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SO LONG A LETTER – ENGL 264

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mariama Ba was one of the pioneers of Senegalese literature. Born in Dakar in 1929, she lost her mother soon after, and was raised by her maternal grandmother, who was of Muslim confession and strongly attached to traditional culture. Through the insistence of her father, an open-minded politician, the young Mariama attended French school, obtained her school-leaving certificate, and won admission to the École Normale for girls in Rufisque, from where she graduated as a schoolteacher in 1947.

Service to her country through education was not Mariama Ba's sole vocation, however. From a Muslim Lebou family from Dakar, she also threw herself into the women's movement to fight for greater recognition of women's issues. Throughout her life, she tried to reconcile her grounding in her culture, her Muslim faith, and her openness to other cultural horizons. As such, rootedness and openness constituted the two sometimes conflicting poles along her exacting journey. Towards the end of her life, her literary genius achieved full expression in So long a letter, a novel which directly confronted polygamy and the caste-system in Senegal – a predominantly Muslim country, firmly attached to its traditions, yet traversed by profound transformations, and confronted by the challenge of new models of society.

GENERAL OVER VIEW OF THE BOOK

"So Long a Letter", is an epistolary novel because it takes the form of letters. "*So Long a Letter"* tells about Ramatoulaye, a widow living in Senegal, Dakar and her letter to her friend, Aissatou who is living in America. Ramatoulaye is grieving her husband Modou's death and

during the mourning forty days, she writes epistles and she intends it to her friend. The epistles capture her younger days in relationship with the man she loves, their stay in marriage for 30 years, the intrusion of polygamy in their marriage journey and the events after her lover's death. Instead of just writing an argument against the practices that no longer response to the modern state of Senegal, Ba has chosen the **epistolary genre** to provide intimacy and connection with her main character, with the intention of swaying her audience to see her point of view.

CHAPTER SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Ramatoulaye , the narrator (living in Dakar, Senegal), addresses her friend, Aissatou , who lives far away, in America. Ramatoulaye writes that she has received Aissatou's letter and that, by way of reply, she has decided to write a diary. This diary, she decides, will serve as a "prop in [her] distress"—though she doesn't yet reveal what has caused this distress. First she recalls her childhood with Aissatou, listing off a series of discrete images: the two of them walking along the same road to Koranic School, and the two of them burying their baby teeth in the same hole. The immediate intimacy of Ramatoulaye's address establishes how close these two friends are, and how close they remain despite the physical distance between them. At first Ramatoulaye's promise to keep a diary that will also serve as a letter to Aissatou seems like a contradiction—one typically thinks of a diary as private, and a letter as inherently shared. Yet Ramatoulaye's memories from their childhood together makes it clear that the two friends share everything—and thus this diary/letter gives the novel its unique form. Ramatoulaye then reveals the cause of her distress: "Yesterday you were divorced," she writes, "today I am a widow." Ramatoulaye's estranged husband, Modou , has died suddenly of a heart attack. Ramatoulaye describes to Aissatou the phone call she received informing her of the news, as well as her trip

to the hospital, and her encounter with the body. She explains that Mawdo , Modou's doctor friend and Aissatou's ex-husband, was called to the scene but arrived too late—all his attempts to resuscitate Modou were for naught—and describes his sadness with a certain tenderness. Distraught and confused, Ramatoulaye seeks consolation in remembered verses from the Koran. Although Ramatoulaye is estranged from Modou, she receives the news of his death with the solemnity, awe, and devotion that her faith demands, and with the grief of a loving spouse. Similarly, she expresses her tenderness toward Mawdo without restraint, despite his estrangement from the letter's addressee, her friend Aissatou. For Ramatoulaye, death is a sacred matter, the gravity of which overcomes (if only for a moment) feelings of animosity or remorse. Here we also see the strength of Ramatoulaye's Islamic faith, and the way that it informs her life, emotion, and decision-making on almost every level.

CHAPTER 2

The day after Modou 's death, droves of mourners appear at Ramatoulaye 's house to pay their respects. Modou's close relatives appear as well, and the women among them help make the funeral preparations, bringing incense, holy water, white muslin, and dark wrappers to the hospital in order to dress the body. In accordance with custom, Modou's young second wife, Binetou , is installed in Ramatoulaye's house, to receive guests alongside her. Ramatoulaye is bothered by her presence but ultimately feels pity toward the girl. The male mourners form a funeral procession and accompany the body to its final resting place, while the women stay behind. Modou's sisters ritually undo Ramatoulaye's and Binetou's hair. Ramatoulaye's description of the funeral preparations demonstrates just how much custom and tradition saturate Senegalese culture and experience—further, it demonstrates that Senegalese-Muslim rituals typically delineate distinct, complementary roles for men and women. Ramatoulaye's complex feelings toward Binetou, her co-wife, include both indignation at having to associate with her husband's second wife and a kind of maternal feeling—after all, Binetou is young enough to be Ramatoulaye's daughter. Custom dictates that Ramatoulaye serve as a hospitable host to Modou 's family and to her co-wife's family, providing them with food and lodging and generally accommodating their every need.

Ramatoulaye dreads this responsibility, most of all because it calls on her to surrender her personality and dignity in the interest of serving her estranged relatives. Modou's sisters shower praises and words of consolation over Ramatoulaye and Binetou , but it bothers Ramatoulaye that they give equal consideration to both—Binetou was married to Modou for only five years, while Ramatoulaye was married to him for thirty. The men return from the funeral procession and offer their condolences to the women in a highly ritualized fashion. In order to satisfy the demands of custom, Ramatoulaye must essentially erase herself, render herself transparent, and reduce herself to an object in the service of men. The fact that she and Binetou receive the same amount of attention only underlines the fact that Ramatoulaye's "role" as the aggrieved wife has, in the eyes of the other mourners, overwhelmed any and all of her individual characteristics as a human being.

CHAPTER 3

The funeral ceremony continues into its third day. Now all sorts of people come out of the woodwork to pay their respects and mooch off the hospitality of the aggrieved. Ramatoulaye 's house is essentially trashed by the crowd. The men and women occupy different sides of the parlor; the men occasionally shout over at the women to chastise them for gossiping loudly and not showing the solemnity that the occasion demands. Many of the guests present gifts of money to Ramatoulaye and to Modou 's family. Ramatoulaye explains that these customary gifts once consisted of unquantifiable goods, such as livestock or millet, but now everyone simply presents the aggrieved with banknotes, and tries to one-up everyone else by giving the most cash. The proceeds are divvied up among Ramatoulaye, Binetou and her family, and Modou's family. Binetou's mother and Modou's sisters get the lion's share, leaving Ramatoulaye destitute in comparison. Ramatoulaye experiences firsthand the marked disconnect between the premise of dignity on which the funeral ritual is founded and the indignity that the ritual actually can create. But while she is skeptical of the traditions she is expected to follow, she is also nostalgic for traditions that have been abandoned or otherwise corrupted: the exchange of cash in lieu of actual gifts strikes her as somewhat appalling. The unequal apportioning of the gift money between her and

her family-in-law only underlines the illogic of custom for custom's sake, and the way even traditions of generosity and selflessness can be easily twisted.
Finally Binetou and the relatives clear out, leaving destruction in their wake: Ramatoulaye 's floors are blackened and her walls are stained with oil, and trash litters the house. In their absence, Ramatoulaye now must confront her mirasse, a period of four months and ten days that she must spend in solitude and mourning, in accordance with custom. She is apprehensive but faces her "duty" with resolve, writing that her "heart concurs with the demands of religion." Despite her clear and outspoken discomfort with many of the demands of her religion and culture, Ramatoulaye is determined to meet them head on and operate within them, rather than against them. This is one of the first glimpses of Ramatoulaye's particular brand of stoicism and quiet courage.

CHAPTER 4

The mirasse also demands that Ramatoulaye and her family-in-law meet to "strip" Modou and reveal the secrets he kept during his lifetime. Mostly this involves laying bare his financial debts. It is then revealed that the chic villa in which Modou had been living with Binetou and Binetou's mother was acquired on a bank loan originally granted to both Modou and Ramatoulaye. Even though the deed has Modou's name on it, Ramatoulaye essentially helped pay for the house. However, Modou's lavish treatment of Binetou and her mother—he paid for their pilgrimage to Mecca, bought them cars, and, to Ramatoulaye's horror, provided Binetou with a monthly allowance after pulling her out of school— has led the two to think that they are guaranteed the house. It seems also that they have begun fraudulently removing furniture from the house, even before the estate is settled. It becomes clear that Modou has used his privileged position to exploit Ramatoulaye's financial independence. His family intends to prolong this exploitation into the future, and it doesn't seem like there is much Ramatoulaye can do about it. Ramatoulaye's horror at Binetou's removal from school establishes Ramatoulaye as someone who cares deeply about education, particularly for young women, and once more illustrates her conflicted maternal feeling toward her young co-wife.

CHAPTER 5

Alone again with her thoughts, Ramatoulaye becomes distressed. She wonders what could have possibly caused Modou to abandon her, not to mention their twelve children, in order to marry the 17-year-old Binetou . Ramatoulaye compares her fate to that of the blind, disabled, and destitute, asking how those in worse situations than hers find strength, moral fortitude, and even heroism in their disadvantage and distress. Like the blind and the disabled, Ramatoulaye's position of social disadvantage has everything to do with the circumstances of her birth and nothing to do with her character. Her assertion that the blind can still act heroically in quiet ways, within the confines of their societal disadvantage, reflects her own brand of stoic feminism.

CHAPTER SIX

Ramatoulaye recalls meeting Modou for the first time, while on a trip to a teachers' training college with Aissatou . Addressing Modou directly, in the second person, she remembers him asking her to dance and their ensuing romance, which endured even after Modou went off to study law in France—Modou, she explains, felt homesick and lonely the whole time he was there, and wrote to her often. Modou's dissatisfaction in France illustrates a conundrum that then faced the educated in Senegal: most pathways to higher education also demanded assimilation to French culture—that is, the culture of the colonizer and oppressor. Separately, Ramatoulaye's use of direct address illustrates her continued feelings of intimacy towards Modou, even after estrangement and death have separated them. Upon his return to Senegal, Modou and Ramatoulaye prepared to marry. Modou also introduced his friend Mawdo to Aissatou . Ramatoulaye's mother was skeptical of her daughter's choice, however, and Ramatoulaye now understands her skepticism. Ramatoulaye and her mother belonged to the first generations of women fighting for empowerment in Senegal, and her mother wanted her daughter to have a husband that would be equal to Ramatoulaye's intellect and ambition. It seems that by marrying Modou, an idler, Ramatoulaye surrendered her freedom to a man who was beneath her. Now she has nothing to

show for it. Ramatoulaye's disagreement with her mother raises a question that vexes the entire novel: are traditional family life, religious marriage, and motherhood fundamentally at odds with female empowerment? Does a woman surrender essential freedoms just by choosing to marry? Or just by marrying the "wrong" kind of person?

CHAPTER 7

Ramatoulaye remembers with fondness her and Aissatou 's French—which is to say, white—schoolteacher. All of her students came from different cultures within French West Africa, and she treated them all equally, and instilled universal moral values in them, lifting them out of the "bog of tradition, superstition, and custom." The acceptance offered to Ramatoulaye by her schoolteacher stands in contrast to the alienation Modou felt in France. Ramatoulaye's admiration for the teacher demonstrates a certain optimism—a faith that education and progress do not have to include the indignity and erasure of forced assimilation into the culture of the oppressor. Ramatoulaye wonders why, despite her education, she chose Modou over Daouda Dieng , an intelligent, mature, wealthy doctor who tried unsuccessfully to court her. She rejected him against the wishes of her parents, who saw Daouda as the more stable, practical option. At the time, Ramatoulaye's rejection of Daouda was in some sense an expression of empowerment and a rejection of tradition. But now she wonders whether accepting a more practical option might have ultimately offered her greater freedoms in the long run.

CHAPTER 8

Ramatoulaye shifts her attention to Aissatou 's controversial engagement to Mawdo . Aissatou is of modest birth—her father is a goldsmith—while Mawdo is nobility, his mother a "Princess of the Sine." In the eyes of tradition it was a total mismatch, and at the time of the engagement everyone in town gossiped angrily about the scandal. The widespread shock in response to the engagement

demonstrates just how strong a grip custom has over social relations in Senegal, or at least the parts of the country that Bâ describes. Ramatoulaye then uses Aissatou 's father's profession to discuss some of the broader social changes happening in Senegal. Aissatou's younger brothers will not take up their father's profession, pursuing a Western education instead. While Ramatoulaye acknowledges the importance of education—she is a schoolteacher, after all—she is wary of overemphasizing it. For one, education is still largely inaccessible for the poor, and in any case schooling is not necessarily right for everyone. What will the dropouts do? Modernization has begun to render obsolete the traditional crafts—like goldsmithing—that would otherwise serve as alternatives to those not receiving a higher education. This conflict between modernization and tradition is an "eternal debate," Ramatoulaye writes. Modernization is not, Ramatoulaye suggests, a universal good. While it is necessary for the progress of Senegal as a newly independent nation, it also seems to compromise important facets of Senegal's cultural identity. While Ramatoulaye cannot offer a solution to the conundrum, she seems to suggest that the "eternal debate" is important to preserve—perhaps the solution lies partly in the very process of debating.

CHAPTER 9

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou marry their fiancés around the same time, and together they endure the joys and frustrations of their new marital life. Ramatoulaye is pestered constantly by her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, who day after day drop in unannounced and abuse her hospitality. She is also exasperated to discover that despite her professional life as a teacher, and despite the help of a few maids, the brunt of household duties still fall to her. For Aissatou's part, her family-in-law does not respect her, and barely acknowledges her existence. Modou's family's careless treatment of Ramatoulaye is a form of objectification—in their eyes she is little more than a provider of service. Even her professional success cannot save her from the role assigned to her by custom. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendship provide them with an escape, however. With their spouses and in-laws they endure their oppression silently, but with each other they can express their frustration openly. In their precious free time together, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou take long walks together along the coast and relax

in Aissatou's beautiful home. They find solace in nature and the open air. They find solace, too, in their professional lives. They are both schoolteachers, and the satisfaction they derive from helping young children is incomparable to anything they feel at home. The openness and natural beauty of the coast stands in sharp contrast to the confines of the home. Against the claims of custom and tradition, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou find more fulfillment in their friendship and profession than their conventionally "sacred" household duties as wives.

CHAPTER 10

Modou rises to the top ranks of the trade union for which he works. Meanwhile, Senegal is in the midst of achieving its independence. Debate over the right path forward—how best to shed the history of colonial exploitation and bring a new republic into being—grips the country. Ramatoulaye sees her generation as occupying a privileged but difficult position between two distinct eras. Modou leads his trade union into collaboration with the government. He is skeptical, however, of the hasty establishment of too many embassies, which he sees as an unnecessary drain on Senegal's precious resources. Ramatoulaye and those around her feel personally invested in the political debates taking place, and the path before them is somewhat fraught. Modou's skepticism of the embassies illustrates one of the biggest dilemmas facing independent Senegal: modernization seems to demand participation in an increasingly global economy, and yet doing so also seems to come at the expense of internal stability (and often at the expense of Senegal's unique culture, at least when "globalization" means assimilation into an oppressive Western culture).

CHAPTER 11

While admitting that she must be reopening old wounds for her friend, Ramatoulaye proceeds to describe the breakup of Aissatou 's marriage. She explains that Mawdo 's mother, Aissatou's " Aunty Nabou ," simply could not accept that her son had married a woman of low birth. Nabou resolves to visit her brother, Farba Diouf , who is a customary chief in Diakhao, a rural town far inland. After a long journey she visits the tomb of her noble ancestors, which is located in the town, and pays her respects there. Nabou is received in her brother's house like a queen: she is served the choicest bits of meat, and relatives from all over the

area come to visit her. Toward the end of her visit, she tells her brother that she needs a child by her side—her children have married and her house is now empty. Farba, hearing this, immediately offers to surrender his own daughter, Nabou's namesake, to Nabou's care. Aunty Nabou returns home with the young Nabou in tow. Nabou's symbolic journey to the country's interior is like a journey back in time: the rural town of Diakhao is still very much under the spell of tradition, unlike cosmopolitan Dakar. And while the rituals Nabou rehearses there are antiquated, Ramatoulaye still describes them with a degree of awe and respect—they are somewhat beautiful and powerful, even if they ultimately quicken Aissatou's personal troubles. Still, the ease with which Farba offers up his young daughter is certainly appalling. She has no say in the matter, and is exchanged like a mere commodity. It's also worth noting that Aunty Nabou, a woman, has internalized the sexist aspects of her culture seemingly as much as any man, and feels no qualms about accepting her niece solely as an object.

CHAPTER 12

Under Aunty Nabou 's guardianship, and with the help of Ramatoulaye , young Nabou is enrolled in a French school and after a few years becomes a midwife. One day, Aunty Nabou summons Mawdo and tells him that Farba has offered young Nabou to Mawdo as a wife. Aunty Nabou implores Mawdo to accept—if he doesn't, she says, she will surely die of shame. Mawdo takes this to heart, and agrees to marry young Nabou. The whole community learns about this before Aissatou does. Reluctantly Mawdo breaks the news to her, telling her that he is agreeing to the marriage only to appease his mother—he does not love young Nabou. Aissatou goes along with this for a while, but when Mawdo begins to have children with young Nabou, Aissatou leaves, leaving him a letter—which Ramatoulaye reproduces for the reader—explaining in direct terms that she cannot accept his decision. While at first it seems that Mawdo maintains an entirely practical view of his marriage to the young Nabou, his actions—namely, having children with his new wife—undercut his claims to pragmatism. Mawdo tells Aissatou his decision is a matter of principle, not passion, and yet Aissatou's uncompromising and impassioned rejection of him is the most principled decision perhaps in the whole novel. Ramatoulaye's role in all of this—in the background, never intervening on the part of either Mawdo or Aissatou—illustrates her more

conservative and reserved tendencies. Now free of her marriage, Aissatou turns to books, and begins taking her education seriously. Ramatoulaye admires this greatly. Aissatou returns to school, receives a degree in interpretation, and gets a job at the Senegalese embassy in America. Meanwhile, Mawdo finds himself dissatisfied with Nabou . She does not keep up the house in the way Aissatou had, and she is constantly receiving visitors from her hometown. In letters Mawdo begs Aissatou to return, but she refuses. Despite his misery, Mawdo continues to have children with Nabou. When Ramatoulaye confronts him about this, Mawdo can only explain himself with a crude analogy: he is a starving man, and Nabou is the nearest plate of food. This disgusts Ramatoulaye. Aissatou flourishes outside the confines of marriage and custom, embracing modernism and education and going so far as to leave the entire country behind. For his part, Mawdo misses Aissatou for reasons that have nothing to do with her and everything to do with her ability to serve him. Ramatoulaye's disgust at Mawdo's analogy demonstrates not just a solidarity with Aissatou but also with Nabou, who throughout the whole ordeal has never been treated as more than just an object.

CHAPTER 13

Ramatoulaye now decides to recount her own marital misfortune. Her teenaged daughter, Daba , begins to spend a lot of time with a friend Binetou ; together they are preparing for a standardized test. Modou often offers to drive Binetou home after the study sessions. Binetou wears expensive dresses which, she explains, have been paid for by a "sugar daddy." Ramatoulaye doesn't think much of this until, one day, Daba explains that the "sugar daddy" wants to marry Binetou. Ramatoulaye tells Daba that Binetou's education is far more important, and that she shouldn't cut short her youth simply because a rich man wants to marry her. Though Binetou agrees, she cannot convince her family, who are attracted to the "sugar daddy's" money. She reluctantly accepts his marriage proposal. Ramatoulaye's emphasis on education, and her wish for a successful future for Binetou, seems to be driven in part by Aissatou's success after leaving Mawdo. Ramatoulaye knows firsthand how difficult it is, in Senegalese society, for a wife to maintain both a home and a professional life. Binetou's submission to her family's demands ominously echoes Mawdo's submission to Aunty Nabou's

demands—it seems that the older generation often forces their family members to continue within the confines of strict or outdated customs. On the day that Binetou is to be married to her sugar daddy, Modou 's brother Tamsir , Mawdo , and a local imam appear at Ramatoulaye 's house. Modou is nowhere to be seen. After some dawdling and beating around the bush, the three men announce the reason for their visit: Modou, it turns out, is Binetou's sugar daddy, and today he is taking her as his second wife. The men express their support of the marriage, which they see as a matter of God's will, though Mawdo, evidently remembering Aissatou 's reaction to his own second marriage, seems subdued. Ramatoulaye is of course shocked and upset—suddenly all of Modou's absences in recent months begin to make sense—yet she maintains her composure, smiling, thanking the men, and offering them something to drink. The formality of the exchange, while supposedly customary, comes off as ridiculous and cowardly, a total breakdown of respectful communication—Modou can't even confront his wife himself. Depending on how you look at it, Ramatoulaye's stoicism in the face of this absurd development is either tragic or empowered. At the very least, it's clear that maintaining her composure and offering these men hospitality is no easy feat.

CHAPTER 14

Daba , who was also kept in the dark about the true identity of Binetou 's sugar daddy, is infuriated, and implores Ramatoulaye to leave Modou just like Aissatou left Mawdo . Ramatoulaye's neighbor, Farmata , also encourages Ramatoulaye to leave. Farmata is a griot, a kind of fortune teller, and she informs Ramatoulaye that her future includes laughter and a new husband. Ramatoulaye rejects these predictions, however—she thinks she is too old to attract the attention of a new man, and worries that if she were to leave Modou she would live out the rest of her life in loneliness. Increasingly distraught, she finds herself descending into a nervous breakdown. Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye has left her unable to imagine that any man will find her attractive in the future. Her steadfast refusal to act on Daba's and Farmata's advice is at once tragic and somewhat impressive—it might be argued that she is asserting a kind of independence, rejecting the idea that she requires a man in her life at all. By way of illustrating

her own distress, Ramatoulaye tells the story of her acquaintance, Jacqueline . Jacqueline, a protestant from Coite d'Ivoire, marries Samba Diack , a friend of Mawdo 's. Jacqueline is not used to Senegalese customs. She is treated like an outsider, and is shocked when Samba begins chasing after other women—relatively standard behavior for Senegalese husbands. Distressed, she begins experiencing all manner of physical pain, which no doctor can diagnose. She undergoes a host of x-rays and invasive tests, but the nature of her illness remains a mystery—that is, until a doctor diagnoses her with depression. The diagnosis alone helps Jacqueline greatly. Now that she knows the source of her illness, she turns her energies inward, and begins to overcome her depression. Taking heart in this story, Ramatoulaye resolves to confront her suffering head-on. She decides to remain married to Modou —in her view, the dignified solution. For Jacqueline and, the reader can assume, Ramatoulaye, mental pain manifests itself as physical pain—a potent reminder of the toll that the constant stress of oppression takes on the body. The conclusion Ramatoulaye draws from Jacqueline's story is certainly counterintuitive: she seems to suggest that her suffering is more a matter of attitude than circumstance. Whether this conclusion should be applauded is left somewhat ambiguous by Bâ. Separately, Jacqueline's story illustrates a political reality that is often overlooked in the West: just how diverse Africa's nations and cultures are.

CHAPTER 15

Ramatoulaye compares and contrasts Nabou and Binetou . Nabou is full of poise and tact, thanks in part to Aunty Nabou 's intense involvement in her moral education. Her job at a maternity home is difficult and often frustrating, but Nabou is a fighter, and in this way Ramatoulaye sees her as a kindred spirit. In contrast, Ramatoulaye feels a kind of pity for Binetou. Trapped in a marriage she never wanted, Binetou can tolerate her life only by making Modou dye his hair, dress younger than his age, and lavish money on her. Some of Ramatoulaye's friends, horrified by Modou's behavior, suggest that she stage a supernatural intervention, using love potions or spiritual mediums to break up the marriage. However, Ramatoulaye rejects these suggestions as irrational. Whereas Ramatoulaye feels a kind of parallel feeling toward Nabou—they are both working women struggling to reconcile their home life with their working life—she feels something closer to a maternal feeling toward Binetou. Ramatoulaye's rejection of her friends'

suggestions constitutes a rejection of the old ways, a rejection of superstition in favor of a kind of brutal and resigned rationalism. Instead, Ramatoulaye resolves to "look reality in the face." As she explains, reality consists of Lady Mother-in-Law (Binetou 's mother) living a pampered, "gilded" life on Modou 's dime. It also consists of the odd couple, Modou and Binetou, going to nightclubs and dancing awkwardly, to everyone else's delight and embarrassment. Neither Binetou nor her mother are seemingly at all interested in Modou; they are only interested in his money.

CHAPTER 16

As time goes on, Ramatoulaye finds that what her children originally begged her to do—to leave Modou —is now functionally the case, as Modou seems to have lost all interest in maintaining even the semblance of a relationship with her. While Ramatoulaye did not make this choice for herself, she learns to cope with and even enjoy her newfound independence. Being a single parent to twelve children is no easy feat, however. Money is tight, and she must make certain compromises, such as making her children ride public transport, while Binetou and Lady Mother-in-Law drive around in a fancy new car. Ramatoulaye's resolve in the face of a fate she never chose for herself demonstrates an extraordinary resilience, and a belief in making due with whatever life has in store. Ramatoulaye does not take direct action on her own behalf in the sense that she doesn't stand up to Modou, but she at least takes the challenges of single motherhood (multiplied twelve-fold) in stride. In passing, Ramatoulaye one day mentions having to ride public transportation to Aissatou in a letter. In response, Aissatou immediately buys Ramatoulaye a car by calling in an order to the local Fiat agency. Ramatoulaye is surprised and overjoyed. She does not know how to drive and is somewhat afraid to learn, but remains determined and overcomes her fear. Not only must Ramatoulaye adapt to her newfound personal independence, she must adapt to Senegal's increasing modernization and globalization, as represented by her learning to drive an Italian car purchased for her by her friend overseas.

CHAPTER 17

Ramatoulaye reflects further on the fate of her marriage. She struggles to understand why Modou decided to leave her in the first place, and tries to determine if there was anything she could have done to prevent his flight. She is sure, however, that she has been an exemplary wife and mother. Further, she admits that she is still devoted to Modou, despite his terrible treatment of her. She writes to Aissatou that, though she respects women who take a stand against their errant husbands and leave them behind, she has never conceived of happiness outside of marriage. Ramatoulaye clearly did nothing to invite Modou's abandonment of her. Despite her sacrifices and invaluable contributions to her family life, she is still seen by Modou as entirely disposable. Ramatoulaye's "confession" to Aissatou shows again just how much she has internalized custom and tradition, including the idea that there can be no real happiness or fulfillment for a woman outside of marriage.

CHAPTER 18

It is now the fortieth day after Modou 's death. Ramatoulaye writes that she has forgiven him. Then, out of the blue, Tamsir , Mawdo , and the Imam appear again in Ramatoulaye's home. Tamsir speaks, telling Ramatoulaye that as soon as she comes out of mourning her will marry her, explaining that he prefers her to the "other one" (Binetou , that is). Tamsir expects to inherit Ramatoulaye from his dead brother much like he would a piece of furniture. His confidence—he doesn't ask so much as he informs—conveys a total disrespect for Ramatoulaye's independence and intelligence, and even her basic humanity. His reference to Binetou as "the other one" might be laughable if it weren't so horrible. Ramatoulaye is infuriated by this proposal. In response, she rails against Tamsir 's disrespect and presumptuousness. She tells him that he is disrespecting not only her, but his own wives and the memory of his brother. She insinuates that he is simply after his brother's properties, which Daba and her husband have recently bought. Taken aback, Mawdo begs Ramatoulaye to stop yelling, but she refuses. Finally she finishes, and Tamsir leaves, defeated and speechless. This is perhaps the first time in the novel that Ramatoulaye takes a stand against her oppressors, and it is certainly satisfying. She proves herself to be more sensitive, smart, and rhetorically deft that Tamsir. Her outburst, which cuts straight to the

heart of things, is a stark counterpoint to the three men's bumbling, awkward admission of Modou's infidelity earlier in the novel.

CHAPTER 19

The next day, Daouda Dieng , Ramatoulaye 's old suitor, appears. Ramatoulaye senses that he has come to ask for her hand in marriage, although he lacks the obnoxious confidence that Tamsir displayed. Wanting to steer Daouda away from the topic of marriage, Ramatoulaye begins discussing politics with him (he is a member of the National Assembly). Ramatoulaye teases Daouda about the lack of women in the assembly—only four of the one hundred representatives are women. She stresses that women should have the right to equal education and equal pay, and that Senegal has gone too long without a female leader. Daouda vehemently agrees, and claims to have given speeches before the assembly on those very issues. He concludes by saying that Senegal has a long way to go. He leaves without bringing up marriage. Though this is exchange is certainly intelligent and mutually respectful, there is something ironic about it too. That is, Daouda has come to Ramatoulaye essentially to claim ownership over her, and yet he insists that he wants greater freedoms for women in Senegal. Still, despite the irony, the civil exchange presents a hopeful picture of the future of political discourse in Senegal (in both public and private spheres). The two speakers are energized and enthusiastic about their country's future.

CHAPTER 20

Some days later, Daouda appears at Ramatoulaye 's door again. Once again they fall on the subject of politics, but this time Daouda redirects the conversation to the subject of marriage. He admits to Ramatoulaye that he has never stopped loving her, ever since he first tried to court her. Ramatoulaye is taken aback if not entirely surprised. She even feels, as she tells Aissatou , a little "intoxicated" by the proposal. Tactfully, Daouda tells Ramatoulaye to think about it, and then he takes his leave. On his way out, he runs into Farmata , Romatoulaye's griot neighbor. After the brief encounter Farmata rushes back to Ramatoulaye and

informs her that she's met Ramatoulaye's new husband, whose arrival she predicted earlier. Daouda's humility and tact are a breath of fresh air in comparison to Tamsir's crass proposal. Rather than announce his intentions, Daouda presents Ramatoulaye with a choice. Still, Ramatoulaye is by no means overjoyed by the attention—at most she is slightly intrigued. Farmata's excited reaction is somewhat absurd and, in Ramatoulaye's eyes, overly superstitious. Ramatoulaye is the true master of her fate, at least in this aspect of her life.

CHAPTER 21

Ramatoulaye thinks over Daouda 's proposal in solitude. She knows Daouda is an honorable man. She trusts that he would serve as wonderful father to her children, and she notes that, despite not really loving his current wife, he has always treated her with the utmost respect, going so far as to involve her in his political life. Farmata concurs with all these assessments, and encourages Ramatoulaye to accept the proposal. However, Ramatoulaye can't bring herself to love Daouda. As she puts it, she knows in her head that he would make a fine husband, but her heart disagrees. She decides she cannot marry him. Ramatoulaye cannot bring herself to agree with a practical view of marriage, choosing instead to follow her heart. In this way she rejects the traditional, conservative worldview—represented here by Farmata's urgings—according to which she has essentially no choice but to choose Daouda. Her choice to remain a single mother is as brave as it is honest. Ramatoulaye decides to write a letter to Daouda , explaining her decision not to marry him. In it, she says that while she holds Daouda in high esteem, it is ultimately only esteem that she feels for him, not romantic love. She also writes that, having only recently been abandoned by her husband, she cannot in good conscience come between Daouda and his current wife. Farmata delivers the letter, thinking that Ramatoulaye has accepted the proposal. She learns otherwise when she sees Daouda's reaction upon reading it. Angry and disappointed, she returns to Ramatoulaye with Daouda's response: "All or nothing. Adieu." Ramatoulaye's letter is measured and reasonable, while Daouda's response is curt and somewhat extreme. Though its extremity perhaps originates in personal anguish, it also seems to reveal that Daouda is unable to conceive of Ramatoulaye as a friend and a peer—she is only a potential mate. Now

that she has turned him down, he has no use for her company anymore. After Daouda , more and more men show up at Ramatoulaye 's doorstep to ask for her hand in marriage. She rejects them all, which earns her a reputation among her neighbors as a crazy woman. As Ramatoulaye explains, all the men seem to be after her inheritance, which she has recently won back from Binetou and Binetou's mother . Most notably, Ramatoulaye—with the help of her daughter Daba and Daba's husband—has won back the villa that Modou lived in with Binetou and her mother. Binetou and her mother are evicted from the house. While Binetou's mother is terribly upset by this, Binetou is indifferent. Ramatoulaye's steadfast refusal of a second husband is completely sensible—and financially responsible—yet in nearly everyone's eyes she seems crazy. In other words, the prejudices of the community do not permit the idea that a powerful, financially independent woman can live on her own. Binetou's indifferent reaction to the loss of her house seems to suggest that her early marriage has sapped her of all emotion, or that the greed that seemed to motivate the marriage mostly belonged to her mother, not herself.

CHAPTER 22

Ramatoulaye writes to Aissatou that Ousmane , her youngest child, is always the one to bring her the letters that Aissatou sends her. Ramatoulaye is greatly comforted by Aissatou's words of comfort and encouragement. She looks forward to the day when they meet again, writing that the changes their bodies have undergone, and the time they have spent apart, will be meaningless to them. Their friendship is founded in the content of their hearts. For Ramatoulaye, true friendship, unlike romantic love and marriage, is impervious to distance, time, and change. Even though Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have conducted their friendship only through letters over many years, it remains as strong as ever. Daba returns from the secondary school that Mawdo (Mawdo Fall), one of Ramatoulaye 's sons, attends. He has been getting into trouble with his white philosophy teacher, who "cannot tolerate a black coming first in philosophy," and favors a white French boy, consistently giving him the highest marks even though Mawdo is the better student. Both Mawdo and Daba understand this to be a great injustice, and Daba wants to tell the teacher off. But Ramatoulaye tries to dissuade her, arguing that doing so will be a waste of energy. It is more important, Ramatoulaye argues,

to focus on one's own studies, one's own improvement. Ramatoulaye and her daughter have two separate ways of responding to this obviously racist, colonialist injustice. Ramatoulaye represents a more conservative, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps view of self-reliance. Daba, who is younger and more fiery, seems to favor confrontation and protest in the face of injustice. These two perspectives represent in miniature a greater political question dogging newly independent Senegal: how best to respond to white supremacy and a recent history of colonialism and oppression. Ramatoulaye lingers on Daba for a while, describing her marriage to her husband Abou. Daba maintains a far more practical view of marriage than Ramatoulaye ever has, fully accepting that there may come a day when she and her husband decide to divorce. Daba has also decided she does not want to enter into electoral politics, preferring instead the small women's organization to which she belongs. Ramatoulaye is somewhat bewildered by her daughter's decisions but ultimately impressed by her conviction and the clarity of her reasoning. Ramatoulaye closes this section of the letter by describing how her daughter Aissatou (Aissatou's namesake) helps her with raising the young children, and how Mawdo Fall helps her when she is sick. Though Daba's view of marriage differs significantly from Ramatoulaye's, Ramatoulaye is able to understand and ultimately respect her daughter's reasoning. Daba represents a younger, more progressive generation coming to the fore, taking the reigns of newly independent Senegal. Ramatoulaye, then, represents an older generation that is potentially willing to let in new values and cultural norms, rather than bitterly clinging to custom and causing pain for her children.

CHAPTER 23

Ramatoulaye recounts to Aissatou a recent episode in which she walked in on three of daughters—whom she describes as "the trio"—smoking cigarettes secretly in their room. She is shocked by this, and doubly shocked by their bewilderment in the face of her anger. Ramatoulaye wonders whether she has been too liberal as a mother (she lets them go out at night on their own) and worries that smoking will lead them into other, more dangerous vices. She notes also that her daughters have started wearing trousers, which strikes her as indecent. Despite her worry, however, Ramatoulaye doesn't crack down on her children—instead she simply keeps watch over them, otherwise trusting them to make their own decisions. The

trio's behavior suggests that they are abandoning conventional Senegalese-Muslim wisdom in favor of a more progressive, European-inflected outlook. On the one hand, they now have access to greater freedoms; on the other hand, these new freedoms present dangers to their health (in a quite literal way, in the case of the cigarettes), and threaten to admit indulgence and vice. Though Ramatoulaye disagrees with her children's decisions, her ultimately measured response to them suggests an underlying liberal attitude.

CHAPTER 24

Not long after, Ramatoulaye is interrupted during her evening prayers when her two sons, Alioune and Malick , come home injured and crying, a group of friends in tow. Malick's arm looks broken. The children explain that while they were playing soccer in the street, a man on a motorcycle ran over a group of them. They bring the motorcyclist, whom they have beaten up, before Ramatoulaye. He apologizes to her, explaining that he did not expect the boys to be playing in the street, and failed to stop before hitting them. To her sons' surprise, Ramatoulaye takes the side of the motorcyclist, chastising her children and telling them they shouldn't have been playing in the street to begin with. Malick's broken arm is treated by Mawdo at the hospital. The motorcycle symbolically comes crashing into the children just as modernization has come crashing into Senegal—with a sudden influx of both new freedoms and new dangers. Ramatoulaye's decision to take the motorcyclist's side in the dispute further characterizes her as a tough but conscientious mother, focused more on educating her children than soothing them in their distress, especially when doing so might compromise her morals or sense of justice. Ramatoulaye segues into discussing her daughter Aissatou, her friend Aissatou's namesake . Aissatou has become pregnant out of wedlock. Ramatoulaye recounts how she learned of this development. Aissatou had begun to show some signs of pregnancy—she had lost weight, her breasts were swelling, and she was suffering from morning sickness—but Ramatoulaye brushed these signs off as coincidences. However, Farmata , Ramatoulaye's griot neighbor, insisted otherwise, until finally Farmata herself confronted Aissatou, learned the truth, and brought her before Ramatoulaye to explain herself. In this case, Ramatoulaye's hands-off parenting leads her into blindness. She does not expect the news, or does not want to believe it, or both.

Suddenly Farmata, who until this point has seemed like a fanatical quack, is the one who sees through to the truth of things. Perhaps conventional wisdom isn't totally useless after all. Aissatou II tearfully explains that the father is Ibrahima Sall , a law student that she has been dating and, in fact, loves. Ramatoulaye is at first angry—how could her daughter do something so careless, and so soon after Modou 's death? However, swallowing her anger and remembering how her daughters supported her in her distress, Ramatoulaye decides to embrace Aissatou with open arms and confront the situation with optimism. Farmata , who expected Ramatoulaye to put on a more angry, indignant display, is hugely disappointed. By consciously rejecting the part of her that wants to punish Aissatou, Ramatoulaye bucks conventional wisdom, creating for herself a code of ethics that prioritizes love, understanding, and forgiveness over the dictates of religion and tradition. It is perhaps only a small victory against the forces of oppression that Ramatoulaye contends with throughout the novel, but for Ramatoulaye and Aissatou it makes all the difference.

CHAPTER 25

Ramatoulaye summons Ibrahima Sall , and he comes to visit her. She is pleasantly surprised by him: he is clean, dresses well, and conducts himself with tact. He assures her that he and Aissatou II have figured everything out: his parents will take care of the baby until Aissatou and Ibrahima finish their studies. Luckily, the baby is due during the holidays, so Aissatou will be able to hide her pregnancy and avoid expulsion. Ramatoulaye is impressed by all of this, and adds nothing to the plan. She writes that she feels that Aissatou has entered Ibrahima's care; Ramatoulaye is no longer her daughter's primary guardian. Ibrahima and Aissatou's open dialogue, careful planning, and their love and mutual respect for each other offer a clear counterpoint to Ramatoulaye's and (other) Aissatou's failed marriages. By Senegalese standards, Ibrahima and Aissatou's union is entirely unconventional—even immoral—and yet in practice it seems like a far healthier relationship than the others the novel has offered thus far. Their example gives Ramatoulaye hope.

CHAPTER 26

Ibrahima visits Ramatoulaye 's house often. He is a role model to Ramatoulaye's young sons, and he encourages Aissatou's namesake in her studies. "The trio" spurns him, and Farmata remains skeptical, but Ramatoulaye comes to admire him greatly. Once again, Ibrahima's conscientious and solicitous behavior is a hopeful counterpoint to Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye. Spurred on by Aissatou II 's pregnancy, Ramatoulaye decides to have a conversation with "the trio," her younger daughters, about sexual education. She remarks that in the past, young girls have been taught chastity above all else. However, instead of forbidding sex outright, she channels a more "modern" outlook, and decides to emphasize safe sex above all. In addition, she tries to underline the "sublime significance" of sex, in the hope that her daughters will take it seriously. She delivers her lecture nervously and with some difficulty, but her daughters seem unfazed and even bored by it—Ramatoulaye gets the impression that, to them, she is merely stating the obvious. Times have changed: though Ramatoulaye finds it difficult to adopt a more "modern" outlook than she is used to, her daughters, simply by virtue of being young, have naturally developed more liberal attitudes toward sex than the older generations. If Ramatoulaye's daughters are any indication, the future of Senegal has the potential to be more open, honest, and understanding than ever before.

CHAPTER 27

Aissatou is coming to visit soon, and Ramatoulaye looks forward to her arrival. Ramatoulaye reflects further on the fate of women in Senegalese society: she is heartened by the expansion of their rights and liberties, but remains wary that their hard-fought gains are unstable—certain social restrictions persist, and men still have a monopoly on power. Ramatoulaye insists, however, on her faith in the institution of marriage, and what she calls the "complementarity" of man and woman. Man and wife are the most basic political unit, she argues, as nations are made up of families. With regard to the status of women in society, Ramatoulaye is hopeful but ever vigilant: she knows that societal advances for women are always fragile and difficult to maintain. At the same time, her belief in the institution of marriage shows her more conservative streak, and demonstrates her belief that family life and political life are not distinct, mutually exclusive pursuits—in fact, they are inseparable. Ramatoulaye wonders if Aissatou will appear changed upon returning. She guesses that Aissatou will be wearing a suit, not traditional

clothing, and will ask to eat at a table with utensils, in the Western style. Ramatoulaye closes by saying that she retains hope for her future, and that she will go out in search of happiness. Ramatoulaye's conjecture about Aissatou, though lighthearted, expresses an anxiety that modernization might come to erase Senegalese culture. Tellingly, the novel does not describe the actual reunion of the two friends—it only exists as an address, a kind of monologue, and any response Aissatou might offer exists only beyond the page.

CHARACTERS ANALYSIS

Ramatoulaye

Ramatoulaye is the narrator of So Long a Letter; the book is both her diary and a long letter to her friend Aissatou . Ramatoulaye belongs to the generation that grew up under the French colonial regime and came of age just as Senegal was achieving its independence. Accordingly, she is very politically engaged, and reflects often on the future of her country, the role of tradition in modern life, and the prospect of women's liberation. She is fundamentally a feminist, though she holds certain beliefs that some feminists might find unfamiliar or perhaps even disagree with. For one, she is a devout Muslim, and follows the dictates of her faith even when they seem to advocate the unequal treatment of women. Though she is a teacher and has a professional life of her own, she is also a devoted mother. Her faith and her patience are tested when her husband, Modou , decides to take a young second wife (perfectly acceptable in Senegalese-Muslim culture) and proceeds to abandon Ramatoulaye and her twelve children. Despite Modou's infidelity, though, she chooses to remain married to him.

Aissatou

Aissatou is Ramatoulaye 's old childhood friend, and the addressee of her letter. She comes from a rather poor family; her father is a goldsmith. Aissatou experiences similar trouble in her marital life—her husband takes on a young

second wife, of noble birth, in order to please his mother—but she reacts to it quite differently. Unlike Ramatoulaye, Aissatou decides to leave her husband on principle. Of a much more independent spirit than Ramatoulaye, Aissatou decides to pursue her education. She ends up moving to America, to work in the Senegalese embassy there.

Modou

Modou is Ramatoulaye 's husband. He is a union organizer and, like Ramatoulaye, engaged in his country's politics. At first, the two are very deeply in love, and they marry despite the protestations of Ramatoulaye's parents. However, their love fades as they grow older. Modou takes secret interest in his daughter's young friend Binetou . He lavishes her with gifts and money, and eventually decides to marry her without telling Ramatoulaye. After this second marriage, Modou essentially abandons Ramatoulaye and their twelve children. His death occasions Ramatoulaye's letter to Aissatou .

Mawdo

Aissatou 's husband. Mawdo is a doctor, an upstanding citizen, and a member of Senegal's class of nobles. He and Aissatou fall in love despite the class difference between their two families. This upsets Mawdo's mother, who eventually tricks him into taking on his young cousin Nabou as a second wife. He does so somewhat reluctantly, but then proceeds to have children with Nabou, claiming all the while that he only loves Aissatou. Aissatou cannot accept this and leaves him. Even after Aissatou's departure, however, Mawdo remains a good friend to Ramatoulaye .

Binetou

Modou 's second wife, and a friend of Daba . She is only 17 when she reluctantly marries Modou. She does so at the urgings of her family, who are after Modou's

money. Binetou survives her marriage to Modou by making fun of him, ordering him around, and making him buy her things

THEMATIC CONCERNS

Custom, Modernity, and Progress The Senegal depicted in So Long a Letter is a country on the threshold, passing between two historical eras. Ramatoulaye is born and educated under the French colonial regime, and she lives through Senegalese independence. Hers is the generation responsible for the slow process of Senegalese self-determination. They have taken on the enormous task imagining a new sociopolitical order, and with it a postcolonial future for their country.

Feminism and Islam

The opposing pulls of custom and progress that Ramatoulaye encounters in the Senegalese political climate become personal and particular in her struggle to reconcile her abiding faith in Islam with her feminism. The central drama of the novel is the disintegration of Ramatoulaye's marriage to Modou after the latter takes on a second wife—his daughter's young friend, no less.

Motherhood Ramatoulaye is a devoted mother to her twelve children. When Modou abandons her for Binetou, and then when he eventually dies, Ramatoulaye must redouble her efforts as a mother and face with courage the prospect of being a single parent. Ramatoulaye's struggles as a mother are not just particular to her marital situation—they are also particular to the times in which she lives, as her children are growing up during the dawn of Senegalese.

Friendship vs. Marital Love Throughout the novel, Ramatoulaye's close bond with her friend Aissatou is continually posed against the disintegration of both of their marriages. For both Ramatoulaye and presumably Aissatou, friendship—especially female friendship—offers a richer and more intimate connection than marriage ever can. This contrast is evident in the very form of the

novel.

DZIWORNU RICHARD KOVOR (DR. K), COHSS PRESIDENT (2021/2022)

DR. K WISHES YOU GOOD LUCK IN YOUR EXAMS