

Journey from Tradition to Modernity: An Exploration of Education as a Means of Women Liberation in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

Abstract

The novel *So Long a Letter* by the West African woman writer, Mariama Bâ, shows the impact of particular types of education for women in the traditional African-Muslim context of Senegal. The novel illustrates that religious education results in the marginalization of Muslim women. In contrast to the religious, the novel highlights the opportunities that Western education affords to the women in Africa. However, the novel also reveals the role of oral and religious education in making one a complete African woman. It is through the journey of the protagonist from tradition to modernity the novel presents the importance of both types of education on the women characters.

Keywords: Marginalization, education, oral, religious traditional, modernity.

Introduction

The main thrust of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is education as a means of liberation from the patriarchal oppression. In numbers of situation, women were given education as option to cope with whatever predicament they find themselves. Education acts as a key or vehicle given to women. The door she opens, or which direction she drives to becomes her choice. The more educated a woman is, the more options she has: the more keys, the more options of places to drive to. What decisions she takes then, is totally up to her.

The novel *So Long a Letter* presents the conflict in Protagonist's mind between tradition and modernity. Though colonialism proved to be detrimental to the role and status of women in some respects, Bâ highlights the fact that industrial expansion and education proved to be beneficial for average African women. Bâ, therefore, takes a positive approach towards colonialism which, to a great extent, provided women an access to education. Bâ's novels highlight the fact that colonialism helped women to overcome the status quo and prove their own independent identity in the patriarchal society. In a broad perspective, colonialism does not take into account ethnicity, concept of ethnic purity, ethno religious aspects, cultural aspects and religion, which are basically defectors in determining non-European and African cultural values. Material progress is very inherent in the process of colonial impact. It is in this respect that Mariama Bâ looks at colonialism and its importance in the process of modernization, especially for women in Africa.

Education allows Ramatoulaye to adopt a liberal attitude conscientiously; but this is possible only to a certain point. The actuality is that Ramatoulaye lives in a society that subjugates women only to the prescribed roles. Evidently, it is to be stressed here that this is the post-colonial position she has been assigned to by religion. African society, on the other hand, is dominated by the Wolof world view of fatalism. According to this world view, everyone's destiny is a fixed reality. As a result, Modou Fall sees his second marriage as something destined by God. Ramatoulaye also views it as a part of her destiny, and therefore, she should accept it without protest. She is ultimately caught between the established social order and her own intellectual renovation due to the Western education. However, Ramatoulaye's psychological dilemma is not observed in the character of her friend Aissatou. Aissatou does not allow



Jayant S. Cherekar

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English,
Arts, Commerce and Science
College,
Nanded, Maharashtra

the established social order to torture her; rather she chooses to divorce her man. Aissatou's divorce may be viewed as an act of courage; it is her moral triumph over the established social order. She writes him a letter and lets him know, in her words: "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (32). She leaves without anything but her sons and rents a house. She starts her life afresh which surprises her friend, Ramatoulaye, who admires this feat. This is something that would have seemed impossible before considering several factors: a dependence on a husband; lack of a will to leave; and that all encompassing holder – tradition.

This courageous act on the part of Aissatou is the result of the power of books. Books provide women like Aissatou courage that result in her decision to start her independent life.

The power of books, this marvellous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Juxtaposition of words from which springs the idea. Though, History, Science, Life, Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted: examination sat and passed took you also to France. The School of Interpreters, from which you graduated, led to your appointment into the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. You make a very good living. You are developing in peace, as your letters tell me, your back resolutely turned on those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationships (32)

Ramatoulaye's poem hints at the fact that education enables women to be 'up lifters' of their fellow ladies too. It as well demonstrates her concern for the changing values in society due to western education. Later, Aissatou comes to Ramatoulaye's aid by giving her the option of picking any Fiat car of her choice. Her freedom to choose indicates that education has provided her economic freedom. She has enough to even spare and lend a helping hand to her friend.

The novel, *So Long a Letter*, subsequently presents a conflict between tradition and modernity in the mind of the protagonist. This is the novel, in particular, about the education of women in colonial French West Africa. Mariama Bâ presents her own autobiographical experiences in relation to education, both traditional and colonial, through the protagonist, Ramatoulaye. This technique is a kind of the author's being in the text.

The first person narrator Ramatoulaye introduces herself as a teacher. She cultivates friendly relations with her students' parents. She recalls vividly with the greatest pleasure the schooldays she spent with her friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye characterizes herself to be one of the earliest pioneers in the promotion of African womanhood. She also mentions the contradictory, conflicting reaction of Senegalese men about the education of women. She writes: "Because being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were few of us. Men would call us as scatter-brained. Others referred to us as she-devils. But many of them wanted to possess us." (14) The statement reveals the post-colonial situation. The education of women was not much supported after the impact of colonialism. It is in the midst of this unfavorable situation that both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou received the school education.

Van Allen lists some of the following cultural factors which contribute to a lack of interest in formal secular education for women in West African societies. First, an investment in a girl's education is not considered fruitful because she is lost to her in-laws when she marries. Secondly, even educated men prefer a wife with at most a secondary school education, since too much education is widely believed to make a woman disobedient. Thirdly, most women who marry are expected to devote themselves exclusively to their families, even if they are educated (Stringer 1996: 9). These factors are often used to demonstrate the so-called "backwardness" of Muslim societies. Western critics such as Crowder refer specifically to Senegal as a society "where Islam as a religion retarded female education" (Stringer 1996: 8). Muslim commentators such as Rahman (1982: 308) asserts that women's education is one of the most important forces for social change in Muslim societies, Al-Khattab (1998: 102) confirms that Islam is sometimes misused to justify denying an empowering education to girls. This occurs despite a long history of scholarship among Muslim women which finds its basis in the Quranic emphasis on the importance of the acquisition of knowledge for all Muslims, male and female

Although Robertson & Berger (1986: 13) posit the view that, rather than paving the way for equality and greater opportunity, education for most women in West Africa functions as an instrument of oppression reinforcing subordinate roles, Miller (1990: 270) affirms that "education, modernization and the supposed coming of egalitarian values have actually proved to be a mixed blessing to many African women". These critics are referring to the effects of formal, secular education some of which are evident in Ramatoulaye's question to Aissatou in her discussion of the French colonial education they received as young girls: "How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed?" (Bâ 1980: 15). Whelehan (1995: 16) states that an adherence to gender identity is something endorsed and reinforced

by ideological agencies outside the home, such as schools. Although the two friends agreed that "much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within [their] traditions" and were "resolutely progressive" (Bâ 1980: 19), their French headmistress's attempts "to make up for [their] inadequacies" (Bâ 1980: 16) results in complex subjectivities.

Ramatoulaye becomes very eloquent when she projects the image of the 'admirable school director.' Ramatoulaye's projection of the school Director almost appears like an official French document about the objectives of African education in colonial setting. It is due to her gratitude "to the European woman who was director of the teachers' college she attended for widening the horizons of the students and for giving them moral and intellectual training." (Stringer, 1996: 39) Ramatoulaye emphasizes on her mission to emancipate African women. She writes: "She loved us without being patronizing us, with our plaits either standing on end or bent down, with our loose blouses, our wrappers. She knew how to discover and appreciate our qualities." (16) The narrator afterward concludes: "The path that our training and development were to follow had hardly been selected at random. It corresponded to the underlying orientations of a new Africa and to the desire to improve the conditions of African women." (Ibid) The statement presents the emancipatory power of school. She describes school as a motivating and stimulating organization for fostering positive, progressive programme. It is the seat of learning which shapes the personality of an individual so as to achieve something in life.

Ramatoulaye presents the mission of the western education in the African context. She becomes more eloquent the moment she mentions about the admirable school director. Ramatoulaye writes:

To lead us from the swamp of traditions, superstitions, and customs; to help us appreciate a variety of other civilizations without repudiating our own; to elevate our own conception of the world, reinforce our virtues, and overcome our flaws; to enable the values of a universal morality, to flourish in us—that was the task the marvelous school director had set for herself. (15)

The above cited lines from the text indicate a healthy, progressive, and affirmative attitude of the educational institutions in imparting liberal and humanitarian values. Teachers and administrators have been subtly appreciated by the narrator. It also shows perceptibility and susceptibility on the part of Ramatoulaye, the narrator.

The narrator's eighth letter clearly indicates the importance of colonial education in Africa. She mentions both the positive and negative aspects of this education. She takes a historical survey of the path she followed from Kindergarten, through primary and secondary school, to the university. To her, every

stage has its own problems and produces its own failures; but as the narrator reflects upon the system as a whole, she regards it as necessary and inevitable:

We all agreed that such dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the 'hard sweat' that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we know that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia, yet resolutely progressive. (18-19)

Undoubtedly, the statement shows Ramatoulaye's anxiety for tradition, and at the same time, it shows her desire to embrace modern values. She acknowledges great importance to the education that provides her a kind of discriminative power. The school education provides Ramatoulaye and her fellow students an insight into the intrinsic issues of life. These students, while reflecting on all these issues, remain progressive aiming at the balance between tradition and modernity. To her, the role of education is very central and decisive in shaping personal careers of emerging African women.

In her next letter, the narrator reflects upon the profession of teaching. She presents her revolutionary ideas about the profession of teaching, which never allows any space for mistakes. The role of teachers has been immensely applauded very logically in framing the bright future of the students. The teachers are called as the panthers of the flag of knowledge and virtue. The role of a teacher, for Ramatoulaye, is central in determining the personality of students.

The novel also presents Mariama Bâ's defense of traditional education for girls in Africa. The character of young Nabou is reposed with certain qualities that make her an adequate wife. Her aunt trained young Nabou at the Ecole des Sages-Femmes, also located in Raffenque. Aunt Nabou always insists: "This school is good. You receive an education here. No garlands for heads, young, sober girls with earrings, dressed in white, the colour of purity." (47) The statement by Aunty Nabou emphasizes the need to maintain the poise and heighten the temper of wisdom and knowledge. Knowledge, merely for the sake of knowledge, cannot make man happy. The narrator describes the result of young Nabou's 'oral education' which repose certain positive qualities that result in her multifaceted development. She mentions:

This kind of education, easily assimilated, full of charms has the power to bring out the best in the adult mind, developed in its contact with it. Softness and generosity, docility and politeness, poise and tact, all these qualities made young Nabou quite pleasant." (Ibid)

The statement reveals the importance of oral education which incorporates gentle human values in

Young Nabou. Nabou's position as the wife of Mawdo provides her the concrete opportunity to successfully complete her education in the traditional system. The modern European system of education can produce mature, conscious women who accept responsibility of their own lives, but so can the traditional African system of education. An example of failed education for women is provided by Binetou, a school friend of Ramatoulaye's daughter Daba. It is, in fact, the state of poverty that forces Binetou's mother to marry her off at quite a young age, leaving education incomplete. After marriage, Binetou avenges on herself and on her surrounding by placing increasingly excessive demands on her husband. She starts leading her life without any consideration for others. Binetou, in fact, behaves like a self-centered and pleasure-seeking woman.

In the novel, the theme of education is not only linked with the theme of marriage but also it is reflected as a concomitant of European schooling. Aissatou could manage to forget her past conveniently and it is the result of the European education which gives her the courage to seek divorce from her husband. Modern education not only provides Aissatou with logical arguments that enable her to preserve her dignity as a woman, but also the time to find solace in books. The same course Ramatoulaye could not adopt after the death of her husband Modou. This is because modern education could not excessively exert its unwanted influence on the personality of Ramatoulaye. She digests only what is good in modern education.

Ramatoulaye's rejection of the marriage proposal by Tasmir, her husband's elder brother, appears to be the direct outcome of French education. Daouda Dieng, her former suitor, once again expresses his desire to marry Ramatoulaye. Both of them discuss various issues, and through their discussion feminist demands are themselves pushed forward. Here, the all round development of a person, along with opening of an intellectual vista is clearly reflected. In her opinion, failure of marriages is not merely the result of modern education. There are other factors too, equally responsible for the breakdown of marriages. These include tradition, male dominated society, and the animal instinct in man. All these and number of other factors contribute for fostering polygamy in the society. In her long letter, Ramatoulaye lays great prominence on education which she hopes will bring a change in the situation of women in the African society.

The education provides her freedom, prestige and economic independence. It is on account of liberal education that Ramatoulaye is capable of making her life pleasurable by way of reading books. It also helps her to derive amenities of modern civilization after the death of her husband. She uses films, radio and also freedom of movement which are the sole contributions of modern times. Moreover, her psychological preparation to shirk off mental tensions makes her life comfortable.

Ramatoulaye, who is in the teaching profession, is largely benefited by the westernized

education which enables her to belong to a privileged class. The education facilitates her to liberate herself from redundant social taboos. She, being devoted to Koranic teaching and having its deep impact on her, is able to pinpoint some negative aspects of Western culture. This is revealed in her remark: "Now our society is shaken to its very foundations, torn between the attraction of import vices and the fierce resistance of old virtues". (73) While describing the third day's funeral ceremony, Ramatoulaye resentfully remarks how modernization has taught people to value materialization over the inner feelings. In recalling Modou's rise in social rank, she comments how the import of western culture has a harmful impact on their native culture.

Bâ also comments on racism that exists within the school system, using one of Ramatoulaye's children as an example. Ramatoulaye explains how her son, Mawdo, has been denied the grade due to him in the class, because the teacher is tougher on him than he is on a white student. She writes:

Mawdo Fall has a remarkable gift for literary work. Right from one, he has been top of this class in this subject, but this year for every capital letter forgotten, for a few commas omitted, for a misspelt word, his teacher knocks off one or two marks. Because of this, Jean Claude, a white boy who has always come second has moved up to first position. The teacher cannot tolerate a black man coming first in philosophy. And Mawdo Fall complains. (72)

The above statement by Ramatoulaye proves the extent to which the colonial domination empowers the education in Africa. It is by pointing out the continuation of the old colonial hierarchy within Senegal's educational system that Bâ is calling for a truly color-blind atmosphere. She emphasizes the importance of entirely merit based educational system. Despite this critique, Mariama Bâ's assessment of the Western method of education is fairly positive.

Aim of the Study

The present research paper intends to reveal the positive impact of Western and traditional education on the women characters in the novel *So Long a Letter*. It is education that provides women freedom from the patriarchal subjugation. However, in their struggle against the patriarchal subjugation the protagonists in *So Long a Letter* make a stronger plea to average women to opt for education that provides financial independence that liberates them from the burden of oppression. The research paper brings to the fore as to how both traditional and western education help women form mutual female bonding. This female bonding results in providing courage to wage war against the established patriarchal society.

Education as a means of liberation is the main thrust of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. In

several situations, the concept of education is shown to give women options out of whatever predicament they find themselves. Education acts as a key or vehicle given to women. The door she opens, or which direction she drives to becomes her choice. The more educated a woman is, the more options she has: the more keys, the more options of places to drive to. What decisions she takes then, is totally up to her.

Conclusion

Thus, Ramatoulaye and other characters in the novel, while not blindly accepting all foreign cultural imports, frankly accept the outside influences and enrichment brought by Western education. At the same time, she is cognizant of the inherent problems with this influence, and is uncomfortable with certain changes. For example, she does not like her daughters to wear pants, nor does she want them to smoke. Whereas, Ramatoulaye is at ease because of the commitment shown by Aissatou's lover and his family, the moment they accept Aissatou even after her pregnancy before the wedlock. Such kind of commitment could not have been expected under traditional or Islamic law. This sort of commitment indicates the changes taking place in society as regards the status of women in Africa. Thus, Ramatoulaye's reflections over both the traditional and western education methods clearly reveal African women's journey from tradition to modernity.

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