

LITERATURE AS A WEAPON: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE NOVELS OF MARIAMA BÂ

Dr. Jayant S. Cherekar

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Arts and commerce & Science College,
Shankar Nagar, Biloli, Nanded

Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese woman writer used writing as a weapon to fight against the male literary tradition. She wishes that women writers must make the use of their literary works as a weapon to eradicate social evils of any type. She also asserts that this literary weapon would enable them to eradicate the male tyranny by presenting the sensitivity of feminine gender. As she says:

We cannot go forward without culture,
Without saying what we believe,
Without communicating with others,
Without making people aware about things.

Books are weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon. (Bond.2003: 214)

Bâ's words aptly sum up her approach towards writing as a weapon to assert the true self of a woman. A self which while asserting itself never loses its touch with the African culture. Present research paper intends to discuss the feminine sensibility presented by the African women writers in general and Mariama Bâ in particular.

The African women writers deal with the array of topics centered on the female condition in Africa. These women writers have presented the condition of women in the African socio-political context. Their writing reflects a correlation between women's actual and textual lives. It is by presenting the real condition of post-colonial Africa these women writers have articulated their inner urge to bring about a change in women's position in society. Their writing replicates wakefulness on the part of some women who sincerely wish to have a change in society in order to have the past glory of pre-colonial Africa. Consequently, the African women writers have become social critics who have tried to create insight into, and a vision of, what future could hold. In Africa, as in other traditional societies, art is never separated from general life but has always been integrated and purposeful. The African women writers have always considered the art of writing as a means of protest which leads them to present a better picture of African society. Mariama Bâ's novels display a certain formal and thematic coherence. Marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic independence, women's education, their political and economic marginalization, their resistance to oppression and role in the nation are the recurrent themes in the novels of Mariama Bâ.

It was Mariama Bâ who declared in an interview:

The woman writer has a special task. She has to present the condition of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice....In the family, in the street, in the institutions, in

society, in political organizations, discrimination reigns supreme....As women, we must overthrow status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We should no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women...room we will fight for with all our might. (Bond.2003: 214)

Bâ's statement in her interview signals an indication to make women aware of the injustices in every walk of life. She urges the African women writers to write on the contemporary socio-political concerns such as the autocracy of male gender and the marginalization of women. She believes that literature is the best medium to present their grievances.

The novels of Bâ are written in the context of Islamic Wolof society having an Islamic/Wolof world view. Bâ is a daughter born into high caste family in a society where caste impacts on one's life. Bâ's status as a *guer* distinguishes her and places her in a position that is different from that of other women who belong to the lower castes. It is by virtue of circumstances of her birth, some superiority is assumed. The fact that she is western educated complicates the matter further and puts her into a whole new category. Therefore, Bâ's positioning as female, Muslim, *guer*, western-educated, orphaned, mother and a divorcee inform her experiences and the different tensions in these multiple positioning. In fact she had much to say on the subject of women and the reality of life in West Africa after independence. She, therefore, used the pen to speak about the injustices inflicted on women by the patriarchal society, and to advance women's issues, and although she wrote only two novels *So Long a Letter* (1979)¹ and *Scarlet Song* (1981)², she remains a central figure in African literature.

The novels of Bâ present the fact that polygamy in Senegalese society is the direct outcome of the impact of Islam and the practice that the traditional societies followed. Bâ offers some clarification regarding what Islam has to say about polygamy,

A man must be like an evenly balanced scale. He must weigh out in equal measures his compliments and his reproaches. He must give equally of himself. He must study his gestures and behavior and apportion everything fairly. (Bâ, 1986: 7)

These lines clearly indicate that no man is qualified to have more than one wife. In fact, polygamy according to Islam was initially introduced as a means of rehabilitating widows and orphans.

And if you fear that ye will not deal fairly with orphans, marry of women, who seem to you, two two, three three, four four and if you fear that you cannot justice then one only. (1997: 172)

The statement clearly shows that Islam allows polygamy with certain restrictions and conditions. A man should marry only when he can afford it. Thus, according to Islam, husband is responsible for all marriage expenses. The custom of dowry especially practiced in India and Pakistan is foreign to Islam. Islam considers love as an essential ingredient in marriage. Consequently, a man cannot compel a woman who does not like to marry him. Islamic laws grant equal rights of separation to both the spouses, but in reality these rights are enjoyed only by men.

The Islamic principles make it clear that religion has not sanctioned polygamy for the purpose of fulfilling man's notorious desires. It is mainly sanctioned for checking social evils like prostitution and kidnapping. Polygamy is mainly recommended for extending support, safety and livelihood for widows, whose husbands have lost their lives in wars. But it is misused by some selfish and narrow minded males in the African context. This aspect of reality has been depicted in the novels of Bâ.

Thus, in both of her novels Bâ presents the fact that female characters like Ramatoulaye, Aissatou and Mireille are the victims of their husband's duplicity. These women are totally kept in dark regarding their second marriage by their husbands. It is in *So Long a Letter* that Ramatoulaye pinpoints the issues at stake that result in polygamy. As she says; 'Thus to satisfy himself he reduced Young Nabou to a plate of food'. In reality much of the argument about polygamy in Bâ's novels rests on this statement by Ramatoulaye¹⁰. The main issue is not polygamy as an institution but men's polygamous instincts that result in philandering, betrayal, infidelity, lack of trust and abandonment. The issue in her novels is less about Islamic or African culture but more about men's inability to control their lust. Thus the male protagonists Modou, Mawdo and Ousmane are irresponsible philanders who manipulate the system to their own advantage. According to Obioma Nnaemeka Ojo-Ade's justification and praise of polygamy as "a function of Africanity" mimics the all too familiar excuses given by Mawdo Bâ, in *So Long a Letter* and Ousmane in *Scarlet Song* to justify their infidelity and philandering.

The another dominant reason is the role of men and women who claim to be the cultural bearers and therefore, any excess on the part of women provokes their cultural nostalgia which leads them to wreck their vengeance against the women who disregard cultural pattern. Therefore, Aissatou and Mireille experience the problematic abandonment due to the dominant role played by their mother-in-laws in wrecking their happy married life. The antagonistic attitude of these mother-in-laws, their cultural nostalgia, and social profit leads them in turning around and confusing the heads of their sons. Both the novels *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* present the typical role played by mother-in-laws in disturbing the happy married life of their sons. Tante Nabou and Yaye Khady represent the feminine reincarnations of the spirit of Iago machinations that led them just to disturb happy married life of Aissatou and Mireille. Their actions and machinations are juxtaposed with the thoughts and actions of Mawdo and Ousmane. On the other hand, Modou Fall alone acts under the influence of lust and vanity. His action results in the disturbance of a twenty five year of married life to Ramatoulaye. All the three characters present the comprehensive picture of the dynamics of abandonment. It is by presenting such characters, Mariama Bâ is able to bring into sharp focus the part played by both male and female segments of society in this process of abandonment.

The role of Imam in polygamous relationship is briefly discussed in *So Long a Letter*. He is the one who breaks the news of Modou and Binetou to Ramatoulaye. As she says, "All he has done is to marry a second wife today." Here he appears to be an insensitive individual; he is completely ignorant to the fact that he has just delivered a heavy blow to Ramatoulaye. But it is hard to blame him. As a man versed in Islamic laws, all that mattered to him was whether the laws had been adhered to or not. Whether Modou treated his wives equally staying three days with Ramatoulaye and three days with Binetou on a rotating basis was not within the Imam's immediate preview. Again, as Ramatoulaye mentions Imam accompanied Modou's brother Tasmir as his witness to ask for the widowed Ramatoulaye's hand for marriage. In bringing in her treatment Imam and his role in polygamy, Bâ criticizes the selfish desire that leads men

towards polygamy. She also condemns the religious laws that sanction it because she considers polygamy as a basic human flaw.

The novel *Scarlet Song* on the other hand also presents a role played by religious man like Djibril Gueye in polygamy. Djibril Gueye, a genuinely religious man having strong religious beliefs embraces Mireille as a new member of the family in the beginning. But in the end, conversely, Djibril Gueye simply fails to understand the logic that Mireille and Ousmane's marriage in Paris was also made in Senegalese heaven. It is this realization from the facts surrounding Ousmane and Mireille's married life in Senegal that prompts Djibril Gueye to allow Ousmane to marry a local girl, Ouleymatou. In the cultural view of Djibril Gueye the secret local marriage is made both on earth-the Senegalese cultural reality-and in Heaven as Moslem. The only man Ali though a Moslem rejects Djibril's views and in a sincere fashion advises Ousmane to divorce Ouleymatou. However, the text does not comment on Djibril's advice to his son.

Nonetheless, the novels of Bâ also show that it is not only an avowed polygamist that makes women's lives a living hell but also polygamy exists under different guises in societies where the practice is unacceptable. Even though women's issues seem universal, they should be addressed on individual basis taking the culture of the women in question into consideration. Not all the women in the novels of Bâ fall under bigamous or polygamous marriages, some women, though in monogamous marriages, have been rendered voiceless by their husbands. Madame de la Valée in *Scarlet Song* is an example. Her silence in the text illustrates her powerlessness in her married life. As a mother, she could only look on helplessly when Monsieur de la Valée opposes the marriage between Ousmane and Mireille. It is by presenting the reality prevalent in African life that Bâ depicts literature as a true but infallible weapon.

Bâ's major concern in her writing is about mothers being role models to their children by making the right choices. Ramatoulaye and her friend Aïssatou's decisions in the face of their failing marriages are going to affect their children. By walking out of Mawdo's life and taking her sons with her despite society's condemnation of her action, Aïssatou has decided to prevent her husband from negatively influencing his sons. She has taken over raising them single-handedly but she is surely preventing them from being treated as undesirables since their father's family will not accept them completely due to their link with their mother's lower caste. By deciding to stay in her failed marriage, Ramatoulaye has decided to concentrate her soul attention on the welfare of her children. She, therefore, becomes a positive role model for her children. This grand gesture on the part of Ramatoulaye shows good instincts of a good woman. It also shows cultural greatness in which Ramatoulaye has been born and brought up. But this cannot be applied to all women invariably who have suffered similar pains in life.

Ramatoulaye's daughters have the potential to alter their existing situation by acknowledging the values of education, economic independence and equality in marriage. She also witnesses a change in gender roles in her daughter's marriage and realizes that Daba's husband plays a more active role in domestic activities. Ramatoulaye contrasts her failed marriage characterized by the absence of communication between husband and wife to the progressive way Daba and her husband handle their relationship.

Overall, the study of Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) reveals that the traditional women of the past carried with them ancestral values that have been transmitted to their daughters and granddaughters. Today's Senegalese women face the challenge of living in a modern world still influenced by their past traditions. In order to improve their present condition, they have to go

through a transformational process that involves a level of awareness of the possibilities offered to them.

Mireille, in *Scarlet Song*, in the throes of her woes, maintains a positive combative attitude towards life. She rails against the capitulationist tendencies of some women who, in similar circumstances hide behind their children to mask their apathy. It is by killing her own son and stabbing Ousmane, Mireille asserts the true self of a woman, who is determined to put an end to her own passivity that makes her suffer throughout her life due to no fault of hers.

In *Scarlet Song*, Mireille's mother finally realizes that her daughter, who belongs to a younger generation, sees life as full of opportunities and of freedom of choice, therefore her decision to marry a black is an act of the freedom to choose. Bà however draws the reader's attention to the fact that racism and cultural intolerance is prevalent not only among the older and more conservative generation but also among the younger and liberal ones. In *Scarlet Song*, Ousmane has proved to be no less racist than his mother. On the question of marriage, Ramatoulaye has finally realized that her friend Aïssatou's decision to divorce Mawdo was right even though in a subtle way, she wished Aïssatou had remarried since in her opinion, men and women are meant to complement each other.

Thus, the heroines of both the novels have affirmative tone towards life. The patriarchal situation enables these women characters to suffer throughout their life; however, it is towards the end of the novel that these women overcome their own sufferings. Bà's intellectual project leaves the battle to the young women to change the status quo. Her hopes are through the younger generation, the archaic and negative attachment to tradition will make a way for a different way of constructing knowledge within tradition but in a positive manner. This transformation she firmly believes can and will take place within Senegalese society.

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