

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

THE NARRATIVES OF WOMEN AND THE WRITING OF THE NATION IN 'SO LONG A LETTER' BY MARIAM BA

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to focus on how the narratives of women, as they are presented in *So Long a Letter*, contribute to the writing of the nation in post-colonial African society. In the formulation of national identity in post-colonial society subaltern groups, especially women, are marginalised as they are not provided with the space to exercise their rights and to assert themselves in a persistently male dominated society underscored and propped up by the patriarchal system. The article aims to highlight some of these discrepancies in society by referring to relevant excerpts from the novel *So Long a Letter*, which illustrate the extent to which women are oppressed in post-colonial African society, yet how they strive to make their voices heard in a quest to contribute to the re-writing of the nation after colonialism.

Key words: women's narratives, subaltern, national identity, marginalized, patriarchal society

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The novel *So Long a Letter* by Mariam Ba focuses on, amongst others, the oppression of women in post-colonial African society as a result of the patriarchal system and cultural practices. The racial discrimination which dominated their lives during the colonial era is replaced by suppression by their male counterparts who expect them to conform to the excesses of a male dominated society of which they are mere pawns.

Thus, they have emerged from racial oppression during the colonial era, hoping that their lot and status in society would improve considerably, only to discover that their hopes and dreams for an equitable and just society have been shattered. Although the scourge of colonial oppression, synonymous with exploitation and discrimination on the basis of colour and race, has diminished, the patriarchal system characterised by

hegemonic masculinity persists thereby effectively denying them of a voice. Furthermore, in the post-colonial era, they are doubly oppressed as they are not only confronted with a rigid patriarchal system, but also with cultural oppression.

Since women are marginalised and their voices are subdued during the post-colonial era, their writings tend to focus on family related issues rather than providing a critique of the political situation of the era per se. African male writers, on the other hand, who tend to be more vocal in this regard, are inclined to examine themes which reflect the failed political order, instability and corruption in African society after the collapse of the colonial era. In a comparative study of Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* for example and Ba's *So Long a Letter*, the variations in the approaches adopted in the writing of the nation are conspicuous. Whilst Ba focuses on the

oppression experienced by women in their day to day interactions in a male dominated society, Ngugi's novel serves as a commentary on the rampant corruption and the oppression of the impoverished masses by a regime that has become oblivious to the needs and expectations of the ordinary masses.

Although Ngugi concentrates on unveiling the political situation at the time, Ba focuses on family related issues, with specific reference to the demands and challenges faced by women, as single parents in a male dominated society. This does not, however, in any way, diminish her contribution to the writing of the nation, as she makes a significant contribution towards highlighting the role of women in the family as representing the voices of the nation. Although, according to Andrade (2002:45), women's culture and politics were often understood as unrelated to nationalism and therefore as not engaged in the larger political process, she contends that when focusing on female protagonists they produce an alternative narrative of the nation which puts one in a better position to perceive how domestic life functions both materially and allegorically in relation to nationalism.

In *So Long a Letter*, for example, both the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou reflect the indomitable spirits of women as they strive to ensure stability within their immediate family units in the face of adversity, rejection and oppression. In Aissatou's case her husband, Mawdo, is persuaded by his mother to take a second wife, whilst Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, chooses to alienate himself from his immediate family by marrying a young schoolgirl; his daughter Daba's best friend. In spite of the fact that both women are rejected by their respective husbands they persevere and do their utmost to ensure that their children are provided with stable environments, are educated and at times play dual roles (that of both father and mother) to meet the challenges and demands of single parenthood. In the writing of the nation, Ba's two protagonists highlight the dynamic role that women can play in the upbringing of their children as they strive to create stable family units in spite of the adversities which beset their lives and threaten to overwhelm their very existence. The

success of the nation thus depends on the family. This viewpoint is very succinctly illustrated by Ramatoulaye as follows:

The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. The nation is made up of all the families, rich and poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of the nation therefore depends inevitably on the family. (Ba, 1982:89)

In this regard, Andrade (2002:47) describes the family as the "nation writ small". According to her, women tend to speak around nationalism through collectivities such as ethnicity, village and above all family in their narratives. This does however not imply that their narratives in the writing of the nation are of lesser value as perceived by their male counterparts. On the contrary, the kind of national identity which emerges from their discourse accentuates the dominant role that the family can play in the writing of the nation.

The structure of *So Long a Letter* also contributes to our understanding of the narratives of women and their perceptions of what constitutes national identity. The use of the letter format for example, does not only serve a didactic function, but also enables readers to have glimpses into the personal experiences of women as they strive to reconstruct their lives in the face of adversity and disappointment. It is essentially a reflection of the day to day experiences of women in a male dominated society. Ramatoulaye's presentation of both her oppressive and demoralising experiences and that of her dear friend Aissatou in a somewhat informal, conversational manner and her commentaries on the ways in which women are treated in post-colonial African society appear to be more believable when presented in this simple, intimate and informal yet effective style. According to Ogunyeni (1985:64) a novel in this form appears more open and sincere than one written in autobiographical mode.

As a result of this openness and sincerity accentuated by the very format, the writer is able to ensure that the story is believable to the readers, who in this case would be predominantly women.

Ogunyeni (1985:77), for example, contends that the letter appears to be authentic and gives the impression that the storyteller is not lying. This thus leads to greater acceptance by the readers who identify similar issues which affect their lives in post-colonial African society. The didactic function inherent in the novel aims to conscientise women to the oppression which they still continue to experience in a male dominated society. The aim is essentially to galvanise women so that they will be empowered to speak out against their oppression and increasing marginalisation in society.

Ramatoulaye's commentaries on the oppression of women are intertwined with her own recollections and her reflections on Aissatou's negative experiences. These commentaries aim to make women aware of the struggles which they still have to wage and the challenges which confront them in their daily lives. Since all the commentaries accentuate the success of women, the narratives aim to provide an alternative view on the writing of the nation and what constitutes national identity. It is evident from the accounts in the novel and the experiences of women that "women's rights" and the experiences and contribution of women should form an integral part of the writing of the nation. The aura of authenticity that was alluded to, according to Ogunyeni, has a didactic function particularly for women readers.

Ba's very act of writing the novel *So Long a Letter* is an achievement in itself, since she is brazen enough to challenge the status quo which places males in the forefront of novel writing. This act of writing thus serves as a protest against the exclusion of women in the writing of the nation and highlights Ba's resolve to ensure that women's voices are not subdued but vocal in post-colonial society. Andrade (2002:54) contends that the act of novel writing and publishing by women is a brave one since they challenged the norms of one of the most restrictive strata's of society; the masculine domain. That is in itself a victory for women.

In *So Long a Letter* Ramatoulaye's account of the case of Jacqueline who was hospitalised for an unknown illness after her husband's many infidelities, is a case in point on the mental strength and willpower which women would have to develop

if they hope to make a meaningful contribution to the writing of the nation. It was only when Jacqueline resolved to exert herself as a woman and to transcend her psychosomatic illnesses that she was able to be cured. This example, which serves as a didactic tool, aims to make women aware of the increasingly difficult tasks which lie ahead of them in a male dominated society. Another important didactic lesson which emerges from *So Long a Letter* is the galvanisation of women in the pursuit of greater equity in society, thereby ensuring that the voices of women are heard and their contributions to national identity acknowledged. The essence of this galvanisation is illustrated by Ramatoulaye's support for the women's movement:

My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever-present and male egoism resists. (Ba, 1985:88)

Although, as Ramatoulaye points out, their journey is an arduous and demanding one, if all women adopt the same attitude and rejoice at other women's successes then their movement would become more vocal and they would be able to exercise their rights in post-colonial society. Thus inherent in her words lie the didactic function of this novel.

Initially, Ramatoulaye is presented as a very passive, obedient wife who tends to her family and aims to fulfill her husband's needs to the best of her ability. Even later when her husband chooses Binetou as his second wife, she still remains married to him and accepts his decision. However, later when she becomes more resolute and stronger in her convictions she is able to exert her authority as a woman and stand up for her rights. Her friend Aissatou, on the other hand, defied the cultural practices of polygamy by divorcing her husband. Through the eyes of the protagonists Ba questions cultural aspects such as polygamy which aim to demoralise and dehumanise women as they become part of a "collection". In this way she is able to highlight the inequities in her own society. In questioning cultural practices, the protagonists aim to ensure that their narratives are vocal so that the

predominantly female readers will become aware of the discrimination which women have to endure and in the process they too will question certain aspects which may be demoralising to them.

Ramatoulaye's development from the passive housewife to the vocal "activist" is reminiscent of the latent energy within all women to exercise their rights in society in spite of the difficulties which they may encounter. The transformation in her personality is explicitly highlighted when she stands up to her brother-in-law who desires to have her as one of his wives, after the death of her husband Modou Fall. Tamsir, Modou's eldest brother, proposes marriage to Ramatoulaye, forty days after his brother's death. The manner in which he broaches the topic of marriage is indicative of the oppression which women are confronted with in African society. His arrogant and pompous attitude is highlighted by his words as follows:

I shall marry you. You suit me a wife...
You are my good luck. I shall marry you.
(Ba, 1985:57)

This is a clear indication that in this society women are still treated like mere objects to be bought or sold, rather than as independent, critical human beings with their own thoughts, feelings and ideas. The arrogance of Tamsir's proposal further accentuates the manner in which women or the female body becomes a commodity in a male dominated society.

Ramatoulaye's fiery reaction to his proposal is indicative of her own transformation and growth which enables her to confront male hegemony as manifested in African society. Henceforth she would not remain subdued, but make her voice heard. It is precisely this transformation which enables her to stand up for her rights; something which she would never have dared to do before her husband's second marriage. As a woman she exerts her authority and by expressing herself in the manner in which she does, represents all the women in her society who have been oppressed by men and who have had to bow down to tradition and custom. Her fiery response to his marriage proposal is presented as follows in the strongest possible terms:

You forget that I have a heart, a mind,
that I am not an object to be passed from
hand to hand ... I shall never be the one to
complete your collection.

(Ba, 1985:58)

Later when Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye's former suitor, proposed marriage to her after Modou's death, she rejects his offer as she does not want his wife to endure the same agony, frustration and turmoil which she was forced to endure. These developments in her character are presented to highlight the fact that women need to be strong, resolute and committed in their resolve to question the status quo and cultural practices so that they could collectively bring about meaningful change in society and thereby contribute to the ongoing discourse relating to national identity. Ramatoulaye's stand is one which questions the denigration of women as they are marginalised and not allowed to contribute to national identity and effectively become the "subalterns" in society. Spivak (1988:308) in her analysis of the subalterns in society comes to the conclusion that they are the voiceless people who are forced to live on the periphery of society and who are not allowed to speak.

Although Ramatoulaye, as the chief protagonist in *So Long a Letter*, is eventually able to liberate herself from oppression as a result of her circumstances which compelled her to become independent, the seeds of liberation were planted within her psyche by her white headmistress when she was still at an all-girls school. She described her headmistress as trying to lift them out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom as she tried to make them appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing their own (1985:15). She describes the girls as the true sisters "destined for the same mission of emancipation". However the seeds of emancipation, symbolising the fight for human rights in a patriarchal society, could not come to fruition as the restrictive and discriminatory system and cultural practices threatened to overwhelm her during her adult life. She thus became a victim of circumstances. Later, however, as a single parent and as a woman struggling to survive and to fend for her children in a male

dominated society, she gained a greater degree of independence which enabled her to exercise her authority as a woman and to make her voice heard.

In her portrayal of both Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's experiences as representatives of women who were forced to share their husbands with other women due to cultural practices notably polygamy, Ba's intention is to use the narratives to illustrate that women should feel empowered to speak out against aspects of culture in this case polygamy. Thus, in the writing of the nation and in the formulation of national identity a space needs to be created for them to give vent to their frustrations so that these concerns would play a meaningful role in the reconfiguring of what constitutes the nation and nationalism. In this way the black female writer is consequently able to ensure larger horizons for herself and her people and is able to liberate black women who are still concerned with the ethics of surviving rather than with the aesthetics of living (Ogunyemi, 1985:79).

After the demise of the colonial era women were filled with a renewed sense of optimism that they would be empowered to make their mark on their country as a whole and that their fears, hopes, dreams and desires for the reconstruction of the nation would be heard and respected. This optimism is described by Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* as follows:

It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. Many of us rallied around the dominant party infusing it with new blood. (1985:25)

However, their expectations were not fulfilled as they became part of the marginalised masses that represented the silent majority. They expected to be included in the writing of the nation, but continued to be excluded and had to explore creative approaches to make their voices heard in their writing by adopting alternative narratives from their male counterparts whose narratives tended to predominate.

In *So Long a Letter* the dominance of the male is highlighted throughout and Ba accentuates this domination by using the chief protagonist,

Ramatoulaye, as a voice to comment on the inequalities in post-colonial society. In this society men tend to make decisions for women and to decide on their fate and future. When Tamsir, for example, comes to inform Ramatoulaye that her husband has decided to take a second wife, his words are so indifferent, cold and callous that they serve to highlight the arrogance of males in that society. It appears as if the twenty five years which she shared with Modou become insignificant and meaningless to him as is evident in the message which Tamsir, his older brother, relays to her:

... God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it. He praises you for the quarter of a century of marriage in which you gave them all the happiness a wife owes her husband. (37)

One cannot but notice the arrogance inherent in these words. Women are expected to please their husbands and to satisfy their needs thereby becoming objects of abuse and rejection. His reference to a woman "owing" her husband happiness is indicative of the fact that women are stripped of all their dignity in that they are expected to serve their masters and in this way continue to be voiceless members of society. Hence they are deprived of contributing in any significant way to the writing of the nation that would question patriarchy and male hegemony.

Aissatou's husband's resolve to please his mother by taking a second wife in Nabou, who was especially groomed for him by his mother, is indicative of his adherence to cultural practices in order to satisfy the wishes of an aged, conniving woman who needed to be vindicated. Both these examples, referred to above, are reminiscent of how women are ostracised in post-colonial society so that their voices become subdued and their narratives insignificant. Spivak (1988:287) contends that both as an object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keep the male dominant. Whilst some women like Aissatou and Ramatoulaye were able to muster up enough courage to rebel against the cultural practices which threatened to destroy their very existence as women in an oppressive society, others according to Ramatoulaye

“had lost all hope of renewal” and were “very quickly laid down by loneliness” (Ba, 1985:40).

As a woman rejected by her husband, Ramatoulaye epitomises the lot of women in a polygamous relationship. In spite of her feeling like, “a fluttering leaf that no hand dares to pick up” (1985:53), she remained strong and resolute, essentially because of her concern for her family. She describes her traumatic state at the time as follows:

I shed tears of joy and sadness together:
joy in being loved by my children, the
sadness of a mother who does not have the
means to change the course of events.
(Ba, 1985:53)

The futility and desperation inherent in her words epitomise the extent to which women are marginalised in patriarchal societies especially when they become victims of age old cultural practices and traditions. Ba uses both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to highlight the exploitation of women in society and in this way makes a statement about how important it is for the narratives of women to be heard so that the writing of the nation and the development of national identity becomes inclusive.

The marginalisation of women from the parliamentary sphere is highlighted by Ramatoulaye during one of her political discussions with Daouda Dieng, a deputy of the national assembly and a former suitor. Ramatoulaye highlights her frustration of a parliamentary system which denies women the opportunity of making decisions on the future of the country as a whole. She is vocal in her criticism of a system which has not appointed a single female minister in nearly twenty years of independence. Although she admits that successes have been made in terms of the opportunity to vote and job opportunities she is highly critical of the revival of old beliefs, emerging egoism and the skepticism which appears in the political field. Her contention that men aim to exclude women from the political system so that they could make decisions for them (the women) is one with which many women would agree. In presenting her views as she does she is taking up the cause for all women who are forced to live on the periphery of society due to patriarchy. In this way she conscientises

women by making them aware of how and to what extent they are marginalised from the political system. Unlike many other women in post-colonial African society who are fearful of expressing their viewpoints openly due to reprisal from their male counterparts, she is unequivocal in her assertion that women need to take their rightful place in society by proactively confronting male hegemony in society at large. This is indicative of the extent to which she has grown from the subservient African wife to the gender based activist.

Daouda’s response to her remonstrations is very interesting in that he provides an alternative viewpoint for the marginalisation of women in the political arena. He contends that women are not deliberately marginalised, but that they choose not to be involved because of the decisions they make in their lives. He expresses this viewpoint as follows:

Even you who are protesting; you
preferred your husband, your class, your
childrento public life. If men alone are
active in the parties why should they think
of the women? It is only human to give
yourself the larger portion of the cake
when you are sharing it out. (40)

Daouda Dieng’s comments are an indictment on women who choose the comforts of a family life to the stresses of a political one. In the writing of the nation and the development of national identity women may themselves undermine their potential by doubting their ability to pursue certain male dominated careers. Could it then be that the silent majority of women who accept the status quo and prefer to adhere to cultural practices are themselves responsible for propping up a system and contributing to their own demise? It is evident then that Ba in her narratives is making a concerted effort to enable women readers to reflect on their positions in post- colonial society so that they are able to free themselves from the shackles of oppression. Daouda’s allegations are meant to enable women to reflect on their positions in society and to assert themselves if they wish to pursue traditionally male dominated career fields.

As a didactic novel *So Long a Letter* aims to enable women to reflect on their stereotypical traditional roles in society and to venture out of

these roles to explore new opportunities so that they are able to break out of the mold that was created for them. Galvanising the support of women and enabling them to speak out will lead to a new generation of women who would be able to make a constructive contribution to the writing of the nation. Thus, by focusing on the experiences of the female protagonists Ba produces an alternative narrative of the nation; one that questions the status quo.

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