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LITERATURE

Mixed Marriages in Ba's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*

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Abstract
The importance of marriage cannot be over-emphasised. It is a crucial ingredient for the survival of man and woman, irrespective of race, religion, cultural and ethnic background. Love is the prerequisite for marriage in all cultures. This fact is negated in the marriage relationships described in Ba's two works. This paper examines mixed marriages in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* and its impact on women. It also highlights the woman's predicament in general and the way forward for women in such plight.

Introduction
Marriage is one of the old institutions ordained by God from biblical times. Men have married women within and from outside their ethnic, racial and cultural background. Mixed marriage therefore abounds in the world today. While some are yielding positive results others have become problematic due to a number of reasons.

Mariama Ba's literary career is probably one of the shortest in African literary history. Virtually unknown until recently, Ba like a meteor, shot to the firmament of African letters in 1979 with her first novel *So Long a Letter*. Aire (2002) posits that "even before Ba won the Noma prize she had already started a second novel *Scarlet Song* which unfortunately turned out to be her swan song for she passed away on August 17, 1981 while the manuscript was still being printed" (148). Short as her literary career may have been, her two novels have carved for her an indisputable niche within African Francophone literature.

So Long a Letter (1980), "is a novel with a difference, first in its plot, the position of women in the marriage institution pitched in the background culture of Moslem religion" (Chukwuma 1994:48). About 500 million women presently live in Moslem countries and communities. Because Islam operates in so many economic, political and cultural situations, the circumstances of women living in these varied contexts will obviously present differences. Helie-Lucas (1993) observes that, "various schools of thought in Islam look at the subordination of women in different terms" (35). Also, Islam, while expanding has absorbed local traditions. This variety in interpretation of religion, as well as indigenous culture and traditions has repercussions on women's lives and rights. There has also been political use of both religion and culture.

Ba writes from a female point of view, a female exposing subjugation from an autobiographical stance. Chukwuma states that, "Ba's main theme is female subjugation, the plight and misfortune of women" (43). Bestman (2003) agrees with Chukwuma that, "Ba was the firs woman to speak powerfully from the point of view of women" (109). Her works highlight the injustice suffered by the feminine gender and challenges accepted social norms that serve to subjugate women in African patriarchal society. In *So Long a Letter*, the author focus on institutionalised polygamy, caste system and the general dehumanisation of women. She also reveals women (especially the older generation) as agents of oppression of their kind because they have imbibed phallocratic construction of women as the norm. *Scarlet Song* looks at the woman question from the angle of inter-racial marriage.

Bestman opines that, "when Mariama Ba published her first novel in 1979 the African female was still generally speaking quite voiceless" (110). At the time when her sisters in the diaspora were up in arms against a patriarchal/imperialist system that had subjugated them for centuries, the African woman was still suffering in silence. The reserve towards active feminism may well be explained by the fact the African woman, unlike her sister in the New World, does not have racial issues to contend with after the attainment of independence. Besides, feminism tends to be the affair of white middle class women that has little or nothing to do with the realities the African woman was facing. Gender awareness was therefore still quite a hazy affair on the literary scene at the time Mariama Ba penned her award winning *So Long a Letter*. Bestman argues that "African women writers were few and still had not yet a clear understanding of difference as could be seen in Caribbean or African American woman writing" (110). Fictional writing was the monopoly of men in Africa for a very long time and as a result, women and gender issues were portrayed through male bias artistic perception. This no doubt is the reason behind the creation of "faceless" female character or at best the stereotype of anti-hero, the negation of the positive male in the form of the wayward city girl, the feather-brained

village belle or the unfaithful wife. It has been suggested that African women shied away from the gender question and from a clearly defined notion of difference for fear of being battered by aggressive male creative writers/critics who wished to maintain the status quo in literary productivity. It is against this background that Mariama Ba's work came to break the silence.

Bestman further states that,

> …in traditional African world view, women are often perceived in materialistic terms as possessions of their husbands in the same way a man might own a house or a farmland and quite often the notion is linked with the idea of buying and selling which reduces the woman to the level of a merchandise (110).

Deeply embedded therefore in the African consciousness is the image of a woman as inferior to a man and even in present day post independence¸ neo-colonial set up, this image has hardly changed in spite of the persistent polemics of the economic independence of the modern African woman. This has been further reinforced by the Islamic concept of women as underlings in societies (like Mariama Ba's Senegal) that has fallen under the influence of Mohammedanism (Bestman 111).

So Long a Letter and *Scarlet Song* address the woman question by focusing on marital infidelity and the institution of polygamy. Her setting is a sexist patriarchal society where women are marginalized if not outrightly dehumanised. Bestman opines that,

> The author's choice of polygamy as the crux of the woman question in Africa is not surprising, because this practice is the very crucible of the oppressive machinery working against female gender, the hydra-headed monster responsible for the fragmentation of the lives of many of our omen" (111).

The true test of female assertion is in the marriage institution and motherhood. It is in the home that the real fight for woman's identity and survival is waged. Chukwuma reasons that "the feminist war is complex and harrowing and when fought in the marriage enclosure leaves more casualty than survivors" (43). One major thematic difference between *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* is a variant of the theme prevalent in the early sixties, that of the "Black man in Paris".

Of all forms of personal love relationship between man and woman that which motivates, nurtures and sustains a marriage has in modern times become the only legitimate romantic passion (Chukwuma 1994). Thus in both modern Europe and the African context, marriage founded on some form of love is the living myth that sustains such relationships. Chukwuma also adds that a love relationship between a man and woman is not only essential for man's survivals as a species, but even more importantly, it is crucial for his quest for self identity, happiness and a meaning in life. The expression of freedom of choice in matters of love is the hallmark of the individualistic ethos that controls the modern world. When compared with the European concept of love, the meaning, significance and role of love in the African culture and marriage becomes quite problematic issues. Love in this context refers strictly to the emotional content of man-woman relationship.

Ba's novels *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* narrate the lives of women whose fanatical love for their husbands fail to yield the envisaged goal of lasting marital bliss. Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Jacqueline and Mireille are loving wives who find themselves "despised, related and exchanged … abandoned like a worn-out or out-dated boubou" (*So Long a Letter*, 41). They are faced with abandonment that in its wake breeds loneliness, wounded self pride, helplessness and imminent despair.

Much of the works' charm derives from a most vivid and realistic characterization. The women come to full life as they struggle with their common fate of husbands' betrayer and abandonment. These women have a common virtue (or vice) – a fanatical fate in the potency and immortality of love. "They are presented as women who are under the spell of dream-like fantasies which may have very little touch with reality – the ugly reality of love relationships in the African society" (Acholonu 1994:201). These wives can therefore be viewed as victims of doomed illusions that arise from their limited knowledge about human love, the male species, their societies and even themselves. Ba agrees with Firestone that "love perhaps even more than child-bearing is the pivot of women's oppression today" (Firestone 1979:121). These wives in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* mistake "eros" for absolute love that is immortal and altruistic. Herein lies the root of the delusion and the heart of their tragedy (Acholonu, 202). Their disillusionment consists of a discovery of their cost of "how quickly man's desire burns itself out" (*Scarlet Song* 159) and the fact that romantic love is a mere emotion which dies off as early as it is born.

Mixed marriage in *So Long a Letter*

Chukwuma reasons that, "marriage is a social duty for both man and woman" (218). In traditional and contemporary setting, love is the prerequisite for marriage. An unmarried man is considered irresponsible

while an unmarried woman is a social failure. Bestman (2003) agrees with Chukwuma that, "an unmarried woman is a social misfit exposed to a lot of humiliation" (112).

Makward (1990) observes that, "Ba was not the first African to treat the subject of mixed marriages" (275). Two outstanding predecessors are Tunisian, Albert Memmi and the Senegalese, Ousman Sembene. An even earlier precursor is Rene Maran with his *Un Home Pareil Aux Autres* published in 1947 (275).

In *So Long a Letter*, Ba examines the mixed marriage between Jacqueline and Samba Diack. Jacqueline the Ivorian disobeyed her Protestant parents and married Samba Diack, a doctor and a Senegalese. In Senegal,

> she found herself in a new world, a world with different reactions, temperament and mentality from that in which she had grown up. In addition, her husband's relatives, always the relatives were cool towards her because she refused to adopt the Moslem religion and went instead to the Protestant church every Sunday (*So Long a Letter*, 41-42).

Being an African like her husband did not stop her from being despised and called a bushwoman, " a nickname which revolted her so much" (*So Long a Letter,* 42).

Jacqueline's problem came to a climax when Samba became unfaithful. He started flirting with "slender Senegalese women" (42) and did not hide the affairs thus showing disrespect for his wife and children. Jacqueline found many proofs of his unfaithfulness – love notes, cheque stubs, bills from restaurants and for hotel rooms. As a result of these problems, her health started deteriorating fast. Despite the prescribed tranquillisers given to her by doctors, the pain in her chest refused to go. To make matters worse, her parents did not sympathise with her, " they sent their sincere blessing but could do nothing to lighten the strange weight in her chest" (*So Long a Letter*, 43).

Concerned for her welfare, Jacqueline's friends consulted native doctors to no avail. She was sent to Farm Hospital and placed in a neurology ward. Different forms of tests and investigations were carried out on her. These included blood test, electro-encephalogram and gaseous electro-encephalography. Thus she became a nervous wreck and turned her thoughts to death. She soon became a pitiable sight. Aire (2002) opines that, "her role seems to be to illustrate the depression that can haunt any woman abandoned the way that she is abandoned" (154).

After a counselling session with the doctor who was head of the Neurology Department and " seeing herself at the brink of a mental

breakdown, Jacqueline regains her willpower to save her tottering psyche" (Acholonu, 201). The doctor told her:

> You must react, go out, give yourself a reason for living. Take courage. Slowly, you will overcome. We will give you a series of shock treatments with curare to relax you. You can leave afterwards. *(So Long a Letter,* 45*).*

Through the doctor's counselling words above, Ba indirectly speaks to all women in such a predicament. Jacqueline told her friends that after the counselling session, she felt "already half-cured" (45). The narrator recounts that, "she knew the heart of her illness and would fight against it. She was morally uplifted …." (*So Long a Letter*, 45). One cannot fail to admire Jacqueline for picking the pieces of her life rather than suffer permanent mental breakdown. Her courage is what Ba celebrates in (*So Long a Letter*.

Mixed marriage in *Scarlet Song*

Ba takes the story of the dehumanised and traumatised woman further in *Scarlet Song* with emphasis on problems emanating from inter-racial marriages. In this novel the author explores the woman question from the point of view of another foreigner as she presents the story of Mireille de la Vallèe, a French girl who marries Ousmane Gueye, a Senegalese, against the wishes of her parents. Soon after the couple returns to Senegal things start to fall apart. Mireille is not accepted by her husband's family and society. Yaye Khady, Ousmane's mother, sees the white girl as her 'thiah' (misfortune) and a rival for her son's affection. Yaye Khady reasons that,

> A toubab can't be a proper daughter-in-law. She'll only have eyes for her man. We'll mean nothing to her… and now I am faced with a woman who is going to take my son away from me. I shall die on my feet in the kitchen (*Scarlet Song,* 49)

Makward (1990) states that although Ousmane does not neglect any of his duties towards his parents, his mother is not satisfied with her son's marriage to a foreigner, for Mireille does not, and cannot possibly fulfil towards her all the functions of a true daughter-in-law in accordance traditional Wolof expectations. Mireille too has not been culturally prepared by her own husband. Yaye Khady swears to overthrow the "she-devil" and mobilises all efforts to achieve her goal. De Almeida (1990) opines that, "in choosing to reject Mireille, Yaye Khady makes her integration into Senegalese society more arduous and sows the seed of discord with the

couple" (169). Also in choosing to marry Mireille, Ousmane severs her from her cultural milieu and creates a cleavage between her family and him. The situation is compounded by Ousmane's attitude. Afraid of being ostracised for choosing a white wife, he channels his energy towards convincing his people that he remains essentially a black man. This, he does by proving himself the absolute master in his home, in the true tradition of a typical African husband. Instead of helping his wife to understand the dynamics of her adopted society, he takes sides with her tormentors and helps in alienating her. For instance, Mireille faces that challenge of coping with her numerous in-laws and Ousmane's friends who visit without invitation to eat, chat and dirty the house with cigarette butts and kolanuts. Yaye Khady on her part bursts into their bedroom unannounced thereby intruding into the couple's privacy. Some of Ousmane's friends criticise mixed marriages openly and despise Mireille's sulkiness and resistance. This was the real torture hence she often takes refuge in her room. To Mireille, communal life is a form of parasitism.

Bestman (2003) recounts that, "Ousmane is torn between the path he has chosen and what his society expects of him" (116). In the face of this dilemma, it is not surprising that he cannot resist the onslaught of Ouleymatou's scheming. He secretly marries her in the name of authenticity and sets up a parallel family. He claims that, "by so doing, he comes to terms with himself having found his roots in his 'negress of the gongo' smell, his symbol of Africa" (116). Mireille, who meanwhile has become a nervous wreck, learns of the betrayal, becomes demented, kills their son and attacks her husband with a knife. There is, on the part of the narrator, a cruel irony in making Mireille the one who advices Ousmane to visit Ousseynou, Oleymatou's brother, thus contributing to the return of Ouleymatau into his life. This return, according to Aire (2002: 160), clinches the matter and prepares Mireille's other actions: the spying on Ousmane, her jealousy, the feeling of betrayal, the anguish and dilemma and finally the mental violence which in turn generates physical violence.

Scarlet Song uses an omniscient narrator who most of the time adopts the point of view of various characters but can also stand above them to criticise or applaud their actions. An upright, intelligent and progressive young man like Ousmane transforms into an intransigent, adulterous and unfaithful husband who is prone to telling lies. Mireille on her part was "wasting away" (*Scarlet Song*, 154). She becomes "inflexible, indignantly condemning behaviours which she qualified as lack of breeding, impertinence, lack of consideration or vulgarity according to circumstances" (*Scarlet Song*, 93). After a few attempts at adaptation Mireille also chooses to remain faithful to her Western culture, thus widening the gap between her and Ousmane. She wishes she could run away from the aridity of her married life and go back to her parents. "The

prodigal daughter should be able to find forgiveness" (*Scarlet Song*, 160) but this was not to be.

The victim of this betrayal, Mireille de la Vallèe, would in an archetypal reading of Ba's second novel, represent the beloved at first difficult to conquer, but who once conquered, is quickly abandoned. We recall that for a long time, she haunts the dreams of Ousmane who makes believe that she is an actress or film star and therefore unreal or imaginary and by that same token, unattainable.

Mireille is a full-blooded woman, stylish, idealistic and militant as many students are. She deserves to be admired for her courage and sacrifices – conversion to Islam, the long wait in France and the cohabitation with the extended family. Aire argues that "this is why he feels that the idyll ends too soon, since we hardly see the spouses enjoy their marriage before the break-up sets in" (161). Too soon after the marriage, Mireille, who is certainly not faultless, cannot seem to do anything right. Despite her goodwill and the initiation imbibed from Rosalie, nothing seems to move Ousmane. In choosing to remain faithful to his culture, Ousmane pays little attention to the fact that Mireille also has a culture. It is therefore easy to understand her revolt.

Some critics have condemned her for taking to violence as a way out of her numerous problems. Acholonu suggests that, "Mireille proves incapable of arriving at a positive solution to her own plight. Her naivety, inordinate sense of pride arising from her bourgeois upbringing, and her devotion to blind love, all combine to drive her to a state of total mental breakdown" (201). Unlike Jacqueline in *So Long a Letter,* she is utterly unable to save herself. However, one must remember that Jacqueline had her friends and the kind doctor for comfort and counselling, whereas Mireille was completely alone with only foes in a strange milieu. Again Acholonu opines that Mireille opts for what she terms the "degrading choice to remain the slave of a dead love" (201).

Like Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter*, Mireille uses the child argument to buttress her tenuous logic. Mariama Ba, by means of an indirect authorial commentary debunks the child argument as a woman's reason for suffering in the hell of a loveless marriage:

> The child argument doesn't hold water. Many humiliated wives use this excuse to camouflage their own lack of will-power. And with faces bathed in tears these mothers protest how ill-used they are… (*Scarlet Song*, 16).

Acholonu argues further that Mireille crumbles eventually because she refuses to exercise her liberty of mind and freedom of action (207). She chooses to remain a slave of a deluded and misguided "love that knew no national frontiers" (*Scarlet Song*, 20). She believes that love has the power

to transform a poor black Moslem (who at heart has no regard for women) into a lasting romantic lover and faithful husband. Yet for Ousmane "all women were as selfish, disdainful, pretentious and hard as Ouleymatou" (*Scarlet Song*, 21). Mireille has the qualities that should yield success in her present situation: "Mireille armed by centuries of civilization, could survive, with her iron will, her enthusiasm for confrontation and with her immense fortune" (*Scarlet Song*, 165). But ironically she chooses the path of passive mental torture that ultimately leads to her self-destruction.

Acholonu reasons that Mireille may be an innocent victim of a bourgeois upbringing: her neurotic self-pride about the prodigal daughter becoming a "laughing stock", smacks of a class complex. In her inability to redeem her psyche and her whole person, she stands for negation of the positive dynamic spirit which charactirise the new woman (207). She argues "She would live, she would fight, uphold by the ideals that did not sink on its knees…" (*Scarlet Song*, 162). Ironically therefore, hope eludes her, because the crumble of a dead love and a dead happiness can only be collected by willpower that she fails to exercise. "She takes pride only in being Ousmane's wife, but hardly in being herself – a woman capable of loving herself, of protecting her interest and seeking happiness even if outside marriage" (Acholonu, 208). Acholonu states that a woman abandoned by her husband should not abandon herself. Mireille's inability to embark on a positive action to save herself is, therefore, nothing short of an act of cowardice. The fury of passionate love does not normally take vengeance in the form of passivity in a situation that calls for positive dynamic action. Mireille by ending up in the degrading state of a mental breakdown, loses her dignity and rightful place among such classical passionate love heroines as Dido, Thisbe and Juliet whose noble death immortalised their love (ibid). In Acholonu's view there is nothing ennobling about Mireille's criminal acts. This is so because her defeatist approach to her problem fails to merit her greatness and honour.

The problem of the Ousmane/Mireille marriage is also basically that of differences – cultural, racial and gender. This is so because each character represents a civilisation and values alien to the other – the symphony of Mozart as opposed to the vibration of African tam-tam (Bestman, 116). Bestman adds that the pre-conceived notion of the domineering nature of the white man and the collective memory of the colonised cannot fully accommodate a white spouse. Coupled with this is the question of gender. If the African is forced to accept the white man's domination and his sense of racial superiority, he finds it difficult to cope with a white female spouse. According to Bestman there is the fear in Ousman's subconscious of being dominated by her (117). This probably explains the particular effort to reduce the while female spouse to a state of subservience. For Ousmane, total devotion to his wife tantamounts to weakness. As a result, he tries to

make a slave of her (a psychological reversal of the slave/master complex)(117).

Unlike Acholonu, Bestman sees Mireille's violent action as a revolt born of her frustration; it is a natural outcome of her long-endured mental agony. Her motive for killing her son is rather complex. It is an act of self-liberation from her frustration, a sort of suicide aimed at relieving herself of the suffering to which she has been subjected (ibid). Left to live, according to Bestman, the child would be a constant reminder of her ordeal. It is an act of revenge against her husband and a way of saving the child from a world of lies, a world where he will be obliged to live double life because of his double heritage. In the same vein, her attack on Ousmane is an attempt to destroy the object of her torment. Bestman adds that Mireille exteriorises her deep-seated resentment through these acts of violence. Bestman also raises the question: Is Mariama Ba making a call, however subtle, to the African woman to rise up like her foreign sister and defend her integrity and break the yoke of male domination? The irony of the situation is that older African women tend to actively support and contribute to the subjugation of their younger counterparts as in Yaye Khady and Mawdo Fall's examples.

With the character of Mirelle, Mariama Ba provides a fresh look at the problem of women in the African society. Seen from a critical foreigner's point of view, the mental agony experienced by African women is fully appreciated. The author, according to Bestman, seems to sympathize with the white girl and asks if it is an "affinity of women for the suffering of another woman or solidarity with women all over the world irrespective of race or colour?' (*ibid*). The echo, howbeit faint, that pervades the work of Mariama Ba is that of a need for the African women to cast off the yoke of oppression by being economically independent and facing life aggressively as did Aissatou, rather than remain a passive object of contempt.

Mariama Ba devotes particular attention to official couples in *Scarlet Song*. Apart from Ousmane and Mireille she portrays four other couples with various religious and social combinations: Ali and Rosalie are both Senegalese and Muslim who do their best to reason with Ousmane; the French couple Guillame and Genevieve are neighbours to Ousmane and Mireille and Guillame's racism is probably as intolerable as that of Monsieur de la Vallèe. Aire recalls that "the third couple – Lamine and Pierrette is a veritable foil, as it shows how an interracial, inter-religious marriage can succeed. Boly Mboup is a griot who incurs his family's hostility by marrying a Catholic after other girls had rejected him because of his caste.

Lamine and Pierrette's marriage deserves attention here because of its uniqueness. Lamine, Ousmane's cousin, had been a witness at his wedding to Mireille. But unlike Mireille's parents, Pierrette's parents had given their daughter's marriage a blessing. Ba accounts that "they had organized a party when their daughter left for Africa" (*Scarlet Song*, 98). To further

show their love and approval of their daughter's marriage, "Pierrette's mother would escape from the European winter to enjoy the African sunshine making no bones about staying with Lamine" (*ibid*). According to the more perceptive Lamine, "one cannot ally two different conceptions of life. If one is to be honest, one has to make a choice" (*Scarlet Song*, 151). Lamine's attitude contrasts sharply with that of his cousin, Ousmane:

> Lamine was an open man who did not suffer any ideological torment. He was not taunted by his negritude … He was not like Ousmane listening to the voice of "his" society. His life was made easy by his detachment from the African Milieu. He adopted the Western way of life. Considered "lost" for his family, he continued to gleefully turn his back to certain social demands which did not in his view, have any essential significance (*Scarlet Song*, 151).

Lamine was very happy with his life with Pierrette at his side. He drinks his wine and eats pork, anathemised by the Koran and did not involve Pierrette in obligatory family visits and she also tried to keep her in-laws away from her home unlike Ousmane whose relation bumped in on them unannounced at odd times. Lamine tells Ousmane that marriage is based on tolerance and a human approach. On how Ousmane treats Mireille, making her overwork herself, Lamine tells him "… You don't need a wife. It's a slave you need …" (*Scarlet Song*, 99). But Ousmane refuses to compromise as he claims this will amount to surrender. He therefore counters Mireille's stubbornness with the hardening of his own position, forgetting that two rights cannot make a wrong. He refuses to listen to Lamine's advice calling him a deserter of his rank but Lamine stands his grounds saying that he will rather spend his money on his family than a lot of idle parasites. All Lamine wants is to have peace and be happy with his family. From the foregoing it is clear why Mireille envies Lamine's wife. The happy life she had envisaged with Ousmane has completely eluded her.

Although Ba did not embark on an outright diatribe against polygamy, Makward (1990) reasons that "Ba was convinced that happiness – and not just woman's happiness, but men's as well as a whole society's happiness – must be based on a monogamous marriage" (272). In the modern context, however, monogamous marriage means a close association between two equals and the sharing of pain, joy, hopes, disappointments and success. The foundation stone of this happiness is, without doubt, in the couple, a concept, an ideal that is clearly new in Africa.

Ba's husbands in *So Long a Letter* (Samba Diack) and *Scarlet Song* (Ousmane) present themselves as monsters who are bereft of shame, honour and respect for human dignity. Ironically, they are both members of the

educated elite with the necessary knowledge and skill to serve as the best samples of the enlightened sons of Africa. There is a note of irresponsibility and callousness in these men who feel no compunction whatever in discarding their wives. Acholonu argues that, "their unsavoury attitude cast doubt on their mental state hence the suspicion of the men being under the spell of a love potion or charm – the natural explanation for such infatuation in traditional African culture" (208). But these men are not under love spell or potion. They are like Mawdo Ba (Aissatou's husband) and Samba Diack (Jacqueline's husband) victims of an irresistible male urge. They are men who seem incapable of controlling their urge for sexual adventures. The crude reality is that men are generally "polygamous" in nature and therefore cannot control the animal instinct in them. Acholunu also adds that another crude reality is that romantic love invariably is a mere physical infatuation which burn itself out in no time" (208). These women fail to realise that the love that sustains marriage is much more than the spontaneous attraction that passes for love. Ousmane has the worst image among the erring husbands. Men's physical charm is no more than a bait to innocent but sincere women, who fall easy prey to their alluring external features as Jacqueline and Mireille did for their husbands. Ba, through these men, seems to be telling us that in matters of love and marriage "all that glitters is not gold" (*ibid*). Physical charm is the least criterion for choosing a marriage partner. In fact Mireille's relationship with Ousmane is variously described in terms of "dream", "mystery", "magic" or "miracle", all symbols that connote a lack of the basic qualities of reality and solidarity that make for performance.

Ousmane is full of chemical ideas about love. In his fantasy he grossly underestimates the possible ugly realities and practical problems of a mixed marriage. He philosophises an inter-racial marriage, which is a risky adventure. "One must take risks. Progress demands changing the way people think…" (*Scarlet Song*, 39). Ironically, most of these apparently noble resolutions fail to be carried out to their logical conclusions (Acholunu 211). The height of the paradox here is that Ousmane proves incapable of living his own life. He lets his mother choose for him. The men are easily victims of their mothers' vile machination against their wives. Ousmane is overwhelmed by the sheer weight of traditional customs and beliefs as well as by his innate lack of moral rectitude. Ba shows that polygamy is a bane of marital bliss in African culture.

Butegwa (1993) states that, "polygamy is another example of customary practice which has been distorted to weaken the position of the wife" (40). Originally, it was the wife who felt the need for an additional woman to come into the home, perhaps to help with domestic work or because she is sickly. It is also the first wife's prerogative to choose the woman she felt most comfortable with. Butegwa argues that one of the essential elements of a subsequent marriage ceremony is the welcoming by

the first wife of the co-wife into the home. Nowadays, polygamy is essentially none of the women's business. A man decides to marry other wives without consulting his wife. The marriage may even be kept secret as in Ramatoulaye's example in *So Long a Letter* or Mireille's example in *Scarlet Song*. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) corroborates Butegwa's stand that polygamy is the greatest form of oppression from which the African women suffer (52).

Kolawole observes that "the Senegalese concept of "Sani-baat" or voice- throwing raises important issues" (7). Siga Jajne's view, quoted in Kolawole (1997) presupposes that African women are rendered voiceless by certain factors. Jajne affirms that patriarchal, colonial and postcolonial situations are some of the factors that affect women. African women, therefore, need to force their voices into existing male and Western feminist discourse. This further implies that African women who have transcended the borders of silence are intercepting certain existing notions.

One cannot discuss African women's position in vacuum. These women are throwing their voices within existing context. Throwing one's voice is one of the best things to have happened to African women in recent years. It is identical to the issue of moving from the margin to the centre that has become an important issue to African scholars male or female globally. Kolawole adds that Bell Hooks problematises this in several works and Ngugi wa Thiongo's most recent treatise is an emphasis on moving to the centre (7).

Convinced that Francophone African women have broken "the emptiness of silence", D' Almeida elicits certain crucial achievements of these women writers that are true of other African women and their efforts in the direction of self-definition, a means of proposing an alternative way of knowing, of doing and of being in the world, women fill some of the pages that formerly were blank.

Conclusion

Ba has been lauded for speaking for women in Africa and the diaspora. Love is essential and a necessary ingredient for a successful marriage. Women should not be made to suffer physical and mental degradation in marriage. Rather men and women should join hands to move their marriage for the betterment of their society, irrespective of racial, ethnic or cultural background. These can only be achieved if there is mutual understanding between the spouses.

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