



## MAPPING OUT 'SELF': A READING OF *SCARLET SONG* CONFORMING TO JOSSELSON'S THEORY OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

A.V. JOEY

Research Scholar, Dept of English,  
Scott Christian College, Nagercoil.



A.V. JOEY

### ABSTRACT

Mariama Ba is a Senegalese author and feminist. She is born in Dakar, and is raised as a Muslim. She perceived the inequalities between the sexes resulting from African traditions and addressed those issues in her works. Raised by her traditional grandparents, she had to struggle even to gain education, because they did not believe that girls should be given education. Ba died a year before the publication of her second novel, *Scarlet Song*. *Scarlet Song* has gained international attention because; this book deals with the critically urgent need for women to create "empowered" spaces for themselves. The book criticizes the tyranny of tradition and expounds upon the despair of cross-cultural marriages. This book focuses on the oppression of culture that destroys the life of Mireille, a white woman who comes to live with her dear husband Ousmane in his black land. This study uses characterization and plot analysis to explore the messages the novel portrays. It shows a comparison of woman characters of how they pursue and achieve what they want, where some characters do fail to achieve their goal. The major women characters are analyzed using Josselson's Theory of Women's Identity Development as a basic tool.

**Key Words:** Women's Identity, Search for Self, Josselson, Mariama Ba.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

### Josselson's Theory of Women's Identity Development

According to Ruthellen Josselson's theory of women's identity development, she states that when women are faced with a confrontation they either progress or shut themselves. She has developed this theory from James E. Marcia's Ego Identity status. She takes the four identity groups from James E. Marcia and adopts it to women. Those four groups include the following:

1. Foreclosures/ Guardians
2. Identity achievers/ Path makers
3. Moratoriums/ Searchers
4. Identity diffusers/ Drifters

The foreclosure group includes women who have not confronted any dispute; but still have made an identity for themselves. These women have internalized the values of their parents, and maintain those values they inherited as children. They do what is expected of them and try to please others. The identity achievers are those who have experienced a crisis, and have accomplished their own identity. They have explored options, and they understand that they have their own authority to make decisions. They are independent and have a greater amount of self confidence. They aim for personal success rather than fame and status. The moratorium group of women have endured crisis,

but they have trouble devoting to an identity. These women realize that there are many choices, but they search for the right answers. They are observant, self-reflexive and sensitive. A strong need for relationship is the unique quality of this group. The identity diffusers have not committed to an identity because they are unable to internalize the experiences into their personalities. They are aware of choices, but are inefficient to choose. They are women who wait for life to happen to them.

Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*, though the story looks deceptively simple, the issues focused in it are not. The novel talks about the fascinating glimpse of how culture can imprison even the most educated people. This novel focuses on issues such as the clash of cultures, racism be it black or white, the role played by women in supporting the patriarchal system and the oppression of the white woman in the Black Country. It is a cross-cultural novel which focuses on the tragic events that happen because of the cultural differences between the protagonist Mireille and her husband. She is left alone in an unknown land without any support. Even her in-laws turn against her and plot events against her. The novel demonstrates how she struggle throughout her life to survive in that foreign land. This study compares and contrasts the women characters in the novel and casts light on the way how clinging to one's traditional and cultural norms takes out the humanity in them.

*Scarlet Song* is the story of Mireille, the daughter of a French diplomat, who marries a black Senegalese man named Ousmane Gueye against the wishes of her parents. Despite the stubborn opposition from her parents they get married in Paris. Mireille, in the meantime, has converted to Islam on Ousmane's request. He thereafter takes her back to Senegal, much to the dismay of his parents. Soon after returning to Senegal, he abandons her on the pretext of returning to his tradition, his tradition taking the shape of another woman, Ouleymatou. Though he accepts the traditional privilege of having more than one wife, but rejects the injunction to care for them equally. As his friend Ali puts it, he tries to find 'cultural justifications for what is simply a physical infatuation'.

In this novel, Ba critically exposes the role of some women –especially those of the older generation - in a couple's life, revealing their attitudes that contribute to victimizing the wife. Following their marriage in Paris, Ousmane and Mireille return to Senegal where they build a home in Ousmane's community. At the beginning, they live their lives as a romantic couple; they are close to each other until things start to crumble.

Ousmane's mother, Yaye Khady, is not happy that her son has married a woman whom she did not choose, and who is not even black. Her racist attitude toward Mireille makes it clear that she is not ready to tolerate a white woman in her family. To her, Mireille is an anomaly and an intruder who will disrupt the traditional family pattern. She openly complains,

Ousmane was introducing an anomaly. A white woman does not enrich a family. She impoverishes it by undermining its unity. She can't be integrated into the community. She keeps herself apart, dragging her husband after her. SS: 73

Yaye Khady's negative attitude toward Mireille can be justified in the sense that the extended family and love for company is of great importance in African societies. But on the other hand, the Western concept of love is one of bilateral exchange, in which the woman gives her husband all her love in exchange for all his love; consequently, this excludes others. Thus, Yaye Khady fears that Ousmane's attention will only be directed towards Mireille, neglecting his traditional African family. Unlike her husband who has left fate in God's hands and decided to give his daughter-in-law a fair chance, Yaye Khady objects to Ousmane's marriage because Mireille will not be able to fulfill all the traditional responsibilities of a daughter-in-law towards her in-laws, especially her mother-in-law. In her opinion, only a daughter-in-law who hails from her own society and tradition would understand and even take care of all the family needs. She says,

'A *Toubab* can't be a proper daughter-in-law. She'll only have eyes for her man. We'll mean nothing to her. And I who dreamt of a daughter-in-law who'd live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking

over the management of the house, and now I'm faced with a woman who's going to take my son away from me. I shall die on my feet, in the kitchen. SS: 66

Ousmane's mother feels that nothing is wrong in encouraging her son to marry a woman of his own choice, what matters to her is to see that her son marries a traditional Senegalese woman, whom she believes would care for her in her old age. Yaye Khady assumes that a Senegalese daughter-in-law would automatically relieve her of her duties, thus rewarding her for her many years of motherhood and childbearing. Because of these selfish feelings, she cannot develop any constructive or meaningful relationship with Mireille. Yaye Khady visualizes of a black and a white daughter-in-law in totally different ways. She asserts:

A black woman knows and accepts the mother-in-law's rights. She enters the

home with the intention of relieving the older woman. The daughter-in-law cocoons her husband's mother in a nest of respect and repose. Acting according to unspoken and undisputed principles, the mother-in-law gives her orders, supervises, and makes her demands. She appropriates the greater part of her son's earnings. She is concerned with the running of his household and has her say in the upbringing of her grandchildren ... SS: 72

A white woman does not enrich a family. She impoverishes it by undermining its unity. She can't be integrated into the community. She keeps herself apart, dragging her husband after her. Has anyone ever seen a white woman pounding millet or fetching buckets of water? On the contrary, the white woman exploits others who have to do the jobs for her that she is not used to doing!

... The white woman manipulates her husband like a puppet. Her husband remains her property. She alone controls her household and all the income is turned to her benefit alone. Nothing goes to her husband's family. SS: 73

For Yaye Khady the issue is not only of racial difference but of her power and familial control. She is determined to break the marriage between Ousmane and Mireille because she is unable to exercise her right to control the house on the basis of her position as a mother and mother-in-law. As part of the plan she rudely intrudes the couple's privacy even on Sunday mornings by walking straight into their bedroom without knocking or excuses. She deliberately does things to make sure that the husband and wife has a quarrel.

She would pick her teeth and spit on the carpet, fully aware that her actions would spark off a quarrel after she has gone. SS: 85

Her callous attitude towards Mireille results in her conscious attempts to get rid of Mireille and regains her own dominant position in the family. It is Yaye Khady who always wins the battle that she has towards Mireille. She is the one who fakes her attitude towards her Ousmane. As a result Ousmane becomes totally insincere towards Mireille's noble sentiments and easily neglects her complaints about Yaye Khay. At one instance when Ousmane is affected by flu, Yaye Khady finds herself running back and forth to her son's flat bringing powders and dubious liquids that stain the sheets and stink the whole atmosphere. But even after Ousmane becomes all right to go back to work; she comes to his place to look after him. This attitude of Yaye Khady is disliked by Mireille and after reaching the peak of her patience, she suggests Yaye Khady that she should stay back at home. Though Mireille didn't pick up a quarrel with her mother-in-law, Yaye Khady misrepresents the events to Ousmane saying,

'Your wife has thrown me out. She told me never to set foot here again'. SS: 94

On hearing this Ousmane gets angered and sides with his mother even before hearing Mireille's version of the events. Accusing her,

'If you can't stand Yaye Khady's presence here, then you can get out'. SS: 95

On hearing this from her once compassionate and caring lover, Mireille becomes speechless, suffocates, and slowly blacking out the outside world, faints. Very soon Yaye Khady flees from the spot knowing that she has created

disharmony between the couple. All her ill conceptualizations paid off when she comes to know that her son has become the father for an African child. She admits to herself,

‘Any African woman rather than this white woman. Any African woman would show respect and consideration for me. God is sending me a child to bring Ousmane Gueye back to the right path.’ SS: 126.

Yaye Khady finally rejoices that she is going to have her day in public. She feels proud of her position in organizing the event. She is overjoyed by the thought that she will be the prime mover and be the one who will gain material benefits. Her narcissism comes out in full force as she participates and works on the things that have to be done during the naming ceremony. She feels redeemed in front of her friends after the disastrous naming ceremony of Gorgui (born of Mireille) during which she was shamed. Finally she feels elated.

In spite of her fatigue, Yaye Khady was elated! At last she had had ‘her day of glory among her peers!’

Those who has been present at his spectacular function would put a stop to any future slander; they would display the proof of her financial resources and restore her dignity... she was happy and invigorates and the fires of shame that had burned her up during long sleepless nights were finally extinguished.

Thanks be to Allah! Give thanks again!

Give thanks that the black blood in the veins of the new grandson is not diluted; this child who will give back what it received to the source which gives him suck!

Give thanks for a daughter-in-law at last who will respect my rights! SS: 134

Thus Yaye Khady who finally regains her dominant position that was due to her through all her scheming makes her one of a guardian in remaining the same with her identity according to Josselson’s theory of Women’s identity development.

Mathilde de la Vallee is the mother of Mireille. She enters the narrative during the breakfast scene. The initial description gives a basic

insight into her behavior and character. She is on strict diet not for herself but for her husband whose positions demands to be so, to maintain her external beauty.

A tray of coffee, croissants and jam for her father; tea for her mother without any bread or butter. Madame de la Vallee kept her appetite well under control with a strict diet. In this way she fought against a tendency to put on weight, as her husband’s position demanded that she retain her beauty and poise. SS: 24

As the novel unfolds, incidents that take place reveal her character as a mother, wife and as a woman in a similar light. After finding out the picture of Ousmane in Mireille’s belongings, Jean de la Vallee calls for a family meeting to interrogate her. On entering the room she sees her mother sitting stiffly, scarcely recognizable. She puts on a hard shell around herself not to let her feelings get exposed. During the interrogation, it is only her father who questions Mireille. Her mother doesn’t utter even a single word. The decision to send Mireille back to France is also made by her father thereby, denying any kind of influence even in the matter of her own daughter’s future. Her father is the only decision maker because acceptance from his wife is assured to him. Not only does she accept his decisions, but even accepts all his opinions. When she talks about the students’ rebellion that shook France in 1968, Mireille observes,

‘As for mother, she accepts everything that her husband says. She repeats to visitors whatever she can remember of his diatribes against “these lunatics” (father’s expression), without giving them a chance to air their own opinions about what father calls “this tidal wave”. SS: 43

Madame de la Vallee is thus reduced to be a human parrot, not capable of making decisions or thinking for herself. Her husband’s word becomes her gospel, the truth, her truth. Her part becomes withdrawn and she represses herself. When faced with a situation where Jean de la Vallee rushes home after receiving the letter from his daughter, who has then married Ousmane; he bursts out to his wife, asking to read the letter. Though she was moved by the

sincerity of her daughter's cry from afar; she could not expose her true feelings. She is forced to abide by the feelings of her husband out of habit.

As a mother she could share her child's despair as she was driven to this drastic measure. Reading between the lines, she could appreciate her dreadful dilemma. She was heartsick at the thought of the wrench her daughter's decision must have caused her. She was moved by the sincerity of her cry from afar. She forgave her. She opened her arms to cradle her child...

But Jean de la Valle was planted in front of her, inflexible in the face of this attack on his honour, this assault on his dignity. He exclaimed loud and furiously, 'snack-in-the-grass! Slut!' by which his wife understood that there could be no reconciliation. And then, out of habit- thirty years during which she had not had a thought of her own, no initiative, no rebellion, thirty years during which she had simply moved in the direction in which she was pushed, thirty years during which it had been her lot to agree and to applaud – then, out of habit rather than conviction, she sobbed, 'Snack-in-the-grass! Slut!' and fell into a faint. SS: 78

Trapped in the male defined concept of womanhood, Mathilde speaks with borrowed words; with no voice, she is a mere echo, only reduced to "spinning around the axis of maleness" according to Molaria Ogundipe Leslie's phrase. As her pain of submission is too difficult to bear emotionally, her body gives way and she repeatedly faints as a means of escaping reality. It makes her situation worse when she has to face the reality. As she opens her eyes,

... Her only feeling was one of total isolation. Her daughter had disappeared into the night. She was sure she would never see her again. She felt plunged into mourning. The only person she had left was her husband, this cold man whom she must wait on, satisfy, applaud, till her heart broke. SS: 78

Though she feels isolated, she has no one to turn to except her husband the very one who isolates and represses her. She has no way of representing herself as an identity apart from her husband's. Her life which is governed by oppression, repression and deprivation is a perfect example of severe psychopathology as she is unable to develop a healthy identity because of the early emotional scars.

Ouleymatou is the childhood girl friend of Ousmane. Though he had his eyes for her, she rejected him for the simple reason of helping his mother by fetching water, sweeping the house and for smelling of dried fish. From then on, he had developed a mental barrier to nip the bud in his thought when he feels emotionally attached to any girl. For him,

...All women were selfish, disdainful, pretentious and hard as Ouleymatou. He drew back from any temptation... he kept his distance to prevent any harmful whispers of 'that's the young man who used to do the sweeping and go to buy dried fish!'

Even when he was attracted by a girl, he took refuge behind an armour of coolness which protected him from her meaningful glances. His attitude was not an escape. He was on his guard. SS: 11

Ouleymatou comes to the picture again after the marriage of Ousmane and Mireille. It is when Ousmane returns to his former neighborhood as a successful and as an overtly generous young man, he learns of Ouleymatou's divorce and the possibility for a renewed relationship. She knows of his marital problems and motivated by love and perhaps more by ambition, she plans an elaborate design to win him back. The fact that he was married was not restraint for her because,

Sharing a man was the common lot of women in her circle and the idea of finding a man for herself alone had never crossed her mind.

She had certain amount of education and her mirror paid tribute to her desirability. From every point of view, she concluded,

she deserved to be the wife of a 'top dog'.  
SS: 106

She schemes to win Yaye Khady first, to get her path cleared for her goal. As if by chance she turns up at Yaye Khady's place and questions her as to why she does all the ironing when she has got a young daughter-in-law? For which Yaye Khady burts out laughing saying,

'My daughter-in-law! Hasn't your mother told you? She's white! And for white woman, the only person who counts is her husband. So I do the ironing. SS: 106

On hearing this Ouleymatou offers her service, as though substituting in the work for the missing daughter-in-law. She gains encouragement in her plans from her own mother and later even from Yaye Khady herself. Very soon the three women form a league against the "stranger" who is defenseless in a foreign environment.

Ouleymatou who is seductive and manipulative organizes her plan around the cultural attributes and habits that Mireille does not possess nor even understands. She wears Senegalese *boubous*, uses Senegalese make-up complete with *gongo*, a powerful aphrodisiac perfume, cooks hearty Senegalese dishes for Ousmane, calls him by his pet name "Oussou" makes the beads around her hips jingle and to top it all hires a *groit* who comes prepared with a chosen song of praise.

'Oussou, prince of culture!  
But before you were a prince of culture  
You were and are a Lebu prince.

A white woman forsook her country to follow you  
But better than the white woman  
The black girl is worthy of you  
Look, look at Ouleymatou, your sister by  
her blood and by her skin.  
She is the one for you'.

Ouleymatou becomes everything that Mireille is not. By carefully executing her plans she attains her position as the wife of Ousmane for whom she also gives birth to a son. She has not faced any crisis in her life. She doesn't have the ability to understand the concept of monogamy. As a result, without any feeling of guilt or thinking, she creates a trap for Ousmane under the guise of "culturally enriching the African soil". All her actions

lead to a drastic calamity in Mireille's and Ousmane's life. Because she doesn't have a unique identity she is placed under the category of foreclosed diffusion.

Mireille the protagonist of the novel is the daughter of a French diplomat Jean de la Vallee. When her father comes to know of the romantic involvement between his daughter and a black man, he instantaneously sends her back to France. As a result both Mireille and Ousmane are parted. This period of separation only serves to strengthen their relationship. Her love for Ousmane is very natural, and not prompted by physical infatuation. She believes in love that knows no geographical or national frontiers. She consciously marries him fully aware that the marriage would ultimately alienate her from her family. She knows she has taken a great risk, but she is determined to fight her way. Initially they are both colorblind and are far away from cultural or racial prejudices. They feel enriched by their differences, which becomes assets, as they are eager to learn more about each other. They both secretly marry in Paris following the traditional Muslim ceremony. They return to Dakar to settle down, and that is when their illusionary idea of marriage starts to crumble. Though Ousmane feels that he can maintain a balance between traditional African culture and his love for Mireille, he reflects,

'All you'll have to do, is to put your life as Mireille's husband in one compartment, and that as Yaye Khady's son, the son of Niari Talli in another.'

'I will never split myself apart for you. I will never leave lose my identity for you!' SS: 39  
Slowly the cultural differences between the couple come to the fore. For instance, to Mireille the sound of the drums is synonymous with maddening "noise". But for Ousmane they are not merely musical instruments; they are the embodiment of his childhood, the living symbol of his culture. He reflects saying,

You can't understand. The tomtom is the black man's whole life bursting forth in sheaves of sound: and baptisms and prayers; and sometimes even the rhythm of death. The tomtom marks the stages of our life. I can see myself as a child, in the boubou I wore for my circumcison.

... He bitterly surveyed the lack of understanding that separated them: an ocean. He must immerse himself in the heart of his own race, to live according to black values and the rhythmic beat of the tomtom. He was drawn by his past, by his nature, to assume with fervor his own cultural heritage. SS: 91 & 92

The failure of their marriage is because of the differences between them. Their inflexible determination to maintain their own cultural identities consequently results in differences with each other. During their everyday discussions, they remain rigid in their individual ideologies. Their everyday life becomes a battleground in which each attempts to exercise his or her supremacy. Mireille wants Ousmane to pick up European lifestyle with appropriate table manners and hygiene. Whereas Ousmane insists on eating with hands and leaving dirty cloths scattered all over the floor. Mireille demands privacy, while Ousmane's friends occupy their apartment anytime they want. The ultimate outcome of these arguments leads to the widening of the differences between the two. Mireille had to undergo very difficult situations of not only dealing with her husband's indifference but of her in-laws too. She was shaken in her beliefs.

Mireille was undergoing two difficult apprenticeships, that of married life and that of a black man's wife in Africa. Over and above the endless round of normal conflicts, inherent in the life of any couple, she suffered from other attacks. She felt as though they wanted to bury her alive and resurrect her as another woman who would have nothing in common with her except her physical appearance. But she resisted. She made it quite clear that she saw things different from the people around her. She was shaken in her most firm and innermost convictions and everyday eroded a little more of the courage with which she had armed herself when she left her own country and turned herself into a rebel. SS: 99

Several times, Mireille tries to patch up with Ousmane. Particularly when she knows the fact that

she is expecting a child; she remains determined to fight the odds between them. She believes that the child will save her drowning marriage. She works towards a transformation of her marital life. Though Mireille tries to change her behavior and her attitudes towards her mother-in-law, her efforts are ridiculed and unappreciated. She clings on to the child that is growing within her to be the only source to reunite with her husband and his family. The tragedy of the birth of this child occurs when the Senegalese family rejects the baby boy, because the child was born a Gnouloule Khessoule which is "Not White! Not Black!" The child instead of bringing happiness and joy becomes the source of great trouble and social mockery. When Mireille realizes that her husband has deceived her for another woman, she becomes crazy. She feels disgusted with him and his family. However, she tries to regain all her strength and is determined not to be crushed by the black society.

But very soon her enthusiasm for life wanes with every new day. She gives up the network of women. She is crushed by loneliness and torn between anxiety and jealousy. She sits lonely in her unclean house feeling sorry for herself, waiting for her husband to return to her. In a fit of anger, and confusion, she poisons her son and pastes all the letters wrote by Ousmane during the period of courtship. She searches for her physical imperfections that have driven him into the hands of a black woman. She loses her mental stability and when Ousmanes returns homes, she stabs him and screams at him,

Dirty nigger! Cheat adulterer! It's better with you nigger woman, isn't it? Answer me! You love your little blackie better than your Gnouloule Khessoule! SS: 164

Thus Mireille is placed under the category of Moratorium Diffusers. Though she is educated, empowered and economically independent, she does not assume self dependence which is vital in marriage. Enduring all her suffering, she is determined to stay in the relationship that makes no progress; at the end making her explode. The romantic notion of love traps her in dependency mentality to her husband, ultimately losing her sanity. According to Acholonu, the critic says,

Her naivety and her inordinate sense of pride arising from her bourgeoisie upbringing and her devotion to blind love, all combine to drive her to a state of mental breakdown.

**WORK CITED**

- [1]. Ba, Mariama. *Scarlet Song*. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman, 1986. Print.
- [2]. Cole, Catherine M., Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan Miescher. *Africa after Gender?* Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2007. Print.
- [3]. Collins, Denise. "Chap two: review of literature: Identity development." *Scholar.lib.vt.edu*. 23 Apr 2001. Web. 01 Oct. 2015.
- [4]. "Mariama Bâ." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. Web. 18 Apr. 2016.
- [5]. "Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies UC Los Angeles Peer Reviewed Title: Women Subjugating Women: Re-Reading Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter and Scarlet Song." *Academia.edu*. Web. 16 Apr. 2016.
- [6]. "Whichbook | A New Way of Choosing What Book to Read next." *Scarlet Song by Mariama Ba*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.
- [7]. "Women Subjugating Women: Re-Reading Mariama ... - EBSCOhost." Web. 15 Apr. 2016.