



SO LONG A LETTER

By: Mariama Ba

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AUTHOR: MARIAMA BA

- Born in Dakar 1929
- Raised by Muslim Grandmother after mother's death
- Schoolteacher 1947
- Pioneer of Senegalese Literature
- Used So Long a letter to express feelings about culture and societal issues in her country
 - Wanted another platform besides teaching/education

SETTING OF STORY

- Dakar, Senegal
- 1970s
- POV- Ramatoulaye, Senegal woman
- Transition from colonization to modern independent nation

SUMMARY

- The story starts with Ramatoulaye writing a letter to her friend Aissatou, who we find out now lives in the U.S. Ramatoulaye tells Aissatou about the death of her estranged husband, Modou. She finds herself working his funeral despite the fact that he left her and her children for Binetou. Ramatoulaye then goes on to reflect over her marriage with Modou. She discusses the betrayal that she feels due to the fact that she gave him 12 children and 30 years of her life. She reflects over her mother's warning about Modou and how he was "too perfect". Ramatoulaye then brings up how her and Aissatou are now in similar situations seeing that the reason Aissatou being in the U.S was due to her ex-husband, Mawdo, taking a second wife, Nabou. The second marriage happens because Mawdo's mother never wanted her son to marry outside of royal blood and Aissatou is the daughter of a goldsmith, which is not royal blood. This causes Aissatou to divorce Mawdo, which differs from Ramatoulaye who decides to stay with her polygamist husband despite her beliefs. The story then jumps back to Ramatoulaye telling her story about how her marriage fell apart. She talks about how her husband's new wife started out as her daughter Daba's friend involved with a sugar daddy, whom they find out is Modou. Once the two marry, Ramatoulaye is left alone to raise her children on her. Ramatoulaye learns to be independent and focuses her attention on raising her children. She even rejects two suitors who ask for her hand in marriage after the death of her husband. The story then shifts to Ramatoulaye's adaptation to the new modern ideals including her children partaking in smoking and her daughter becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The story/letter end with Ramatoulaye expressing her joy about Aissatou's return and how the things that they have gone through has made them stronger as friends.

THEMES

- Marriage Views (Women vs. Men and Tradition vs. Modern)

- "You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you." (I emphasized the word 'chosen.') (pg.60). -woman view
- "He compares what he had with what he no longer has, what he has with what he could have" (pg.42). -man view
- "This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her..." (pg.4).-traditional view
- " 'Daba is my wife. She is not my slave, nor my servant.'

'Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life's programme. So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain? It may be Abou (her husband); it may be me. Why not? The wife can take the initiative to make the break' " (pg.77).

- Oppression of Women

- " 'To tell the truth, a woman does not need too much education" (pg.30)
- " '...A wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about "betrayals of the flesh" "(pg.35)
- "In the midst of life, in the midst of poverty, in midst of ugliness, young Nabou would often triumph with her knowledge and experience; but she sometimes knew heartrending failure; she remained powerless, faced with the force of death" (pg.50).

THEMES

- Karma- the universe takes care of those who have wronged us

- "He understood fully that he'd been defeated. Thus I took revenge for that other day when all three of them had airily informed me of the marriage of Modou Fall and Binetou" (pg.61)
- " 'Remember, I was your daughter's best friend. You made her my mother's rival. Remember. For five years you deprived my mother and her twelve children of their breadwinner. Remember. My mother suffered a great deal. How can a woman sap the happiness of another? You deserve no pity. Pack up" (pg.74)

- Maternal relationships

- Throughout the book, Ramatoulaye makes it a point to make sure her 12 children are taken care of despite her situation.
- " I shed tears of joy and sadness together: joy in being loved by my children, the sadness of a mother who does not have means to change the course of events" (pg. 56).
- " And also, one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end" (pg.87).

CURRENT INTERPRETATIONS

- Criticism of Polygamy: Cultural purposes or sexual desires? How caste systems affects marriage
 - "Some men exploit Islamic teachings in order to gratify and justify their base desires under the guise of a transcendent sanction."
 - "The significance of Bâ's incandescent exposition of polygamy hinges on the fact that it discloses the evil hidden agenda of its contemporary practitioners and reveals the faulty logic behind it"
 - "For instance, through Aissatou's failed marriage to Mawdo Bâ in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ explores the caste system and shows how Senegal and other countries of the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa follow it to justify polygamy. Aissatou is the victim of her mother-in-law's strong caste prejudices. "

SOURCES

"Biography." *Mariama Ba Biography | Women*, en.unesco.org/womeninafrica/mariama-ba-0/biography.

Cherekar, J S. "In The Prison House of Marriage: an Exploration of Theme of Polygamy In Miriam Bar's *So Long A Letter*." *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, vol. 21, no. 8, 2016, pp. 24–31., doi:10.9790/0837-2108082433 .

