

Representation of national stereotypes in so long a letter



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Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* depicts the life of a newly widowed Ramatoulaye who writes a letter to her childhood best friend Aissatou, describing her life as a co-wife and an oppressed woman in the Senegalese culture and tradition. By writing the novel in an epistolary form, the author indicates that women are silenced and do not have the right to publically express their outcry against injustice. Bâ's epistolary novel, with the use of indirect characterization, reinforces the significant negative stereotypes of wives, husbands, and mothers to highlight the inequality in a Senegalese society. In *So Long a Letter*, female characters are conveyed as victims of the Senegalese societal patriarchy. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Ramatoulaye Fall, is viewed as a stereotypical Senegalese woman that is silenced and oppressed by her community and society's accepted norms.

In the novel, which uses an epistolary form, Ramatoulaye evokes her memories of her failed marriage post her husband Modou's death. Modou Fall married a younger woman as his second wife without the consent of his first wife. Although she does not display it, Ramatoulaye's constant suffering overwhelms her responsibilities since as well as her "former duties, [she] took over Modou's as well" (Bâ 53). Stuck in a vicious cycle, Ramatoulaye continues pleasing her husband rather than herself, despite his lack of presence. Ramatoulaye declines further marriage proposal made by Daouda Dieng, her former lover and decides to "remain faithful to the love of [her] youth" (59), even though it was after Modou's death, showing her complete dependence on her husband. Long after the two separated, Ramatoulaye still "[cried] for Modou" (59). Binetou, Modou's co-wife, is also portrayed as a woman with no voice and as a follower of the society's norms. Despite not

wanting to marry Modou, she does because like many other women, she is “ a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence” (40), showing that she is not responsible to act upon her reasoning and make decisions based for her own well-being. By being a young co-wife by force, she is “ exiled in the world of adults, which was not her own” (50), but continues participating in that foreign world to please her husband. Binetou is also characterized as an object which is “ sold” (50) to an older man, making her Modou’s ultimate property and obedient object for her husband. In addition to being viewed as an object, she is decorated with “ jewelry and rich boubous” (52), making her resemble a trophy-wife. Although the representation of women is stereotypical and negative, Aissatou challenges those stereotypes by assuming the role of a strong-willed and independent woman. Aissatou, opposed to Ramatoulaye and Binetou, takes her life in control by leaving her husband and choosing to work in France. Apart from Aissatou, Bâ characterizes women in a negative form in the Senegalese culture, representing them as silenced, oppressed and obedient. Finally, the protagonist Ramatoulaye and her rival Binetou of *So Long a Letter* emphasizes these stereotypes of a Senegalese wife who is completely dependent on her husband.

Women are not the only ones that are represented with strong Senegalese stereotypes in the novel. Bâ portrays the Senegalese male characters as misogynistic and as a source of oppression towards women due to their interpretations of Islam, but are also ridiculed in the novel. Modou Fall rejects the option of polygamy at the start of his marriage with Ramatoulaye, and even goes against his parents’ word to marry her. Thirty years and twelve

children later, he embraces the traditional Senegalese custom of polygamy and marries Binetou, a young student who is forced into the marriage by her mother. Although his actions are supported by the views of Islam, it is viewed as shocking and abrupt since Ramatoulaye did not give her consent and the co-wife is the friend of Modou's daughter. Bâ, by having Ramatoulaye characterize Modou, criticizes his patriarchal behavior and mocks his physical appearance such as his "graceless sag of a double chin" or the fact that he "would dye his hair every month" (Bâ 50). This gives the effect that Modou tries to impress his younger wife by trying to stay young himself, although Binetou "would never miss a chance of laughing wickedly at him" (50) due to his foolishness. Furthermore, the Qur'an states that men can marry up to four women as long as they treat them all equally and with respect, so that it is "more likely that [he] will not do injustice" (Qur'an 4: 3). Instead of starting a harmonious life with his two wives as permitted, Modou abandons his first wife for Bientou. His actions reveal a misogynistic behavior due to the abandonment of his children and wife, and emphasizes his indifference towards Ramatoulaye's feelings. Without divorcing her, Modou leaves Ramatoulaye like "a fluttering leaf that no hand dare[s] to pick up" (56), showing his selfish and egocentric side, and only using the Islamic faith for his convenience. Furthermore, Mawdo, Aissatou's husband, also uses his religion and Senegalese traditions in his convenience by marrying a younger woman, despite initially refusing to do so. Contrarily to Modou, Mawdo still cares for Aissatou and wants to continue living with her as the tradition requires, although she refuses and moves on. His initial suggestion of only seeing Young Nabou, his co-wife, to "fulfill a duty" (31) could suggest that he only wanted her for pleasure and not for love. Although he carries on to <https://assignbuster.com/representation-of-national-stereotypes-in-so-long-a-letter/>

follow the Senegalese traditions and Islamic faith as convenient, which oppresses Aissatou to an extent where she leaves him to move to France. The author portrays Modou as a misogynistic oppressor and ridicules him for his physical appearance, and additionally ridicules Mawdo by representing him as a naïve and easily influenced by his mother.

Mothers, in the Senegalese culture, are stereotyped as dominant, materialistic and being in constant control of a couple's life. In *So Long a Letter*, Bâ portrays the motherly figures as irrational and commanding towards the decisions they make for their children or children-in-law. Binetou's mother, also known as Lady Mother-in-Law in the novel, does not think twice about making her daughter stop her education and to marry a man old enough to be her father just to be able to have a luxurious lifestyle. When Binetou told her mother about Modou, her mother "cried so much [and] begged her daughter to give her life a happy end" (Bâ 37), without taking in consideration the relationship the two have together or whether it is something Binetou wants. The actions made by Lady Mother-in-law portray her as a selfish and superficial woman that would prefer to gain luxury "from the marriage" (40) rather than care for her daughter's wishes. Furthermore, her sudden increase in social status due to the marriage makes the community "spiteful and jealous of [her] promotion" (40), which indicates that her lack of morality and rational thinking. Another woman that is portrayed as a dominant and controlling woman is Aunty Nabou, Mawdo's mother, who raises Young Nabou as a perfect wife for her son. After disapproving of her son's initial marriage, she "thought more and more of her revenge" (26) to deliberately sabotage Aissatou's relationship with

Mawdo. With a specific goal in mind, Aunty Nabou raises her niece to become a stereotypical Senegalese wife – obedient and silenced. She raises Young Nabou with a traditional mentality to become a typical housewife and midwife only, since “ a women does not need too much education” (29). Aunty Nabou despised Aissatou for her abundant education and tried keeping her away from her son since “ school turns [girls] into devils who lure [men] away from the right path” (17). Her actions reveal a traditional and authoritarian perspective in her son’s marriage that lead to a divorce. Bâ portrays the motherly figures as selfish and dominant, and as women who do not necessarily mean the best for their sons or daughters.

Ultimately, Bâ emphasizes the stereotypes of women, husbands and mothers in Senegal with the use of indirect characterization throughout the novel. Women are perceived as oppressed, obedient and victims of a patriarchy, while men are portrayed as the source of oppression and as misogynistic. The mother-in-laws, are shown to be materialistic and dominant in a couple’s personal life. Bâ’s reinforcement of stereotypes in the Senegalese culture shows the conflict of gender roles and inequality in the country.