

POWER OF EDUCATION IN MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER*

By

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Abstract

So Long a Letter is a radical novel, which maintains the form of a long letter. The novel was written and narrated completely in the form of a letter. Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter is an epistolary form of novel. The events narrated in the novel chronicles Ramatoulaye's life from childhood to adulthood. She is a Senegalese woman writer, who used writing as a weapon to fight against the male literary tradition. Mariama Ba speaks about the inequity exposed on women by the patriarchal society and to advance women's issues in African society. Although she wrote only two novels, she remains a central figure in African literature. The main theme of the novel is the condition of women in West African society. This paper focuses on woman, education, culture, divorce, and widowhood in So Long a Letter. Through this novel, she depicts the different ways in which women fight for survival in an environment of cultural conflicts change.

Keywords: *motherhood, adulthood, women, education, africa, polygamy.*

Introduction

Mariama Ba was born in Darkar in 1929. Her novel *So Long a Letter* was originally written in French and has been translated into sixteen languages. The book recounts the friendship that existed between two women named Ramatoulaye, who resides in Senegal and Aissatou living in the United States. The novel is about the letter that Ramatoulaye writes to her friend Aissatou and reminds her of their friendship that goes as far back as their grandmothers, mothers and their shared childhood.

The portrayal of women described in the novel that is used for the study has exposed that women are still subjected to a culture that contradicts their capacity for high levels of participation in society. Nevertheless, *So Long a Letter* has also explained that more

and more women are gaining realization of their hardships and choosing to oppose it. In terms of education, the women in the novel are portrayed, in ways that reflect real life situations, in that some are educated while others are not.

Power of Education

In *So Long a Letter*, the major theme focuses on religion and its influences on the educated women. The two major influences that manifest on her works are, the authors western education and Islamic religious tradition. So there are lots of echoes of Islamic teaching sounding recurrently in her novels. Mariama Ba's first novel *So Long a Letter*, won her the most acclaimed noma award for publishing in Africa in 1980's. The novel portrays the story in *So Long a Letter* in which Ramatoulaye describes her daily

diary of events after the death of her husband, Modou. Ramatoulaye writes a letter to her childhood friend Aissatou. It focuses on their happiness, sadness and their shared experiences of their husband marriages to other wives are reinforced by Islamic religion.

The women represented in the novel have good level of education. In the light of this aspect of the portrayal of women, African women writers contribute to the importance of education in the sovereignty of women. In *So Long a Letter*, Ba describes women who, though educated, they don't occupy powerful positions Ramatoulaye, for instance, is a teacher; still, the men holds higher positions that give them reputation not only within their communities, but also in the society. After the death of Ramatoulaye's husband, Dauda Deing, becomes her suitor. He is the deputy at the "National assembly and Aissatou former husband, Mawdo Ba, is a doctor" (*So Long a Letter*, 59). Ramatoulaye describes that even after twenty years of independence, there is no single female ministers who is involved in the decision which is concerned about the development of the country.

The equality that results from friendship and education are important elements in *So Long a Letter*. The fact that Ramatoulaye is writing a letter to Aissatou helps to formulate this idea. Both women were educated at French convent schools in Senegal, very rare for women of that time. Their friendship remains because of education and the recognition of the path each one took is thoughtful of how education

embellishes human understanding. Ramatoulaye does not neglect Aissatou's choice of divorcing her husband because she is educated and understands how the choices made are done to assert her own sense of being. It is education that permits Ramatoulaye to respect the path her friend took and not abandon the friendship. Even though Ramatoulaye took a different path, there is a respect present because of her being educated (Ashley Kannan).

The respect for choices made is the basis of the friendship between both women (Ashley Kannan). It improves the equality shared between both in a setting where cultural tradition and practice is given unhealthy favoritism. The conclusion in which Ramatoulaye desires that she and Aissatou can meet up and talk as friends show how education can help to supply "the lasting foundation between human beings as equals as a transcendent quality amidst a world of temporal contingency".

The connection between education, power, and culture is exposed through Assiatou's portrayal. She receives good education, leaves her polygamous husband. She is able to get a good job as an interpreter in the United States, thus she identifies her own-self and she self empowers by the means of education. Aissatou's portrayal reflects the importance of education. As Catherine asserts,

The need for women to not only look to others for empowerment but to empower themselves (33)

So Long a Letter depicts three women who are educated, are attentive of their social circumstances and as a result, they have the tendency to react to their situation. Ramatoulaye, a teacher, and her friend Aissatou, an interpreter are highly educated women. They are the sufferer of traditional custom: still, these two women react to the victimization differently. While Ramatoulaye seems adjusted to live within her community, Aissatou chooses to move forward with her education and relocate to another country.

Ba portrays Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, as more independent, and educated young woman. At one time Daba requests her mother to divorce her father after he accepts the young girl, Binetou, as his second wife. She says

Break with him mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me.....I can't see you fighting over a man with a girl my age (1981:39 *So Long a Letter*).

However, Ramatoulaye responds differently to Aissatou as she decides to stay with her polygamous husband so as not to be criticized severely by her community. Ba depicts Daba in the class of women who are certainly brave and crucial in their idea of life; for instance, she gets married to a man who respects her and treats her equally. Both use their power of education to free their minds. Ramatoulaye asserts that

If your opinions are to carry weight, they must be based on knowledge

backed by diplomas. A diploma is not a myth (73, *So Long a Letter*).

Ramatoulaye also characterizes Daba as someone who reasons out everything and this portrayal reflects a generation of thinking women who establish their determination on reason. Daba is a self-independent woman, who is the representative of the new wave African women. She does not reject culture but reaches it with sense and reason. It is from such a portrayal that Ba connects the positive attitudes of some of the female characters to the enduring negative attitudes of those who choose to blame rather than to act. Thus the characters depicted in the novel boldly explore a change for the advancement of the women's cause culturally and realize education as a procedure to overcoming injustice and maltreatments.

Conclusion

Through education, it is the women who conquer and stand high in their several experiences. It is education that helps Aissatou to leave her husband, rise above and be a powerful source of support for her friend, Ramatoulaye. It is with education, that Ramatoulaye though deciding to stay married takes care of her children. It is this education that gives her the alternative of ignoring to marry Tamsir, her husband's elder brother. It is what gives her the recklessness to deny the handsome offer of Daouda Dieng. It is education that gives young Nabou the chance to establish a better thinking capability and to be a lady of purpose. Thus, a total education brings

about the inspiration of the woman and is an advantage to every family and society. An

educated woman can stand on her own and reach greater heights.

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To cite this article

Ashmi. (2020). Power of Education in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. *Sparkling International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Studies*, 3(1), 12-15.

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