
African Tradition and Modernity in Francophone African Fiction: the Case of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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Abstract: Francophone African literature refers to African literature written in French by authors living in Africa or abroad. Many issues are dealt with by francophone African writers as Boubacar Boris DIOP, Ousmane SEMBENE and Ferdinand OYONO and female writers as Ken Bougoul. Mariama BA who was one of the most prominent female writers in francophone African literature had chronicled the phenomenon of polygamy and women's role in African culture especially in her novel *So Long a Letter*. This work is an attempt to demonstrate the power of tradition in Senegalese culture especially in patriarchal societies where women are relegated to the margins and men participated to the most important decisions concerning the community. The novel also echoes how western education participates to the emancipation and engagement of women in Senegalese culture in an aim to resist to the sense of subordination, poverty and oppression.

Keywords: Tradition, engagement, polygamy, subordination, modernity, emancipation

I. Introduction

African literature is a literature produced by African writers in French-speaking countries which were formerly colonized by European French colonists in the 19th century. In this respect, these African intellectuals manage to figure out the power of tradition and culture in African traditional societies. Men turn out to be the most significant agents in the communities in contrast to the roles played by females who are considered to play a lesser role in their surroundings. Furthermore, traditional practices of polygamy in a Muslim-based community seem to play a crucial role in African traditional society where the plurality of women is a real prestige and a sign of power for most conservative people in this African community.

Francophone African writers as Ousmane SEMBENE, a native of Ziguinchor which is a West African city still deals with such themes as racism, and discrimination. Some immigrants may experience in some European countries economic oppression and ongoing enslavement that result from migration, a subject of Ousmane SEMBENE's *The Black Docker* that reviews the face of a decadent society through the portrayal of the male character El hadj Abdou Kader Beye as a polygamist.

In the light of francophone African literary production, the Senegalese female writer Aminata Sow FALL is celebrated in her home country as a committed writer as her works have gained international recognition and translated into major languages. Her works mainly reflect socio-political realities of Senegalese society as well as economic and cultural aspects and valorizing African culture. Her novels also showcase African cultural heritage as well as social and political consciousness. Mariama BA as a francophone African writer portrays the social mores of her Senegalese society where the practice of polygamy seems a significant practice destined to strengthen the role of women in African patriarchal societies.

This work is divided into two sections. The first section reviews in a specific way the power of tradition in patriarchal societies where the practice of polygamy plays a major role in maintaining the customary ties of African traditional values. This shows also the role played by women in Senegalese society. The second part evidences how western education as a symbol of social achievement and human progress opens the way for female engagement, empowerment and emancipation.

II. The Power of Tradition in African Patriarchal Societies

Mariama BA was regarded as one of the best advocates of women's rights in a society where tradition has a strong hold on Senegalese culture. BA's *So Long a Letter* tackles such issues as marriage, religion as well as the failure of two marriages in Senegalese Islamic context. This is to say that Ramatoulaye who is a product of western education due to her position as a teacher lives in a polygamous family as she accepts her fate after her husband's death Modou Fall.

This mourning performed by Ramatoulaye is illustrative of the strong influence Islamic religion has had on Senegalese culture. In accordance with Islamic culture, a widow must observe four months and ten days of mourning after her husband's death. In this respect, after her mourning, Ramatoulaye had to give all her belonging to her family-in-law. As Mariama BA records the concept of education of women in colonial West African counties like Senegal, she also tries her best to contrast Ramatoulaye's patience, subservience, and dedication to her own family including the number of her children.

However, Aissatou seems a more liberal woman and assertive who refuses to accept polygamy as a practice because she divorces and moves to USA. Mariama BA's frustration with the fate of African women becomes a subject matter of her semi-autobiographical novel *So Long a Letter* which was translated into a dozen languages. Mariama BA's *Scarlat Song* has also gained international recognition. As the novel is about a marriage between a European woman, Mireille a daughter of a wealthy diplomat and African man Ousmane who has just come back from France. Ousmane is completely rooted in his traditional culture and customary practices contrary to Mireille, a western woman who does not understand the foundation of traditional culture as well as the practice of polygamy.

Ramatoulaye's co-wife Bineta stayed married with Modou Fall only four years before he died from heart attack leaving Ramatoulaye with twelve children to rise in a polygamous family. Published a year before Mariama BA's death, the novel *Scarlat Song* had also gained international acclaim as this work analyses the practice of polygamy which is part and parcel of Senegalese Muslim culture and tradition.

The book also deals with the urgent need for women to recreate spaces for themselves in a patriarchal society where women are relegated to the margins as most of them suffer from the tyranny of tradition and the sense of despair and hopelessness that result from cross-cultural marriages. The promising career of Mariama BA ends with her death in 1981 at the age of 52. As a long life critic of gender inequality, she deeply advocates women's freedom and emancipation as she addresses the issues of gender, race, tradition and post-colonialism in her writings. One can compare Mariama BA's literary career with Nawal El SAADAWI's beliefs and ideology. A physician by education and medical doctor, SAADAWI was one of the Egyptian icons and feminists who advocate women's rights, emancipation against the psychological state of oppression and exploitation most women face in modern societies.

His works which were translated into several languages, had received international recognition worldwide. As a renowned activist and psychiatrist, Nawal El SAADAWI who worked in the Egyptian government was removed from her post and forced into exile in order to work as a visiting professor at American universities. Her novel *Woman at Point Zero* explores women's issues and their place in patriarchal societies.

As an advocate of women's rights in her home country of Senegal, Mariama BA shows the significant role played by the practice of polygamy in a Muslim society. BA describes Ramatoulaye who is Modou Fall's first wife who lives and suffers in polygamous Muslim society despite the birth of her many children. By portraying Ramatoulaye as a teacher, Mariama BA reviews how the practice of polygamy has stronghold influence on African women. According to women's tradition which is a dominant one in Senegal, the female character Ramatoulaye's mourning over the loss of her husband is symbolic of Islamic culture.

The novel is the account of the life of women in Senegal while the main protagonist Ramatoulaye writes a letter to her long life friend Aissatou who migrates to the USA and works as a clerk in the Senegalese embassy in the USA. As the latter goes deep down into Ramatoulaye's daily experience and how her husband Modou Fall dies from heart attack and her four-month and ten days mourning is symbolic of Islamic practice of polygamy.

Like Mariama BA, Ousmane SEMBENE was another icon of francophone African literature. Born on January 1, 1923 in Casamance especially in Ziguinchor, French West Africa, SEMBENE died in June 2007 in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. He was a Senegalese writer and filmmaker and known for his political and historical themes. He studied at the school of Ceramics at Marsassoum before moving to Dakar where he worked as a bricklayer and plumber.

Later, SEMBENE moved to the French army in 1939 during the Second World War a situation which drove him to work as a docker in Marseille and as a trade unionist as he taught himself to read and write in French. With the publication of his first novel, in 1956, he devoted his life to literature.

The novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) became a cornerstone of francophone African fiction which portrays the African workers' strike railroad. As one of the most prolific French speaking African writers, he was regarded as the father of African film and his literary works have entered the curricula of many high schools and universities around the world. He was also the most interviewed and African film director on the globe.

Moreover, ACHEBE's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* chronicle the authenticity of African culture and how Western ways of life had disturbed the harmony of African tradition with the introduction of Christianity in colonized nations of Africa. However in the other novels by Chinua ACHEBE as *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, the emphasis is laid on the critique of African contemporary politics which emerged after many African nations gained political independence from European nations. This period corresponds to the rise of political dictatorship in Africa, the emergence of coups d'états as well as the occurrence of civil wars and presidential assassinations especially in Nigeria which became a subject matter in modern African fiction. This idea of political corruption was also analyzed by the Senegalese writer Gorgui DIENG in his novel *A Leap out the Dark*. In *Ville Cruelle* and *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, the author highlights the cruelty of colonial enterprise which was a source of oppression, exploitation from which the colonized people suffered for several centuries back.

The vitality of African tradition is deeply analyzed in Seydou BODIAN's *Sous L'Orage* as the novel relates the conflict between tradition and modernity through the female character Kani when Cheikh Hamidou KANE's *Les Gardiens du Temple* deeply focuses on cultural identity, orature as well as the relationship between Islam and modernity and through a comparative approach, the author tends to show how Islam and modernity can move towards development and harmony.

In *Le Cercle des Tropiques*, Alioum FANTOURE reviews the issue of corruption and violence which occurs after independence. Camara LAYE's *The African Child* and Ngugi's *Weep, Not Child* tends to recount the traditional customs of African communities as well as practices and beliefs.

Apart from the Senegalese culture which is beautifully described by the female character Ramatoulaye through mourning and customary practices, the female writer Mariama BA manages to portray the influence of western

culture which invades the traditional African culture. In *So Long a Letter*, the female protagonist Ramatoulaye is an educated woman who lives in a society where tradition plays a central role in everyday life. To show the introduction of the new ways of life, Ramatoulaye's husband Modou Fall works as an advisor to the Ministry of Public Works and his friend Daouda Dieng is a member of the National Assembly.

This situation shows that Western education has left an indelible mark on Senegalese society as the female protagonist Ramatoulaye despite her education is nostalgic of the certain Senegalese customs like her mourning after her husband's death. This work implicitly portrays the march of progress and people's eagerness for the traditional ways of life. This ability to reconcile western ways and African tradition is a cornerstone in African francophone literature. BA's novel largely explores the tensions between Ramatoulaye's feminist values as a result of her education and religion shown by her mourning which compels Ramatoulaye to give all her wealth to the family in-laws in accordance with the Senegalese tradition. As the female writer acknowledges the predicament of African women in polygamous societies:

I listen to the words that create around me a new atmosphere in which I move, a stranger and tormented. Death, the tenuous passage between two opposite worlds, one tumultuous, the other still¹

This passage highlights Ramatoulaye's personal experience including her female condition as a wife as well as the aftermath of her husband's death which catapulted her life. It is the female author's attempt to revitalize the existing contradiction between life and death and the experience of reconciling marital life and her profession as a teacher in the midst of traditional customary beliefs that traditional women are expected to stay at home as guardians of family harmony and security. As a consequence, the author strives to reconcile uppermost values:

To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and customs to make us appreciate a multitude of civilization without renouncing our own, to raise our view of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress².

Traditional culture has always been a central issue dealt with by African modern writers. In *So Long a Letter*, tradition and customs hold an important position in daily lives of Senegalese women who, through the power of education, get emancipated and empowered in most African patriarchal societies.

III. Western Education and Female Engagement

Colonialism has had drastic consequences on the lives of the colonized people who were victims of oppression, exploitation and racism by white colonists for centuries back. Translated into six languages, the novel *So Long a Letter* recounts the female protagonist Ramatoulaye's life from childhood to maturity from which she experiences during her marital life and after her husband's death. Mirroring the condition of women in West African societies, the novel is a reflection on culture, divorce, widowhood, and western education which had influenced her life as a married female literate in a patriarchal society.

Through the portrayal of women, the author reveals how women are subjected to culture that contradict their capacity for high levels of participation in society. As one of the pioneers of Senegalese literature, Mariama BA was born in Dakar in the capital city of Senegal in 1929. Later, BA lost her mother at an early age and was brought up by her grandfather.

Like most francophone African writers in postcolonial period, BA explicitly analyses the social realities of her society, female condition and how women are victimized in polygamous African societies. As a semi-autobiographical novel originally written in French, Mariama BA's novel reviews women's roles in postcolonial

¹ Mariama, BA, *So Long a Letter*, Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1980, p.2

² Mariama, BA, *So Long a Letter*, op, cit, p.16

Africa as well as Senegalese class hierarchal realities and the role of religion in African society. The novel like a journal also deals with family and community as well as death rituals.

The letter which is destined for Aissatou is a remembrance of hard experience as friends including happiness and sadness they share during their childhoods. The power of education is analyzed through the portrayal of Mawdo Ba who is a doctor and the former husband of Aissatou who migrated to the USA. Western education is all the more important as it participated to the fulfillment of both female and male characters in the novel. Because western education had allowed Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to achieve financial independence and autonomy which reduce female victimization in African societies.

As a result of her education, Ramatoulaye did respect the choice of her friend Aissatou to divorce her husband Mawdo Ba and migrated abroad. This is an opportunity for the female author to show the dynamic bonds of friendship in modern societies which love fails. Western education did empower women like Aissatou who resists to the practice of polygamy and chooses a life of her own. Education did strengthen the friendship ties between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye. Although Mariama BA was not victim of polygamy, the novella contains parallels to the author's own life as the novel may be read as a semi-autobiographical depiction of a life of a woman living in a socio-cultural milieu of a particular time in her country's history. Despite her education, the female protagonist has a strong hold of African identity.

Mariama BA died at the age of 51 in 1981 before the publication of her novel *Scarlat Song*, a poetic drama of a love affair between a Senegalese woman and a daughter of a French diplomat. This work which is about race, gender, cultural disparities, and post-colonialism as the female writer was one of the most prominent francophone African writers to ponder over issue of gender inequality. As far as *The Scarlat Song* is concerned, the book portrays the male protagonist Ousmane Gueye as a Senegalese student in the 1960s who received western education.

With this union between Ousmane and Mireille, the feminist writer Mariama BA analyses the critically urgent need for women to create empowered spaces for themselves. The issue of gender, the contact between tradition and modernity and how the introduction of the new ways invaded the traditional African scene remain the subject matter of BA's novelistic approach. The sense of hopelessness that derived from cross-cultural marriages because of the misunderstanding between families in-laws seems a real preoccupation for Mariama BA.

Unlike Mariama BA's first novel *So Long a Letter* which analyses the triumph of friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, the novel *Scarlat Song* which was published after the female author's death emphasizes the failure of love due to cultural differences and cross-cultural barriers between African traditional values and European ways of life.

Because in BA's *Scarlat Song*, Mireille's sense of hopelessness led to tragedy as she finally kills her own son and attempts to murder her husband Ousmane Gueye when she realized that her husband has got a second wife. Mireille's descent into madness makes the novel more tragic than *So Long a Letter* where the female protagonist Ramatoulaye and her long life friend Aissatou as a result of their western education, manage so far to experience their hardships with patience without resorting to murder.

Both female protagonists have been accustomed to African women's plight in marital life when African culture contends a married woman must be subservient to the desires of her husband and family in-laws despite the high level of education African women may receive.

The issue of cross-cultural and religious conflict turns out to be a crucial issue in postcolonial African literature which is often dealt with by feminist writers. In the second novel, Mireille attempts to commit suicide and her descent into madness is tragic as she is traumatized by the effect of polygamy, a practice which is in

contradiction with the cultural and religious norms of European society. This is an attempt for the female author to contrast western culture with the rural African nations, the opposition between tradition and modernity and Islamic conventional beliefs in opposition to western ways.

VI. Conclusion

For several centuries, the colonizer experienced the hard realities of colonization which had drastic effects on the culture of the colonized people. This cultural hybrid brought about the conflict and endangered the social, cultural and religious harmony of the colonizer as this situation became the cornerstone of the downfall of African values. However western education as a source of empowerment and emancipation for most feminist writers, paves the way for female engagement and independence in traditional African societies. Senegalese women suffered from the practice of polygamy as well as marriage related issues as female subordination. For Mariama BA, western education has opened the way for female emancipation even through tradition played a central role in the African societies especially Senegalese culture. In my opinion, women should be emancipated as they play a central role in the social, economic and religious development of any nation.

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