

Marriage And Choice in Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*

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Introduction

One of the strongest female voices to adorn the canvas of African literature in the past two decade is Senegal's Mariama Ba. She has through her works brought to the fore the condition of the woman in the marriage institution in particular, and in the African society which is largely patriarchal. The focus on the woman in her literary output is attracting added attention, apparently because of the searchlight beamed on women in the Muslim world.

It will be recalled that before now the whole corpus called African literature was simply a male dominated spectrum. And as such their concerns were equally limited, concentrating only on male related issues and where women were brought in, it was lacking in positive portrayal as could be deduced in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966) and many others.

Women writers therefore took up the gauntlet to address issues that are of great importance to the womenfolk, which hitherto had been neglected. One can categorically say and quite frankly too that women writers and critics have come of age, as there is a more balanced views and perspectives dominating African literature today. Lending credence to this, Modupe Kolawale in her essay 'Feminine Preoccupations in African Literature: A Theoretical Appraisal' agrees that:

Feminine issues have emerged as one of the most recent perspectives in African literary scholarship. One cannot deny the impact of gender on the writer and critic of African literature. Gender has become ubiquitous in modern humanistic studies. It becomes inevitably significant in Africa because the curliest writers und critics were male

and logically, there was a dearth of feminine representation (115).

Among these writers carrying the baton of promoting women issues is Mariama Ba. Even though she has two novels *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, it's worthy to note that they have become a reference point on issues pertaining women's subjugation and enslavement in the matrimonial hearth.

Theme

In *Scarlet Song*, Ba once again looks at the woman in the marriage institution against the backdrop of race. She focuses on the woman question in this novel, but unlike *So Long a Letter* which she interrogated within the same cultural milieu, she explores it from the angle of a foreigner, a white girl, Mireille de la Vallee, daughter of a French diplomat, who against parental objection marries her school mate friend, Ousmane Gueye, a Senegalese. It is widely held that marriage is the consummation of love between the man and the woman, and as Helen Chukwuma underscores in 'Voices and Choices ...', it is 'a social duty for both man and woman' (218). The same applies to Ousmane and Mireille in taking their love affair to a higher level.

However, this dream of settling down was vehemently kicked against by Mireille's parents whose contempt for Ousmane is best illustrated in the statement over the picture; by her father 'Do you recognise this object?' (25). Despite all parental threats of 'no more university' (27), Mireille stood her ground. The novel exposes the heartache women face in making these choices in marriage. The parents unperturbed and adamant to their daughter's feelings flies her back to Paris. And contrary to their wishes, she asserts herself and marries him. According to Chukwuma, two main features come into play in female assertion:

first, the woman herself, her acumen and disposition which makes her fight for herself. Secondly, the environment where she operates in (xiii).

It is important to state that while Mireille's parents had objected to the

marriage, the same did not receive the blessings of Ousmane's parent back at home, in that Mireille wasn't accepted in the family upon their return from Paris. Ousmane's mother Yaye Khady opposes it and demonstrates what could be linked to 'Jocasta Complex' over her son. She argues that:

A *Toubab* cant be a proper daughter-in-law. She'll only have eyes for her man. We'll mean nothing to her. And **I** who dreamt of a daughter-in-law who'd live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over the management of the house, and now I'm faced with a woman who's going to take my son away from me. I shall die on my feet, in the kitchen (66).

Yaye Khady swears to do all she could to make Mireille uncomfortable in the marriage. This posture only quickened to widen the apparent cultural gulf between Mireille and the Senegalese society. The mother Yaye Khady who would have been at the forefront of this integration is bent on sowing the seed of discord at every given opportunity.

The mother-in-law influence is a persistent reoccurrence in African literature of today. This is also evidenced in *So Long a Letter* as both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou were victims of over domineering mother-in-laws. This same brunt is also unleashed on Amaka by Obiora's mother in *One is Enough* (1981), Chukwuma in her study, 'The Face of Eve: Feminist Writing in African Literature', recognises that man is not the only enemy, because women are too, in encouraging intimidating norms and traditions of subjugating and negative values inherent in our society (109). She adduces reason for this ugly development, pointing out that having experienced subjugation and second-class status in the various stages of life, any claim to authority or superiority on the part of the woman is clearly maximized. She argues that:

The mother of your husband, your lord and master, must be recognized and acclaimed as the powerful woman she is. Further, the wife's gain of a marriage partner in her son is her own loss and her daughter-in-law must eschew the fact and accord her that respect and favour. Finally women generally in the marriage set-up act to please the men, be such men husbands or sons, and in such a priority the women aggrieve themselves (109).

Chukwuma's submission aptly captures Yaye Khady, who as the

narrator points out does not spare a thought for the other mother who too had been cut off from her own daughter. Instead she continues to fume; 'white woman does not enrich a family. She impoverishes it by undermining its unity' (73). An irony if one considers the background Yaye Khady and the rest of the family were emerging from. But as Emelia Oko states in her study; *Eros, Psyche and Society: Narrative Continuity in Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter*, Yaye Khady does not conceive of life outside her son. According to Oko, 'she is the image of woman destroyed in her acceptance of the tradition of self negation, self sacrifice ... who has accepted her existence as immanent in the service of man ... not self realizing' (86).

While the over bearing influence of the mother-in-law Yaye Khady is well documented, its important to pause and take a look at the character of Qusmane Gueye. According to Akachi Ezelgbo, the apparent success of cross cultural marriage like in *Scarlet Song* rests essentially on the moral strength, discipline, faithfulness and maturity of character of the couple (60). It is obvious that Ousmane was found wanting. The problem with him comes in the fact that he wanted to make a Senegalese woman out of Mireille. In the first spark of quarrel between them, he accused Mireille of being 'self centred' (82) because she preferred going to cinema to watching his father recite the Koran and even when it was complained that 'the *Toubab* does not kneel down to pray' (84). The result according to the narrator, 'Ousmane, uncompromising, relentlessly pursued Mireille to see that she carried out her religious duties correctly' (84). This marked the beginning of incessant quarrels between them.

In furtherance of the above submission, and recognising too that right from the beginning Yaye Khady rejects Mireille and her son especially on the grounds of racial prejudice, and equally important for economic and social reasons too. To her, Mireille is going to supplant her in relation to Ousmane, and deny her the 'glorious' opportunity to flaunt her son's wealth to neighbours. It is worthy also to mention that the person of Ousmane had not manifested that unflinching love expected of a man who is going to take a giant step of marrying 'a white woman and of different culture. On receiving Mireille's letter pledging her underlying love, he was torn between sticking to his people and environment than following his heart. The choice he had to make, he couldn't go through till end, instead offered that he will make it a *condition* that Mireille should first convert to Islam. 'I will never

split myself apart for you. I will never lose my identity for you' (39).

In assessing the couple, Edris Makward in his essay 'Marriage, Tradition and Woman's Pursuit of Happiness-- in the Novels of Mariama Ba, argues that:

They are confronted with a number of cultural difficulties; the most devastating of all being the overwhelming weight of the family and the community on the young couple (275).

He opines that the fear of Ousmane betraying his people haunted him. And so torn between the two cultural worlds, his dilemma therefore lies in his wish to preserve both of these world.

It was in this torn mind therefore that Olleymatou capitalized to put herself in the forefront of his life. She recognizes herself in Yaye Khady and works hard to achieve her motive. Like Aunt Nabou in *So Long a Letter* who uses young Nabou to foil Aissatou, Yaye Khady uses Ouleymatou Ngom to foil Mireille.

Mawdo Fall a prince, marrying Aissatoll a goldsmith's daughter, to aunt Nabou is a disgrace to the family's social standing as it would lead to ridiculing. She plans to redress the disgrace by planting young Nabou into her son's marriage.

Ousmane's attitude towards Mireille only helped in quickening the disintegration and breakdown of their marriage. In order not to be ostracized for marrying a white woman, he embarks on measures to assure his people that he is truly in charge in his house. Instead of helping the wife to adapt to the new environment and culture, he rather takes sides against her, further alienating her. Its important to point out here that Mireille faces the challenge of numerous visitors to the house who come unannounced and expect to be fed, litter everywhere with cigarette butts and kolanuts, cntIcIze mixed marriages right in her presence and even Ousmane's mother invasion oftheir privacy. All these attitudes were totally alien to her, and she sees it as a form of parasitism. According to Mimiko Bestman, in his study, 'Mariama Ba and the Woman question' 'Uusmane is torn between the path he has chosen and what his society expects of him' (116). Even when friends prodded him to change, his obstinacy was almost legendary.

It was not much of a shock therefore that Ousmane quickly falls prey

to Ouleymatou's scheming, and that of his mother, who swore to deal with 'she devil'. Writing in *Ngambika*, Makward observes that:

The failure of the couple Ousmane/Mireille is due basically to Ousmane's nostalgic infatuation with an early flame of his adolescence, Ouleymatou. But the encouragement of his mother who benefits from Ouleymatou's triumph is also a factor (279).

It is really a victory for Yaye Khady because it places her right in the centre of his life once again. The lavish and extravagant party thrown at the birth of his son by Ouleymatou attests to this. His secret marriage to her therefore was to authenticate the relationship. He claims that 'by so doing he comes to terms with himself having found his roots in his 'regress of the gongo' smell his symbol of Africa'. He sees marriage to Ouleymatou as a reconnection to Africa to his roots and emancipator of the continent, ambassador of his people (149).

In his landmark essay, 'Urban Spaces, Women's Places ... ', Obioma Nnaemeka dismisses Ousmane's linkage of marriage to Ouleymatou with Africa, frowning that:

This deceit wrapped up in naturalized, ongmary, feminized, idealized and 'motherized' Africa and sung in poetry will be met with poetic justice at the end of the novel. Ousmane is not least confused, he knows what he is doing; he is only battling his demon(186).

The shock of the discovery of this immense deception drives Mireille crazy. In a fit of anger and apparent confusion, she pastes Ousmane's love letters to her all over their home, kills their only child and stabs Ousmane when he comes home, as usual, in the early hours of the morning. The contradictions of Mireille's married life take a human form in her mulatto son whom she kills as a rejection and possible resolution of those contradictions. Her letters feverishly pasted all over the house contain sentiments; - 'I shall never love anyone but you, as long 'as I live' ... 'you, my Blanch, You my Blond, how I miss you' ... without you, life has no relish' (163) that contradict Ousmane's current attitude towards her. It's also important to add that Ousmane's bravado; 'must I back down because of my wife's anger? Because she may get violent in her fury? (150), is not a smart move after all, as Mireille eventually stabs him. Fortunately for Ousmane, he is left bleeding but not declared dead; luckily too for Mireille, the plea of

insanity remains a legal recourse to be exploited in France.

There is also a wicked twist of irony here as it is Mireille that advises Ousmane to visit Ouseynou, Ouleymatou's brother in their place, as the later had bitterly complained to her, thus inadvertently contributing to the return of Ouleymatou into his life and which eventually rocks their marriage. According to Victor Aire, this actually clinches the matter and prepares and foregrounds Mireille's subsequent actions: the spying on Ousmane, her jealousy, the feeling of betrayal, the anguish and dilemma and finally the mental violence which in turn generates physical violence (160). A sure sign of betrayal and abandonment of one in love. Nnaemeka takes a second look at characters in Ba's novels suggesting that:

Mariama Ba puts on stage a bunch of irresponsible philanders who use the institution of polygamy as an alibi, whose wealth and easy mobility in an urban setting make it possible for them to manipulate the system to their own advantage (154).

Therefore the issue is not polygamy as an institution, even though, as underscored in *Scarlet Song*, in the muslim world marriages are dismantled at will even with the use of e-mails and telephones, leaving the woman worse off. But the contention is men's polygamous instincts that inaugurate and encourage philandering, betrayal, infidelity, lack of trust and abandonment. In that the issue here is less about Islamic or African culture and instead more about men's inability to control their roving eyes round the woman's skirt. This is applicable to Modou and Mawdo in *So Long a Letter*.

As will be recalled, in his letter to his father after their wedding, Ousmane admits the immense positive contribution Mireille has made to his life:

If I had made success of my life, as if I am, as you say, your pride and joy, if I have fulfilled all your wishes, if you have left the dust of Usine Niari Talli behind you, if you can contemplate serenely months and years stretching out before you, it is all thanks to her. It is difficult for a man to undertake anything alone ... Mireille has helped me, by her unflagging moral, to realize my potential. She was always before me, like a flaming torch, lighting up my path (64).

But unfortunately, it's jettisoned immediately he sets his eyes on Ouleymatou

whose effort is all about survival and conquering poverty. She is even not averse to sharing men with other women. Nnaemeka therefore frowns at the way 'to which religious and traditional institution are subverted by 'modernity' in Africa's urban areas, particularly among the more affluent middle and upper-middle classes (186). It is ironic that the wealth which the first wife helps to acquire is _eventually used against her.

Oko further observes that Ouleymatou's so 'called love is motivated by economic realism. She dismissed her numerous suitors because they are incapable of setting her up the opulent style favoured in films' (106). In a world that prefers woman as commodity she is the answer. Even though, not academically brilliant but she is imbued with native intelligence to paddle her canoe for survival.

In her quest for love, Mireille have had to make some tough choices. This is even manifest as early as possible in the novel when she decides to study for a degree in philosophy in Dakar instead of France, where everything would be at her beck and call, just to make sure she could continue to see Ousmane. She equally converts to Islam out of love for Ousmane, who had given that as one of the conditions on which they could marry. She also turns her back on her parents, foregoing royalty and even the country. She wriks to her parents:

I am turning my back on a protected past to face the unknown. I am aware of this. I am giving up comfort for adventure. I know that too. I say to myself, happiness does not fall into one's lap. It must be deserved (46).

During the long wait in France for Ousmane, suitors were also coming for her hand in marriage. Pierre's proposal is particularly pertinent:

She puts up with his company, but she did not love him ... the red roses that invaded the apartment every Saturday evening did not cause her to change her mind But when they wanted to announce an official engagement she dug her heels in. The aquamarine ring, set in precious diamonds, would never sparkle on her finger (53).

Also, from far away France, her heart is inseperable from the one she has given her body to and would not accommodate anything outside of it. She declares in her letter; 'Just tell me what to do and nothing else except you

will matter' (36). Not even caring a hoot the long wait that is associated to the time she will be able to have her independence under law. Invariably, the choice she makes were to come back to haunt her.

In her essay, 'The Concept of Choice in Mariama Ba's Fiction', Irene Assiba d' Almeida observes that:

Mariama Ba widens the scope of concept of choice by showing how all human beings female and male, Black and White deal with that concept and the consequences that choice can have on the self and on the human community (171).

The point being underscored here is the choices characters make in *Scarlet Song* help to shape the story in one way or the other, especially on those to the two main characters, Ousmane and Mireile.

There are implications therefore on the choices made in *Scarlet Song* as they come together in bringing Mireille down. Her destruction also will affect the people who made the choice. According to Jean Paul Sarte:

... man is responsible for what he is...when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men (qtd... *Ngambika*).

In *Scarlet Song*, there is strong linkage between choice and responsibility, in that main characters are not only responsible for what happens to others as a result of their choices, but also responsible for what happens to them as individuals, couples and members of the larger community.

This therefore brings to question why Mireille choose to stay in marriage, that has obviously hit the rocks. Rose Acholonu in her essay, 'The Loving Wives of Mariama Ba: Victims of Doomed Illusions', wonders why despite obvious husband treacherous betrayal, Mireille, 'proves utterly unable to save herself. She contrary to reason and common sense, opts for what she terms the degrading choice to remain slave to a dead love' (206). On the other hand, in her battle with what to do with herself in the face of abandonment and callousness by Ousmane, Mireille had tried to use the child argument like Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* and Li in *The Stillborn*, as reason for hanging on. But Ba disagrees here that:

The child argument doesn't hold water. Many humiliated wives use this excuse to camouflage their own lack of will-power. And with faces bathed in tears, these mothers protest how ill-used they are (*Scarlet*. 161).

Oko, on the other angle, argues that Mireille is economically balanced, but most importantly she does not assume self dependence that is vital in marriage, and that's why she stays in a relationship that destroys her sense (84). This is interesting because, the romantic notion of love traps women in dependency mentality to their husbands. This comes from the marriage myth which looks at the 'blissfulness that marriage brings and which tend to occupy their minds.

Mireille suffers from this simply because she fails to heed Grace Okereke's advice in 'Feminist consciousness ... ' that:

The new woman, whether in marriage or outside of it, should be assertive economically independent and predisposed towards survival and self realization, even if her husband betrays their marriage (97).

Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter* captures quite strongly the fate of women who gave all marriage, but only to find that they are despised, relegated or exchanged, who were abandoned like a worn-out or out-dated *boubou* (*So Long ...* , 41). The result of which tends to put them in difficult pedestal of wallowing in obvious loneliness, deflated pride, hopelessness and as sometimes as the case may be outright madness, as in *Scarlet Song*.

Emphasizing on the above situation, Eton Simon, submits that 'Ba's novels, *So Long ...* and *Scarlet Song* narrates the lives of women whose fanatical love for their husbands fail to yield the envisaged goal of lasting marital bliss' (70).

Though arguments have been raised as to why she could not arrive at any positive solution to her plight, Acholonu believes that her naivety, inordinate sense of pride arising from her bourgeoisie upbringing and her devotion to blind love, all combine to drive her to a state of mental breakdown (201).

Style

In *Scarlet Song*, the author use the omniscient narrator to tell the story, and who most of the time adopts the point of view of different characters, but through the use of authorial commentary stand above these characters to applaud or even criticize their actions or decisions as the case may be. Through this technique the picture of an upright, intelligent, and progressive young man like Ousmane, suddenly becomes an unfaithful, adulterous and intransigent person who takes recourse in telling lies. This third person narrative comments on issues in order to give a balanced view to the reader. For instance, 'Not for one moment did Yaye Khady spare a thought for the other woman for all that she was white, had also given birth, loved, and hoped' (74). This omniscient narrator enables as to follow the character as the negotiate life changing events in the novel.

Another aspect of style that enhanced the story is language. The consistent use of indigenous language brought an added colour to the whole story. The picture of what is described comes to life when they are mentioned. For instance hot *kinkelibe* that is served as the breakfast, as well as other local words ; ndeup, dédélé, m'boum, toubab used that are found in the glossary for everybody to consult and follow. Also, the use of proverbs as epitomised by the one Ousmane's father told at the police station on people to be cautious in life, and also not to abandon loved ones. When one abandons ones own hill, the next hill which one climbs will ,crumble' (168). All these help in achieving credibility in the story. Ba also make use of letters which is meant to create effect not only in the beginning during the courtship between Ousmane and Mireille but when she pastes them on the wall to shown pain of a failed love.

There are positive issues that abound in *Scarlet Song*. The need for women to come together in confronting subjugation and enslavement, and also to help each other reduce pain in relationships.

Okereke underscores that:

Female friendship serves 'as a balm over the wounds , of marital abuse and betrayal for woman. It also opens up new vistas of life for the brutalized women whose narrow vision in the domestic hearth had benefit her of any meaningful communication and growth outside home (99).

Just as we saw Amaka and Adaobi, in *One is Enough*, Ramaibulaye and Aissatou, in *So Long a Letter*, Mireille and Rosalie establish that bond. As a matter of fact Rosalie encourages Mireille to learn new things about Senegalese culture. Also, Ousmane's sister Soukenya whose action of anonymous letter informed Mireille of her brother's second home.

Despite the sad ending of the story, Ba is not against interracial marriage. As can be deduced from the novel, Lamine a Senegalese and Pierrette a French make success of their own marriage. The big lesson is that those involved must make cogent and conscious effort and some amount of sacrifice and compromise to break down these racial and cultural differences that rock relationship.

Ba also left a message for women in the society. According to Chukwuma in *Accents in the African Novel*, 'A woman's fate is her own, as is her choice of life. In a world of diversities and choice, a woman ultimately has to stand up and make a choice and her success and failure in that choice lies in her (35). The contention above is that the woman has the sole responsibility of making that choice which inhibits or uplifts her growth in the society.

Conclusion

This novel, Ba's second has captured in essence the important ingredient people need to have to experience a successful marriage. Women should not be degraded, dehumanized and denigrated, but the need for both male and female to sink their differences and make allowances for one another to have success in marriage, not tainted by any ethnic, religious, cultural and inhibitions.

It is advisory to posit here for the menfolk In particular, and according to Nnaemeka, what Ba's novels encapsulate is the:

transformation of traditional African institutions by 'modernity' and the' manipulation of these transformatory stages by men to their own advantage thereby creating the pain of their female partners (170).

This is poignant as the recognition of the woman as a partner and not a competitor would in no small way enhance a successful home that invariably benefits the larger society.

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