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Alternative Methods of Stress Management in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter

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Abstract

In So Long a Letter Ramatoulaye's ordeal, and to a lesser extent Aissatou's, are indisputable and the subject of numerous studies. These childhood friends grow up to become pioneer professionals in post-independent Senegal. They marry two friends who also form part of the new elite, but they are both betrayed when their husbands, encouraged by Islam and culture, become polygamists. Aissatou divorces and relocates abroad. Ramatoulaye yields to societal pressure and stays married but is abandoned with her twelve children. Modou's sudden death, the funeral proceedings, the threat of bankruptcy and pressure to quickly remarry further harm Ramatoulaye's mental health. Confined to her house in the mourning period prescribed by Islam, Ramatoulaye is bent on avoiding Jacqeline's lot, that of a friend who suffered a nervous breakdown and challenged the diagnosis of depression until modern and traditional medicine failed to cure her. Some studies have highlighted religion, ecotherapy, and sisterhood among the coping strategies employed by Ramatoulaye, but none has analysed these alongside others under the Generalized Resistance Resources (GRRs) coined from the health promotion theory of salutogenesis. Some GRRs perceived as having contributed to Ramatoulaye's mental restoration include educational empowerment, economic independence, sisterly bonding, introspection and writing.

1. Introduction

So Long a Letter is a groundbreaking novel reputed for exploring the liberation and independence of the educated African woman in the postcolonial period. Critics like Ajayi (1997) and Bolat (2025) have outlined its role in developing an African feminist perspective. Alongside social, cultural and religious challenges, emotional strain is a recurrent theme in this *epistolary* novel. Ramatoulaye, the middle-aged narrator, and Aissatou, her childhood friend, both endure mental suffering in their quests for satisfying and purposeful lives in a patriarchal setting. In their journeys from young girls to wives, mothers and eventually, single women, they use strategies at their disposal for emotional balance and psychological restoration.

From an African cultural perspective, one can argue that Ramatoulaye brought some of her troubles on herself by marrying against her parents' wishes and in disrespect of cultural values. Gueye (2012) asserts that she viewed her culture as a liability following her Western education. Her failure to conform to the custom of dowry payment make her family feel that she will be disrespected in the marriage (Mutunda, 2007), and, indeed, Modou subsequently marries a second wife and abandons her. Aissatou likewise contracts a controversial marriage and suffers the same fate, for Mawdo too marries a second and much younger woman.

While Aissatou chooses to divorce, Ramatoulaye stays married, thus marking the transition to polygamy after twenty-five in a monogamous union. Her reasons include the moral and financial challenges of raising twelve children by herself and the fear of loneliness, and perhaps the fear of defying societal and cultural norms yet again, following her initial rebellion. Ajayi (1997) expounds on this, writing, "Once an independent free thinker who, as a young girl, defied restrictive traditions, Ramatou [Ramatoulaye] matures into an adult life of compromises. … She learns to 'choose' from what is expected of her in the very traditions she sets out as a teenager to challenge," (p. 41). Maintaining her belief of happiness in marriage, Ramatoulaye chooses the undignified solution to stay faithful to her first love. Mutunda (2007) adds that "the fear of not belonging, of going against the status-quo keeps Ramatoulaye quiet, caged in her bitterness and resentment," (p. 97).

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou fight for dignity and strive to overcome subjugation at the hands of their husbands who are encouraged by tradition and Islam, although the latter is nonetheless a source of solace for Ramatoulaye. The focus here is to dissect how these protagonists handle emotional struggles irrespective of their origins. This is informed by salutogenesis, a theory in health promotion developed by Aaron Antonovsky which posits that "life experiences help shape one's sense of coherence [SOC]… A strong sense of coherence helps one mobilise resources to cope with stressors and manage tension successfully," (Mittelmark & Bauer, 2017, p. 7). Despite the oppressive setting and circumstances, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou continue to manage their homes, bring up their children, and progress in their careers. This paper looks beyond religion and ecotherapy, re-examines sisterly bonding, and explores educational empowerment, economic independence, introspection and writing as Generalized Resistance Resources (GRRs) in stress management.

2. Literature Review

Ramatoulaye endures the mental trauma of loving a man who abandons her and their children and who later dies leaving her financially ruined. She cries out, "But my despair persists, but

my rancour remains, but the waves of an immense sadness break in me!" (Bâ, p. 6). The origin of her emotional turbulence is mainly the breakdown of her marriage, attributable to the prevalent culture of polygamy and patriarchal excesses. Solanke (2013) observes that Ramatoulaye makes and sticks with the choice to remain in the marriage, "to the chagrin of her loved ones, admirers and even her children: she finds solace in the religion that imposes polygamy on her!" (p. 334). Bolat (2025) adds that "Men keep a close eye on women's subjugation, which is represented in law, religion, family, and society at large," (p. 22).

While Ramatoulaye stays married, her childhood friend Aissatou would rather face stigmatisation from society for daring to divorce than spend another day with the man who promised her a lifetime of love and commitment: "I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had," (Bâ, p. 32). According to Ajayi (1997), although Ramatoulaye "identifies and analyzes the source and forms of her oppression, she does not make choices that rattle the system," (p. 43).

In addition to her emotional, financial, social, professional and parenting challenges, Ramatoulaye lives with the constant dilemma of reconciling her Western education with cultural values and Islamic precepts in a post-independent nation. Aggrieved and distressed, she is, however, determined to avoid Jacqueline's woes stemming from marital strife. The lot of Jacqueline is that of an Ivorian woman married to a Senegalese medic who becomes an open flirt. The chagrin provokes a nervous breakdown which leads to her admission to a mental health clinic. Even then, Jacqueline's prognosis remains poor, prompting her friends to turn to traditional medicine. Ramatoulaye asserts that they "tried everything to draw this sister out of her private hell," (ibid, p. 45) with little success since Jacqueline contemplates death. After countless procedures, some invasive, the doctors finally convince Jacqueline that her problem is depression. Ramatoulaye is thus bent on avoiding a similar fate and declares, "To overcome distress when it sits upon you demands strong will," (ibid, p. 42).

Ramatoulaye cites religion as a source of consolation, and membership in an association as promoting inner satisfaction and, therefore, an improved sense of well-being. Udi & Okiemute (2025) number among the few scholars who have researched alternative methods of stress management in Bâ's novel, and African literature in general. They assert that Ramatoulaye's memories of nature bring healing through ecotherapy and that her "childhood recollections serve as a refuge from present suffering," (p. 140). The healing role of sisterly bonding in the novel has been examined by Nnaemeka (1997), Dubek (2001), Cherekar (2014), Hudson-Weens (2019), and El Arbaoui (2023) among others. About this Bolat (2025) writes, "With the

intimate bond between these two African women, Ba [Bâ] actually promotes the concept of sisterhood, emphasizing that women are stronger when they embrace one another," (p. 32).

The body of work on Bâ's novel covers diverse themes, some which are relevant to this paper. Ramsay (1998), McElaney-Johnson (1999), Engelking, (2008), Shirin Edwin, (2009), Ogede (2011), and Gueye(2012) discuss writing and the format of the novel, while Nnaemeka (1990), Latha (2001), and Sehulster (2004) examine Ramatoulaye's inner search for herself. Cherekar (2014) views financial independence as a form of liberation for Bâ's female protagonists, and Jagne (2004) mentions the benefits of their education. This paper develops the above factors among resources favouring mental well-being under the theory of salutogenesis and the GRRs, which provide a broad scope to analyse how the protagonists manage stress in the absence of psychotherapy (modern or traditional).

3. Methodology

Mittelmark and Bauer (2017) broadly define salutogenesis (as opposed to pathogenesis) as "a scholarly *orientation* focusing attention on the study of the origins of health and assets for health, contra the origins of disease and risk factors" (p. 7) but then narrow down *orientation* to the practical concept of the sense of coherence (SOC) which is more concerned with "an individual's ability to engage resources to cope with stressors ... It is the life experience of bringing resources to bear on coping with stressors that shapes the sense of coherence," (ibid). The SOC, in turn, "helps a person mobilise generalized resistance resources and specific resistance resources in the face of psychosocial and physical stressors," (ibid, p. 10), which, the authors specify, may empower one to avoid, redefine, manage/overcome, or lessen the stressors, among the favourable outcomes.

The GRRs, coined by Antonovsky, comprise "the characteristics of a person, a group, or a community that facilitate the individual's abilities to cope effectively with stressors and contribute to the development of the individual's level of (SOC)," (Idan et al., 2017, p. 57). In the salutogenic model of health, a GRR is presented as providing one with "sets of meaningful, coherent life experiences" even though GRR sources can create stressors (ibid, p. 9). Bâ's novel is hinged on traditional and Islamic cultures, and this rouses interest in Mittelmark and Bauer's (2017) observation that, although neglected in research on salutogenesis, culture contributes to developing stressors but also resistance resources and in building a SOC, (p. 8). In a nutshell, GRRs enable one to cope with stressors, thus preventing the development of stress (Vinje et al, 2017).

The GRRs pertinent to this paper include: "(1) material resources (e.g., money), (2) knowledge and intelligence (e.g., knowing the real world and acquiring skills), (3) ego identity (e.g., integrated but flexible self), (4) coping strategies; (5) social support…" (Idan et al., 2017, p.57). Some of these five GRRs would be analysed in the context of Hudson-Ween's feminist theory of Africana Womanism. The discussion section will focus on the perceived role of these GRRs in enabling the protagonists to successfully manage the constant stressors and mental challenges in their lives.

4. Some GRRs perceived in the lives of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou

4.1. Educational empowerment (knowledge and intelligence)

"Knowing the real world and acquiring skills," (Idan et al., 2017, p. 57) applies aptly to Bâ's novel, which highlights aspects of home education (upbringing), informal oral education, koranic education, colonial and postcolonial secular education acquired in Senegal or abroad, and vocational education (craftsmanship). While some types are necessary in the holistic formation of a person, not all education empowers. A badly brought-up child is likely to contribute little to their community unless they are influenced by other forms of education. Empowering education in this context is that which is suited for the purpose or utilised to improve one's lot, such as Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's formal education or the skills of the goldsmiths.

In post-independent Senegal, only a few women received formal education (Engelking, 2008). Ramatoulaye describes herself and her mates as pioneers who nevertheless raised suspicions: "Men would call us scatter-brained. Others labelled us devils. But many wanted to possess us," (Bâ, 15). They were stigmatised for acquiring education and becoming career women, but they intrigued and attracted men. Even Aunt Nabou, who passes as the mouthpiece of the Senegalese society in minimising education for women, ensures that her niece she is grooming to marry Mawdo, becomes a midwife. Ramatoulaye frowns at the news that Binetou, her then unknown rival, wants to drop out of school to marry a "sugar daddy," this because her philosophy is that women "ought to be able to pursue [education] to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities," (ibid, p. 63). Considering the overall gains, and that she is a teacher herself, Ramatoulaye desires formal education for all women, and she questions the lawmaker Daouda Dieng: "When will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex but of talent?" (ibid, p. 64). Such feminist advocacy improves educational opportunities and career prospects for women.

Jagne (2004) argues that Ramatoulaye's education grants her only partial liberation due to the patriarchal nature of her society but concurs that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have the "privilege of choice" thanks to their Western education (p. 4). Solitude is another drawback of being an educated woman (Mutunda, 2007), and Aissatou's case is aggravated by her move to the West, after she rebelled against her family, religion and culture by divorcing. A challenging professional life is yet another downside of formal education as captured by Latha (2004):

> Despite being a strong proponent of secondary and tertiary education for women, Ramatoulaye does not hesitate to reveal the constraints which govern her own life as an educated, professional woman. She seems to regard her job as an economic necessity, as an extension of her duties as a traditional wife and mother. The fact that she is "first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working" … indicates that she believes she has chosen a difficult life for herself (p. 193).

This is consistent with the principles of salutogenesis, as she uses her universe of experiences and education to inform her decisions and state of mind.

4.2.Economic independence (material resources)

Golembieski (2017) quotes Antonovsky as listing among material resources "money, physical strength, shelter, clothing, adequate food, and the like," (p. 263). Although this paper is not pivoted on feminism, it is important to place economic independence in the context of the movements for women's empowerment. About her theory of Africana Womanism, Hudson-Weems (2019) writes:

> …because there are some Africana women who pride themselves on being economically independent – which was the way of life for Africana women long before the advent of feminism – and because one of the chief tenets of feminism in the larger society is that a woman is economically independent, many Africana women unthinkingly respond positively to the notion of being a feminist. To be sure, Africana women have always been, by necessity, independent and responsible co-workers and decision-makers (pp. 27-28).

Ramatoulaye enjoys and displays her material comfort: "Others … envied my comfort and purchasing power. They would go into raptures over the many 'gadgets' in my house: gas cooker, vegetable grater, sugar tongs. They forgot the source of this easy life: first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working," (Bâ, p. 21). Ramatoulaye, therefore, worries about

losing her possessions at her husband's death: "This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing …" (ibid, p. 4).

Ramatoulaye's fear is justified, and not simply because salutogenesis considers shelter as a material resource crucial for emotional wellness. Any career woman who knows the pains of being *first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working*, will be interested in assets she contributed to acquiring, especially when she now has the sole duty of providing for her family. Equally valid is her worry about debts left by a man who mortgaged their home to uplift his new bride and her family. Without her financial prowess, Ramatoulaye and her twelve children would have become homeless like Binetou who, in the liquidation of Modou's bankrupt estate, loses her villa and its contents to a financially empowered Daba (Ramatoulaye's daughter) and her husband.

Ramatoulaye's complaints about material resources at her husband's funeral can be frowned upon; however, pretence or indifference would have been more harmful to her mental health. Her ability to face a situation rather than shy away from it enables her to mobilise GRRs in the face of stressors.

4.3.Sisterly bonding (social support)

Idan et al. (2017) mention studies on salutogenesis which underline the healing impact of having people around during stressful situations, and, among forms of social support, they list emotional, material, informational or caregiving from one's social network.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are childhood friends growing up in the same village although from different ethnic groups (a Dahomey and a Malinke) and socio-economic backgrounds – Ramatoulaye comes from a large family in town and Aissatou is the daughter of a goldsmith. Central to their upbringing is the Islamic culture, and their friendship grows as they pursue education in a French school. Their sisterhood solidifies when these pioneer Senegalese professional women marry two middleclass intellectuals and friends who form the new elite. They are committed wives, and they juggle professional life, home keeping and motherhood to the satisfaction of the men at the centre of their lives. Only, they are both betrayed by these men who marry younger women.

"Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain" (Bâ, p. 1).

The third sentence in Bâ's classic evokes a survival technique applied by Ramatoulaye. The novel is rife with instances of both sisterly bonding and the victimisation of women by women. Bâ's portrayal of male characters, the main victimisers of women, has been criticised by some scholars. Ifejirika (2018) writes, "in Mariama Ba's [Bâ's] *So Long a Letter*, men are generally depicted as unfaithful husbands, irresponsible fathers, shameless womanizers or studs/he-goats, who go after any woman on [in] skirt. The men are seen as conscienceless victimizers who are grossly remorseless in their actions against women," (p. 4). Ifejirika's view that Bâ idealises female protagonists and diabolises their male counterparts is partial, for there are subtle references to the contrary, like when the *griot* woman reprimands Ramatoulaye for daring to refusing a suitor like Daouda Dieng and likewise when Ramatoulaye praises Mawdo for his handiness whenever the children are sick. Latha (2001) is more objective with her assertion that "Ramatoulaye does try to give a balanced perspective of her life by outlining the contrasts between the ideals that guide her and the societal practices which disempower her," (p. 24). She goes on to observe that while Ramatoulaye negatively portrays most men, she acknowledges to Aissatou that their husbands were "great men," and she also mentions positive role models like Daouda Dieng and her sons-in-law (ibid).

Considering again that the novel is presented as being semi-autobiographical, Bâ could not have invented everything about these male characters. Hudson-Weens (2019) mentions that the negative image feminism attributes to African men is in part due to Michelle Wallace's 1980 well-marketed book entitled *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman*, which was largely based on the author's negative experiences with men. That said, Gueye (2012) quotes sources who hold that Bâ's novel does not represent most Senegalese women's voices. While acknowledging that men are sometimes misrepresented, this paper examines how Ramatoulaye and Aissatou bear and overcome the emotional burden to emerge as confident and stable women.

Friendship with Aissatou prepares and fortifies Ramatoulaye to face her trials, which come three years after the former's divorce. The two middle-aged women empower each other in rebuilding their lives, supporting their families and forging a path for women in a post-colonial emerging nation. They maintain a strong bond despite their different perceptions and approaches to betrayal. Neither condemns the other's method. Rather, they display mutual respect and support (Cherekar, 2014). They offer each other the kind of social support advocated by salutogenesis.

4.4.Introspection (ego identity)

Jagne (2004) observes that the mourning period of "solitude, prayer and reflection" is only for widows and not widowers (p. 8). Four months and ten days in seclusion, for a busy professional and mother of twelve children, can be viewed either as a luxury or prison sentence. Denied the distraction from work, Ramatoulaye does not surrender to despair but uses the ample time to her advantage by embarking on self-discovery. Idan et al. (2017) associate such an intrapersonal move with the GRR of ego identity.

Ramatoulaye retreats into herself to search her being, aiming to examine her past to improve her present and future. McElaney-Johnson (1999) posits that Bâ's first paragraph is a call to "read the text both as an individual's search for self-understanding and as woman's written communication with a carefully selected confidant," (p. 111).

In a calm and composed manner, almost without tormenting herself, Ramatoulaye re-examines her past choices and ruminates on ways of addressing the conflicts frustrating her. Nnaemeka (1990) states that "It is the entire map of this inner landscape of 'heart-searchings' that I call the interior space. This space, which Ramatoulaye evokes by closing her eyes, is an internalized world inhabited by her 'souvenirs,'" (p. 3).

Ramatoulaye criticises the traditional/Muslim community which she, nonetheless, remains a part of despite having the choice to leave. The image of the imperfect but valuable place/person applies to herself. She internalises her pain and, from that space within, she analyses her life for flaws with a goal to emerge as a better person, one intent on living a meaningful and purposeful life. Understanding her predicament equally empowers her to avoid the confusion that often leads to indecision that aggravates distress. This approach is consistent with the salutogenic model, which advances that life experiences help shape one's SOC.

4.5.Writing (coping strategy)

In a study cited by Idan et al. (2017) "engaging in demanding activities" was the coping strategy with the strongest positive association with SOC (p. 63). Writing a *long letter* can be considered a mental and physical engaging activity. While seemingly a letter, the format of Bâ's novel has been debated by many critics. Whether an epistolary novel, a diary (Ramsay, 1998), a memoir (Gueye, 2012), or historical/personal experience (Ogede, 2011), Ramatoulaye's writing initially serves as a means of coping with the solitude imposed by Islam to mourn: "The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories

in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness," (Bâ, p. 9).

Although some critics like Gueye (2012) observe that Bâ's dedication of the novel, her views portrayed, and the use of annotations that would be redundant to Aissatou, reveal that Ramatoulaye's interlocutor is the Western audience from whom she hopes to garner sympathy, pertaining to the emotional well-being of the protagonist, Ramatoulaye writes to four persons.

Firstly, Ramatoulaye writes first to herself, to explore and manage her thoughts through the deeply personal medium of a diary. Ramsay (1998) states that "Ramatoulaye makes it clear at the beginning of the text that she is keeping a diary, engaging in a personal even intimate conversation as a means of coming to terms with her own painful experience by sharing it with others rather than listening to voices from outside," (p. 71).

Next, she writes a reply to Aissatou, her confidant. Developing his argument that Bâ's novel is more of a memorial to capture historical events, Ogede (2011) argues that Ramatoulaye is not writing to Aissatou, further proved by the fact that she does not mail the letter, since she is still writing on the eve of Aissatou's arrival for holidays. McElaney-Johnson (1999) states that the letter writer reaches out to another person. In that light, irrespective of what becomes of the letter, the mere fact of keeping Aissatou in mind while writing and envisaging her reaction to one aspect or another of the write-up is mentally uplifting. Aissatou is the silent listener, neither interrupting nor probing but one who lets Ramatoulaye air out her being until there is nothing left but the roots of peace. Aissatou thus appears to be the "internal reader" referred to by McElaney-Johnson (1999).

Another addressee is Modou, for chapter six is a direct address to him. Modou's second marriage and death have left her with so many questions which, in the absence of revelations from third parties, she can only attempt answering by piecing together events of their life in search of meaning. Hence, as a way of finding some solace, Ramatoulaye also writes to Modou.

Finally, Ramatoulaye writes to the reader (Shirin Edwin, 2009), the unknown third parties she hopes would understand her predicament. The mere thought that someone out there could be sympathetic has some healing effects.

Regardless of who the addressee of Ramatoulaye's letter is, it is obvious that the process of writing brings her some sought-after solace. She builds a SOC that help mobilise GRRs in the face of stressors.

5. Discussion

At the end of the novel, Ramatoulaye is hopeful and declares, "I can feel new buds springing up in me," (Bâ, p. 95). She and Aissatou have regained emotional balance thanks, in part, to the GRRs that include educational empowerment, economic independence, sisterly bonding, introspection and writing.

Education grants these protagonists the ability to think through situations and come to fulfilling decisions. The confusion and doubt stemming from ignorance is not the lot of both women. Caught in the dilemma of being a faithful Muslim, a traditional but Western-educated wife/widow, and a feminist visionary, Ramatoulaye manages to maintain a balanced mind frame which spares her additional emotional distress. A less educated woman would probably not handle such complexities with her calm and assurance. Despite her inability to pursue life as she pleases, she chooses to accept her predicament as a co-wife and later a widow and single mother. She maintains her house and lifestyle thanks to her job and stable salary, all fruits of her education. Ba-Curry (2008) asserts that "…Mariama Bâ's novels show that women's progressive access to education can help them redefine the existing patriarchal constructions of gender and female consciousness in modern Senegal," (p. 125).

Aissatou divorces Mawdo, relocates to France with her four children, furthers her education and accepts a job as a translator in the Senegalese embassy in the United States. Her plans pan out thanks to critical thinking skills and assertiveness acquired through her education. While she could indeed be lonely (Mutunda, 2007), which is a risk factor for depression, she is free from the "frustrating taboos" (Bâ, p. 16) of their culture and the Islamic restrictions which so embittered her. The distance, freedom and better financial prospects are boosters to her mental health.

Bolat (2025) holds that Bâ "stresses the importance of education for women but also concedes that traditions can have a puissant influence on even educated women. Ramatoulaye… is still bound by tradition, as evidenced by her hesitation to divorce her husband…" (p. 33). Education, therefore, serves a woman depending on how she exploits it. It helps one to develop critical thinking abilities, but these do not always translate to rational decision-making and an improvement in one's socio-economic and psychological status, especially in the face of immerse pressure as exerted on women in Bâ's patriarchal setting. The economic and moral rewards aside, formal education likewise paves the way for Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to take advantage of the medium of writing, another coping mechanism in their search for reprieve and renewal.

Economic independence is another GRR employed by the protagonists. Ramatoulaye, who once lived in affluence, is reduced to one who must budget every dime to provide the basics for her children. Her income and practicality enable her to quickly adapt to the changes following Modou's abandonment and later his death.

Aissatou chooses not to endure humiliation as a disgruntled co-wife. Economic independence facilitates her decision to divorce, about which Solanke (2013) writes:

> This modern, untraditional choice advocated in *So Long a Letter* is vehemently opposed by religion and society. The woman, although on the receiving end of the broken marriage, will be ostracized and labelled by both religion and society. Aissatou takes this path. Out of the many that tread this road, as an exemplification, she is seen as lucky because she has a job. Most, who decide to walk this lane while jobless, either remarry - falling into the old trap (as they become second, third, or fourth wives somewhere else) - or are totally abandoned (dying early of loneliness or from societal scorn) (p. 334).

By becoming self-reliant, Aissatou creates opportunities for improved mental health for herself and her children. The ripple effects reach Ramatoulaye, for whom she later buys a car. About getting a driver's license Bolat (2025) writes, "By acquiring this new skill, she [Ramatoulaye] gains not only a practical means of transport but also a metaphorical representation of her capability to traverse the unexplored terrain of her newly transformed life," (p. 30).

Financial autonomy not only gives these women agency, but it is a source of emotional stability. Inclusion in decision-making or being the decision-makers gives them a voice and value, factors which boost their mental well-being.

Sisterly bonding is another resource crucial to mental well-being in the novel. Women's mutual growth in oppressive environments is enhanced through friendship, solidarity and sisterhood (El Arbaoui, 2023, quoting Nnaemeka). Elsewhere Nnaemeka (1997) contrasts friendship and love, writing, "African women writers often make a clear distinction between love and friendship—on the one hand, the painfully debilitating love and sexual relationship between men and women in marriage and outside of it, and on the other hand, the affirming and empowering friendship between women inside and outside of marriage" (p. 170). She goes on to cite the relationship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as a quintessential friendship form. About friendship, Ramatoulaye says, "Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows

stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love," (Bâ, p. 56).

Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's friendship blossoms and begets solidary displayed in their mutual support during their trials. Their friendship transcends meeting emotional needs to physical ones, for Aissatou buys a car for Ramatoulaye, an act which not only provides her with a means of private transportation but redeems her image and restores her dignity (Cherekar, 2014). Although patriarchy may enable female rivalry, Cherekar highlights "the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome prejudice and survive, to enjoy female empowerment, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building," (p. 407).

Hudson-Weens (2019) elaborates on sisterhood, stressing that genuine sisterhood is a relationship between women who confide in each other, support each other, and share their fears, hopes, aspirations. Sisterhood keeps the childhood friends Ramatoulaye and Aissatou together despite their different perspectives and the distance that separates them later in life, and their sisterhood transcends their generation to that of their progeny, for Dubek (2001) notes that "Protected and nurtured by Aissatou, Ramatoulaye now begins to redefine and strengthen her relationships with her daughters. When one of them becomes pregnant, she decides not to reprimand or threaten (as custom demands), but to help and support," (p. 215).

Ramatoulaye highlights the role of good communication in maintaining a strong bond, whether sisterly or marital. She sees in Daba's relationship with her husband progressiveness which can only benefit her mental well-being: "I sense the tenderness growing between this young couple, an ideal couple, just as I have always imagined. They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise," (Bâ, p. 77). She thus identifies open and effective communication as a means through which her daughter may not only live a happier marriage but maintain emotional stability.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou survive thanks to an "enduring friendship" (Bâ, p. 16), sustained solidarity and genuine sisterhood. Apart from easing women's educational, political and economic independence in the novel (El Arbaoui, 2023), friendship, solidarity and sisterhood also help in alleviating their mental suffering, with an overall positive impact on their family and professional lives. Ramatoulaye celebrates the gains of women but acknowledges that the fight goes on: "My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present and male egoism resists," (Bâ, p. 88).

Ramatoulaye enjoys her association with Aissatou but not at the detriment of introspection. Settled in that "interior space" (Nnaemeka, 1990), Ramatoulaye has a dialogue with herself. Ramsay (1998) describes Bâ writing through Ramatoulaye as being "close to the direct interlocution of a first person [first-person] protagonist in the search for understanding, truth and sincerity," (p. 68). Ramatoulaye questions her life to understand where she failed: "I try to spot my faults in the failure of my marriage… I am trying to pinpoint any weaknesses in the way I conducted myself… And I ask myself. I ask myself, why? Why did Modou detach himself? Why did he put Binetou between us?" (Bâ, pp. 58-59). This demonstrates an eagerness to accept her share of the blame and make peace with herself. Latha (2001) adds that "Self-questioning leads to a certain amount of self-knowledge for Ramatoulaye," (p. 34). She thus derives relative calm from having defined views and thought-out strategies to cope with her pain.

Introspection likewise plunges her into the memory of the natural environment as mentioned by Udi & Okiemute (2025). Alone, Ramatoulaye sometimes listened to the radio: "The continuity of radio broadcasts was a great relief. I gave the radio the role of comforter. At night the music lulled my anxiety. I heard the message of old and new songs, which awakened hope. My sadness dissolved," (Bâ, p. 55).

Ramatoulaye so finds comfort in spending time with herself that she exteriorises the relationship with herself. From being alone in a room or house ruminating or listening to the radio, she moves to going to the cinema, alone in a crowded hall, yet cherishing every moment: "I survived. I overcame my shyness at going alone to cinemas; I would take a seat with less and less embarrassment as the months went by … I learned from them lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance," (ibid, p. 54).

The conflicting experiences and emotions at Modou's betrayal and death urge Ramatoulaye to redefine her life or be lost in the storm. Sehulster (2004) asserts that Ramatoulaye "felt somewhat lost and struggled simply to survive in this new role, the new, forced-upon quest to find and define herself," (p. 368). In redefining herself, she adopts new beliefs and broadens her mentality. These bring more emotional stability as demonstrated at the discovery of her teenage daughter's pregnancy. Instead of being hysterical or stressed, she consoles and protects her vulnerable daughter. She is better equipped to cope with such trials because she found some meaning in her struggles. Her empathy shocks the *griot* woman: "She expected wailing: I smiled. She wanted strong reprimands: I consoled. She wished for threats: I forgave," (Bâ, p.

88). It is no surprise then that by the fortieth day of seclusion, Ramatoulaye declares that she has forgiven Modou.

Introspection and writing are closely linked because, in isolation, Ramatoulaye interacts with herself, and, through the medium of writing, she interacts with others. She admits in the very first sentence of the novel that the act of writing brings some relief: "Dear Aissatou, I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress," (Bâ, p. 1). Elsewhere she writes: "These caressing words, which relax me, are indeed from you," (ibid, p. 75). By admitting the healing received from Aissatou's letter, Ramatoulaye indirectly affirms that her own words can likewise bring healing to herself. In her personal life, Bâ saw writing as a peaceful weapon capable of liberating women from oppression (Engelking, 2008).

Unlike face-to-face communication which is often spontaneous, writing accommodates reflection and contemplation. The downside of Bâ's work presented as Ramatoulaye's dairy or letter is that, as a literary format, the prose is at times so dense it disrupts the flow of the literary narrative. The slow pace not only shifts focus from the story but leaves the audience with a feeling of being trapped in Ramatoulaye's head, which nonetheless, becomes a safe space for her, for Sehuster (2004) observes about Ramatoulaye and Aissatou: "Each woman had to find her own space within or outside of tradition, but most importantly, within her self [herself]," (p. 369).

6. Conclusion

The GRRs emerge as significant tools in stress management in Bâ's novel. Ramatoulaye summoned the courage to remain in a system identified as oppressive because she had previously made the fundamental choices to be committed to her education and job. In seclusion during mourning, she makes the subtle choices to delve into herself and to convey her feelings to her confidant (and other possible addressees of her letter), a process which further nurtures their sisterly bond. By the end of the novel, Ramatoulaye is a completely different woman. As demonstrated through analysis of the GRRs, her healing can be attributed to the questions answered, soothing theories developed and overall confidence and well-being acquired thanks to educational empowerment, economic independence, sisterly bonding, introspection, and writing.

As a Western health promotion theory, salutogenesis was not developed with the African woman in mind. This study is thus limited in the choice of GRRs, given that there may be other

resources which better suit the reality of the African protagonists, but which are yet to be formulated as part of a theory.

Future studies on salutogenesis and Bâ's novel could explore other GRRs like culture and religion, and how culture acts as both a stressor and GRR in the text. The application of salutogenesis and the GRRs to literary studies is relatively new, and this creates prospects for future studies on how protagonists manage stress in other novels by African writers.

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