

RELIGION, TRADITION AND WOMAN: MARIAMA BA'S "SO LONG A LETTER"

M. ASWANI REDDY

Research scholar (M.Phil), Andhra University, Visakhapatnam



ABSTRACT

Since the ages it has been inferred that the women have been subjugated by the prevailing patriarchal conditions in the society. This plight of very women has been conditioned in many ways which are comfortable to men. Most of those can be astute principles prescribed by men for the women in way that the men are the protectors of women..This perception has been worked out for many decades, inured women in such a way that, sometimes women themselves became perpetrators of women causes. The first weapon the men used through the name of religious norms which affected women more in a men wanted way.

This is the conditioned life, It is within this theoretical understanding, this paper attempts a critical reading of a novella *So Long a Letter* by a Senegalese feminist writer, Mariam Ba, whose novels are rejoiced for the 'most deeply felt presentation of the female condition in African fiction'

Key Words: Religion, Tradition, Women, Polygamy, Patriarchy

Article Info:

Article Received:08/01/2015

Revised on: 16/01/2015

Accepted on: 22/01/2015

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From the very first stage of the human civilization, it is concluded that there has been discrepancy in the distribution of power between man and woman. And any art form for that matter render as a palpable evidence which are created on the base of facts in projecting women as mere 'objects'. Further, the astute changes men brought down the ages are invisible, wide spreading, intrinsically complex, and it oppressed and reinforced physical, economic, political and ideological domination over the 'other'. Literature, being one of the art forms, has no exception from such accusation. Alongside, volumes of literary works are produced to resist patriarchal domination; to rewrite and to redefine the concept of gender; and to historicize any modes of oppression and voice out true emancipation. Literature by women writers, particularly when it comes to African women writers, always stand as stupendous exemplars of such well-presented creative material as their expression is a result of oppression. And ultimately novels are the best of the literary genres to offer both descriptive and thematic space in detailing the various encounters women's had.

The conversation of this paper used as a basis in stressing the disempowering effects made by any religion, particularly with reference to women in the traditional African Muslim context of Senegal. An examination of the issues such as Islamic principles and cultural practices by people of Senegal, in the Novella "*So Long a Letter*" by Mariama Ba would seem to indicate the marginalisation of Muslim women in particular. Ba uses the epistolary form to reflect on the female condition in post colonial Senegal. Women in the novella can be traced to be 'victims' and 'victimizers' of the patriarchal society. Hence, this paper aims to analyze the battle of sexes in the novella by examining the treatment, exploitation and manipulation of the female characters that are established on the ground of principles of Religion and Tradition.

The plight of an educated women in Muslim context is reflected in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. The Noma Award Novella *So Long a Letter* is a sequence of reminiscence recounted by Senegalese school teacher Ramatoulaye who widowed recently. Ba delineates the effects of Islam and tradition on women. As a letter begins, we learn that Ramatoulaye has just lost her husband because of heart attack. She resolves to write a letter to her friend Aissatou to cope up herself in a seclusion of four months as mandated by Islam for a widow. She writes about her emotional struggle to regain her life soon after she came to know about her husband's second marriage at the age of fifty. Though the laws of Islam agreeable to the actions of her husband Modou, it is regarded as abrupt rejection of their thirty years of life together. It also considered as betrayal of trust of woman, which is encouraged by a religion as Islamic law allows polygamy, where a Muslim man can be married to four women at the same time.

Religion treats women inferior to men in a society and condemned to be second class citizens. Even Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's childhood friend had to deal with this same heartbreaking ordeal before Ramatoulaye, when her husband Mowdo decides to take another wife. But unlike Ramatoulaye, despite her Islamic background, Aissatou takes a boldly moves further, leaves her husband and problem behind, goes to France and starts life on her own. She breaks the ancient habits that prosper women's subjugation and oppression. Aissatou expresses her refusal to stay with him clearly in a letter:

Mawdo
Princes master their feelings to fulfil their
duties, 'Others' bend their heads and, in
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 me today in
place of the happiness we once had...
I am stripping myself of your love, your
name. Clothed in my dignity, the only
garment, I go away (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

This letter not only said about their personal relationship, instead it gave a clear picture of the society, women's condition and men's treatment of women in those days.

In a letter Ramatoulaye writes of how she wished, she had the strength of her friend to just walk away.

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

Despite their western education, castes, though both the women belong to same community, they both contrast in their decisions and shares and even respect each other's decisions. Though Ramatoulaye is against of her husband's deed, as an educated, professional woman, a mother of twelve children obeys the norms of culture, where the women are always tend to be submissive.

She says to Aissatou:

I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated woman, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

Even her daughter Dada Binetou's friend advices with her mother to break with him

Break with him mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Auntie Aissatou did; break with him. (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

The society does not leave the woman who struggles and fights against the man, even though she suffers much with him. It has been imbibed into the people's nerves like that; but most of the women accept those norms for the sake of society than their own purpose. When Aissatou takes the decision to leave her husband and his family soon after she knows that he decides to take second wife, Ramatoulaye advices her

You were advised to compromise: 'you don't burn the tree that bares the fruits' You were threatened through your flesh: 'Boys cannot succeed without their father.' (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

As Ramatoulaye helps Aissatou conquer her throbbing experience, Aissatou also shows a remarkable support to her friend all the way through her tribulation even though they are different in their point of views of polygamy. Because she understands her friend's predicament, Aissatou completely empathize with her situation, thereby helping her overcome this challenge. When Modou leaves Ramatoulaye after twenty-five years of marriage with twelve children, the failure of love is not only real, but also vivid; however, Aissatou will always be there for her.

Binetou, the second wife of Moudo, whose age is, the age of Moudo's first daughter, would suffer more in the long run. The pressure of poverty and seeking desperately find the way of forceful decision of marriage with the man twice her age by her mother. She is the one who always with the true problem, who shattered more than Ramatoulaye with the death of her husband Modou, need to start her life all alone at very small age of nineteen. It is very hard to accept the fact by the children of Modou who had been grown up and studied with Binetou.

Referring to Benetou Ramatoulaye says:

like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence (Ba: So Long a Letter)

The holy Quran states that:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in husband's absence what Allah would have them Guard

The words like this strengthen the men into superiority and make women vulnerable. According to Islamic laws, it also mentioned that the men should give the equal importance and rights to every wife if they marry more than one and also look after them and their children economically and in other means. But Moudo violates even these rules. He failed to support his wife Ramatoulaye and his child economically which support Ramatoulaye expects atleast from him as a father os twelve children.

'Men are allowed to have four wives, but one wife is best always'. Men take it for granted, according to their convenience as Modou and Mowdo take this statement as their own.

Though Mowdo loves Aissatou, the impact of culture and traditions of African Muslim Society make Mowdo to accept his cousin Nabou as his second wife which can be granted on his mother's wish, who regrets later for his deed. The influence of religion is in such a way that neither he nor Modou able to think once of their wives before they take decision to go for second marriage.

In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dares to commit such an act of disavowal (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

The women are in such a condition in male perceptions that their wives are not need to be informed about their husband's second marriages, which also stressed the in text. It is personal job of a Imam and few family males. The Imam words are

There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

And Tamsir's (Ramatoulaye's brother-in-law) reaction:

...it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have second wife, there is nothing he can do about it (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

Though a man can control when any extenuating circumstances come suddenly, can be absent in a situation like this, which will be supported by Imams (The Clerics) who themselves are also men in polygamous set up.

Soon after the forty days of Ramatoulaye's husband's death, Tamsir along with Imam and others, come to her for a marriage proposal with Tamsir, which she abruptly rejects. For which the reaction of Imam Prayed to God to be his witness (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

It is the tradition that does not allow women even to study which is expressed by Ba in text through the character Aunt Nobou Mawdo's mother who teaches her niece

A woman does not need too much education (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

This is against the woman who rejects the marriage proposed by religion and tradition.

Although the letter is addressed to Aissatou, it is clear that, it targeted to all women and men of the world. The novel focuses on the negative effects that Islam and polygamy have on women, though the way of Islam that portrays in specifically Senegalese. The novel also stressed on the eternal victimization of two African women by their religion and culture in post colonial era of Senegal. It also focused on child marriages, encouraging during those days, which Ba wants to the same plights and aspirations. Because the text is a depiction of mainly what occurs in the lives of women and African women in particular.

The proposed paper is a feminist reading of *So Long a Letter* with special reference tracing the religion, traditions and customs are some of the reasons for inequity in power which causes tension between men and women. It also analyse the marginalization and stereotyping of women in Senegales literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in Senegales criticism. Through the character of Ramatoulaye, Ba questioned the ideology of the founding fathers of Negritude, especially the ways the male writers represent female. She claims that men oppress and mistreat women and restrict them from not allowing realizing themselves. Therefore she rejects patriarchy completely.

Ba juxtaposes male behaviour with sexual instincts and female continence and rationality. Once Ramatoulaye warns her daughter that

The existence of contraception's should not lead to unhindered release of desires and instincts. It is through his self control, his ability to reason to choose his power to attachment, that the individual distinguishes himself from the animal. (Ba: *So Long a Letter*)

Ba's frustration with the fate of African women as well as her ultimate acceptance of it is expressed in her novel. She had a vision on deleterious impact of their cultural thought and institutions are made to demonstrate masquerades as tradition and 'culture' men and women have been seduced into, accepting the continuation of these customs. Ba wants to persuade the people of their respective rational cultural perceptions by using her works as a medium or vehicles to change the perceptions of human kind of society especially in Senegal.

This paper is trying to highlight that the role of religion and it's customs particularly Islam religion in the oppression of women in a society. It has been accepted that the women are victims in the hands of men, the religious principles of any religion in the world also are made by the men themselves. Therefore every aim of religion is in support of men itself, makes women victims in the hands of them, which actually meant for love and peace among the humanity.

It is where and how the men in the *So Long a Letter* made the injustice in way of justice, which ruin the lives of Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Benetou and Nabou. Although Nabou might not be affected by this customs and religious norms explicitly, in a sense as she realizes the lack, but the loss is direct to the spectators. She has been influenced by her Aunt Nabou from her childhood onwards in such a way that she does not even know that she has lost something which is very important for her psychological development. She has accepted just what her Aunt granted to her and missed the very important aspect, so called education. Her Aunt teaches her that *a woman does not need too much education*, (Ba: *So Long a Letter*) and just need to manage her home.

The work was written by Ba in post colonial era, therefore the traditions, customs and problems discussed here, are the circumstances of those days particularly. But we have to focus in these issues not only in West Africa because it's influence is there in many societies even today especially in the countries like Africa, India etc where the crux is tradition. Both men and women together should aware of this negative impact of these irrational religious principles and customs existing in a modern society even to fill the gaps in male-constructed literary history and canon.

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