

CHAPTER 9 ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED NOVELS

Introduction

We shall study two selected novels in this chapter. They are:

- (i) **A Woman in Her Prime** by Samuel Asare Konadu, and
- (ii) **So Long a Letter** by Mariama Ba.

You have to learn how to study any chosen novel in order to score high marks. The first step to take in the study of any novel is to carefully read the book and know the contents very well. It is only after reading and understanding the novel that you can answer the different types of questions set on it. Remember that essay, context and multiple choice questions will be set.

***A Woman in Her Prime* by Samuel Asare Konadu (1932 – 1994)**

Author's Background

Samuel Asare Konadu was born in 1932 and died in 1994. He hailed from Asamang in Central Ghana. He was a journalist, novelist and publisher. He wrote mainly on African heritage and civilization before the coming of the white men. That is why his work is filled with superstition, songs and stories. Other books by Asare Konadu are *Don't Leave Me, Mercy* (1966), *A Husband for Esi Ellua* (1967), *Nightwatchers of Korlebu* (1967), *Ordained by the Oracle* (1969), *Devils in the Making* (1989) and *The Coup Makers* (1994).

Plot of the Story

This is a novel of village life set in the village of Brenhoma. Brenhoma can be a village anywhere in Africa but it is located in Ghana. The novel deals with the problems of an African woman called Pokuwaa who was in her thirties but had no child. Her childlessness was seen as a terrible condition by her mother, herself and the society at large.

At an early age, she married Kofi Daafo. After two years of marriage without a child, Pokuwaa divorced Kofi and married her second husband, Kwaku Fosu. After three years of marriage to Kwaku without a child, Pokuwaa divorced him with her mother's support. This is because Pokuwaa's mother was desperate to have grandchildren from Pokuwaa. Despite the fact that Pokuwaa was fond of Kwaku, she still divorced him because he also could not give her a child. Her third husband was a man who was already married with two children. His name was Kwadwo Fordwuo. This time she had to share the man's time with his first wife and family.

Shortly after her third marriage, Pokuwaa became pregnant. She later lost this pregnancy through miscarriage. Her mother took her to a medicine man who said the miscarriage was because her mother "never sent sacrifices in thanksgiving to the god which gave her to you, you remember Anowuo?"

The native doctor asked for "a white sheep, eggs and a length of white cloth".

This was the beginning of so many sacrifices to many deities like Tano and Anowuo. She drank herbal concoctions and smeared her body with different medicines. She performed cleansing rituals under very difficult conditions just to have a baby but all was in vain. She did not conceive for a long time. Her husband Kwadwo,

afraid of being divorced like others before him, accompanied her most of the time and her mother helped her too, but all to no avail. Pokuwaa did not conceive.

One day, she woke up and decided to stop her purification rituals and burnt all her charms. Her husband and her mother both tried to convince her to continue her treatment but she refused.

Soon after this, she noticed that she was pregnant. She kept it a secret for three months before she informed her friend Koramo, her mother and her husband. Her husband and her mother gave credit to the god, Tano, while Pokuwaa said it was Nyankopon Twedeampon that had shown her mercy.

Themes of the Novel

A Woman in Her Prime has many themes. Some of them are:

Superstition

They believe in so many gods. Their village has more than seventy-seven gods and ancestors that they must always worship and please. Pokuwaa could not conceive because her mother did not thank the god of fertility, Tano. Pokuwaa had to visit native doctors and oracles in her bid to get pregnant. The people of Brenhoma believe in ghosts, witches and incantations. They were always looking out for omens and signs.

Childlessness

In Brenhoma, childlessness is a terrible thing. A woman without a child faces the fate of loneliness and having nobody to take care of her in old age. Because of this, she is ready to do anything to get a child. Children are gifts from God, and it is not the woman's fault if she cannot have babies.

Marriage

Marriage is flexible in Brenhoma and can be dissolved because of any flimsy excuse. Pokuwaa married three times, and Koramo was planning to divorce her own husband.

Determination

Pokuwaa was determined in whatever she did. She was a rich farmer and worked hard always. When she decided to stop the sacrifices and rituals, not even her husband and mother could convince her to continue. When she decided to divorce her former husbands, her love for Kwaku Fosu did not stop her. She took decisions and stood by them.

Impatience

Being impatient is bad. Pokuwaa divorced one man after the other because she had not conceived. If she had been patient, she might have had a baby with one of her two divorced husbands like her friend Koramo did with her husband.

Communal Life

Communal life in Brenhoma was good. There was love and care for one another. Anytime there was a problem, members of the community solved it together. When Yaw Boakye got missing, all the young men went to look for him. All the members of the community participated in his funeral. They also celebrated the Odwira festival together.

Friendship

Friendship between Pokuwaa and Koramoah last for a very long time. They were childhood friends and supported each other at difficult moments. Her husband Kwadwo also had a friend who he is not ready to break with when Pokuwaa accused the friend of drawing Kwadwo into bad company and excessive drinking. His name is Kofi Bad. Kwadwo said Kofi's pieces of advice were helpful to him. Konadu in this novel is saying that good friends are to be encouraged.

Adultery and Alcoholism

The bad habits of adultery, alcoholism and keeping bad friends are criticized in the novel. Afua Koramoah was very worried that her husband was flirting with Akosua Serwaa and threatened not to cook for him anymore and even divorce him. Pokuwaa advised her not to do that. Pokuwaa herself was accusing Kwadwo of learning bad things like excessive drinking from Kofi Badu. He denied the accusation and claimed Kofi was a good friend.

Setting

The story is set in a Ghanaian village. We have Ghanaian names and towns all through the novel. Examples are Pokuwaa, Kwadwo, Kofi, Adwoa, Kwaku, Brenhoma, Ninting, Nsutem, Mmuoho and others. There is extensive use of native Ashanti language like, "Well, bo yebehiyia", "Wawu Ako a momma", "Momma Onna", "Wadi akokoduru akowu". The setting of this novel in time is before the coming of the white man and Christianity. Time is measured by the position of the sun and the year is counted by the quantity of corn dropped into a bag by the priests.

Language and Style

Konadu uses the language of the Ashantis of Ghana a great deal, as can be seen in the following: "Well, bo yebehiyia", "Wawu Ako a momma", "Momma Onna", "Wadi akokoduru akowu". There are many songs and lines of poems. Generally, the diction of the novel is easy to understand.

Point of View

The third person omniscient point of view is employed in the novel. There is an extensive use of pronouns such as "he", "she", "her", "it" and "one".

Flashback

Flashback is used to make the story interesting. Pokuwaa and Koramoah move back to their girlhood days with nostalgia and longing. They lament that girls of nowadays do not enjoy fun like they themselves did.

Pokuwaa and Koramoah were able to discuss the dead chief and Pokuwaa's father through flashback. Pokuwaa was able to think about her marriage to Kwaku Fosu by recalling when and how it happened.

Humour

There are many humorous episodes. Pokuwaa was teasing her husband about "his great capacity for sleep". She made a derogatory statement thinking her husband was asleep. Kwadwo now asked her, "What are you saying?" to which she replied, "Oh, aren't you asleep?" Pokuwaa also mistook her husband for a ghost and he did not correct the error.

Other literary devices abound in the novel. (Read the book carefully and quote as many examples as possible).

Characterisation

Asare Konadu made use of around thirty characters on the whole but less than ten of them are well developed characters. Some were just mentioned without their playing any role at all. Characters like Kofi Badu did not utter a word. Other characters like Pokuwaa and Kwadwo were very active and the story revolved around them. Here are some of the characters:

Adwoa Pokuwaa

She is the main/principal character in this story. She is very beautiful and dances well. She is the only girl among five boys, and this makes her mother love her excessively. After being married three times, she was still barren. This led to a lot of sacrifices to her people's deities and sacrifices and purifications recommended by native doctors. Pokuwaa is a good daughter to her mother, a good friend of Koramo, a good wife to Kwadwo, and loves children greatly.

After trying for about seven years to appease the gods and get a child, she decided to stop making the effort. It was soon after this decision that she noticed that she was pregnant. She is a rich, hard working farmer. She is very easy to like because she was her parents' favourite child. Her friend Koromo liked her so much that their friendship lasted a long time. The late old chief loved her and gave her gifts. All the three men in her life loved her.

Kwadwo Frodwuo

He is Pokuwaa's third husband. Before Pokuwaa, he had another wife and two or three children. He loved Pokuwaa so much he was afraid she would divorce him like she did the other men she married when they could not get her pregnant. He stands by her through all her troubles and accompanies her to consult the gods. He spends time with Pokuwaa and was falling more and more deeply in love with her.

He was overjoyed when he learnt that Pokuwaa was pregnant and cried "like a boy". He gave Tano the credit for Pokuwaa's pregnancy and plans to take a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the god. He was a farmer and a hunter by profession.

Pokuwaa's Mother

We are not sure of her name. She has five sons and one daughter. Her husband treated her well when he was alive, and she kept talking about him now that she is old. She is waiting anxiously for Pokuwaa to give her grandchildren.

Pokuwaa is very close to her mother. She believes in the tradition of her people and helped Pokuwaa in her search for a child. When Pokuwaa gave up sacrificing to the gods and taking her drugs, her mother reported her to her uncle, Opanin Kofi Owusu. She encouraged her daughter to divorce the men that could not make her pregnant. She had even started complaining that Kwaduo was poisoning her child's mind against Tano.

Pokuwaa tells her mother all her secrets and cares very much for her. When Pokuwa goes to farm, her mother takes care of the home for her and never stops offering sacrifices of eggs to Tano every Fofie.

Afua Koramo

She is an old time friend of Pokuwaa. She has a special way of greeting her friend, “Akye O Pokuwaa”. She stood by her friend all through her time of trouble, and she is one of the first to know that Pokuwaa is pregnant. The author used her to give a lot of information about Pokuwaa. The two women discuss the good time they had as young girls in flashback technique. She found it difficult to conceive at first but she later conceived and had a baby boy. Of course, she went with her husband to thank Tano. Despite not conceiving early in her marriage, she is firm with the boy. She does not pamper him like Pokuwaa would do. She insists on the boy “learning to obey”. In the same way, when she caught her husband with another woman, she was ready to divorce him. It was Pokuwaa who advised her not to.

The minor characters include:

Yaw Boakye: Pokuwaa saw his decomposing corpse near her farm at Disemi. This bothered her a lot and made her cry a lot at his funeral ceremony. During his funeral, many fetish practices came up like his wife and sister displaying his favourite dishes when he was alive in wooden trays and his widows giving him cowries with which to pay for his passage across the river into the spirit world. The people also believed that if a coffin’s shadow falls across a person, the person will die. Soon after his death, girls started singing about him at Asogoro.

Barima Otu Brempong: He organized the search for the missing Yaw Boakye. He encouraged the youth and told them stories of his ancestors.

Kofi Badu, Kofi Dede, Kofi Daafso and Kwaku Fosu: They were mentioned at one point or the other. They did not speak.

Maame Yaa Manu: She must be a friend or relative of Pokuwaa’s family because Pokuwaa’s mother was planning a visit to her house. She was wounded in a fall in which she broke her thigh bone.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1

It was a Fofie, which is one festive Friday in six weeks when people sacrifice to the god of fertility called Tano. This god and other gods and goddesses moved among men on Fofie days to feast on their gifts and grant people’s requests. Pokuwaa believed that these gods and goddesses could answer her need for a child.

This visit to the house of Tano was going to be her fifth visit and the priest had told her to bring a black hen and some eggs as her items of worship.

Pokuwaa woke very early in the morning and fetched water from the stream and got ready to go so that they would not be late. This was when she noticed that the sacrificial hen was missing. In her search for the hen, she saw some children who helped direct her to where the hen was. In an attempt to recover the hen, she was stabbed by thorns and saw that there was a black snake swallowing the hen. She fearlessly killed the snake and took her hen. She regarded the killing of the snake as a good omen that would grant her success in her quest for a child. She said, “if the black snake was a bad spirit, or a man turned into a snake, it has been conquered.” When she got back to the house, she saw her third husband, Kwadwo Fordwuo, waiting for her. She promised to tell him about her encounter with the hen and the snake on their way to the house of Tano.

Chapter 2

The god Tano was carried on the head of a middle aged man who stayed in the same room with the Tano priest. Pokuwaa was told she has to “rub the leaves in your left hand and as the juice emerges, rub it on your body. After your bath with water boiled with the tree barks, drink a cupful of the bath brew, and walk quickly to the house without turning back. All this should be done very early in the morning just as the dawn breaks.”

This ritual was to last for seven days and Kwadwo promised to spend this time with Pokuwaa. This means he would not spend any time that week with his other wife. This led to a quarrel between Kwadwo and his first wife. Pokuwaa and Kwadwo spent most of the night conversing. This made them wake late the following morning and Pokuwaa missed her first day of sacrifice.

Chapter 3

Pokuwaa’s friend, Koramo, paid her a visit and they spent the time talking about their farms at Bentenkor and their years as girls. Pokuwaa wondered if she would have had a baby like Koramo if she had stuck to her first husband. They also discussed how they met their first lovers and how their relationship fared. Pokuwaa started having doubts about the barks she was using in her rituals as they were exactly the same as the ones she was given the previous year by a herbalist at Mmuoho. Why did they not make her pregnant. Koramo complained to Pokuwaa about the trouble her child gave her while he was in her womb. She said the child was always crying and she did not have time to herself. Pokuwaa consoled her friend by saying “He will soon grow and you will be free.” Koramo replied, “when will that happen? That will be years from now.” Pokuwaa also thought about her miscarriage and how heartbroken she was after it happened. She remembered how her mother made her divorce her former husbands even though she was very fond of Kwaku Fosu. Pokuwaa remembered so many happy events in her past.

Chapter 4

When Pokuwaa concluded her purification rites, she started working lightly on the farms and didn’t carry any heavy loads. Six months after, she was still not pregnant. She went back to the priest to complain. The priest told her she did not go through the ceremony correctly and gave her another collection of herbs. Koramo discovered that her husband, Kofi Dede, was having an affair with Akosua Serwaa. She threatened that she would stop cooking for him and even divorce him. Pokuwaa advised her not to do so as that would mean, “sending him like a gift of yam to Serwaa. She will cook and eat without saying thanks to you”.

Chapter 5

The outbreak of fire might put fear into the hearts of many. Some said it was a bad omen, while others said the gods were angry. Investigators find out that lightning had struck the Wawa tree outside the village. The fire went on for many days. Instead of children being frightened in the night, they used the opportunity to run up and down the streets. The flames from the fire lit the whole place.

The elders consulted the oracle and all the women of Brenhoma were requested to cook for the pacification of ancestral spirits. During the meeting, Pokuwaa told a man near her to suggest that, “we must look for the person who was the cause of this. We were lucky that the lightning hit a tree. If it had hit a hut, where would we be?” They agreed with the suggestion, and a general prayer was said for the barren women, the children and the entire community. This prayer pleased and touched Pokuwaa greatly and she said her own personal prayers.

Chapter 6

The rains had reduced and members of the community were busy cleaning their environment and rebuilding their collapsed walls. Pokuwaa, being naturally decent and having distaste for filth and its smell, spent time cleaning

up her house. Markets had reopened and people looked forward to reunion with their friends. In a conversation in their house, Pokuwaa and Kwadwo discuss their childhood days. Pokuwaa told her husband that she was rich even as a child. She recalled her father's illness, death and burial.

Chapter 7

The priests said they were going to have plentiful harvest because of the heavy rains. Everybody looked forward to the time of the new yams. Pokuwaa's mother agreed with the priests. She said that when she was young, the rains were so heavy that they thought "the grasshoppers would go blind". She said the harvests were so plentiful that "the sight of our farms filled us with happiness". Plantains and bananas ripened to rottenness because they could not take all that food home. "Everybody had enough to eat. All we needed was salt." Suddenly, drought came and the crops withered. The drought lasted for weeks and Pokuwaa had to dig holes to water her farm. People were wondering how they were going to celebrate the Odwira Festival without yams. When Pokuwaa, her mother and her husband were discussing the Odwira thinking it was one month away, the street crier announced that it would be on 'Awukudae'. They had a low-keyed Odwira Festival but there were many dancing groups. Pokuwaa and her family joined in all the celebrations.

Chapter 8

The end of Odwira made everywhere quiet and boring. Pokuwaa used three days to build a new fire place for herself. After this, she went to her farm at Disemi to collect foodstuff. Her mother told her to come back in time for them to visit Maame Yaa Manu who fell down the previous night and broke her thigh bone.

As she approached the farm, she saw vultures in the sky. When she went nearer, she was shocked by what she saw. It was the body of a man. She carried her basket and ran back home. On her way home she was wondering who it was that died and who killed him. She decided she would not tell anyone because "Brenhoma is not like other places ... In other places if you break the news of disaster like this, people are prepared to assist. In Brenhoma, I'm going to have to answer unending questions, head search parties, stand before a meeting of elders who will listen and either let me have my head's innocence or accuse me of having a hand in it". (p 78)

Because of the shock, she collapsed when she got home and that made her mother panic. After asking her for a long time, she told her mother what happened. They agreed they would not mention it to any other person as it was a very serious matter.

Chapter 9

That evening, the village crier was going around summoning "every young man fit to walk to come out and join the search for Yaw Boakye or be punished by the great oath". The search lasted for two days. Pokuwaa had a nightmare that woke her husband. She dreamt that four men were hiding behind a tree trying to seize her and she screamed loudly. She went out the following morning and thought she saw a ghost when it was Kwadwo that she woke from sleep and he ran to meet others searching for Boakye. When the body of Yaw Boakye was found, a drum message relayed it to the people. His relatives were told to be ready to receive his body for burial.

Chapter 10

Yaw Boakye was buried the following day at the cemetery. Mourners filed in and out of the house. Many people were weeping and there was drumming and dancing. When the burial processing started at sunset, Pokuwaa wept bitterly. She wept so much that everybody's attention was drawn to her. So many fetish rites were performed before Boakye was buried at last. Pokuwaa was haunted by this unhappy incident for a long time. This made Kwadwo to accompany her to the farm and to stay around her always.

Chapter 11

Kwadwo's love for his wife was growing deeper. She was beautiful and had a good heart. She was also good at conversation and was humorous. One day when she bent to fetch water at the stream, she noticed her reflection and felt that she was getting old because her breast were not flat on her chest. She also noticed that she was losing weight and flesh. She had another encounter with her mother in which her mother insisted she must purify herself. She had picked a bird killed by an eagle. Her mother forced her to return the bird to the stream. Soon after that, her mother carried out a purification ceremony for her. That evening, her friend Koramoah came to visit her and she told her friend that she had decided to stop sacrificing to the gods. This decision gave Pokuwaa peace.

Chapter 12

When it became dark, Pokuwaa and Koramoah hid the pot of herbs she had been using for her washing rites under the cloth that covered her shoulders. When they got to the bush, Pokuwaa removed the pot from under her cloth and hurled it into the bush. The pot broke into little pieces. When she returned home she told Kwadwo. He did not like the idea but he saw that she was serious about her decision. She had a peaceful night that day. The following day, she told her mother her decision and she was very angry. She walked out of the house in anger. She went to see Opanin Kofi Owusu to report what Pokuwaa had said. She threatened she would disown her for "she is like any boy in Brenhoma, for there is no difference between a barren woman and a man".

Opanin Kofi Owusu advised her not to worry because Pokuwaa will return to reason soon.

Chapter 13

The return of the rains made people busy. Pokuwaa kept herself very busy working on the new farm that Kwadwo had cleared for her. She became so cheerful that people noticed and were praising Kwadwo for being able to keep her so happy. They grew closer and Kwadwo fear that Pokuwaa would leave him melted away. He gave her a gift of a whole antelope.

Pokuwaa began to notice changes in her body, her menstrual flow ceased and there are other signs. She kept it to herself for almost three months. She then invited Koramoah to go to the stream with her. She told her friend everything. When they got home, they told Pokuwaa's mother who insisted Kwadwo must be told. She sent for Kwadwo.

Chapter 14

When Kwadwo arrived, he was given the good news. He was speechless. He wondered why Pokuwaa had not told him, and she answered that it was because she did not want to raise his hopes. He sobbed like a little boy out of joy. He was so happy he bought her Kente cloth. He said they would give thanks to Tano but Pokuwaa said her gratitude was to Nyankopon. They discussed both the sex and the name of the unborn child. This news was received with mixed feelings in the community. Some were happy while others were skeptical.

Conclusion

There is nothing that can take the place of reading the text carefully. This will help you answer the questions you will be given correctly.

Anytime you have a novel to study, take the following steps:

1. Find out as much information as you can about the author.
2. Understand the plot of the story.
3. Identify the setting of the work.
4. Know what the themes of the novel are.
5. Know the different characters that play out the story.

6. Be familiar with the writer's use of language/diction.

7. Be familiar also with the literary devices used.

Revision Questions

1. Discuss the role of the protagonist in this novel.
2. What is the setting in place and time of this novel?
3. Write briefly on Pokuwaa's marriages.
4. Give two reasons why Pokuwaa's mother was desperate for Pokuwaa to have children.
5. According to the medicine man, what was the cause of Pokuwaa's miscarriage?

Objective Questions

1. How many marriages did Pokuwaa enter into in the course of the novel?

- A. one B. two C. three D. four

2. Brenhoma's good communal life was shown in

- A. Pokuwaa's divorce and pregnancy.
B. Boakye's search and Odwira festival.
C. sacrificing to Tano and working in the farm.
D. fighting the people of Domakwae.

3. Koramoa was Pokuwaa's friend. _____ was Kwadwo's friend.

- A. Kofi Daafu B. Kofi Badu C. Kofi Owudu D. Kofi Dede

4. To whom do the people of Brenhoma offer the sacrifices?

- A. Tano and the ancestors B. Nyankopon and the ancestors C. The gods and goddesses and the ancestors D. To the goddesses and the ancestors

5. Brenhoma was described as a confluence. What two rivers meet there?

- A. Ananse and Kunkum B. Kunkum and Asamansua
C. Ananse and Disemi D. Kunkum and Disemi

6. Pokuwaa was born on a Monday. Which of her names shows this?

- A. Pokuwaa B. Ahwenee C. Adwoa D. Yaw

7. Boakye's parting gifts from his three widows were

- A. spoons B. plates C. pots D. lamps

8. Pokuwaa was a hardworking _____.

- A. teacher B. housewife C. farmer D. nurse

9. Kwadwo was a good _____.

- A. drummer and farmer B. farmer and hunter
C. drummer and hunter D. hunter and teacher

10. In Brenhoma, the code name for a corpse is _____.

- A. wasps B. carcass C. bees D. scorpion

Answers

1. A 2. B 3. B 4. C 5. A 6. C 7. C 8. C 9. B 10. A

MARIAMA BA'S SO LONG A LETTER

Introduction

This is the second novel we will study in this chapter. Just like we learnt in Chapter 5 of Book One, we have different types of novels. This one is written in form of a letter. Any novel written in form of letters is called the epistolary novel.

Background of the Author

Mariama Ba was born in Dakar in Senegal in 1929. She was among the first set of girls to be educated in her generation. She schooled at the Ecole Normale for Girls in Rufisque. She began writing at school at an early age. A pioneer of women's rights, she became involved in several Senegalese women's organizations. Her commitment to eradicating inequalities between men and women in Africa led her to write *So Long a Letter*. The novel was very well received and was written in French. It has been translated into sixteen languages and it won the first Noma Award for publishing in Africa.

She was a school teacher and an Inspector of Education. She died in 1981 in Dakar. Her other novel is *Le Chant Ecarlate*.

Plot

The story is in the form of a letter written by a school teacher called Ramatoulaye to her bosom friend and classmate, Aissatou, who lives in the USA. In the letter, she tried to tell Aissatou her own experience and the experiences of most of their common friends and relatives. The letter discussed her husband's death recently and her emotional struggle for survival. Through this letter, she reviews her own experiences, Aissatou's experiences and in fact she went down memory lane to discuss every aspect of her life with her husband. She also recounts every important incident in their lives especially how their two husbands betrayed them and took second wives. Two of them reacted differently. Aissatou promptly divorced her husband, Mawdo Ba, and took her four sons and left for the United States. On her own part, Ramatoulaye decided to stay married to her husband, Modou Fall, because of her faith. She recounted their school life together and the relationship between their two families.

This letter touches on every aspect of Ramatoulaye's life and that of anyone related to two of them in one way or the other. Examples include the problems of Jacqueline and Samba Diack, sharing of Modou's assets between Binetou and Ramatoulaye, Ramatoulaye's suitors and problems she faced as a result of raising a large family.

A letter from Aissatou informs Ramatoulaye that her friend Aissatou will be visiting her the following day and she is waiting expectantly. She concludes her letter by telling her friend that she has hopes in the future and will keep searching for happiness.

Subject Matter

This book is preoccupied with the conditions of women and family in the West African society, especially in the Islamic homes. It mirrors the duties of women in past colonial Africa.

Themes

Superstition

There are many superstitious beliefs that came up. The girls buried their lost milk teeth in the same hole and prayed to their fairy godmothers to replace those teeth with more splendid ones. The part of the griot has a lot of superstition.

Oppressive customs should be dropped

Aissatou promptly refused to share her husband and divorced him.

Discrimination among the social classes

Mawdo Ba's mother rejected his wife because she is the daughter of a goldsmith. She is supposed to come from the royal lineage. She made it impossible for the marriage to succeed.

Polygamy

Even highly educated men who married for love still went for second wives. Moslems are allowed to marry four wives.

Marriage

Mariama believes strongly in marriage. She feels that marriage should not be allowed to die as it is the bedrock of stability in the society.

Importance of women

Women are even more important when there is a problem. The men walk out. It is the women who take care of the children and other family needs. Aissatou took her four sons to America and Ramatoulaye is raising her twelve children alone.

Family interference in marriages

Almost all the marriages in the book face the interference of the family. Aissatou was rejected by her mother-in-law. Ramatoulaye's family wanted her to marry someone else. Jacqueline's family did not want her to marry Samba.

A woman should determine her destiny

Aissatou divorced her husband immediately he took a second wife. Women should challenge oppressive and enslaving cultures.

Courage and integrity

The theme of courage is also present in *So Long a Letter*. It took courage for Aissatou to face her hostile mother-in-law and break from her husband. It took courage for Ramatoulaye to learn to exist without help from her husband in raising twelve children.

Encouragement

We should encourage one another. It was the doctor's encouragement that helped Jacqueline fight her non-existent sickness. Aissatou also encouraged her friend with the gift of a car when she was finding things very difficult.

Family and friendship

They form the bedrock of society. They stand by you in times of trouble. The book boasts of many enduring friendships and family obligations.

Materialism

The theme of materialism can be seen in Binetou's marriage to Modou because of her mother's love for money.

Ostentations living or extravagance

Modou Fall, Ramatoulaye's husband, abandoned his first wife and children and was wasting money buying expensive gifts for Binetou and her mother.

Chastity

Ramatoulaye teaches her 'wild girls' that extra-marital relations or sex outside marriage leads to "early ageing and debasement". She taught them that the sexual act must be an expression of love between husband and wife.

Motherhood

Every mother in this book is up and doing. They take good care of their children and support them in times of trouble.

Other themes like patience, religion, love and politics are also present.

Mariama Ba contrasts men's betrayal, humiliation and disappointments with women's patience, endurance and responsibility.

Setting

In this play, there are two main forms of setting. There is setting in space, that is Senegal in West Africa. There is also setting in time which is the post independence period.

Language and Style

The language of the book is simple and easy to understand. The tone is sad and angry. The style is in form of a letter. It is the epistolary style. The point of view is the omniscient point of view in which the narrator knows everything.

Literary Devices

Ba used similes, metaphors, flashback, repetition, imagery and poetic language to beautify her work.

Characterisation

Ramatoulaye Fall: She is the main character and story teller. Her husband abandons her and their twelve children for a younger woman. She is very friendly with Aissatou. It is a lifelong relationship. She takes care of

herself and the family as a whole. When her husband suddenly dies of a heart attack, she goes to the hospital to identify him and mourns him according to Muslim rites.

Modou Fall: He is the husband of Ramatoulaye and Binetou. According to Ramatoulaye, he was charming, handsome and well-educated. When his daughter Daba brought one of her friends home from school, Modou got attracted and ended up marrying her (Binetou). This led to Modou abandoning his first wife and children to be cared for by Ramatoulaye alone. Later Modou died of a heart attack.

Mawdo Ba: He is a medical doctor by profession. After his mother forced him to take a second wife to spite his wife, Aissatou divorced him and left for America with her four sons. He is also Modou Ba's friend for a very long time.

Aissatou Ba: She is the imaginary character that the letter is written to. Ramatoulaye confides in her and she is very good to her. She does not believe in polygamy and divorced her husband when he took a second wife. She bought a car for her friend and her children when Modou Fall abandoned them. She is the daughter of a goldsmith.

Aissatou Fall: She is Ramatoulaye and Modou's daughter. She is named after Aissatou Ba, her mother's friend. She is impregnated by Ibrahim Sall, a student and this made her mother sad. Ibrahim explained that they would get married when they finish school as they love each other. Their plan is that Ibrahim's mother will take care of their child till they both finish school.

Ibrahim Sall: He is a student of Law who made Aissatou Fall pregnant. Ramatoulaye describes him as "respectful, well-dressed and punctual"; he says that Aissatou is his "first love and possibly his only love," implying that he would not marry another woman later in life. He promises to marry Aissatou at the end of his course if her mother will allow him.

Binetou: Daba Fall's friend and possibly classmate. She had an affair with Modou Fall, Daba's father and later married him. She was pushed into the marriage by her mother who was poor and wanted to enjoy life. This made Daba and her mother very angry and Daba turned into her enemy throughout the story. Binetou found it difficult to fit into Modou's circle of friends, and her own friends deserted her.

Daouda Dieng: He is a medical doctor who has always been friendly with Ramatoulaye. Earlier, he wanted to marry her but she preferred Modou Fall. After Modou's death, he still wanted to marry Ramatoulaye as his second wife but the latter refused.

Daba Fall: She is Ramatoulaye and Modou's daughter. She was Binetou's friend and did not like her father marrying Binetou. She kept telling her mother to leave or divorce her father the way Aissatou did.

Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba: They are called 'the trio'. They are Ramatoulaye's daughter. They smoke, drink and attend parties. They wear trousers and pants instead of lady-like clothes.

Alioune and Malick: They are Ramatoulaye's children who play ball in the streets. When a motorcyclist hits them, their mother scolds her sons instead of the motorcyclist. She blamed her children for playing carelessly in the streets.

Ousmane and Oumar: Young sons of Ramatoulaye who need a father in their lives.

Farmata: She is Ramatoulaye's neighbour and childhood friend. She discovers that Aissatou is pregnant and tells Ramatoulaye. She was mad at Ramatoulaye when she refused to marry Daouda Dieng because she has a lot of respect for Daouda.

Jacqueline Diack: She is from Ivory Coast. She nearly died for a non-existent disease as a result of heartache and worry when her first husband, Samba Diack, started flirting with other women. She nearly had a nervous breakdown.

Samba Diack: Married an Ivorian woman, Jacqueline, whom he dropped for other women.

Lady-mother-in-law: She is Binetou's mother. Modou gave her expensive gifts and built her a "three-room flat".

Little or Young Nabou: She is Mawdo Ba's second wife who is brought up under traditional Moslem customs. She becomes a midwife and has other children for Mawdo Ba.

Grand Nabou: She is a princess from a royal family. She dislikes Aissatou Ba because Aissatou comes from a working-class family.

Tamsir: Modou Fall's elder brother who wanted to marry Ramatoulaye after her husband died.

Abou: Daba's husband who cooks for her and helps her do housework. He says, "Daba is my wife. She is not my slave or my servant."

Summary of the Chapters

Here is the summary of all the chapters.

Chapter 1

Ramatoulaye establishes the relationship between Aissatou and herself. Their grandmothers and mothers were friends. They shared many childhood experiences going to Koranic school together, sharing the same green mango. We read about Modou Fall (though dead) and his doctor and friend Mawdo Ba who gives the cause of death. He died of heart attack in his office. Ramatoulaye had to identify his corpse, conflicting feelings of life and death pass through her mind.

Chapter 2

The death of Modou Fall is announced over the radio and his burial is attended by many people from all parts of the country. Ramatoulaye's co-wife is mentioned and described. She is too young to lose her husband. Ramatoulaye has some complaints – she has spent thirty years of marriage while her co-wife had spent only five years, yet both of them receive equal consideration. Binetou is the name of her co-wife.

Chapter 3

The burial ceremony lasted for three days and different topics like fashion and gossip formed the topic of discussion. Details of the burial rites are given. Different funeral rites are described. The period of mourning was four months and ten days.

Chapter 4

There is a meeting comprising both wives' families, Modou's brother, his friend and doctor and the Imam. Modou's debtors were outlined and they were enormous.

Chapter 5

Why did Modou marry Binetou? She attributes it to fate and destiny. Ramatoulaye laments about the treatment and disappointment meted out to her by her husband but still decides to stay married to him.

Chapter 6

This chapter vividly describes the meeting of Ramatoulaye and Modou Fall, their courtship and their relationship while Modou was studying in France. Ramatoulaye's mother sensed he would not make a very good husband for her child as he was "too handsome, too polished, too perfect for a man". This is shown as a flashback scene.

Chapter 7

Ramatoulaye describes their alma mater, the school head teacher and school life vividly. She also had a lot of praise for her headmistress. Her family would have preferred her to marry Dauda Dieng who was a doctor and well to do but Ramatoulaye felt he was too old for her. She married Modou to the disappointment of all the members of her family.

Chapter 8

Aissatou's courtship with Mawdo Ba was described. His family did not like the idea but Mawdo still went ahead with this marriage plan. Mawdo admired Aissatou's father a lot and called him a "creative artist". She highlights the problems of the lack of money and not having enough places in school for all. Many youths succumb to "drugs, vagrancy and sensuality and the jobless fall pray to delinquency".

Chapter 9

Her marriage to Modou was successful as she learnt to tolerate his sisters' interruptions and his mother. Modou's father was understanding and prayed for them. The life of a working housewife is contrasted with that of a full-time housewife. Ramatoulaye compares her life with that of her sisters-in-law. Many parties were organised as forms of leisure.

Chapter 10

This chapter explains Modou's rise to the top of his career and Mawdo's reputation as a good doctor growing. Africans copied the colonists' way of life and mode of dressing and argued about the political parties to belong to or political ideologies to practise. Brave men were sent to prison but this did not stop others carrying on where they stopped. They also preached and advocated national unity. The country became independent and later a republic with its own flag and anthem. Modou collaborated with the government. Both families of Modou and Mawdo were rising in the social ladder but Mawdo's mother-in-law who was not happy with his choice of wife kept planning her revenge.

Chapter 11

Aunty Seynabou, Mawdo's mother, makes a trip to her father's home. She is attached to her only son, Mawdo. She planned day and night how to take a revenge against Aissatou for coming from a poor background and marrying her child from a royal background. She travelled home in a bus and was treated to a lot of respect by her people. At the end of the visit, she asked her brother for a child to stay with her as her children had all left home. She was given her namesake, Nabou, whom she took back to town.

Chapter 12

Aunty Nabou introduced young Nabou to the homes of all her friends. Ramatoulaye helped to get young Nabou admission into the French school. She also learnt from her namesake how to cook and iron. Her aunt made her very conscious of her royal origin and the importance of docility in a woman's life.

Young Nabou became a midwife eventually and her aunt forced her only son Mawdo to marry her. At first, Aissatou did not know even though all the town had known. Later she was told and she decided to leave Mawdo and left with her sons. Mawdo's life was turned upside down because there was no comparison between Aissatou and young Nabou. Aissatou calmly made a new life for her children and herself and forgot or ignored Mawdo.

Chapter 13

Three years after the breakup between Mawdo and Aissatou, Modou Fall married again. He married his daughter's friend, Binetou. At first, as usual, Ramatoulaye did not know although her daughter, Daba, kept discussing Binetou's problem with her mother.

Modou's brother, Tamsir, Mawdo Ba and the Imam broke the news of Modou's and Binetou's wedding day to Ramatoulaye. This broke her heart but she did her best to pretend she did not care. Only Mawdo knew how she felt.

Chapter 14

Modou's marriage affected different people in different ways. Daba's pride was wounded. Some of their acquaintances were jealous of Binetou's mother's rise in society. Daba advised her mother to react like Aissatou but she considered things like the effect of polygamy and infidelity on some of her acquaintances like Jacqueline and decided to stay. Her children were against her decision but she still did not divorce Modou who soon stopped coming to see Ramatoulaye or their twelve children. This is because his new wife did not want to share him with his first family.

Chapter 15

This chapter compares young Nabou and Binetou. While Nabou really felt love for Mawdo and had a job that helped occupy her, Binetou and her husband did not enjoy such love and spent a lot of time and money at night clubs. Binetou's mother was really enjoying her new status while her daughter was not so happy when she compared her life with her friends. Daba would also go to the same clubs to taunt and embarrass her father and his wife.

Chapter 16

Ramatoulaye tried to make the best of a bad situation. She did her former chores and added those that Modou used to do around the house like mending spoilt doors and replacing bulbs. She also learnt to visit the cinemas alone to pass time. At first, she felt shy at going alone but later she overcame the shyness. She derived a lot of benefits from the stories she watched at the cinema. She took Modou's desertion and rejection bravely. With the help of messages from films and songs, she was able to build hope and comfort around herself. Friendship is here compared with love and Aissatou bought a new car for her friend's family to alleviate their transport problems.

Chapter 17

Ramatoulaye reflects on the different causes of the different failed marriages. Some fail as a result of fickleness of character, selfishness, alcoholism, battering or beatings and many other acts like gambling. Modou's family kept supporting Ramatoulaye, and her children were doing well at school.

Chapter 18

Modou is dead. The fortieth day has just been celebrated and Tamsir, in the presence of Mawdo and the Imam, proposes to Ramatoulaye. She bluntly refuses his offer. She explains that she takes marriage very seriously.

Chapter 19

Ramatoulaye had other suitors like Daouda Dieng who came to ask her hand in marriage but she carefully drew him to a long discussion on politics. It was clear she preferred Daouda Dieng to Tamsir, Modou's brother, as her mother preferred him to Modou when Daouda proposed to Ramatoulaye before her marriage to Modou. On his second visit to talk about marriage, Ramatoulaye's aunts (maternal) were visiting her and they had no privacy to talk about marriage.

Chapter 20

Here, Ramatoulaye dwells a lot on the cleanliness of her body and in fact the value of cleanliness generally. Cleanliness adds value to things while dirt reduces the value of things. The housewife and her great contribution to the home is also discussed. Daouda Dieng eventually comes back for the answer to his proposal and refuses to be diverted by Ramatoulaye. He told her to give him an answer the following day.

Chapter 21

After due consideration, Ramatoulaye discovers that she did not love the man and sent her refusal through the griot, Farmata, who had foreseen that Ramatoulaye should marry Dieng. Ramatoulaye told him in her letter of refusal that she held him in high esteem but did not love him. From experience, she does not want to marry him because she did not want to hurt his wife and children. She however offered him friendship, instead of love. Dieng's short answer was, "All or nothing, Adieu". Her action was greeted by curses and abuses from Farmata. Ramatoulaye did not regret her decision not to marry Daouda Dieng but was angered by the number of people who came to ask her hand in marriage. Because she refused all of them, she was nicknamed "lioness" or mad woman. Modou's belongings were shared or sold, and Binetou and her mother did not get much. Binetou's mother asked for mercy but Daba was bent on punishing them for what they did to Ramatoulaye.

Chapter 22

Ramatoulaye feels immense fatigue and has lost some weight. Aissatou will be around at the end of her friend's seclusion (mourning) according to a letter Ousmane collected. Ramatoulaye believes that friendship is superior to love because of her relationship. Daba goes to her brother Modou's school to discuss with Aissatou his problems with his teacher. In this chapter, we meet most of Ramatoulaye's twelve children and get to know how some of them behave and perform their duties in the house. They include – Daba, Mawdo, Aissatou, Aminata, Hwa, Omar and Ousmane. Despite the fact that Ramatoulaye criticised Mawdo Ba when his marriage failed, Mawdo was still willing to help the family during their serious illnesses.

Chapter 23

The behaviour of Ramatoulaye's children made her to remember her grandmother's sayings. We meet three other members of the family. They are all girls and were smoking. This shocked their mother and made her decide to be more vigilant in order to stop their bad habit. Dieynaba, Arame and Yacine are close, and they shop for clothes. They also work hard at school.

Chapter 24

Ramatoulaye's evening prayer was disrupted by cries from the street which proved to be the result of street football. Her two sons, Alioune and Malick, were involved. Ramatoulaye blamed her sons instead of the motorcyclists that knocked them down. Aissatou is instructed to take Malick to hospital for treatment and Alioune used the opportunity to complain about lack of playing fields in their area. More problems like Aissatou being pregnant cropped up. Ramatoulaye did her best to help the girl. She had to face Farmata who blamed her for being soft with the pregnant girl. Aissatou told her mother the father of her child was Ibrahim Sall.

Chapter 25

The interview with Ibrahim Sall was conducted in the presence of Farmata. Ibrahim was tall and had pleasant features. Ramatoulaye saw him as an orderly man without deceit. He accepted responsibility for the pregnancy

and helped Aissatou plan on how to handle the situation so that Aissatou will not be expelled from school. Ramatoulaye had no alternative but to agree with the couple's plan.

Chapter 26

Because of Aissatou's pregnancy, Ramatoulaye decided that it was necessary to give sex education to her daughters. The girls received the lecture with "no surprise". Ibrahim Sall becomes a regular visitor to the Fall family. He built a relationship with most of them and helped Aissatou to improve academically. The few members of the family that refused his friendship were Dieynaba, Yacine and Arame. Farmata also complained that Ibrahim was proud and shameless and was always ready to hit out at him. Ibrahim's parents also visit Aissatou's family to show concern.

Chapter 27

This is the concluding chapter. Ramatoulaye is expecting her friend, Aissatou, from the United States the following day. She is telling her friend her opinion on a lot of issues like women's liberation and her hopes for the future. She emphasises that love alone is the natural link between man and woman. She notes that the family must succeed so that the nation will succeed.

Conclusion

In this novel, Mariama Ba has successfully convinced her readers that women deserve better treatment. She also feels that family life and marriage should be taken very seriously.

Now, take time and read the novel itself many times to understand every other message it contains. Pay attention to names of characters, events and places to help you answer set questions correctly.

Revision Questions

1. A taxi quickly hailed! Fast! Fast! Faster still! My throat is dry. There is a rigid hump in my chest. Fast: faster still. At last, the hospital: the mixed smell of suppurations and ether. The hospital – distorted faces, a train of tearful people, known and unknown, witnesses of this awful tragedy.
 - (a) Who is speaking?
 - (b) What tragedy has taken place?
 - (c) What was the cause of the tragedy?
 - (d) Mention one person that was there.
2. The theme of friendship is one of the themes in this book. Discuss the outcome of two sets of friends in this book.
3. Discuss the motorcycle accident.
4. Did any marriage in this novel succeed? Which one?
- 5a. Which of the customs discussed in this book do you want to continue?
b. Which of the customs discussed do you think is the worst?

Objective Questions

1. The narrator in *So Long a letter* is _____.
 - A. Mariama Ba
 - B. Ramatoulaye Fall
 - C. Aissatou Fall
 - D. Aissatou Ba
2. What religion is practised most in this novel?
 - A. Christian religion

- B. Islamic religion
 - C. Customary religion
 - D. Pentecostal religion
3. Ramatoulaye and Modou had children.
- A. 10
 - B. 12
 - C. 4
 - D. 8
4. In this Senegalese community, what type of family system is mostly practised?
- A. The nuclear family
 - B. The extended family
 - C. The religious family
 - D. The close family
5. Before he died, Modou Fall was promoted to the rank of _____.
- A. director
 - B. chief executive
 - C. technical adviser
 - D. personnel officer
6. Young Nabou, Mawdo Ba's second wife, was a professional _____.
- A. nurse
 - B. teacher
 - C. seamstress
 - D. midwife
7. Before proposing to Ramatoulaye, Tamsir, Modou's brother, had how many wives?
- A. One
 - B. Two
 - C. Three
 - D. Four
8. When was *So Long a Letter* written?
- A. 1961
 - B. 1981
 - C. 1991
 - D. 1971
9. Which of Ramatoulaye's daughters got pregnant outside marriage?
- A. Daba
 - B. Yacine
 - C. Aissatou
 - D. Aminata
10. Ramatoulaye was given a brand of car by Aissatou.
- A. Mercedes
 - B. Toyota
 - C. Fiat
 - D. Peugeot

Answers to the Objective Questions

1. B 2. B 3. B 4. B 5. C 6. D 7. C 8. B 9. C 10. C