



Analyzing Ba, Mariama (1979) book, “So long a letter” from a Citizenship Education Lens

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis from a citizenship education lens of a book titled “*So long a letter*” (*Une si longue lettre*) by Mariama Ba, which was originally written in French and has been translated into sixteen languages. The author shows how the book could be used to teach certain aspects of citizenship education in Botswana including issues of identity, culture, religion, feminism and polygamy. Ba’s odyssey in this book provides teachers with insights on teaching citizenship from an African perspective in an effort to show the wealth in cultural diversity that exists within the continent. Ba was born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1929 and died in 1981 after a long illness. As an African, Muslim, Mother, Wife and Educated Woman, Ba lived her multiple heritage with dignity and great understanding. Writing from this vantage point, Ba is able, in a most insightful and poetic ways, to portray the different ways in which women fight for survival in an environment of cultural conflicts and change. This book provides an alternative for teaching citizenship education from an African perspective, and is evidence of using literature to teach social studies in schools and higher education.

Keywords: Book Review, Women’s rights, Africa, Islam, Citizenship Education, Culture, Diasporas.

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INTRODUCTION

This book “*So long a letter*” by Mariama Ba is an interesting and insightful narrative of courage based on two educated women who are married to progressive men in a polygamous Muslim society in Senegal, West Africa. Mariama Ba in her book “*So long a letter*” chooses to use a letter as a vehicle for conveying her message and experiences as an African woman. The author

provides an excellent attempt to help the readers to understand the historical context within which this text was written, the impact of colonial education and some verses in the Koran and polygamy. The book which some people argue that it is a representation of the author's autobiography is written in the form of a long reflective letter by Ramatoulaye to her best friend Assitou who lives in the United States. Ramatoulaye decides to write her friend Assitou a long letter after the death of her husband Modou, who they have been married for twenty-five years and have twelve children.

This letter begins with Ramatoulaye telling her friend Assitou about the death of her husband and how she is coping with the loss. She uses the period of mourning dictated by Islamic custom as a retreat and begins to recount on how her husband betrayed her to marry a second wife, hardships she and her children endured as a result of his egocentric decision and how her friend Assitou's husband also cheated her with his polygamous acts. Throughout the novel both women, Ramatoulaye and Assitou who are the main characters in the book are treated as victims of polygamy and role models as they were the first crop of educated women with careers in their society. The author in this book does show the aspects of culture both good and bad but does not in anyway hide the extent to which women were oppressed and marginalized through culture and religion.

This article presents an analysis of the book through a citizenship education lens by identifying the major strands and themes that cut across the narrative in the book and the reviewer's personal thoughts on them. This book is a classic and could be used in the teaching of citizenship education within the social studies curriculum to debunk some of myths, portrayals and misinformation about the teaching of Africa in the western world. Citizenship education in past African societies was defined as an integration of all history, culture, values, and beliefs, in short, the customs of the family, community, and ethnic group (Department of curriculum development and evaluation, 1990). The production of socially responsible and culturally acceptable members of the society was fostered through a curriculum that comprised knowledge of social values, norms, etiquette and morality (Mhlauli, 2012b; Ali, 2008). The production of socially responsible and culturally acceptable members of the society was fostered through a curriculum that comprised knowledge of social values, norms, etiquette and morality (Ali, 2008).

In Botswana, citizenship education is taught through social studies and its approach is usually centered within the western perspectives (Mhlauli, 2012a). Currently citizenship education emphasizes child centered pedagogies, inquiry and questioning which contradict the very cultural milieu that the student brings with from home. The school suddenly deconstructs the socialization process that the student is acquainted with. It is this contradiction between the expectations of the school and the home that creates a dilemma for the student. Paradoxically, citizenship education is context specific and should be aligned to the students' environment and socialization process. However, it is important to note that though taught from a Eurocentric view, it has always been part and parcel of the Tswana traditional society as it was used to train young women and men into the cultural norms and values of the society. It is against this backdrop that the author sees a relationship between literature and social studies where African literature can be used to indigenize the African curriculum is social studies in order to unpack issues of colonialism, decolonization, feminism and culture. It is also pivotal that books like "So long a letter" can be used to show that women activism and cultural challenges have long been practiced among African societies and women's subordination is not a given in all African countries.

MAJOR THEMES

In reading the book, insights are provided that tend to bear on issues of culture and religion and echo sentiments necessary to allow the author to deduce themes that are relevant to the teaching of citizenship education and social studies in schools. Some of the themes that I have captured in the book revolve around the following:

- Female bonding as a legacy of traditional Africa
- Role of women in Islam
- National identities in Decolonization

These themes are discussed as outlined above and the author uses quotes from the text to elaborate on how she views Mariama Ba's discussion on such issues.

FEMALE BONDING AS A LEGACY OF TRADITIONAL AFRICA

The book is based on the friendship that existed between two women named Ramatoulaye who lives in Dakar, Senegal and Assitou living in the United States, who even distance could not separate them. In this letter that Ramatoulaye writes to Assitou, she reflects and reminds her of their friendship that goes as far back as their grandmothers, mothers and their shared childhood. She acknowledges that their friendship goes beyond time with similarities in terms of their shared Islamic past, a long sustained relationship and painful experiences of polygamy. She sees their lives and destiny as similar though different in some ways, so their friendship is at the heart of this book. In replying to a letter from Assitou, Ramatoulaye begins by saying:

Your presence in my life is by no means a fortuitous one. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts, As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the Koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them before us, more splendid than before (Ba, 1979, p. 1).

It is this sentiment that she shares with her friend and reflects on their friendship as she emphasizes their plight that "We walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present. My friend, my friend, my friend. I call you three times. Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow" (p. 1). It is this feeling of bad fate that makes them identify as victims throughout the text.

Their friendship is a source of inspiration and they both draw on it for support and courage. She writes this letter as a way of self-reflection and uses it in her healing process as she mourns the death of her polygamous husband Modou and she admits that "Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain" (p. v1). It is interesting to note the essence of friendship as a traditional tool of healing and the power it has on women in Senegal, Africa and how they create a sense of belonging and identity that allows them to endure the difficult circumstances that they encounter in a society that is highly patriarchal and oppressive to women culturally. First they see themselves as friends, and identify themselves as victims of polygamy and the first crop of educated women who have defied tradition.

It is this friendship and identity that keeps them going and allows them to continue to survive amidst this cultural oppression and at times assist them to develop strategies of combating their experiences. In appreciating their friendship that had stood the test of time and how her friend has been there for her during difficult and troubled times when her husband abdicated his role as a father and rejected his children and wife for a young girl old enough to be her daughter; Ramatoulaye told Assitou that “Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love” (Ba, 1979, p. 54). This was an indication that friendship can survive the winds of change as opposed to love that is only temporary. I want to hasten to mention that in reading this book, it should be understood that Africa is a continent with diverse cultures and peoples and what is taking place in Senegal should not be understood to represent the rest of Africa.

WOMEN, CULTURE AND ISLAM

The author narrates the role of Islam in marginalizing women and uses the issue of polygamy which she argues was sanctioned by Islam. Ramatoulye and her friend Assitou were both educated as teachers and both married to polygamous progressive men in their society who were educated abroad in France. According to Islam polygamy is sanctioned by God and women do not have a say in the marriage of the second wife. This is shown where the *Imam* (One of the Elders) stated that “There is nothing that one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side” (p. 36). When Modou betrays Ramatoulaye to marry Binetou his daughter’s friend and age mate as his second wife, his first wife is neither consulted nor informed and all the husband’s relatives attend the wedding in the absence of the first wife and her children. After the wedding, a convoy of elders including Modou’s brothers and his friend Mawdo come to relay the sad news which in fact to them is good news. When they enter the household, all dressed in elegance, Ramatoulaye, recognizes the absence of her husband and cries out asking where her husband is and if he is well. The response from the delegation is that:

Yes, Modou Fall, but, happily, he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks be to God. All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place... ‘Modou sends his thanks. He says it is fate that decides men and things: 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 him all the happiness a wife owes her husband (Ba, 1979, p. 37).

In response to the sad news Ramatoulaye acts calmly, and pretends everything is well with her and even thanks her husband for having married the second wife. This for me is betrayal at its highest level. Modou decides to marry a young girl as his second wife and rejects the woman who he has made pregnant a dozen times. This does not only put shame on the wife but to his twelve children as well more especially the one whose step mother is her former friend. However, Ramatoulaye in her submissiveness and rejection comforts herself that “I told myself what every betrayed woman says: If Modou was milk, it was I who had all the cream. The rest, well nothing but water with a vague smell of milk (p. 39). This was an indication that Ramatoulaye had given up hope and unlike her best friend Assitou, she was not going to go against her culture and divorce her husband but she would rather stay in the marriage despite all the betrayal,

abandonment and humiliation, she still wanted to be identified as a married woman and the wife to Modou.

The way the author discusses Islam and having alluded to being raised from a Muslim family, one wonders how much she knows about Islam as practiced, written in the Koran and how it is interpreted. From reading this book and having read Hamdan (2004) and Sensoy's (nd), it appears that the book misrepresents Islam and the very issue of polygamy. The book may reinforce some of the stereotypes that are prevalent about Islam that operate from a particular myopic grand narrative that opines that Muslim women are oppressed, mistreated, hyper-sexual and erotic (Sensoy, n.d). It may as well portray Africa in a negative way, as though polygamy is practiced all over the continent and that wherever it is practiced it is always bad. If not read with a critical lens, the book may reinforce Eurocentric views, and perpetuate stereotypes about African culture. There is need to read the book carefully and unpack some of the subtleties embedded in the modernization paradigm. The book is significant in teaching about religion, polygamy and culture as it unveils the intersection of African culture and Islam. It will assist students to better understand Islam as a form of religion.

Another incident in the book that emphasizes on the oppressive nature of Islam on women is the practice known as the warding of evil spirits during the funeral procession. This is regarded as the most dreadful experience of widowed women in Senegal. During this procession, the other women throw some coins in the canopy where the widow is seated and it is said that:

This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends... (Ba, 1979, p. 5).

The above quote shows how the widowed women are stripped off their belongings to please the husband's family. All his belongings are distributed to his family and friends and the paternal mother-in-law is the one in charge. Islam further calls for a disclosure of the possessions of the deceased for purposes of inheritance as though the dead man does not have a wife and children to make such decisions. It also encourages the revelations of the deceased to allow for disclosure for purposes of healing. I have an issue with the idea of disclosure of a dead person's secrets, one wonders who is embarrassed here, it is the poor wife who remains with the pain of knowing what her husband did with no one to answer all the questions that come with all the revelations. For, me, this is further intended to hurt the woman who is at that time mourning the death of an unfaithful husband. Ramatoulaye is committed to Islamic tradition as she spends four months in mourning and seclusion.

The book portrays women as being mistreated in this society which also appears to be oppressive and in violation of their fundamental human rights as partners in a relationship. The problems of domination and subordination among African women have been recognized and that there are a number of gender-related obstacles that obscure women's emancipation efforts on the continent (Oloka-Oanyaale & Tamale, 2009). A woman is treated as a child and does not have a say in any matters pertaining to her marriage and it is the man who controls everything. This scenario shows the extent to which women are culturally and religiously marginalized and omitted in decision making processes pertaining to their lives. This invisibility and marginalization exacerbates their subjugation and perpetuates their treatment as minors in the

family and the society at large. However, Oloka-Oanyaale and Tamale (2009) have a different view regarding cultural oppression among African women arguing that it is difficult to address issues of African women's human rights primarily because of the universalism of western feminist theory and ideology which tends to view all women's problems as similar. Their argument is that women's human rights in Africa require an endogenous approach to such issues which will be able to augment international action and domestic issues appropriately.

Their culture is seen to marginalize women in that it puts men on a pedestal as opposed to women. The socialization process within this culture promotes inequalities between men and women and gives men an upper hand in all matters. It is interesting to note that men were educated outside in far away places such as France and women were educated in Dakar, Senegal. This is a typical patriarchal society that elevates men at the expense of women as stated in Mhlauli, Vosburg-Bluem & Merryfield (2010) that in Africa culturally and traditionally the social, religious and political norms often place restrictions on where women should go and what they should do and interact with. Women are often treated as children and have to obey and respect men without question. Men are prepared to serve in the public sphere as doctors in the case of Mawdo, Assitou's divorced husband and Lawyers, in the case of Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband. They come back to occupy high profiled positions within the society as lawyers, Trade Unionists, Doctors, Politicians and many others. Whereas women are socialized to remain in the private sphere and to work in jobs that are related to nurturing such as teaching and nursing. This is exemplified in the way Ramatoulaye praised her job as a teacher that:

Teachers- at kindergarten level, as at university level-form a noble army accomplishing daily feats, never praised, and never decorated. An army forever on the move, forever vigilant. An army without drums, without gleaming uniforms. This army, thwarting traps and snares, everywhere plants the flag of knowledge and morality (Ba, 1979, p. 23).

For her teaching was a service to the nation as she saw it as way of molding children into noble citizens within the society. She acknowledges that teaching as a profession is not recognized within the society yet it is teachers who are charged with the responsibility of equipping these children with the desired knowledge and morals, this to me denotes the essence of developing citizens.

One other issue pertaining to women and culture that cuts across this book is the two women's capacity to break tradition, norms and culture that has been practiced over the years. Firstly, Ramatoulaye and Assitou were married to progressive and educated men against their parents will and blessings. Secondly, they both got married without any celebration or dowry since they were married to poor men of their choice. Thirdly Assitou defied tradition when she divorced her husband for betraying her and marrying another woman without consulting her. Tradition also requires that when a woman's husband dies, his younger brother inherits his wife in order to carry on his name. After Modou's death, his brother Tasmir came to announce that he would like to marry his brother's wife.

However, it is interesting to see Ramotoulaye reawakening and challenging her own culture, and in the midst of this proposal she vowed to speak and she says; "My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, and sometimes contemptuous" (p. 58). Her belief is that she cannot marry a man whom she is not romantically in love with. It is this statement that shows that Ramatoulaye has made some introspection and further questions that "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an

object to be passed from hand to hand” (p. 58). Ramatoulaye for me has come to realize the oppressive nature of her culture and vows to fight it to the bitter end. Could this mean that her bereavement has given her a chance to reflect on her life? Could this be that finally Ramatoulaye has reached some self-realization? or could it be that Ramatoulaye despises her own culture and wants to adopt western forms of doing things? It remains to be seen, arguably, tradition or not, who would allow herself to be exchanged within the same family as though they do not have any feelings?

NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE DECOLONIZATION ERA

One of the themes that crops up in the book is that of national identities. Like many colonized areas decolonization did not come easily, as the author puts it “History marched on, inexorably. The debate over the right path to take shook West Africa. Brave men went to prison; others, following in their footsteps, continued the work begun” (p. 25). The sentiments shared about the decolonization era are reminiscent of the difficulties most African countries had to endure during this period and the freedom that came with their liberation struggles. People began to identify themselves as citizens and were appreciative of the changes that were sweeping through their country as evidenced in the text where it is stated that:

Our incipient democracy, which is changing the situation of the citizen and which your party may take much credit, appeals to me. Socialism, which is the heart of your action, is the expression of my deepest aspirations if it is adapted to the realities of our life...Senegal offers a new prospect of liberty regained...(Ba, 1979, p. 64).

As much as I concur with the spirit of decolonization as espoused by the author and its view of citizenship and liberation as long overdue, I tend to also feel that the author was also influenced by the modernization paradigm and believed that what was western was superior to what their culture provided. There is no indication that the coming of democracy was coupled with some recognition of indigenous cultures and as such alienated the traditional forms of governance.

With decolonization, people began to talk about identities beyond family names that were entrenched in the social stratification for the families they were born into as members of the royal family, a blacksmith’s daughter or priesthood. A new form of national identities came with the decolonization period as Ramatoulaye puts it:

It was a privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained young and efficient, for we were the messengers of a new design. With independence achieved, we witnessed the birth of a republic, the birth of an anthem and the implantation of a flag (Ba, 1979, p. 25).

People worked towards unity as opposed to politics. Trade unions collaborated with the government to see to it that schools were built, hospital equipment bought and demanded for higher wages. The spirit of liberation was flowing among the people of Senegal and they were also engulfed with feelings of modernity coupled with feminist ideologies. Women were also calling for their emancipation and this was also shown through their dress which emulated western forms of dress as exemplified by the wearing of sun helmets, short dresses, white shorts and men smoking pipes.

What is problematic about this emancipation and liberation is that it tended to see western forms of dress as better compared to their way of life. They started talking about cinemas, maids,

and the quest for true love, books and cleanliness. My problem with these ideologies is that they were assimilationist and perpetuated the production of the colonial subject. This is the contradiction that I see in Ramatoulaye as she appears to stick to her culture if and when it suits her and at the same time envious of the path taken by liberated women. To resist assimilation it is important for women to strategize and one of the ways in which they can do so is articulated well by Brayboy (2005) of using education as an empowerment tool for achieving self determination through manipulating the system to their advantage and acquiring more knowledge about the patriarchal structures in order to “fight fire with fire”.

Looking at the decolonization era, one is inclined to argue that it did not bring with it all good things because it also promoted elitist ideology as people were now identified according to their professions such as Modou, the Bureaucrat, Mawdo the Doctor, Assitou the Interpreter and Ramatoulaye the Teacher. This led to classism and a decline in the moral fabric that the society was borne on hence losing their identity as Senegalese; the school took over the role of the church and people no longer used traditional medicine but rather went to the hospital. These aspects of the transformation and evolution of the African way of life can be understood vividly by students through analyzing such materials that are rich in African mores, values and beliefs.

CONCLUSION

The book in totality heralds a series of mixed feelings where we see two women who are friends responding to their situation in a polygamous marriage differently. Assitou faced with polygamy decides to take a different path to liberate herself as she divorces her husband and goes to stay in the United States to start her life afresh. Whereas, Ramatoulaye decides to stay in the marriage and grieves over her love for her husband and wishes things could go back to where they used to be. Despite her children’s persuasion that she divorces her husband, she refuses. However, all is not lost as she promises her friend Assitou that:

I warn you already, I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything-disappointments and humiliations- hope still lives within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me (Ba, 1979, p. 89).

It is this last stanza that brings hope for women to fight for equality and representation without fear of abandoning their culture. Culture is not static, it develops as the people also develop and interact with other people from different cultures.

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