Articulating Visibility in the African-Muslim Contexts of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence*

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Summary

Both *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* were written in the aftermath of the struggle for liberation from colonial rule, articulating the visibility of women in traditional, patriarchal African-Muslim contexts at a time when personal and socio-political exposés by women writers were quite uncommon. These first generation novellas, situated within the former French colonies Senegal and Morocco respectively, are articulations of agency which move both within and across borders and boundaries. Due to their personal circumstances, both narrators find themselves in a personal space where they are insiders as well as outsiders within their African-Muslim nations. Since they state that their commitment to their Islamic faith encompasses a critical interrogation of traditional and religious practices within their own societies, I will draw on the term *dihliz*, an Arabo-Persian term, (Moosa 2006:7) which suggests a liminal, threshold space. During their periods of *iddat,* their seclusion enables the narrators to explore the prosaic and the sacred, the personal and the political from this space of *dihliz*, and also promotes a sensitive perception of their historical and personal contexts from multiple perspectives, thereby re-positioning and re-constructing their identities as Muslim women.

Opsomming

So Long a Letter en *Year of the Elephant* is albei geskryf in die nadraai van die stryd om koloniale oorheersing omver te werp en gee uiting aan die sigbaarheid van vroue in tradisionele, patriargale Afrika-Moslem-kontekste in tye toe persoonlike en sosiaal-politieke onthullings deur vroueskrywers heel ongewoon was. Hierdie eerste generasienovelles speel onderskeidelik af in Senegal en Marokko, voormalige Franse kolonies, en gee uitdrukking aan mag (*agency*) wat binne grense én oor grense en skeidings heen uitgeoefen word. Weens hulle persoonlike omstandighede bevind albei vertellers hulself in 'n persoonlike ruimte waar hulle sowel lede van die binnekring as buitestaanders in hulle Afrika-Moslem-nasies is. Hulle verklaar dat hulle toewyding aan die Islamitiese geloof 'n kritiese bevraagtekening van tradisionele en godsdienspraktyke in hulle eie gemeenskappe insluit, dus maak ek gebruik van die term *dihliz,* 'n Arabies-Persiese term (Moosa 2006: 7) wat 'n liminale of drempelruimte aandui. Tydens hulle *iddat*-periodes stel die vertellers se afsondering hulle in staat om die prosaïese en die heilige, die persoonlike en die

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politieke vanuit die *dihliz*-ruimte te ondersoek. Hulle afsondering maak dit vir hulle moontlik om hulle historiese en persoonlike kontekste sensitief vanuit meervoudige perspektiewe waar te neem en hulle identiteite as Moslemvroue sodoende te herposisioneer en te rekonstrueer.

Introduction

Since the World Trade Centre attack in 2001, the volume of academic, literary and media output on the veiling and disempowerment of Muslim women has become so ubiquitous that this type of representation is now part of popular culture. Catherine Burwell states: "When heterogeneous histories are reduced to the myth of an unchanging monolith, single texts may be perceived as representing "the truth" about large and diverse populations." She adds that reading a book about a single Muslim woman may be perceived as enough to "know" these women, stating that the clash of civilisations theory also provides further problems for reading, "as it circulates and perpetuates stereotypes" (2007: 286). Writers who present a patronising, "insider" perspective of the subjugation of women in various Muslim societies (such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali in *The Infidel*, Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, Marjane Satrapi in her graphic novels *Persepolis 1* and *Persepolis 2*, and Nawaal-El-Saadawi *in The Hidden face of Eve*) have gained canonical status in Western societies. Their works are often regarded as *prima facie* evidence of the current status of all women in Muslim societies. Kiran Grewal states that whilst diverse political, social and ideological positions are open to the white western subject, the "third world woman" remains essentialised and homogenised (2012: 587).Thus, the voices of women from developing countries which are highlighted and made audible within the global canon often reflect present-day asymmetrical power relations between developed and developing contexts. However, the post-9/11 years have witnessed a surge of counter narratives by Muslim authors, artists and scholars which are resistant and reconstructive and build upon a long history of anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal cultural politics (Zine, Taylor & Davis 2007: 274). African-Muslim authors who produce this type of counter-narrative include Leila Aboulela, Rayda Jacobs, Nuruddin Farah and Abdulrazack Gurnah. Notwithstanding these more recent representations, the process of articulating not only agency and visibility, but also of subverting the prevailing narratives of Muslim women, had begun decades ago in the works of two African-Muslim women writers.[1] The focus in this article will be on the first publications of Mariama

1. The focus will be on the word "Muslim" women, and not "Islamic" women. As Amin Malak explains in *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, the word "Muslim" denotes the person who espouses the religion of Islam or is shaped by its cultural impact, irrespective of her or his being secular,

Bâ, whose novella *Uni si Longue Lettre* (*So Long a Letter*) first appeared in French in 1979, and was translated into English in 1981, and Leila Abouzeid, whose Arabic novella [*Am Al-Fil*] *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey toward Independence* (hereafter referred to as *Year of the Elephant*), first appeared as episodes in a Moroccan newspaper in 1983; was published as part of a collection in 1984, and translated into English in 1989.

Fluid Boundaries

Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasises the need for feminist solidarity and says that the focus should be simultaneously on individual and collective experiences of oppression and exploitation and of struggle and resistance. She adds that this implies that geographical and cultural boundaries can become more fluid and interrelated by the promotion and practice of transnational feminist solidarities (2003: 521-522).The emphasis in this article will be on nationalism as well as transnationalism in these two novellas; the rhizomic intertwining of identities and solidarities which do not detract from the rootedness and agency of the narrators within their own specific cultural and political contexts. In her study of Francophone African women writers, D'Almeida confirms that it is not only necessary to locate these women writers in time and space, but also in the social, religious and political environments which shape their lives (1994: 35). The articulation by women writers in traditional Muslim societies signifies the germination and fruition of agency and a tangible form of visibility. Stuart Hall defines "articulation" as a term which has a suitable double meaning because "articulate" means not only to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate, but may also refer to an object such as an "articulated" lorry in which the front and back may be connected to one another. He adds that an articulation is therefore the type of connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under particular conditions (1986: 53). Victor Li points out that articulation enables us to rethink and reinvent the possibility of linkage where resistance and difference may seem only too firmly entrenched, stating that the practice of articulation reopens the dimensions of agency, change, risk and uncertainty (2005: 216). Although *Year of the Elephant* and

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agnostic, or a practicing believer; whereas the word "Islamic" emphasises Islam as a particular type of faith and activities associated with its theological traditions. Zine (2004: 181) makes the distinction between the category of "Muslim" as a social designation that absorbs many, often secular meanings, and the category "Muslim" as a religious conception that is inextricably linked to practice of the faith since it means "submission to God." Moreover, she points out that Islamic identity is qualitatively different from ethnic identity because it is claimed through conscious praxis of faith.

So Long a Letter were written more than thirty years ago, a comparative, linked, "articulated" reading of the two has the potential to re-position and reconstruct the prevailing conception of Muslim women by some "insiders", as well as many "outsiders" as inarticulate and invisible; devoid of agency and the ability to critique nationalist ideals and patriarchal religious practices with the aim of trying to promote positive changes in society. In her discussion of the public function of literary texts, particularly by women writers, Maria Pia Lara utilises the term "illocutionary," which refers to the intention of a writer in articulating a message that is a form of social action for all women (in Gagiano 2006: 46). She states that the concept of "illocutionary force" or "creative rhetorical power" is a necessary aspect of "the narrative of the social" and the garnering of recognition by those who are oppressed. Thus, it is possible to perceive the articulations of visibility by Bâ and Abouzeid as a purposeful movement to gather understandings and support both within and beyond their specific personal and political boundaries, both within and beyond Africa. Hitchcott believes that Bâ's novels reveal the potential for women to speak with a united voice and to create an "imagined community" of women's voices which will be heard (2000: 85). The transnational links between *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* are reinforced by cultural and religious similarities. Rosander confirms that there are particular structuring principles for social life that are similar in North and West Africa, since Senegal is influenced by Arabo-Islamic culture and traditions (1995: 10). In his article criticising the disjunction between North- and Sub-Saharan Africa in academic scholarship, Bentahar (2011: 1) affirms that although there is a clear difference between regions, proximity does play a role in cultural cohesion, even across the Sahara desert. Although there is some diversity in the interpretations of Islamic precepts in Senegalese and Moroccan societies, readings of *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* indicate significant affinities between them, especially within the area of gender politics. As Ingvar and Westerland (1999: 2-6) state, despite the variety among Muslims, there are certain basic features, such as classical Arabic as a ritual language and Mecca as a religious centre, which give the worldwide community of Muslims a feeling of togetherness. Both Bâ's and Abouzeid's representations of culture, religion, gender and nationalism are rooted in their Islamic faith, despite the fact that they are outspoken and visible in their interrogation of the differences between the precepts of Islam and the practices of Muslims in their patriarchal societies, as well as the divergence between nationalist rhetoric and the postcolonial realities that govern the lives of women. Although these writers cannot be perceived by the reader as being fully representative of, or spokespersons for the women in their societies, they do present a perspective on the ways in which African-Muslim women can deal productively with specific demands and situations in their conservative and traditional socio-cultural milieus, thereby offering

an alternative to types of narratives by Muslim women which have gained popularity in recent times.

Morocco, which stands at the juncture of the African and Arab worlds (and may be considered as acting as a bridge between them) achieved its independence from France in 1956. Senegal, situated in West Africa, followed soon after, in 1960. *So Long a Letter* is based on the reminiscences of a Muslim, French-educated, middle-aged Senegalese schoolteacher during her *iddat*, the period of four months and ten days of seclusion prescribed for Muslim widows. In this long 'letter' written to her best friend Aissatou, Ramatoulaye, the mother of twelve children, reflects on her life with the husband she loved and had chosen to marry despite her mother's protestations. Her memories are poignant and sometimes bitter, as she had been forced to survive on her own during the last five years of his life, when Modou contracted a polygynous marriage with their daughter's young school-friend. Although the novella focuses on the construction and re-construction of Ramatoulaye's identity as an individual, her ruminations promote particular perceptions of the collective identities of Muslim women both inside and outside her socio-cultural milieu (Latha 2001: 23). In addition to the blend of fact and fiction and the blurring between the two in the semi-autobiographical format, the epistolary format is deployed in her communication with her closest friend Aissatou, who had divorced her polygamous husband and migrated to New York with her children. This format also facilitates Ramatoulaye's insights into her past and present experiences. Similarly, although Leila Abouzeid does not utilise the epistolary mode; her utilisation of the short novella format facilitates a pithy portrayal of the life and experiences of a newly-divorced woman, Zahra, in Morocco after its liberation from French colonial domination. Like Ramatoulaye, she feels a deep sense of loss and abandonment by the husband she had loved and served diligently. In keeping with Islamic laws regarding divorced women, she is also expected to undergo a period of *iddat*, or social isolation, which, according to Islamic laws, is shorter than the period prescribed for widows. Zahra deals with this period in a different manner from Ramatoulaye, as she has no home in which she can be secluded, and has been left with nothing, "but a room in [her] father's house that should be free soon, and a maintenance allowance for three months and ten days" (Abouzeid 1984: 10). During this period of *iddat*, she tries to cope with the social stigma of being a divorced woman, having only obtained a certificate for literacy. Despite these enormous setbacks, Zahra is represented as journeying toward financial, emotional and spiritual independence after this callous divorce by a man who had elected to have a privileged lifestyle as a member of the political elite in the aftermath of liberation. His disdain of her is based on her affirmation of her ideals and her choice not to validate this way of life; patently ignoring the fact that she had made enormous financial sacrifices

and actively fought alongside him during the struggle for national liberation. The commonalities between *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* include the fact that both are written in the first person, employ a confidential tone and utilise a variety of established literary techniques such as characterisation, plot, setting, dialogue, narrative and personal reflection. Both construct visibility through poignant ruminations about their past lives and the numerous social, religious and cultural challenges of their current circumstances as women who supported the nationalist struggle and are faced with the realities of post-liberation politics. Most significantly, the differences between the precepts and practice of Islam are a central factor in their representations. Mariama Bâ has stated, "the African woman is heavily burdened with mores and customs, in combination with mistaken and egoistic interpretations of religions" (in Schipper 1987: 46). This is echoed by Leila Abouzeid, whose title, *Year of the Elephant,* refers directly to a battle in Islamic history depicted in the Quran (Sura 105: Al-Fil) in which a flock of birds bombarded and overcame the might of an army transported by elephants, thereby indicating that Morocco's struggle for independence from French colonial rule was made possible by the people without huge armies and sophisticated weapons, and primarily by the strength of their faith and their commitment to the ideal of liberation. The sub-title of the novella, *A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence* indicates the central character's corresponding beliefs, as well as her struggle as an individual living in a patriarchal Muslim society. Spiritual empowerment is a fundamental aspect of her journey, and this is facilitated by guidance of the *Sheikh*, her deeply pious mentor, whom she mentions at focal points of the novella. Towards the end, she meets him again, and says, "he is pleased with the spiritual change I have undergone" (Abouzeid 1984: 79).

Muslim Narratives

Mariama Bâ, who was born to middle class Muslim parents in Dakar, Senegal, says that *So Long a Letter* is a cry from the heart of all women, although first and foremost from that of Muslim Senegalese women (Stringer 1996: 58). Senegal is characterised by Blair as a country where there is a high degree of homogeneity, in which the Muslim majority cohabits easily with the Catholic minority and has a strong tolerance of traditional beliefs and cults (Lang in Harrow 1991: 306). Similarly, Morocco is predominantly Muslim and is known to have a history of religious tolerance. In *The Myth of the Silent Woman: Moroccan Women Writers,* Diaconoff (2009: 183) asserts, "for Abouzeid's protagonists, … Islam is simply an important part of daily identity; verses from the Quran or the words of the prophet are referenced naturally, not as didactic intrusions but as sources that heal and calm an unhappy soul, that speak to beauty and

truth, and underscore the necessity of social justice and equality". Salah Moukhlis points out that *Year of the Elephant* is very similar to many other African women's narratives including Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter,* as these texts straddle the borderline between colonialism and independence (2003: 69). Eva Hunter (2006: 149) affirms that these two texts invite comparison with each other, since both writers focus on protagonists who deal with similar personal and political issues in the aftermath of French colonial rule. Moreover, Bentahar (2012: 6) confirms that Bâ and Abouzeid have "different but complementary approaches to their own historical contexts and gender dynamics". Erickson (1999: 20) states that the question of intertextuality, the traces left in the author's work of other languages and cultures that preceded him or her, is of singular importance in postcolonial narrative with its transcultural crossings. Since *So Long a Letter and Year of the Elephant* were published within a few years of each other; are set in geographical locations which are not too far apart; and focus on interrogating the role of Muslim women in their African societies, it is not improbable that elements of Mariama Bâ's text, written in 1981, constitute the implicit intertext of Leila Abouzeid's text, published as a book in 1984. Most notably, the openings and endings of the two novellas are similar, reflecting on the effects on women of abandonment in traditional Muslim contexts. In the opening paragraph of *So Long a Letter,* Ramatoulaye tell her friend Aissatou, "I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning his diary, my prop in distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain" (Bâ 1981: 1). In the last paragraph of this page, she says, "Modou is dead. How am I to tell you? One does not fix appointments with fate. Fate grasps whom it wants, when it wants". In a similar vein, *Year of the Elephant* begins with Zahra's words which also indicate a tone of despair, "I come back to my hometown feeling shattered and helpless. Yesterday, anxiety was tearing me apart, but today despair is tormenting me even more". In the final paragraph of this page, she echoes Ramatoulaye's feelings of loss and the inflexibility of fate when she talks about her ex-husband's decision to expel her from his life: "He had simply sat down and said, 'Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides'" (Abouzeid 1984: 1). However, the endings of the two novellas display a similar level of faith and optimism. Ramatoulaye ends with the words, "the word 'happiness' does indeed have meaning, doesn't it? I shall go out in search of it. Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter …" (Bâ 1981: 95). Similarly, Zahra declares, "I want to be content despite my regression. I want to believe that life is not full of the wicked alone, and that everything is new and different and as good as it can be" (Abouzeid 1984: 81).

However, despite these transnational links, one of the most significant differences in the representations by these two writers is the contrast in their languages of expression. Unlike Abouzeid, Mariama Bâ uses French as her

medium of self-expression, with a strong element of transculturation in this writing, articulating a hybrid mix of expository, narrative and epistolary styles to present her protagonist's multi-faceted identity and cultural ambivalence in the guise of various personas, both female and male. This is particularly evident in the epistolary format, in which , Ramatoulaye writes to her alter-ego, Aissatou, and in the staging of the dialogue between these two Senegalese women; one living in a patriarchal society in a developing country, and the other in a developed country. The confluence of oral and written linguistic elements in the novella allows for the perception of fluid boundaries between the real and fictional elements in her text. Pratt declares that, as a cultural strategy, subordinated and marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant and metropolitan culture. She adds, "While the subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own use and what they use it for" (1992: 23). Bâ's simultaneous attraction to and repulsion at the colonial system is manifested in the rhythms and repetition characteristic of African orality and the traditional *griots* of Senegalese society. Afua Kapi refers to this use of language as linguistic hybridity, written to accommodate and disseminate the African writer's view of himself or herself and his or her African culture, to the world (2006: 182). However, although Bâ was able to reach a very small sector of the Senegalese population which was literate in French at the time, Leila Abouzeid (who is also fluent in French) deliberately chose to subvert French acculturation policies by writing in her native language, disregarding the imagined global Francophone reader, and articulating her visibility to a larger majority of people living within her own traditional society. Like Mariama Bâ, she has utilised a hybrid form of her language of expression, by mixing classical Arabic with Modern Standard Arabic, leading Parmenter to declare, "Thus, *Year of the Elephant* is a new kind of novella, utilising a new kind of language, for a woman in a new independent Morocco" (1984: xxx). The first English translation of *Year of the Elephant* appeared in 1989. Bassnett and Trivedi point out that the student of translated texts assumes that the text will be diminished and rendered inferior, but rarely considers that there might also be a process of gain (1999: 4) and Abouzeid has validated the translation of her text in her statement, "Barbara [Parmenter] did a remarkable work and succeeded to a great extent in rendering in beautiful English the mood, spirit and style of the Arabic" (1989: ix). Likewise, *So Long a Letter* has been translated into sixteen languages, and the English translation, which appeared in 1981, has become a canonical text in the global literary canon. In addition to these linguistic translations, both texts contain paratextual features such as introductions and glossaries to assist in the cultural translation of individual and collective experiences in their African-Muslim contexts. Thus, these translations enable Bâ's and Abouzeid's representations to reach a wide

multiplicity of reading audiences, and most importantly, the decision-makers and educated political elite within their own societies.

It is interesting to note that both writers promote subtle forms of subversion and multiplicities of meaning by constantly moving between various spaces of time in their memories of the past, their experiences of the present, and their hopes for the future. Techniques such as deliberate silences and omissions may be seen as part of this process, since they allow the reader into tangible aspects of the lived experiences of their narrators whilst they choose to creatively represent other aspects. In this way, the narrator of each novella is enabled to freely "reshape" elements of her personal life to accommodate the other within the self. Individual and communal concerns become intertwined, facilitating and providing greater latitude for both writers to engage in social critique in the representations. Davies affirms that the very act of self-articulation by African women writers dismantles the social construction of women as silent (1991: 253), and this is evident in *So Long a Letter* as Ramatoulaye discusses in detail the plight and subsequent flight of her confidanté, Aissatou, who, despite being a lower caste woman, had become a member of the educated elite in Senegal, mainly through her marriage to a man of a higher caste. She also portrays the tribulations of women of other nationalities, such as Jacqueline Diack, a Protestant from the Ivory Coast who refused to adopt the Muslim religion and whose Senegalese husband is openly unfaithful to her, and the loneliness of Jacqueline's room-mate, a French teacher of literature who is single. Thus, her empathy encompasses women of all classes and castes, including her husband's young wife Binetou, whom she describes as "kindhearted, intelligent" (1981: 50) and as a victim of her own mother's greed and her elderly husband's pride and lust. Similarly, in *Year of the Elephant*, Zahra mentions witnessing the extreme poverty and suffering of the daughter of Rahma, her old neighbour, though she does confess that she did not have the emotional strength to reach out to help this young woman. Thus, both writers articulate individual, as well as the collective experiences of the voiceless women in their societies. In his discussion of the Algerian woman writer Assia Djebar in *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative*, Erickson (citing Blanchot & Derrida 1998) claims that a distinction should be made between narrative voice and narratorial voice. The narratorial voice can be located in the system of the narrative, as the source of the narration, whereas the narrative voice is the unvoiced (unrepresentable) "voice" of the repressed, invisible, cultural/sexual other. Clearly, Mariama Bâ and Leila Abouzeid not only employ the narratorial voices of their narrators, but also articulate the identities of women characters who are silent or repressed. The attempt to silence women is confirmed by Leila Abouzeid in the following words:

> I am a woman, and women in my culture do not speak in public, let alone speak about their private lives in public. When I published my first article in a Moroccan newspaper in 1962, I did not even sign it with my real name, but used the pseudonym of Aziza, and when I published my first novel, Am al Fil [*Year of the Elephant*], I left the protagonist's home town unnamed because it was my own.
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> (2003: 160)

Significantly, as a fictional construct, Zahra, Abouzeid's narrator, is empowered to say, "My situation, as I have said, frees me from normal social obligations to cajole, defer and blush at the proper moment" (Abouzeid 1984: 67). Similarly, Ramatoulaye, Mariama Bâ's narrator, confronts her patriarchal older brother-in-law who tries to inherit her in accordance with customary norms. She vehemently declares, "I look Tamsir straight in the eye. I look at Mawdo. I look at the Imam. I draw my black shawl closer. I tell my beads. This time I shall speak out. My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous" (Bâ 1981: 60). The articulation of visibility by these first generation writers within the multiple boundaries and constraints of the traditional milieus grants them agency and a public voice in their traditional societies. Mariama Bâ's and Leila Abouzeid's depiction of the development of agency in their characters thus indicates a deepening consciousness of the impact of the individual on the larger socio-political milieu. These writers not only incorporate, but also move beyond the position that the "personal is the political" to promote the belief that ideological change has to be accompanied by social and material change. In an interview, Mariama Bâ affirmed that African women writers should awaken the conscience of the reader, and serve as a guide, whilst avoiding the production of social and political tracts and that a work of art should be a blend of commitment and artistic values (Stringer 1996: 50-51).

Narrative Modes

Notably, the differences between fact and fiction in the two novellas are often blurred, due to the narrative formats chosen by the two writers, although both have indicated that their novellas are not autobiographies. This is confirmed by the specific differences between their life-histories and those of their narrators. Nonetheless, there are a number of commonalities in the life circumstances of both authors and their narrators. These include (inter alia) a shared culture, religion, age group, a commitment to overcoming colonial rule, and the various types of gender activism that undergird their multifaceted identities. Although Stephanie Newell affirms that regarding any literary text as the accurate, pristine reflection of society is to ignore the author's creativity as well as the textuality of the work, the

fictionality of the characters, and the literary qualities of the language (2006: 41), it must be said that distinguishing verifiable historical and sociological facts from the combination of personalised interpretations and fictional, creative representations in *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* often becomes challenging for the reader. Although much of the historical and sociological information provided by the two writers is incontestable, their articulation occurs within spaces which signify multiple forms of marginalisation, thereby indicating that the occupation of this type of thirdspace can be used as a strong source of resistance and a rich site of empowerment. Gillian Rose (1993: 137) states that thirdspace forces us to recognise the complexity, ambiguity and multi-dimensionality of identity, and the ways in which class, gender and race intersect, cross-cut and intersect in different times and spaces. The writers of these novellas portray their narrating protagonists as women who, due to their personal circumstances, find themselves occupying this hybrid space which facilitates disclosure. Since Ramatoulaye and Aissatou articulate their identities as Muslim women living in traditional, patriarchal societies, I draw on the term *dihliz*, an Arabo-Persian term, employed by Moosa (2006: 7) which suggests a vantage point, a liminal, threshold space which signifies that area between the door and the inner area of the home. It symbolises the passageway that distinguishes and at the same time connects the inward and the outward, the higher and the lower forms of being. During the periods of *iddat*, the social seclusion of the narrators of *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* places their lives in a state of limbo, an uncertain period of waiting for a resolution about their futures, enabling them to explore the prosaic and the sacred, the personal and the political from this space of *dihliz*. This space at this stage of their lives therefore enables the narrators of both novellas to share an exilic consciousness which facilitates the articulations of their personal and the political concerns. According to Said, this is not an actual exile, but "a metaphorical condition" (1994: 52). He asserts, "in the end it is the intellectual as a representative figure that matters – someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers" (Said 1994: 14). Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (1999: 17) have also pointed out that intellectuals need not leave their own country in order to experience the condition of marginality and exilic consciousness. In *So Long a Letter*, this exilic consciousness dictates the tone of circumspection and cultural and religious ambivalence evident in the novella, with the hybrid mix of expository, narrative and epistolary styles utilised in the novella serving to facilitate self-presentation. The format of *So Long a Letter* reveals symmetrical layers of an inside, "home" space, which enables Ramatoulaye to disclose not only her notions of home as a physical space for good housekeeping and for nurturing her family, but also as a way of providing a critique on the issues of culture, religion and politics in Senegal. Mildred

Mortimer refers to this as disclosure from a space of enclosure (1990: 69). Thus, Ramatoulaye is enabled to establish a new relationship to domestic space by securing an additional liberating, alternative space within it, even obtaining an extension of her widow's leave. She is represented as going beyond the call of duty to conform to the notion of a good wife in accordance with Senagalese norms and customs, by accepting Madou's polygynous union and carefully observing the social strictures prescribed for widows. Within the context of readership in Senegal, this seems to provide her with the moral high ground which enables her to acquire an empowering space to speak out without fear of disapproval or censure. Thus, the layers of protection provided by the sanctuary of her home and the additional, spatial and temporal constraints of her *iddat* provide her with the emotional space and religious authority to try to subvert many of the gender norms of her society and to articulate her concerns about post-liberation politics with a clever, considered mixture of boldness and discretion. In discussing the concept of "intimate immensity", French philosopher Bachelard affirms: "Often it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws its strength" (1994: 229). The epistolary format of the text has a significant effect, as the informal "long letter" also houses two short letters written by Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to the men in their lives. Enfolded within the sanctuary of the long letter with its hybrid forms of discourse, these formal short letters are artfully designed to underscore the transmission of more openly critical perspectives on the issues affecting all African-Muslim women. In particular, Aissatou's pithy, extremely formal letter to her ex-husband is tailored to emphasise the ability of women to make empowering choices, containing a more open indictment of polygyny, a ubiquitous symbol of traditionalism which continues to prevail after national liberation. The "long letter" and short letters thus draw their potency from the discovery and uncovering of truths. They intertwine and provide a crossover between formality and informality, forthrightness and ambivalence, indicating the breadth of vision and the expansiveness of social, cultural and religious critique in Mariama Bâ's novella. In contrast to Mariama Bâ, Leila Abouzeid depicts a narrator who has acquired a pariah status in her traditional society. She does not utilise the semi-auto-biographical format, and her more direct representation of place and identity would seem to place *Year of the Elephant* within the ambit of creative non-fiction. In the afterword of her later novel, *The Last Chapter*, she says: "Content comes easily enough, from people, places, and events around me. Most of the characters are composites of several real people. Zahra, the protagonist of *Year of the Elephant*, is somewhere between imaginary and real" (2003: 156). In *Writing Creative Nonfiction,* Carolyn Fouché and Philip Gerard state: "When a writer feels an obligation to be true to actual people, events, and places while at the same time presenting his or her own feelings

honestly, the work will be creative non-fiction (2001: 5). Barbara Lounsberry says that creative non-fiction includes, "Fine Writing: A Literary Prose Style". She adds that "verifiable subject matter and exhaustive research guarantee the nonfiction side of literary nonfiction; the narrative form and structure disclose the writer's artistry; and finally, its polished language reveals that the goal all along has been literature" (1990: xiii). In *Year of the Elephant*, Abouzeid places an emphasis on making references to specific episodes in the liberation struggle in Morocco and manifests her creativity in her representation of the active and unambiguous role her narrator plays in it. In the preface to the first edition of her book, Abouzeid has said: "The main events and characters throughout the whole collection are real. They have surprised and moved me in real life, and I wanted, by their reconstitution in the book, to provide the same feelings for the reader" (1984: xviii). Moreover, many of the episodes are similar to those depicted in her autobiography, *Return to Childhood*, and this combination of "verifiable subject matter" and "the writer's artistry" are demonstrated in Zahra's depiction of the role that many women played in the struggle for liberation:

> Our plan worked, and at the appointed time women flooded into the house. In the courtyard, Safia and Roukia and I spoke to them. We told them about the delicate phase our country was presently going through, and about the new Morocco and how we were just beginning the real struggle for development and economic independence, the great *jihad*, as the Sultan would later say.
>
> (1984: 55)

Similarly, Ramatoulaye says: "It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence" (Bâ 1981: 25), indicating that the issues of gender, nationalism and Muslim women's identities are deeply intertwined in *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant*.[2]

Amina Wadud-Muhsin points out that there are two groups of thought which prevail in the present day: those who believe that Islam as it is today is fair and just to women, and those who believe that Islam as it is practiced today is very patriarchal, but that true Islam is not (1992: 10). In her later publication, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006: 23), she refers to Islam as "engaged surrender which emphasises the requisite role of human agency". Many Muslim feminists express very critical opinions of the situation of

2. Jasmine Zine (2004: 181) proposes the construction of a critical space in which faith-centred women may articulate notions of femininity and womanhood, a space that is attentive to the role spirituality and religious commitment play in Muslim women's conceptions of selfhood and feminist engagement.

women in post-revolutionary Muslim societies (Tohidi 1991; Ahmed 1992). Both Bâ and Abouzeid demonstrate in their novellas that gender inequities have been sustained by male nationalists after political liberation. Loomba maintains that colonialists regarded the position of women in many colonised countries as evidence of a degenerate culture and that the reform of women's positions became a focus of colonial rule. Nationalists responded by initiating reforms of their own. Although this resulted in partial reform, it also often strengthened indigenous patriarchal practices (1994: 192). In *Year of the Elephant*, Zahra directly refers to the word "jihad" (Abouzeid 1984: 38) and willingly accedes when the liberation movement sends a message, "They want you to deliver guns" (Abouzeid 1984: 38). She also organises meetings with women to collect donations for the nationalist struggle, creating an awareness amongst the women about the goal of political independence and the ideals for post-liberation Morocco. Ali-Karamali (2008: 169) identifies four forms of jihad in Islamic Law; firstly, jihad of the heart (which is the greater form of jihad and means purging oneself of impiety), jihad in the form of verbal persuasion to correct injustice; jihad to undertake good works to correct injustice; and lastly (only when all other means have failed) jihad of the sword. The first type is clearly a private form of jihad; the other three forms may be regarded as struggles against oppressive social and political practices. The articulating of visibility in African-Muslim societies by women in the context and aftermath of nationalist liberation struggles may therefore be viewed as a combination of both political and personal jihads. Both Ramatoulaye and Zahra are depicted by these writers as being committed to nationalism as well as the critical interrogation of the traditional and religious practices that have a negative impact on women's lives.[3] The first, more personal form of jihad would seem to be reflected in incidents such as Ramatoulaye's moral struggle about her schoolgirl daughter's pregnancy, and in Zahra's conflicting emotions about her decision not to assist her impoverished childhood friend,

These forms of jihad are depicted as universal struggles, which are not necessarily confined to the specific contexts of Senegal and Morocco. However, the predominantly African-Muslim settings of the novellas enable the decision of both protagonists to support their nationalist struggles for

3. An examination of this issue would seem to indicate that the marginalization of Muslim women in this and other countries could be alleviated by a religious education which would investigate the differences between Islamic principles and cultural practices as one of its key focus areas. Combined with a secular education taking cognisance of present-day hybrid identities in postcolonial and other states, this approach has the potential to empower Muslim women to become socially and politically active and thereby to reconstruct their status in societies in which the forces of traditionalism often overpower both basic Islamic principles and state legislation designed to promote women's rights (Latha 2004: 54).

freedom from colonisation to be perceived as a combination of the other forms of jihad. Unlike Zahra, Ramatoulaye avoids militancy, and even eschews fighting the battle for women's empowerment in the political arena in post-liberation Senegal. The character of Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye's suitor, a member of the National Assembly, is utilised to articulate Mariama Bâ's concern about women's lack of involvement in the arena of politics:

> Whom are you addressing, Ramatoulaye? You are echoing my speeches in the National Assembly, where I have been called a "feminist". I am not, in fact, the only one to insist on changing the rules of the game and injecting a new life into it. Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered, or calmed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a greater interest in the destiny of the country. Even you who are protesting: you preferred your husband, your class, your children to public life. If men alone are active in the [political] parties, why should they think of women? It is only human to give yourself the larger portion of the cake when you are sharing it out.
>
> (Bâ 1981: 62)

Thus, Daouda Dieng seems to be Mariama Bâ's spokesperson in this episode, indicating that various personas are also utilised in the novella to facilitate the presentation of personal, cultural, religious and political critique which has to veiled at times.

African-Islamic Feminism and African-Islamic Womanism

A close reading of *So Long a Letter* also reveals a number of approaches to feminism and womanism that reflect the multifaceted identity of the central character. The feminisms in *So Long a Letter* emerge not only as separate manifestations of the central character's identity, but also as intersecting forms which demonstrate the hybridity which characterises women's identities in postcolonial societies (Latha 2001: 29). Thus, due to the acculturation she undergoes under the influence of the French headmistress whom she greatly admired, Ramatoulaye also has an allegiance to the ideals of Western feminism. In the penultimate page of *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye says: "Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed" (Bâ 1981: 88). This concept of a sisterhood that encompasses all women and all nationalities is also evident in her words: "I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world" (Bâ 1981: 93). In *Year of the Elephant*, Abouzeid also indicates her perception of a global sisterhood by telling the

sheikh that she had found some measure of peace in the realisation that her situation was not unique, as she was told about the book written by the first wife of the renowned South African heart surgeon, Dr Christiaan Barnard, which recounted his abandonment of her after twenty years, when he had "gained fame" (Abouzeid 1984: 80). Nonetheless, despite Zahra's insights and her commitment to personal and political jihad, her ex-husband's ascendency into the political elite, and the general abdication of ideals by many of her fellow freedom fighters leads to her strong sense of disillusionment. This is demonstrated in the words: "In the beginning of the Resistance, we believed that the struggle would wash away all spite and malice, just as we thought Independence would relieve our cares and heal our sores like miracle cures sold in the market. In fact, we loaded Independence down with a burden it could not bear" (Abouzeid 1984: 67). She thus demonstrates that gender inequities have not only been sustained, but also promoted by male nationalists after political liberation. Nonetheless, Zahra later asserts her individuality and independence. Her faith-based outlook, when combined with her refusal to rely on family and friends despite her severe plight within her predominantly Muslim society, provides an indication of her commitment to African-Islamic feminism. This ideology is based on the struggle for women's dignity and participation in public life in accordance with an educated examination of the culturally-specific ways in which Islamic precepts are adapted or distorted for the purpose of subjugating African-Muslim women (Latha 2001: 33). In *So Long a Letter*, Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's alter-ego, is a hybrid representative of a combination of Western and Islamic feminisms. In contrast, Ramatoulaye's discussion of social, family and parenting issues as well as her statement, "I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman" (Bâ 1981: 93) indicates a commitment to the ideology of African-Muslim womanism, which encompasses a focus on the role of individuals working within the ambit of cultural and religious structures to bring about positive changes for women within traditional Muslim societies such as Senegal.[4] As Mubashir Majeed states, Islamic womanist philosophy is an emerging field of religious, cultural, theological and ethical reflection in which historic and present-day insights are brought into critical conversation with Muslim traditions and the teachings of Islam (2006: 117).

4. Customary norms such as female circumcision and violence against women are still widespread in Senegal. At present the battle for women's rights is being spearheaded by women's associations such as the Reseau Siggel Djigeen, which are firmly rooted in this West African socio-cultural and religious milieu. The RSD focuses on challenging gender inequities by reaching out to women in all sectors of society to try to effectively tackle cultural and religious doctrines which subjugate women and impede formulation of new reforms and implementation of existing ones such as the revised Family Code (Latha 2010: 54).

Conclusion

Many third generation Muslim women writers are currently articulating their diasporic identities in transnational contexts, and their insider/outsider perspectives are underscored by the expansion of their spatial and personal boundaries. In contrast, as first generation writers, Mariama Bâ and Leila Abouzeid portray their narrating protagonists as women who utilize the liminal space of *dihlitz* during the periods of their *iddat* to articulate their visibility. The creation of this narrative thirdspace enables both writers to represent hybrid identities in hybrid texts which contain an integration of mediated facts and creative fiction in innovative formats, facilitating their critical discourse on social, cultural, religious and political issues, and enabling their message to reach local and global reading audiences; including the decision-makers and political elite within their own societies. Transnational feminist solidarities are affirmed by the commonalities and the intertextual elements in their novellas which enable these voices to merge and converge, thereby promoting a potent message about the empowering spaces which Muslim women have the capacity to occupy.[5]

5. Huggan states that operating across disciplinary boundaries helps researchers to transcend the legacies of imperialism and colonialism, and to focus on an active and contextualized critical and theoretical practice (2008: 6). The self-confessional mode utilized by the narrators of *So Long a Letter* and *Year of the Elephant* also serves to promote self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher. As Abouzeid's novella is set in postcolonial North Africa, and Mariama Bâ's novella is set in postcolonial West Africa, I, as a South African Muslim woman who has lived through the strictures of apartheid, and acquired my first qualification in 1976, have been given the opportunity to explore the common concerns which underlie the ways in which my own identity is enacted alongside those of Mariama Bâ's and Leila Abouzeid's narrators. In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I have found myself interrogating my own articulation of visibility as a Muslim woman in local and global contexts in which we experience multiple layers of marginalisation. Thus, the articulation of visibility and agency in the aftermath of political liberation by these first generation women writers who are deeply rooted within societies has laid a legacy not only for second and third generation African Muslim women writers, but has also expanded the ambit for scholars who have commonalities with the identities and concerns which Mariama Bâ and Leila Abouzeid articulate so effectively in their novellas.

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