

Shades of Womanhood in Mariama Ba's *So Longer a Letter*

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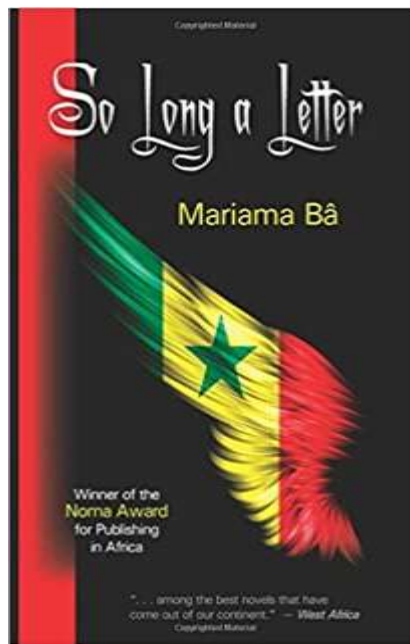
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Abstract

Mariama Ba has created a unique place for herself in African literature by her contemporary themes and narrative style. Her protagonists act as the spokesperson for Senegalese women. Her female characters depict Senegalese woman who are subjected to

patriarchal system of Senegal society. Obioma Nnaemeka, the writer of the book, *Mariama Ba: Parallels, Convergence, and Interior Space*, analyzed the works of Ba. She writes that, “the works of Ba question, subvert, and destabilize certain dichotomies rooted in race, age, sex and culture. The author posits that dualisms, when they do exist, coexist in a mere flexible and relational manner (...) The richness of Ba’s works emanates from the author’s ability to transcend the rigidity of binary paradigms”. (p.14)

The present paper aims to explore and analyze the issues of women and their individual responses as represented in *So Long a Letter*. The novel is written in first-person narrative by the protagonist Ramatoulaye, who relates the stories of herself and her friend Aissatou. The novel is semi-autobiographical in nature, thereby the writer herself is enacting the role of the narrator. The novel slowly and steadily unfolds the stories of its female characters with apt explanation and well documented commentary of the narrator. The novel reveals the conscious effort of the writer to bring change in the condition of African/Senegalese women. Her female characters emerge out of their traditional roles and challenge the system by taking new and breaking decisions.

Keywords: Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter*, Patriarchy, Oppression, Exploitation, Francophone, Intersectionality, Communities.

Introduction

Mariama Ba has been an iconoclast writer in Francophone literature. She has been the pioneering writer in discussing the condition of African women, particularly the African Muslim women. She is credited with discussing the multi-layered oppressions of women at the hands of African/Senegalese men. Her novels explicitly articulate the intersectionality of oppression observed in African/Senegalese cultures and communities. *Intersectionality* is the term used by the African American writer Kimberle Crenshaw to expose the layers (sections) of exploitation of African women in male-centered societies. Ba’s literary outputs align completely to the term *intersectionality* because she consciously highlights women exploitation in every good and bad situation. With the publications of *So Longer a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (1981), Ba occupies a place in the line of world feminist writers like Buchi Emeceata, Flora Nwapa and Nawal El Sadaawi.

So Longer a Letter is a feministic work which describes the life of women in the patriarchal society in Africa/Senegalese society. It denounces gender discrimination and violation of human rights of women in patriarchal societies. Treiber in her article, “Feminism and Identity Politics: Mariama Ba’s “Un Chant ecarlate”, observes the case of African married women not better than a ‘prison house.’ (p.109) Treiber finds African communities to be highly traditional and essentially male-centered where women are expected to perform stereotype roles

only. *So Long a Letter* is a representation of the conditions of women which hardly allow them to break the shackles prepared for them by the rigid socio-cultural societies.

The story is one of the finest examples of feminism in the context of African literature. The woman writer articulates the injustices and oppression done to women. However, Ba rejected the term *feminist* for herself even though her novels represent the pathetic conditions of women, their exploitations, and oppressions, which form the core of feminist philosophy. Ajyayi in her article, "Feminism and the Quest for Identity: Rereading of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*," feels that Ba has been credited in adding strong, unique, and culturally relevant feminist voice to modern African literature. Her characters are strong enough, "to be able to speak and act independently, as they struggle, the various injustices in their society." (p.35)

Shades of Womanhood

This paper attempts to explore the multiple oppressions imposed upon the female characters, and the latter's subsequent struggle for self-identity. Women in *So Long a Letter* are the victims of the socio-culturally conservative society wherein they are exploited by the male members of their family.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are childhood friends and had received western education. Both the friends had shown enough courage in marrying the persons of their choice without bride-payment which was the custom in Senegalese society. But both differ in their position to the same situation in life; one emerges a rebel by shirking off the relationship and moves ahead in life while the other surrenders to subjugation and oppression for emotional and economic security of her children. The novel thus builds up two distinct stories of two friends who despite the likeness in all other things depart in their most important decision of life. These decisions were very important in terms of feminist movements in African countries.

Aissatou takes the role of a feminist by discarding and throwing of all attachments with her husband while Ramatoulaye shows feminine sensibility in not breaking up with the husband and caring for emotional and economic security of her children. Aissatou's stand has been appreciated even by Ramatoulaye who, much later in the novel, cannot act like her friend. de Almeida observes: "Such poignant decisions are all the more symbolic because they constitute acts of defiance and self-preservation, in a social context which isolates married women, who refuse to accept polygamy whereas it is sanctioned by Islam." (p.162)

The Senegalese writer has been a staunch critic of male-oriented approach to Islamic teaching. She reprimands biased or prejudiced views towards women under the umbrella of religion. The second or marginal class of Senegal women has been upheld by Ba time and again in her works. Her narrative world is woven around the exposition and articulation of patriarchal

strategies by which women are dominated and exploited by men under the pretext of culture and religion.

Ramatoulaye is the protagonist and narrator of the story *So Long a Letter*, who is seen constantly suffering at the hands of her male counterpart. She faces anguish and psychological endurance during the course of the novel. After a long time of oppression and suppression in male dominated society, she decides to move ahead of all this mechanism where women are meant to be exploited. Her mourning allows her to retire from her responsibilities and have a look at the present traditions and social mores that treat women no better than a secondary person. She has been conscious of hard conditions of women about which she makes a comment at the very outset of the novel. It is quite saddening on the part of the protagonist to lose her possession as gifts to her family members even after becoming widowed. Being widowed is itself a shattering moment emotionally, physically, and psychologically. In that situation if you are asked to give up your possessions, then there is nothing more devastating than that. Ramatoulaye sacrificed her personality, dignity and had become a servant to the members of the family of the person whom she had married. She had been enslaved to her husband, his grandparents, parents, brothers-sisters, and cousins as well.

The narrative style of Ba highlights the multilayered exigencies of marital life in Senegalese society. As Ba describes, the woman in this society toils all her life for her in-laws and ends up in being the victim of intersectional oppressions. Even after the death of her husband she is expected to perform her duties for the other members of the family. Ramatoulaye and her co-wife Bintou are tossed about from one position to another by their in-laws as if they are inhuman and senseless creatures. In other words, women suffer at the hands of not just the male members but even the female members of the family. Collins quotes in his article entitled, “Positionality and Feminisms of women within Sufi Brotherhoods of Senegal”, “the fact that women are stripped of their rights in Muslim societies in post-independence Senegal, it is because of patriarchal interpretations of the sacred text, not because of the texts themselves.”

Thus, the novel *So Long a Letter* examines the position of women in traditional Senegal societies wherein they are burdened with daily chores, emotional, physical, and socio-cultural bonding. The story shows that it is the male members of the narrative who are responsible for the break-up of their marriages while female members are the passive recipients of actions that happen in their lives.

The betrayal of Ramatoulaye’s husband breaks her marital bond with her youth love. On the other hand, Aissatou suffers because of her “low-birth”. Being the daughter of a goldsmith, Aissatou undergoes a lot of exploitation at the hands of her in-laws particularly her mother-in-law who avenges her for marrying her son. The example of Aissatou speaks volumes of ugliness of the caste system and stratification of society. By citing the examples of Ramatoulaye and

Aissatou, the writer wants to underline the resultant contradictions of adopting the modernity and not leaving the unpractical traditions. Both the ladies had gone against the custom of Islam by not receiving bridal dowry which is mandatory in Muslim marriages of Senegalese societies. People believe that when the bride does not receive the dowry, the groom and his family members will not respect the bride. But the western educated women Ramatoulaye and Aissatou thought, as Makward notes, “Marriage is a close association between two equals, and the sharing of the pains, joys, hopes, disappointments and success.” (p. 273) They did not value the monetary benefit in the sacred bond of love and relationship and went against the wishes of their parents to get into holy wedlock.

Ramatoulaye recollects the terrible situation Aissatou underwent at the disposal of her family-in-laws where she was reduced to an object that is emotionless and senseless. She was tortured and humiliated because her in-laws thought that she brought bad-luck, death, and dearth. Ba laments the mentality of the society that harasses an individual on the basis of superstitions. She thinks that these fallacious beliefs can have wide and deepening effects on the mind and the soul of the sufferer and can send them into oblivion and depression forever. The treatment given to her friend could have broken her marital life forever or could have had far-reaching and irreparable effects on her mind and body. Ramatoulaye reveals the real condition of her friend Aissatou in the following words:

“In any case, could a goldsmith’s daughter have any dignity, any honour? This was tantamount to asking whether you had a heart and flesh. Ah! For some people the honour and chagrin of a goldsmith’s daughter count far less, much less, than the honour and chagrin of a Guelwaar. (*SLL*, 31)

The character of Aissatou is in great contrast to that of Ramatoulaye, for she does not bow and surrender to the injustices in life. Upon the betrayal of her husband Mawdo in marrying a much younger lady than her, she decides to break up her relationship by giving divorce. She does not mourn or care for the security of her children like Ramatoulaye, instead she moves ahead, advances her education, and takes up job for herself. Chukwuma acknowledges her fortitude, “She bursts the fence of subjugation and nihilism and turned her back to its oppression.” (P.32) She is a mentally and physically strong lady to secure the future of her children and herself. The protagonist is sorry for the existing traditions, fallacious beliefs and stereo-typing roles of the individuals that allow other individuals to harass, humiliate and torture.

Ba comes heavily on the tradition of polygamy, for she believes it is the root cause of pain and distress for most of the women in Muslim communities. Polygamy is one of the recurrent and most important themes in almost all novels of Ba. She does not fail to underline the adverse and devastating conditions of women due to the tradition of polygamy.

So Long a Letter is the story of two abandoned women who happened to be friends, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Ramatoulaye's husband betrays her by breaking the marital bond of thirty years for the love the friend of their elder daughter while Aissatou's husband is a puppet in his mother's hand who, to please his mother, brings another woman in his life. The tradition of polygamy allows men to marry women half of their age.

Aissatou does not follow the footprints of Ramatoulaye; she steps out of marital bond with her husband and set an example for other women in the society. Her act is appreciated and saluted by Ramatoulaye who being the narrator of the story feels that the breakup is the new discourse and befitting reply to polygamy. But she herself remains in the bond to ensure the security of her children to share her husband with her co-wife. But she felt dismayed and was utterly disappointed. Her husband showed complete disregard for her and her children. He did not fulfill the physical, psychological, or economic requirements of Ramatoulaye and her children.

By giving this example the writer is probably alarming the other Senegalese women about the future prospect of their lives in case of remarriages by their husbands. By projecting Aissatou to be strong and a woman of action, Ba is providing a new discourse for women. Aissatou's reaction to the polygamous treatment of her husband can be taken as historical initiative in the context of African societies. Her exhibition of fortitude and self-belief is really path breaking for the younger generations to come. Her letter to her husband after his remarriage shows the kind of character she is.

Mawdo,

Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties, 'Others' bend their heads and, on silence accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering to me today in place of happiness we once had. I'm stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only garment, I go away. (SLL, 31-32)

Conclusion

Thus, *So Long a Letter* offers the stories of women who have been victimized by traditions and superstitions. Acceptance of and negligence to the exploitation under the social taboos encouraged patriarchy. The novel revolves around the problems of the protagonist and other women in it. It explores the suffering, pain, and traumatic experiences of the women characters in the novel and reveals how they encounter the situations that surround them. In the face of Aissatou, the writer gives birth to the new woman who rejects accepting another woman in the life of her husband and who rebels by breaking up with the marital bond. This kind of

activities will possibly put a check on the tradition of polygamy. Ba emerges as the pioneering feminist writer in giving a call for the redefinition of gender roles in African literature.

Abbreviation: *SLL* for *So Long a Letter*

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