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A REFLECTION OF COURAGE AND OPTIMISM IN AFRICAN WOMEN IN MARIAMA BA'S SO LONG A LETTER

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ABSTRACT

The traditional position in most patriarchal society is that the female sex is seen and protected as inferior to the female sex. For a very long time particularly in most African societies, desirable attitudes and virtues are expected from the man. Any woman found putting up such is simply described as behaving like a man. A man found displaying absence is simply rebuked stop behaving like a woman. This paper discusses two of the attributes. Optimism and courage as projected by Mariama Ba in So Long A Letter in the novel, Ba presents Ramatoulaye as a courageous woman who is very optimistic. These are very obvious in the way and manner she handles the situation at home and after demise of her husband. Modou Fall. The paper tries to establish the fact that the quality to move through hardship and difficult situations and still record success is not restricted only to men as conceptualized by most people in most patriarchal societies. This is to join other voices that every situation has to be treated on merit. Today many woman are in positions of authority through courageous and optimistic minded. This paper concludes that every situation must be treated in his own merit.

KEYWORDS: Women, society, reproduction, placement, disappointment.

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a sociological look at Ba's So Long A Letter. The discussion in the paper is drawn from a womanist point of view. Women generally have been considered patriarchal society as weak creatures. Every male child considers himself as superior being over and above his female counterpart. Every married man is the head of his family. The wife is, traditionally seen as an object of reproduction whose duties start and end in the kitchen.

“Traditionally, women and men alike accepted the fact that men have rights that women do not. Male behaviour has been considered the norm, and women have been viewed to some degree, as inferior. These

attitudes are part of the stereotypes that shake thinking about women and women's behaviour. Ultimately, they help determine women's status in the society. (Encyclopedia Americana: 111a)”

Olutoye, in an oral address in an open forum in college of Education, Ikere Ekiti questioned the logic behind 'professor Mrs' and there was nothing like 'professor Mr.' She was of the opinion that a professor is a professor. This disparity and the likes are what some writers try to resolve in the modern age. A good example is Mariama Ba. Historically, women have been labeled physically weaker than men, more emotional, less reasonable, less able to learn and dependent (Encyclopedia Americana: 111a). This belief has

influenced the assignment of roles and the placement of priority in the society over the years. So women can only be seen and not be heard.

This has been the situation until recent time when perception about women began to witness certain changes socially, politically and economically in the society. In the modern age, women are not just seen. They are also heard. Taiwo (1984) rightly observes that “the personality and inner reality of African women have been hidden under such a heap of myths, so called ethnological theories... That it might be interesting to study what they have to say for themselves”

The modern perception about women is favourable. Women who are literary artists are mostly preoccupied in their works with women virtue. They write about the quality of women, their contributions to the development of the home and society at large. Such works emphasize the significance of women maintaining law and order in the home coupled with transmission of societal socio- cultural values. These realities are better felt in situations where men fail to live up with expectation. This is the situation presented by Ba in *So Long a Letter* (1981). This will be referred to as SLAL hereafter.

COURAGE AND OPTIMISM IN AFRICAN WOMEN

The description of courage and optimism as discussed in this paper conform with the life of Ramatoulaye in Ba's *So Long A Letter*. As stated earlier, Ramatoulaye typifies an average African woman who believes in one Yoruba adage that “bi idibabaje, to nidi lo nda (when a person fails to take necessary steps forestall evil, misfortune or calamity, the person bears the burnt when it eventually comes). As one of “the very first female novelist from sub-Saharan African to explore the experience of Muslim African Women” (Killiam and Rowe, 2000) Ba in an epistolary form narrates the experience of Ramatoulaye as an African woman whose marriage life is characterized with disappointments.

The type of life that Moudo Fall lived while he was alive and the resultant effect after his death reveals so many things about Ramatoulaye (his wife). Her courage is revealed in the way she approached the situation as a widow left with twelve children. Incidentally her co-wife is the best friend of her first daughter. The optimism is revealed in her disposition to the characters of her children especially those who take after their father. For example, Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba (the trio) engage in smoking. The action is considered a deviation from the norm in a Muslim community. The daughters like to be in trousers. Ramatoulaye considers the act as a “dreadful in view of our build, which is not that of slim western women” For her, “trousers accentuate the ample figure of the black woman and further emphasize the curve of the small of the back” (77SLAL). To worsen the situation,

Ibrahima impregnates Aissatou.

Ba's *So Long a Letter* reveals the ordeals of many African women in a male dominated society with a Muslim background where polygamy is allowed. Ramatoulaye typifies an African woman whose mettle and confidence have always been her aid and the saving grace in the time of trouble and disappointment. This is well displayed in Ramatoulaye's role in her family, most especially on her twelve children after the death of her husband. The disappointment case is the inability of the husband to keep abreast of his plans.

The contribution of women to the growth and development of society can no longer be swept under the carpet. In the light of this Taiwo (1984) observes that “the contribution of African women to literature and society has been largely connected with their roles as wives mother and partners in the home.” The home is the first setting that a child finds himself. The success of a child or otherwise depend largely on the family background and the type of training such a child has from home. The mother (a woman) is at the centre. The child stays with her more often. The mother initiates the societal norms, the traditional values and the cultural heritage. All these are significant in the life of a child who later grows up as adult in the society. To carry out this task requires resoluteness and hope which reside in African women as we see in Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

Taylor (2002) describes *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba as a “novel” which “has Senegalese background but with a universal thematic focus particularly for African”. Ba has in particular African readers in mind when she wrote *So Long A Letter*. The disposition of Ramatoulaye to circumstances that surround her marriage shows some elements of gallantry and trust. The action of some characters in the novel especially those of Moudo Fall (the husband of Ramatoulaye) do not favour a successful marital life. It takes Ramatoulaye strong determination to overcome the resultant effects of those actions and steps.

As a Taylor (2002) rightly puts in that “Mariama Ba in *So Long A Letter* examines the plight of married women who refuse to come to terms with polygamy in a society that accepts the practice as a matter of facts.” To effect a change in already established custom requires intrepidity and boldness. Ba in her novel *So Long A Letter* reveals Ramatoulaye as a School teacher who is very friendly. Tragedy strikes her home when her husband died. In her letter to her friend Aissatou, she says “yesterday you were divorced, today I am a widow” (1 SLAL). She further says:

“I listen to the words that create around me a new atmosphere.... may coins beat as to the rhythm of childbirth noble words of consolation fight my attention...joyous miracle of birth, dark miracle of death says Mawdo Ba... I admire his noble hands...”

used to track down illness. Those hands, moved by friendship and rigorous science, could not save his friend. Modou Fall is indeed dead (2-3 SLAL)."

Typical of any African society is the sharing of properties of a deceased.

The situation is always very competitive and most of the times generates hot blood among the concerned especially when the deceased was a wealthy person. In the case of Moudo Fall, Ramatoulaye remarks "Thus our family - in - law take away with them a wad of notes painstakingly topped, and leave us utterly destitute, we who need support." (7 SLAL) Ramatoulaye bears this and goes on with her normal life. This is courageous. She still feels life must continue and she hopes for better future (optimism). Other things as Muslim religion puts them begin to follow. Binetou the Co-wife returns to her SICAP Villa. Ramatoulaye has this to say "Alone,

I live in a monotony broken only by purifying baths, the changing of my mourning clothes every Monday and Friday. I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demand of religion (8 SLAL).

Ramatoulaye has to cope with the recklessness and irresponsibility of her husband during his life time. The outcome of the husband's irresponsibility becomes her burden after his death. These recklessness and gross irresponsibility are spelt out on pages nine to ten of the novel. Moudo Fall abandons his first family. He fails to control his expenses, which leads to a pile of debts. The debts are discovered after his death. He builds four bedrooms, two bathrooms, pink and blue arge sitting- room and a three- room flat for his new wife and her mother.. He does this through a loan. The collateral security of the loan is Villa Fallene' where Ramatoulaye lives which the build by joint savings. As if this is not enough Moudo Fall borrowed Four Million Francs to sponsor the parents of Binetou to Mecca. He discontinues the keeping of joint account with Ramatoulaye to disallow suspicion. In order to make sure that he marries Binetou, Moudo Manama ba.

Ba makes an attempt to celebrate woman's (African Woman) Virtues in *so long A Letter*. In the light of this, Animasaun (2000) asserts that "the woman was an important member of the society in the traditional west African setting" the attitude and disposition of Ramatoulaye in *so Long a Letter* reveal the fearlessness and firmness of an average African woman in a terrible condition. There make her to be a good wife at home, a good mother of children and a virtuous woman whose examples can be emulated in any society aiming to move forward.

Olusola (2002) spell out some of the names given to woman in the society. They include: "the mirror of the nation", "the gate

keeper of the family", "the life - wire of the family", the motivation of the home", "the influence of the Home" and "the resource manager of the Home". All these admirable names are not given to woman in abstraction. The names show certain genuine in woman's character. Ramatoulaye actually displays this benevolence which makes her answerable to such names. Her moral uprightness and propitious actions make her a worthy woman.

While referring to the experience of herself and Aissatou her friend, Ramatoulaye says "we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom"(19 SLA L).The courage in her, coupled with her optimistic mind make her love for Modou to remain .she compromises with his people and tolerates his sisters. Ramatoulaye still receives her mother-in-law and accords her the respect due to a queen in spite of her son's (Modou Fall) lackadaisical attitude.

This makes Ramatoulaye, as an African woman to fit into the opinion of Achufusi (1994) while considering feminist inclinations of flora Nwapa that"... African societies have not internalized the notion that the woman's self actualization is no longer dependent on her biological role of reproduction" Mariama Ba expresses this opinion through the personality of Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter*. This shows that an average African Woman is very fortitude and enthusiastic. Ramatoulaye declares

"...Try explaining to them that a working Woman is no less responsible for her home. Try explaining to them that nothing is done If you do not step in, that you have to see to everything ... the children to be washed, the husband to be looked after. The working woman has a dual task ... first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working (20 S'LAL)"

From this declaration, one gathers that to succeed in life requires hard work, intelligence, and patience. These imply hardiness and trustworthiness. An average African woman combines domestic work with official duties just as Ramatoulaye does in *So Long A Letter* by Mariama Ba. The social engagement is not left unattended to. So she requires a great deal of courage and optimism to cope especially in a male dominated society where woman are pushed to the background. This patriarchal situation makes Akali (2000) to exclaim in reference to the Patricia McFadden and okojie that;

"Over the last thirty years or so, women's labour has been efficiently exploited, mainly in the cultivation and processing of agricultural commodities in many third World countries ...it is estimated that about 60-80 percent of agricultural

impute is provided by them” (woman) .. It is however argued that in spite of this huge contribution to economy, thus national development, women have had a much more limited access to government, as such could not invest their resources in the same way as men.”

As a school teacher, Ramatoulaye is proud of the profession. Teaching suffers ill treatment in African especially in Nigeria. For a woman, who is considered a weak creature in the society, to be good one is encouraging. Ramatoulaye points out in the novel. She Says

“and we lived when we stood in front of our overcrowded classes, we represented a force in the economics effort to be accompanied in order to overcome ignorance... ours, like that of the doctor, does not allow for any mistake ... Teacher at kindergarten level, as at university level from a noble army accomplishing daily feats, never praised, never decorated thwarting traps and snares everywhere plants the flag of knowledge and morality (23 SLA L).”

Effective teaching requires velour and discretion such that is found in Ramatoulaye. In addition to her commitment and her means of livelihood Ramatoulaye, is one of those woman who, “rallied around the dominant party, infusing it with new blood” when there is campaign for “national unity” they do this so that “all the active forces in the country should be mobilized” (25 SLAL). This is indeed courageous act. The optimism is revealed in the belief that “to be productive in the crowd was better than cross one’s arms and hiding behind imported ideologies (25 SLAL).

The courage and optimism in African woman is also seen in Mawdo’s mother. Ba presents her in *So Long a Letter* as a woman who still lives in the past. So she is not aware of the fact that the world is changing. This posits that she passes through certain hardship in life. Mawdo and her sister who are the product of the marriage we young when their father died. She faces the challenges in a brave manner. She brings up Mawdo together with his two sisters. The two sisters are well brought up and are well married. Mawdo becomes a practicing medical doctor. For Aunt Nabou to single handedly take care of three children from childhood to adulthood requires courage and optimism. It requires serious effort and hard labour for a widow to be responsible for the training of a medical doctor.

Young Nabou learns from her aunt (a woman) “the secret of making delicious sauces” (29

SLAL). The aunt (a woman) “the secret of making delicious sauces” (29 SLAL). The aunt did not forget to teach her that the first quality of a woman, which is docility. For her docility is to patience, what patience is to courage and optimism. King Odewale in *the Gods Are Not Blame* prays to the god so that he can have the kind of patience that Ojuola his wife (the queen) has (Rotimi, 1979). An average African woman is very docile. She exercises patience and hope for brighter future when things are getting out of hand. This is the disposition of Ramatoulaye when she is aware of the wife of her husband; a friend to her daughter.

African woman, like Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* live their life to disapprove the opinion of people like Catherine Conquery-Vidrovitch. Conquery-vidrovitch (1997) opines that African woman “are so overburdened with taste of all kinds that they hardly have time to bemoan their fate or even to wonder about it. Their image of themselves remains cloudy”, in reaction to this opinion and the likes, Okome (2003) describes such opinions as “the negative scholarly depiction of African woman” because Conquery Vidrovitch “attitudes only to woman, or only to men, some of the roles that are generalizable to both”.

The action of Aissatou in disagreement with polygamy, though in a radical manner is considered a “surprising courage” in that she decides “to the” her “life into” her {own hand” (32 S L A L). Aissatou (a woman) embarks on a difficult task. The education that she has saves her. She graduates from “the school of interpreters” and secures an “appointment into the Senegalese Embassy in the United States.” (32 SLAL). Bamidele (2003) describes the life of Ramatoulaye as one. As Bamidele rightly observes, *So Long A letter* is a novel

“Written in epistolary form” to “portray a Senegalese widow Ramatoulaye, recounting her feelings and experiences (most of which are bitter) to her close friend, Aissatou, who passes through a similar ordeal... Both women (Ramatoulate and Aissatou) struggle to make life meaningful to themselves and manage their mental health (Bamidele 2003)”

This is nothing but courage and optimism. These two qualities actually help the two women to succeed. Their misery turns to joy. According to Bamidele (2003) the long letter “reveals” Ramatoulaye’s “courage”.

Ramatoulaye describes Aissatou, in her letter as “an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life” (34 S L A L). As a promising woman, Ramatoulaye says “I forced myself to check my inneragitation ... smile, take the matter lightly” (38 S L A L). This is when the ‘Imamed group’ comes to notify Ramatoulaye of the holy wedlock between Modou Fall and Binetou after twenty- five years in marriage with twelve

children. The most painful thing is that the new wife is the best friend of their daughter (Daba).

When Ramatoulaye discovers that Binetou is of the same age as her daughter Daba, she initially contemplates on divorce as a way out of the shame. She later braces herself. She thinks of her twelve children and the love she has for Modou. An internet source has it that Ramatoulaye consider the situation as a “divine” one. She admits that life must continue. She accepts the situation in good fate. Ramatoulaye is very hopeful. She displays a sense of understanding and responsibility. The good spirit in her speaks "... to overcome distress when it sits upon demands strong will... Brace oneself to check despair and get it to proportion” (41 SLA L).

Bamidele (2003) remarks that “Ramatoulate had to learn to live with her emotion ... developed an analytical mind to enable her know who she is, what she wants to achieve, how she intends to achieving it. And when to make moves towards achieving it”. The calmness in Ramatoulate is further seen when friends advice her to react having talked of her husband being bewitched. Her response is emphatically no. She says “...? No, I would not give in to the pressure. My mind and my faith rejected supernatural power.... I looked reality in the face” (49 S L A L).

This is the kind of commitment in African women, which have made them to be very supportive at home. They still contribute to their quota to the development of African society socially economically and politically despite their unfavourable condition. They remain the brain behind the success of any home, any community and any society. Taiwo (1984) while considering the role of African women in literature and society discloses that preliterate African women contributed a great deal to education and literature. Their art was verbal and their purpose didactic. In the same vein Kolawole (1997) submits that African woman's strength derives from within and her culture forms the foundation of a wholesome self appreciation. Their self actualization, which is a product of courage and optimism, has always shown them the way out of any misfortune that comes on their ways.

Ramatoulaye is happy in that she is surviving. The purchase of basic food kept her occupied at the end of the month. Her brain was task by new financial gymnastic. The payment of the electricity bills and of water rates demanded her attention as she is always the only woman in the queue. She remarks I survived. I overcame my shyness... the early show in the cinema queue filled me with the delight. They gave me the courage to meet... (51 SLAL). Okafo'r (1981) while trying to examine the women characters in the plays of Aidoo and Sutherland, observe that they show the courage of women in the world that tries to frustrate their aspirations.

Mariama Ba addresses herself to these realities in male -oriented society like African. This make her, in so long A letter to portray some women especially Ramatoulaye as very daring and promising.

The love that Ramatoulaye has for her children sustains her. She realizes that she owns them help and affection. This makes her not to replace Modou with another man. She decides to shoulder the responsibility of the twelve children. Ramatoulaye being a trust worthy woman remains faithful for the love that she was for Modou. She prays for him. She celebrates the fortieth day as custom demands. In spite all she encounters she is able to forgive her husband. Ramatoulate rejects the proposition of Tamsir (the brother of Modou). She says to tamsir ...you forget that I have a heart, a mind that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. Emphatically she tells him I can ever be your wife (58 SLAL).

After Tamsir, comes DaoudouDeing. Deing is the favourite of Ramatoulaye mother. The is the advice of ramatoulate mother at the initial time a woman must marry the man who loves her but never the one that she loves; that is the secret of lasting happiness (59 SLAL). Deing who is now a deputy at the national assembly does not yet attract the interest of Ramatoulaye to the extent of marrying him. One marvel at this kind of resolution of Ramatoulate in spite of her condition and the success of Deing who happens to be the rival of Modou some thirty years ago.

Ramatoulaye acknowledges the love that Daouda Deing has for her. She tries to open the eyes of Deingto' the problem of polygamy. She politely rejects the offer of Deing. This action does not receive the approval of Farmata who already dreams of a blissful life for Ramatoulaye in the house of Daouda Deing. Having gone to give Daouda the letter containing the response of Ramatoulaye, farmata, the griot woman rancorously remarks and says bissimilai what was it that you dared to write? You have killed a man. You have rejected the messenger sent to you by God. You shall live in mud. I wish you another Modou to make you shed tears of blood (69 SLAL). This tirade does not move Ramatoulaye. She is firm, resolute and hopes to reap the best result out of her decision. She remains in her ideals. Names such as lioness and mad woman comes out of this. Ramatoulaye turns deaf ears to them. Instead, she copes with the up keep and education of her children. She tries to hard to make sure that they are in good health. Her mother passed through the same experiences. African women develops courageous characters in day us of trouble. Ramatoulaye also faces the problem of adolescence in her children. These include: smoking by the trio (Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba), wearing of loose dresses, and aissatou (the name sake of Ramatoulates friend) is pregnant.

Ramatoulaye, as an African woman realizes that the future of Aissatou is at stake. These considerations override all taboos and assume greater importance in her mind. So she decides to help and protect the pregnant girl. This action is least expected by Farmata who is expecting a strong reprimand. Instead, Ramatoulaye consoles. For threat, she forgives. This goes in agreement with a Yoruba adage that *oribibe ko ni oogun efori* (the solution to a terrible headache is not cutting off the head from the body).

Ramatoulaye overcomes the situation and gives Ibrahim sail (the boy behind the episode) a warm welcome. The task becomes very easy because Ibrahim is reasonable. He regrets his action. He promises to marry Aissatou. He tells Ramatoulaye that his mother will look after the child. Ibrahim goes further to say that his education and Aissatou will continue. Courageous of an African woman, the mother of Ibrahim is taking the responsibility to look after an unwanted child in order to ease the problem. To this Ramatoulaye happily reacts. My daughter's boyfriend had worked it out logically... (85SLAL) courageously, as an African woman, she accepts to play a subordinate role. In the end Ramatoulaye makes a declaration

"I felt that I had emerged into the light after a long journey through dark, narrow tunnel I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything-disappointments and humiliations- hope still, lives on within me. If is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me. The word happiness does indeed have meaning I shall go out in search of it.. (89 SLAL)."

CONCLUSION

Life is made up of ups and downs. Joy today, sorrow tomorrow. Love now, hatred thereafter, friendship in the morning, disappointment in the afternoon. One goes to bed with a glimpse of bright future and wakes only to be surrounded by illusion. To succeed in life requires a great deal of courage and optimism. One has to take reasonable decisions and execute same paying little or no attention to frustrating circumstances. To be courageous and optimistic is to protect and defend as appropriate during hardship and unwanted situation. African women are not found wanting in this regard. They display high sense of responsibility at the time of distress in the home and in the society at large. The future of any courageous and optimistic person irrespective of the sex is a promising one. The society where such abide will live to record high level of development it is not surpassing today to have women who are commissioners, senators, ministers and even president of a country. Women who are wives to men who hold significant post in the society play vital role to ensure that the

administration of their respective husbands brings out the best for the people.

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