

World literature

Government, Colonialism



QUESTION: THE INFLUENCE OF ASSIMILATION: CASE STUDY OF

RAMATOULAYE. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is one of the African novels written by an African credited with showcasing the various changes that have been brought about by colonialism especially in African countries. "So Long A Letter" was written with the ideal timing and place that is after the French colonisation in Senegal in the latter part of the 20th Century. It is thus uniquely placed to portray to us at first hand, the influence of Colonialism on the Senegalese people. Assimilation is a term used in tandem with colonialism where it pertains to the French. It advocated a wholesale immersion onto the French culture by the natives, to the end of making Frenchmen out of them. This essay will discuss the impact of this French policy through the main character. I have chosen to focus on the character of Ramatoulaye as she is central to the plot of the novel, being both its narrator and principal character. She also has the unique position of being presented as having witnessed both colonial and post-colonial times. In addition to her narration, Bâ affords her times of reflection that give us further insight into societal pressures and issues of her era. Bâ is able to show this influence through a use of a number of techniques which includes writing the book in an epistolary format between two best friends that is Ramatoulaye and Aissatou and through the blending of three cultures that existed at that time which are the Traditional culture, the French assimilation and the Islamic culture. Also, a number of themes created especially that of education in the novel hinges on the issue of assimilation. One of the most visible influences of assimilation is the newfound boldness of the African Woman symbolised by, Ramatoulaye. She is shown to be a fully educated lady, married to an

important man in the country, Modou Fall with 12 children but widowed after 25 years of marriage. Traditionally, Ramatoulaye is expected to remarry as soon as she can, to get another husband to replace Modou Fall. For example, when Farmata says, “ If he has come back looking for you, you an old woman burdened with family, it is because he loves you; he can look after you and your family” (pg. 70). However, as a result of Ramatoulaye being educated, which is one significant influence of the Assimilation, she refuses to marry even the “ double trouser man (pg. 70)” Daouda Dieng. This strength not to settle for just any man is frowned upon by traditionalists represented here by Farmata. The influence of the Assimilation on cultural beliefs becomes very important as the theme of polygamy is being exposed. This is because, as mentioned at the beginning, since Ramatoulaye’s husband married another wife and she also loses her husband, according to tradition, she is expected to live a polygamous marriage but like her best friend Aissatou, she refuses to marry another man including Tamsir, Daouda Dieng which also makes Farmata furious and gives her names like “ wolere”, “ guere”, “ samba linguere which mean a mad woman. This is supported by the quotation “ you can provide food to your stomach as well as you please; it will still provide for itself without your knowing” (page number) which mentions that it is not always men who are to give you all the comfort you need so there is a need to provide for yourself no matter the situation. BÃ¶ shows that education is so important in some parts of the book especially to the girl child and this is as a result of the French Assimilation. For example as she says, “ When you are adults, if your opinions are to carry weight, they must be based on knowledge backed by diplomas”. This is very clear influence since according

to Farmata; it could be her traditional beliefs through using cowries that could convince people to achieve something very important. The epistolary format of the novel is yet another evidence of the impact of assimilation. It indicates that Ramatoulaye is well educated. We are also told that, in her times of difficulty, books saved Aissatou. This is emphasised by her quotation, “ To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition,...cultivate our personalities, and strengthen our qualities,.... develop universal moral in us. ” (pg. 16) It is because of this education that she was employed and therefore able to fend for her family. This is not to say though that education was embraced by the Senegalese people. Young women pioneers of education were labelled “ devils” and called all sorts of names for example when society states that, “ School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path” (pg. 17) Additionally, the influence of the Assimilation is shown through Senegalese society of that era which featured a good blend of three cultures that is the Islamic, Traditional and French cultures. BÃ¸ portrays that all cultures are important as Ramatoulaye is shown to respect each one of them. At the beginning the Islamic culture plays its role at the death and burial of Modou Fall. The traditional culture when Farmata tries to go advise Ramatoulaye on how to treat her children. Ramatoulaye also sometimes believed in the cowries owned by Farmata for example when Ramatouley told Aissatou “ Aissatou, your namesake, is three months pregnant. Farmata, the griot woman of cowries very cleverly led me to this discovery. ”(pg. 84) However, since the book was written just about the end of the assimilation, the French culture is more dominant in the book. First of all, it’s exposed by the behaviours of the trio daughters of

Ramatoulaye that is their dressing, smoking, drinking and so many more behaviours. Also as a result of the assimilation, most of Ramatoulaye's daughters are shown to be educated which was not ideal in the traditional times. To continue, because of the education of Ramatoulaye, her reaction towards some situations is so different for instance, she confirms that she has to overcome some obstacles of tradition when it comes to taking care of her children. This is accentuated with the quotation, " Her life and her future were at stake, and these were powerful considerations, overriding all taboos" (pg. 87). Mariama Bâ demonstrates that although a number of these changes occur to Ramatoulaye as a result of the French Assimilation, most of them are negative through using people and the environment which she lives with and lives in. For example, Farmata believes that girls are supposed to get pregnant at a certain age and after marriage. This is reinforced by the quotation, " She had dreams of sumptuous marriage celebration for Aissatou, which should compensate her for my mengre nuptids when she was a young girl. " (pg. 88) But when Ramatoulaye finds out that young Aissatou is pregnant, she does not vigorously react to it since she knows what she is going through. Also, as the trio daughters of Ramatoulaye dress anyhow, smoke and drink without her know about, it is then that she realises that she has been seriously blinded by the French kind of life. The French assimilation furthermore is demonstrated as a way of neglecting the normal kind of work that people usually did. For example, Ramatoulaye who would be expected to be doing house chores all day is a professional teacher and her daughter Daba. In addition, as a result of the Assimilation, there has been a change in generational behaviours and this is significantly shown by

Ramatoulaye's children. For example Daba who is married and fully educated lives her husband to do most of the house work which was not the issue when Ramatoulaye was married and that is why when BÃ© says, " life holds many surprises to Daba who is pampered by the husband" reveals that it is a pity for her to be treated like this. Also Ramatoulaye's trio daughters display this generational change in their dressing for example trousers in contrast to the mother's Islamic dressing at the beginning. BÃ©'s blending and contrasting of cultures makes the book even more interesting and makes us appreciate all the cultures that exist at that moment and how they play a role in controlling how Ramatoulaye thinks of certain situations. Finally, with the quotation " It is from dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me" however much the French Assimilation has brought a number of changes especially the negative ones, more changes are expected with the Assimilation and according to Ramatoulaye, there are also positive ones that need to be appreciated. Mariama BÃ©'s description of the various situations also adds to how Ramatoulaye thinks that the Assimilation is of help or a disadvantage. Works Cited Ba, Mariama. " SO LONG A LETTER." Ba, Mariama. SO LONG A LETTER. London: Pearson Education Limited, 1980. 70. -. SO LONG A LETTER. London: Pearson Education Limited, 1980. Word count: 1449