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Women, Individual and National Aspirations in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

SUNNY AWHEFEADA
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

Abstract. Almost every discourse on gender in Africa invariably slides into an evaluation of the fate of women in a male structured society. This tendency is also prevalent in the body of writings known as modern African literature. The focus of this paper is to examine the emergence of the new African woman in the scheme of a social order that is programmed to suffocate her. The Senegalese Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (a novel) will be adopted as an illustrative text to depict the emergence of the new African woman striving against social and religious impediments to carve a niche for herself in a continent that hitherto did not factor women into its aspirations. Ba's novel portrays the role education can play in the empowerment of women not only in breaking cultural barriers, but also in self-actualization which leads to their contributing to the wellbeing of their family, social order and by extension national development. Although, the novel depicts two women badly bruised by marital crises aided by cultural sanctions there is hope that education and the appropriate social and gender policies will ensure a place for the new woman.

Keywords: Women, National Aspirations, Discourse, Gender, Empowerment

1. Introduction

The publication of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* in 1980, not only startled and excited critics and readers of the African novel, but it also marked the turning point for the female novel in Africa. Described by Uzo Esonwanne as "The first explicit self-conscious meditation on gender difference; . . ." (1997, 83), the novel's freshness, its remarkable poetic style and the courage with which the author confronts the condition of women remain unparalleled. Before Ba's epistolary novel, the female African novel focuses on the plight of the traditional African woman as she remains unheard, but only seen. Located within the framework of "motherhood and cultural inhibition" (2007, 532) as Lauretta Ngcobo puts it, the focus of many of the earlier female African novels, especially Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*, Rebeka Njau's *Ripples in the Pool*, etc, explore the traditional impediments of women ranging from polygamy, childlessness to other socio-cultural encumbrances. Where some of the later novels, such as those by Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Ifeoma Okoye's *Men Without Ears* mirror women problems, it is done from a conservative and usually apologetic perspective which the authors feel will not ruffle feathers. Such narratives often present the condition of women as if it is the established norm of social experience for women to be at the receiving end. The novels merely represent the deplorable condition of women making them appear to be in need of sympathy. The novelists did not explore the subject matter from an ideological or combative perspective which is geared towards making tangible statements for the emancipation of women. This is where Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* differs from it precursors. In this debut novel, Ba radicalizes women experience with a loud feminist undertone as she depicts the emergence of the new African woman made

conscious and articulate by the instrumentality of western education. Her narrative scheme not only challenges long held traditional and cultural conventions which hold down women, but she weaves into the story evidences of the possible emergence of a new generation of the African woman as the continent undergoes socio-political evolution.

It is tempting as Janos Riesz thinks to read *So Long a Letter* as a novel about failed marriages and education in colonial French West Africa (1991, 27). The epistolary narrative is in part a diary of the nuptial experience of two bosom friends, Ramatoulaye, the writer of the letter, and Aissatou, the recipient. Symbolically, the novel as Michael Obinna puts it, "relates the female experiences of the African caught between the established order of the past and the exigencies of the present, while prognosticating the future." (1999, 183). As a letter, the novel is taken as a confidential recall of incidences in the lives of the two friends who are also the dual protagonists of the story. Embedded in the narrative are wistful flashbacks, allusions, recent and present happenings which the writer narrates with poetic finesse. The binding narrative and ideological chord of the novel revolves round the strength derived from friendship and a kind of empowerment which borders on emancipation anchored on western education. It is this emancipatory slant in the novel that Marie Pauline Eboh emphasizes. (1999,17). The manifestation of the link between friendship, which in this case is solidarity, and education, which ensures economic empowerment, gives great impetus to women's realization of individual and national aspirations.

The novel's opening foregrounds its content and therefore its *leit motif*. Ramatoulaye writes:

I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.
. . .
We walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present.
. . .
Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow. (1)

2. Theme of the Novel

The foregoing encompasses much of the novel's preoccupation from which springs ancillary issues of individual and national aspirations. Explicit in the excerpt is a bond nurtured by friendship. It also gives a glimpse of the protagonists' condition of being divorced and widowed just as the idea of "adolescence to maturity" gives the narrative an autobiographical slant albeit fictional. Much of the novel's accusatory recall is provoked by the condition of being divorced and widowed. The condition which brings disappointment and pain especially to Ramatoulaye is traceable to what she configures as acts of betrayal on the side of their husbands, Modou Fall and Mawdo Ba. While the two protagonists are childhood friends, they met the men they married while in school. Hence both families' acquaintance dates back to many years as they experience the fluctuating fortunes of life especially in marriage.

Ramatoulaye romanticizes friendship as her relationship with Aissatou evolves into a sisterhood. In one moment of intense evocation of what she thinks of friendship, she declares: *"Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love"* (54). Her estimation of the wholesomeness associated with friendship is exaggerated, nevertheless it can be ascribed to the fact that since marriage fails her, she finds succor in friendship to not only alleviate her pain and disappointment, but also as a means of shoring up happiness through reminiscences of their lives in time past. The presence of Aissatou in Ramatoulaye's life, the similar marital experience they share and the fact that they are educated, ideologically conscious and articulate help in consolidating their friendship. It makes them share and compare experience and by so doing draw strength from each other. Ramatoulaye says more:

You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our

children brothers and sisters. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvest? (72)

Her privileging of friendship over love finds justification in her relationship with Aissatou as well as its survival in spite of time and distance. Hence their undeclared sisterhood creates for them a platform for self-assurance which they both need to sustain their positions as women discarding the socio-cultural burden which society places on them. In dismantling the obstacles to happiness in their lives, they are strengthened by an awareness of their predicament for which they hold their husbands responsible. In spite of their bitter experience occasioned by marital failure, the sisterhood inspires in both women a desire to remake their lives and relieve their aspirations. This tendency to overcome obstacles and move on in remaking their lives is one of the positive consequences of their great friendship.

The tendon which strengthens their friendship is made firmer by education which created the ideals upon which their resistance and tendency to happiness, in spite of their bitter experiences, is built. As young girls in colonial Francophone Africa, the French colonial policy of Assimilation ensures they enjoy holistic western education to prepare them for the challenges of a new world where they are expected to play pivotal roles. It is for this reason that both protagonists train as teachers to bring up a new generation of Africans as the continent consolidates the gains of independence. It is this imperative which drives Ramatoulaye and Aissatou on the path of individual and national aspirations. Ramatoulaye prods Assaitou's memory of their college days in the following words:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an "uncommon" destiny. Together, let us recall our school, green, pink, blue, yellow, a veritable rainbow: . . . Let us hear the wall of our school come to life with the intensityof our study. Let us relive it intoxicating atmosphere at night, . . . , our prayer rang out, full of hope. The admission policy which was based on an entrance examination for the whole of former French West Africa, now broken up into autonomous republics, made possible a fruitful blend of different intellects, characters, manners and customs. (15)

The "white woman" in the foregoing is symbolic of the goal of the policy of Assimilation for the generation of Africans to which both protagonists belong. The notion of "uncommon" destiny points at the pioneering role of both women as harbingers of a new dawn. Unlike their mothers who were tethered to the homestead merely as wives and mothers, the new women of Africa being trained are superwomen who are not just wives and mothers, but professionals and nation builders. They combine multiple roles as pioneers of a new phase of development on the continent. Although, the novel is set in Senegal, the narrator recalls that the education agenda of the colonialists covers all of French West Africa. This moment is defining as it is the period which prepares both protagonists for the fulfillment of individual and national aspirations consolidated in their functions as professionals and nation builders. However, there is a looming almost overwhelming presence and influence of tradition in the narrative. As the reader will observe, Ramatoulaye submits to the dictates of tradition in spite of its limiting potentials. Thus there is a dual allegiance to tradition and the imperative of a new world conditioned by western education. Here is the essence of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. means when he says the black text in a western language "occupies two spaces in at least two traditions" (1984, 6). This view is similar to that of Janos Riesz which he puts forth as "problems inherent in the conflict between traditional African and modern French ideas of education" (1991, 27). This pattern of dualities which breeds contradictions runs through the novel. This probably informs Femi Ojo-Ade erroneous reading of the novel as deriving from the realm of "tradition and colonialism" (1982, 71).

Already empowered by the consciousness which only education can give, Ramatoulaye tells the younger generation:

When you are adults, if your opinions are to carry weight, they must
be based on knowledge backed by diplomas. A diploma is not a myth.
It is not everything, true. But it crowns knowledge, work. Tomorrow,
you will be able to elect to power anyone of your choice, anyone you
find suitable. It is your choice, and not ours, that will direct the country. (73)

The above submission sums up Ramatoulaye's act as a nation builder striving to contribute to the realisation of the national aspiration of her country. Having acquired education and qualifying as a teacher, her responsibility is to the younger generation whom she must inspire in the task of nation building. Implicated in her responsibility is political consciousness with emphasis on the power of education in the realm of politics. Since politics is central to the development process, Ramatoulaye instills in the younger generation the need for good education if they are to make the right political choice for their nation. As a visionary, she already envisages a time when the younger generation will decide the future of the country. This frame of mind will help in sustaining the quest for national aspiration.

At the individual level both women are "rejected" by their husbands and as Ramatoulaye sums up her case regarding her husband's desertion "He never came again; his new found happiness swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us." (46). Their abandonment means their taking up financial responsibilities for the children. This is a big burden to bear especially as Ramatoulaye has twelve children to fend for, while Aissatou has four. Their capacity to cope with their new status as single parents stems from the fulfillment of individual aspiration through education and the economic empowerment that comes with it. For instance, while Ramatoulaye earns income as a teacher, Aissatou goes on to train as an interpreter and ends up with a good job in the Foreign Service. They are thus able to cope economically. Hear Ramatoulaye's telling of her new responsibility as sole bread winner:

I was surviving. In addition to my former duties, I took over Modou's
as well.
……. My brain was taxed by new financial gymnastics.
The last date for payment of electricity bills and of water rates
demanded my attention. I was often the only woman in the queue.
Replacing the locks and latches of broken doors, replacing broken
windows was a bother, as well as looking for a plumber to deal with blocked
sinks. (51)

Her new status as a single parent places on her a series of responsibilities which are mentally, physically and financially tasking. This is in addition to the payment of school fees for her children. However, the economic empowerment which her education gives her enables her to cope. Her education enables her to map out strategies to cope with her new status and responsibility. She says:

Managing the family budget requires flexibility, vigilance and prudence
in performing the financial gymnastics that send you from one more or
less dangerous leap to another, from the first to the last day of the month. (64)

Ramatoulaye is able to survive the debilitating crises arising from divorce and widowhood not just due to her economic stability, but also the financial support she receives from her well-off confidante Aissatou who buys her a car as gift. Having received extra training in interpretation and secured a plum job in the Foreign Service, Aissatou is able to buy Ramatoulaye a "cream-coloured Fiat 125" (54). The car not only eases her mobility problems, it also boosts her social standing and gives her children a sense of pride.

Both protagonists are trained to become nation builders. However, the role is given full attention in Ramatoulaye. Although, we are told

that Aissatou works in the Foreign Service, it is in Ramatoulaye that we actually see the demonstration of the realization of national aspirations. As a teacher, she is a motivator and mentor to the younger generation. Ramatoulaye gets carried away in her ruminations on her teaching profession. She again rhapsodises:

How we loved this priesthood, humble teachers in humble local schools.
How faithfully we served our profession, and how we sent ourselves to do
it honour. Like all apprentices, we learnt how to practice it well at the
demonstration school, a few steps away from our own, where experienced
teachers taught the novice that we were how to apply, in the lessons
we gave, our knowledge of psychology and method. . . . In those children
we set in motion waves that, breaking, carried away in their furl a bit of
ourselves. (23)

The flourish with which Ramatoulaye describes the teaching profession and the commitment of teachers to the evolution of individual and national aspiration is almost unrivalled. She considers the profession as unique. She recalls her training with nostalgia and praises the teaching methods she has been exposed to. She sees teaching as a calling, while she considers teachers as the makers of the new generation of Africans. The unspoken implication of her privileging teachers is that without them there would be no social cohesion and by extension national development. This thinking takes us back to the earlier position of how the French colonial policy of Assimilation educated Ramatoulaye's generation as pioneers who will set the continent on a new path after independence. Her profession as a teacher complements the self-appointed role of trail blazers her generation ascribes to itself. She says with so much conviction:

It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods
of our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained
young and efficient, for we were the messangers of a new design. With
independence achieved; we witnessed the birth of a republic, the birth of an
anthem and the implantation of a flag. (25)

It is this role of a being a pathfinder and at the same time serving as a link between the past and the future that Ramatoulaye celebrates with so much gusto. Lauretta Ngcobo has this group of women in mind when she declares:

Our women are caught up in a hybrid world of the old and the new;
the African and the alien locked in the struggle to integrate contradictions
into meaningful new "whole". (1986, 82)

The circumstances of history place on this generation of women the duty of being the link between two worlds that are different in every ramification.

Central to the motif of individual and national aspiration in *So Long a Letter* is the question of women liberation as well as representation in the national scheme of things. Again, Ramatoulaye's education equips her for the wave of gender consciousness which blew across Africa after independence. Whether it is ideologically code-named feminism or politely rendered as women empowerment, Ramatoulaye is able to navigate and articulate the dominant strains of the women rights credo. However, she takes a moderate view of women's liberation unlike her friend, Aissatou who is radical to the extreme in her adoption of feminist precepts. Hence, while Ramatoulaye acquiesces as her husband marries a second wife, Aissatou opts for divorce to show her rejection of her husband's capitulation to a traditional obligation. In the letter to her husband announcing her divorce from him she states emphatically: "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment. I go my way." (32). This resolute pronouncement must have come from an extreme feminist which according to Filomena Steady is "an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and resilient." (1981, 35) This is in contrast with

the moderate Ramatoulaye who says "I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage." (56). Thus, while both women experience betrayal from the men they married their reactions were different. Although bitter, Ramatoulaye did not negate her marriage because tradition and the religion of Islam sanction her husband's marriage to a second wife. Ramatoulaye's position finds accommodation in *stiwanism* which Molara Ogundipe-Leslie sees as discussing "the needs of the African woman today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women." (2007, 580) But her friend, Aissatou thinks otherwise and opts out of the marriage.

There is a great deal of political awareness demonstrated by Ramatoulaye. The impression one gets is that she is a character that has imbibed sublime lessons in political education. Her political consciousness is sharpened by her coming to terms with the reality that the future of her country, Senegal and that of the continent of Africa will depend on their politics. Hence she sees herself as an advocate of good governance to be realised through the active involvement of all well-educated citizens. Besides her all-inclusive political orientation is her clamour for adequate female representation in government. As Flora Nwapa insists, "there have been tremendous changes in all facets of life which contribute to the continent wide awareness and rethinking of women's problems and roles in society" (2007, 529). As a nation just emerging from colonial rule, Senegal is in the process of political evolution and the political space, to a very large extent, remains locked up to women. Nwapa expatiates more, "The role of women in Africa is crucial for the survival and progress of the race" (2007, 527). Yet women are at the receiving end of a dual oppressive structure defined by the home and the political space. It is this compellingly suffocating thralldom that Ramatoulaye seeks to rupture when she in a rare burst of courage says:

I am not indifferent to the irreversible current of women's liberation
that are lashing at the world. This commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities. (88)

The perspective taken by Ramatoulaye for a long time in the letter remains conservative or at best moderate in matters of women's activism. This is unlike Aissatou who would not brook half measures. But on this rare moment quoted above, Ramatoulaye thumbs up for women liberation albeit in her usual cautionary tone.

Her political consciousness veers into a celebration of the little and gradual gains made by women in politics. Since her generation of women suffers from political maginalisation, each time one of them makes a political breakthrough it is considered as a big achievement. Hence, she evocatively declares:

My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know
that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult;
social constraints are ever present, and male egoism resists. (88)

The foregoing is a strong statement which underscores the contradiction inherent in the aspiration and realisation of equitable representation of women in the political space. Ramatoulaye expresses happiness that women are making inroads into the political sphere, yet she doubts the sustainability of their achievement even as she deplores male dominance and the attitude nourishing female subjugation.

3. Literary Devices in the Novel

Ramatoulaye's most intensive moments of expressing her strong desire for equal female representation are depicted whenever she encounters Daouda Dieng her suitor of old. Dieng is a successful medical doctor and a respected member of the National Assembly. He is presented as the symbol of the male dominance of the political space. However, he cuts the picture of a moderate patriarchal figure who is not averse to the emergence of women on the political terrain. In one of her encounters with Dieng, she queries:

Nearly twenty years after independence ! When will we have the first female minister involved in the decision concerning the development of our country? And yet the militancy and ability of our women, their disinterested commitment have already been demonstrated. Women have raised more than one man to power. (61)

Ramatoulaye does not only assume the posture of a spokesperson for gender parity, but her articulation of the agenda for women participation in the political process foreshadows the subject matter of many female empowerment strategies that evolved from the 1990s to date. Her generation of women having received western education and having functioned as pioneers in their country's march to a new dawn, Ramatoulaye, speaking for the rest of them, thinks that women should take the centre stage politically. The culmination of such a dream will be the peak of the actualisation of women's individual and national aspiration. Nevertheless, Ba's agenda in the novel can be viewed from the perspective adopted by Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi that, "the women writers usually exhibit a sense of social responsibility in their writing. They believe in change for the sake of progress, not simply as a passing fashion to destabilize society." (1986, 2)

4. Conclusion

So Long a Letter is unique in many ways. Although, it reads largely like a diary of disappointment arising from domestic and marital crisis, the novel is highly political with implications for many aspects of life in the African society. At one level, it sounds like a rebuke and denunciation of patriarchy, while at other times the author presents how women turn out to be their own adversaries. The novel's feminist tone remains strident, but Ramatoulaye often becomes equivocal as her perspectives slide into a moderate mode. This contradictory nature of the novel finds rationalisation when Okonjo-Ogunyemi says:

African novels written by women, as counter narratives, fascinate with their inherent contradictions as they reveal strength and weakness, beauty and ugliness, ambiguity and clarity, in unfolding the politics of oppression. (1996, 4)

It is apt to read Ramatoulaye's position as that which is constructed around contradictory lines. Nevertheless, her articulation of the plight of women remains persuasive in the same way that her advocacy for the fulfillment of their individual and national aspiration is remarkable. Her sense of a new society where both sexes will complement each other is already evolving in the relationship her children enter into. As the narrative reaches the end, Ramatoulaye presents the crux of the novel's central argument as gender harmony which will foster a wholesome society and by extension the nation.

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