz reports that the first dissections were performed on women's bodies in 1315[825], yet:

> from antiquity until the Enlightenment, no fundamental difference between the male and the female body was acknowledged. The male body was used as the model for the human body, and the only difference between the two was that the female genitalia were turned inside into the body. Except for this difference (inside-outside), the female genitalia were considered to be essentially the same as the male genitalia. Even the terminology was the same for the female and the male organs, and special terms for female reproductive organs did not exist. Women were presented as inverted, and hence less perfect, men[826].

This theory of female imperfection can be dated to Galen, who agreed that Aristotle was right in thinking that the female is less perfect than the male, writing: "for one principal reason – because she is colder", giving as his second reason the 'layout' of a woman's body:

> All the parts, then, that men have, women have too, the difference between them lying in only one thing [...] that in women the parts are within [the body], whereas in men they are outside [...]. Consider first whichever ones you please, turn outward the woman's, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's, and you will find them the same in both in every respect"[827].

"According to Laqueur[828], *difference* [between the male and female body] was acknowledged, but it was accorded to gender and not to sex. [...]. There was, accordingly, a gendered social self, but only one body or one flesh. In other words, one acknowledged two genders but only one sex"[829].

Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus (1825BC) is the first known gynaecological text still in existence, followed by the *Edwin Smith Papyrus* (c.1600BC), an ancient textbook on surgery, and *Eber's Papyrus* (1534BC), which included treatments for the 'wandering womb', which, at that time, was portrayed as an

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[825] Katz, Stephen, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia (1996), p.33.
[826] Lie, Merete, 'Science as Father? Sex and Gender in the Age of Reproductive Technologies' in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:4, November 2002, pp.386-387.
[827] Galen, Claudius, 'The Fourteenth Book of Galen: The Reproductive Tract' in *Galen and the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, translated from the Greek by Margaret Tallmadge May., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1968), p.628.
[828] Laqueur, Thomas, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (1990).
[829] Lie, Merete, 'Science as Father? Sex and Gender in the Age of Reproductive Technologies' in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:4, November 2002, p.387.

independent animal (usually a tortoise, newt or crocodile), capable of movement within the female body, and women's illnesses were thus often attributed to the fact of the unconstrained, uncontrollable movement of this animal. This theory was widely accepted until the writings of Soranus of Ephesus (98-138AD), a Greek doctor practising in Rome, whose text in four volumes, *Gynecology*, provided the foundation for gynaecological writings until the seventeenth century, and exists today, first translated into modern Greek, and recently into English[830]. He mentioned the menopause, performed hysterectomies and rejected the theory of the wandering womb.

It was, however, not until 1543 that Vesalius published the first accurate drawing of the entire female genital tract. Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), a Belgian who studied first in Paris and then in Italy, revolutionised the medical world with the publication of his seven volume *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (On the Structure of the Human Body) in 1543, which, although it included a drawing of a dissected female with a dissected uterus, was otherwise restricted to non-sexualised drawings of the human skeleton. His work disproved much of Galen's work, showing that Galen, for religious reasons, had been restricted to carrying out dissection of animals, in the main Barbary Apes, then believed to be the closest relation to man. It was, however, a pupil of Vesalius's, Matteo Realdo Colombo (c.1516-1559) who made the claim, widely disputed, to have discovered the clitoris, and Gabriele Fallopio (1523-1562) who identified the Fallopian tubes, although not their purpose.

It was not until the eighteenth century that the body changed from a one sex to two sex model with drawings of the female skeleton surfacing in Europe between 1730 and 1790, and also in India at the same time (Muhammad Arzani, a renowned Sufi physician produced drawings of pregnant women) and the search was on for the organ of the body, particularly of the female body, which contained the essence of sex, or, rather, the essence of femininity, although it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that scientists decided that sex was located in the hormonal system, rather than in a specific organ[831].

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[830] Soranus of Ephesus, *Soranus's Gynecology*, translated by Owsei Temkin, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins (1956).
[831] Lie, Merete, 'Science as Father? Sex and Gender in the Age of Reproductive Technologies' in *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:4, November 2002, p.387.

APPENDIX E

La lettre d'Elsa Triolet[832]

Il n'est pas facile de te parler. Tu sembles oublier que nous vivons l'épilogue de notre vie, qu'ensuite il n'y aura plus rien à dire et que l'index lui-même d'autres le liront – pas nous.

Je te reproche de vivre depuis trente-cinq ans comme si tu avais à courir pour éteindre un feu. Dans ta course, il ne faut surtout pas te déranger, ni te devancer, ni t'emboîter le pas, ni te suivre – quel que soit l'ouvrage – aussi bien couper des branches sèches, il ne faut surtout pas s'aviser de faire quoi que ce soit *avec* toi, *ensemble*. Cette dernière entreprise est bien ce que j'ai vécu de plus affreusement triste. Tu es là à trembler devant mes initiatives, jamais tu ne discutes, tu ne fais que crier ou tu "prends sur toi". Le plaisir normal de faire quelque chose *ensemble*, tu ne le connais pas. Un mot anodin à ce sujet et tu te mets à m'expliquer la montagne de choses que tu as à faire. Comme au téléphone, tu racontes toutes tes activités, à n'importe qui, pour expliquer que tu ne peux pas voir ce quelqu'un juste maintenant. En somme, rien de changé depuis l'exposition anti-coloniale[833].

Pourtant, il serait peut-être aussi urgent de parfois nous rencontrer. Il nous reste extrêmement peu de temps, et tu le sais mieux que quiconque. Mon Dieu, ce que la sérénité me manque, toute une vie comme dans la voiture où je ne peux jamais te dire "regard!" puisque toujours tu lis ou tu écris, et qu'il ne faut pas te déranger. J'étouffe de toutes les choses pas dites, sans importance, mais qui auraient rendu la vie simple, sans interdits. Avoir constamment à tourner la langue sept fois avant d'oser dire quelque chose, de peur de provoquer un cyclone – et lorsque cela m'échappe, cela ne rate jamais! J'y ai droit.

Pourquoi je te le dis? Pour rien. Comme on crie, bien que cela ne soulage pas. La solitude n'est pas le grand thème de mes livres, elle l'est – de ma vie. J'y suis habituée, je m'y plais après tout. À l'heure qu'il est, le contraire me dérangerait. Ce que je veux? Rien. Le dire. Que tu t'en rendes compte. Mais j'ai déjà essayé, je sais que c'est impossible. Et si tu me dis encore une fois combien juste maintenant tu tiens tout à bout de bras – je casse tout dans la maison! Je ne mendie pas, rien, ni ton temps, ni ton assistance, ce que je ne supporte pas c'est la manière dont tu te tiens sur la défensive, les barbelés et les fossés. Ma peine te dérange, il ne faut pas que j'aie mal juste quand tu as tant à faire. Moi aussi je prends sur moi, et même je ne fais que cela. À en éclater, à sauter au plafond. Même ma mort, c'est à toi que cela arriverait.

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[832] Found in Aragon's effects by Michel Apel-Muller and published in 1994: Apel-Muller, Michel, 'Les jambages bleus du malheur' in *Recherches croisées Aragon/Elsa Triolet*, 5, Paris: Les Belles lettres (1994), pp.27-28.

[833] In 1931, that is, in their early years together.

Et puis – zut! Je suppose que quand on n'a pas de larmes, il vous faut une autre soupape. Alors mettons que ce que je ressens soit pathologique, et consolons-nous avec ça. Autrement tu vas encore me sortir que "tu as encore commis un péché" … Et si c'était vrai? Un péché contre un semblant de bonheur. Je te rappelle seulement l'heure: nous en sommes à moins cinq. Ne me dis pas à moins six et demi, parce que c'est la même chose.

APPENDIX F

Maryse Condé – Biography

Born: Maryse Boucoulon to Auguste Boucolon and Jeanne Boucolon (née Quidal) on 11 February 1937, youngest of eight children, in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadaloupe. She also had two step-brothers from her father's first marriage.

Married: Mamadou Condé in August 1959, a Guinean actor (divorced in 1981); four children - a son, Denis (d); three daughters – Sylvie, Aicha and Leila from first marriage.
Met Richard Philcox in 1969 in Kaolack at the Lycée Gaston Berger in Senegal and married him in 1982.

Education: She gained a *mention* in her *baccalauréat* and was given a quarter scholarship to study in France. In 1953, aged sixteen, she travelled to Paris to study at the Lycée Fénelon (from which she was expelled after two years) and then attended the Sorbonne. She gained her licence in English and a demi-licence in Classics at the University of Paris III, (Sorbonne Nouvelle).
In 1976, she graduated *docteur ès lettres* in Comparative Literature, with a thesis entitled '*Stéréotypes du noirs dans la littérature antillaise: Guadeloupe et Martinique*'.

Professional Career:

1959-1960	taught in Bingerville, Ivory Coast.
1960-1964	taught at the École Normale Supérieure, Conakry, Guinea.
1964-1966	taught at the Ghana Institute of Languages, Accra, Ghana.
1964-1968	taught at the Lycée Charles de Gaulle, Saint Louis, Senegal.
1968-1970	programme producer at the BBC, London, UK.
1970-1972	assistant at University of Paris VII, Jussieu.
1972-1980	lecturer at University of Paris X, Nanterre.
1979	taught for one semester at the University of California at Santa Barbara.
1980-1985	programme producer at Radio France International and France Culture.
1980-1985	chargé de cours at University of Paris III, Sorbonne.
[1984	bought a house in Montebello, Guadeloupe].
1985-1986	Fulbright Scholar at Occidental College, Los Angeles, USA.
[1986	Returned to live in Guadeloupe].
1990-1992	Tenured Professor of French, University of California, Berkeley.
1992-1995	Professor of French, University of Maryland, College Park.
1995-2002	Professor of French in the Department of French & Romance Philology, Columbia University. Retired from full-time teaching in December 2002.
1997-2002	Founder of the Center for French and Francophone Studies, Columbia University.

Major Awards:

1987	Guggenheim Fellowship.
1993	Puterbaugh Fellow at the 14th Puterbaugh Conference on Writers of the French-speaking and Hispanic World (the first woman fellow).

Visiting Lectureships:

1986	Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio Writer-in-Residence.
1989	California Institute of Technology.
1993-1995	University of Virginia
1994	Harvard University.

Major Prizes:	1986	Grand prix de la littérature de la Femme for *Moi, Tituba, sorcière, Noire de Salem.*
	1987	Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe for *Desirada.*
	1988	Prix Anaïs Ségalas de l'Académie française (bronze medal) for *La vie scélérate.*
	1988	Prix Liberatur (Germany) for *Ségou: les murailles de terre.*
	1999	Prix Marguerite Yourcenar for excellence in French writing by an author who lives permanently in the USA for *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer.*
	1999	Lifetime Achievement Award, New York University Africana Studies Program and Institute of African-American Affairs.
Other:	2001	Named Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government.
	2004	President of "Le comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage"[834] in France.

[834] The Committee was formed on 8 April 2004. "Il a pour objectif de suggérer [...] des programmes de recherche en histoire et dans les autres sciences humaines et proposer la date de la commémoration annuelle, en France métropolitaine, de l'abolition de l'esclavage, ainsi que l'identification de lieux de célébration et de mémoire sur l'ensemble du territoire national." The Commemoration will be called: "Journée des mémoires de la traite négrière, de l'esclavage et de leurs abolitions". The Committee has proposed the date of 10 May*, a decision which has to be ratified by the Prime Minister. Source accessed 7 July 2005: http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/information/actualites_20/esclavage_participer_constitution_une_52761.html
*Date of 10 May agreed and announced on 30 January 2006.

APPENDIX G

Caliban's last speech

Caliban: Il faut que tu comprennes, Prospero:
des années j'ai courbé la tête
des années j'ai accepté
[...]

Prospero, tu es un grand illusionniste:
le mensonge, ça te connaît.
Et tu m'as tellement menti,
menti sur le monde, menti sur moi-même,
que tu as fini par m'imposer
une image de moi-même:
Un sous-développé, comme tu dis,
un sous-capable,
voilà comment tu m'as obligé à me voir,
et cette image, je la hais! Et elle est fausse!
Mais maintenant, je te connais, vieux cancer,
et je me connais aussi!

Césaire, Aimé, *Une tempête d'après «la Tempête» de Shakespeare – adaptation pour un théâtre nègre*, Paris: Seuil (1969), pp.87-88.

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