Patriarchy and the Concept of Power in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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Abstract

Whereas the human species is biologically and inherently delineated in dispositions, yet socio-cultural and even religious institutions continually project other attributes onto them. These contrived gender attributes, largely synthetic, tend to mould the genders into forced constructs within which they must operate, or else society will be displeased. Moreover, the contrived male-female categorisations determine their personalities, abilities and capability, in short, their power of being.
Within the African cultural space, behavioural attitudes, reinforced by entrenched belief systems, persistently endow the man as characteristically strong, honourable, and having authority, but the woman as feeble, of minimal intellect and emotionally unstable, and therefore feeble in critical decision-making capabilities.
This paper sets out to debunk the fallacy of this patently false portraiture of the gender types, and argues rather that women can, and have taken courageous actions in the face of difficult challenges, just as men. The paper also contends that women are not emotionally stable, but they are no less secure than men when dealing with difficulties in life.
Employing the Liberal hypothesis of the Feminist theory, the paper argues using a qualitative analytical method that the patriarchal concept of power being strictly male-domiciled is demonstrably false, as it overlooks the particular variables of personality, inner strength, as well as the resourcefulness and intelligence of individual women.
This paper's textual analysis of Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter reveals how the well-judged actions of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou rescued them from becoming victims of their strongly patriarchal society, thus upturning the prevailing male-female power dynamics. Having suffered societal-enabled and devastating marital betrayals, these women competently handled the accompanying fallouts without falling apart. Their individual and successful overcoming of culturally-engendered tragedies disproves received notions about male superiority. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, by their strong actions in the face of overwhelming societal opposition and hostility, proved that when women strategically confront cultural stereotyping, the status quo is reversible.
The paper, therefore, concluded that the concept of absolute male power and female feebleness is only a false contrivance of the patriarchal system.
Keywords: *Patriarchy, Power, Culture, Tradition, Resistance*

Introduction

Patriarchy, which devolves into different forms of women's oppression in diverse societies, is a system of male dominance that seeks to consign the female gender to the bottom, or at best, to the back burner, in almost all aspects of life. While matrilineality is also a way of life in some societies, patriarchal practices tend to dominate modern gender discourses more. Several scholars, especially within the African society, have made significant contributions to

conversations concerning marginalisation and oppression of women, while some have challenged foreign, particularly Western feminist frameworks within which African women are being evaluated and gauged, to the disadvantage of their real values and self-worth. Even though the origin of women's marginalisation may be a hard-to-determine question, history does reveal that the practice is quite as old as humankind's presence on earth. These scholarly works, observations, and interventions consistently provide robust discussion on various gender-related issues, which help to shed light on various aspects of the gender discourse.

Renowned feminist writer and activist, Nawal El-Saadawi, in her influential novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), encapsulates important issues around women's oppression in Arab society, through her lead character, Firdaus, to portray the grim reality of gender-based violence, fuelled by entrenched patriarchal tendencies. Characterised by the frankness of personal experience and the author's observations of women's lives in the Arab country of Egypt, El Sadaawi's work greatly captures the fight for women's empowerment and support, particularly in patriarchal societies. Renowned feminist scholar, author, and critic, Ifi Amadiume, in several critical works, has raised issues on gender, culture, and identity, particularly in African contexts, to emphasise how cultural specificity, stereotyping, and women's struggles are handled in typical male-dominated societies. In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1997), Amadiume critiques feminist theories that seem to ignore or cancel in principle the realities of cultural specificities when addressing women's issues. The work calls for a re-evaluation of analytical tools that do not account for cultural specificities, advocating rather for analysis rooted in the realities of African women's lives. Oyeronke Oyewumi, just as Amadiume, has done, specifically challenged Western feminist frameworks, which tend to fail in recognising the peculiarities of the situation of African women in the politics of gender discourses.

Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* has been particularly vital in contributing to African feminist scholarship, as it strongly emphasises the importance of understanding African gender issues through cultural lenses. It is in this work also that Amadiume discusses intersections of gender and class, explaining how class, economic factors, and even age intersect with gender issues, thus complicating the understanding or appreciation of women's peculiar experiences in the African situation. Set specifically within the Igbo culture in Nigeria, Amadiume illustrates her position, using strong characterisation, elderly women and matronly figures, who become influential in their society through guiding and upholding cultural practices. These female characters are projected as prominent because they are made to take on male roles within the culture. They inherit property just as if they were men and take on as

well as embody roles traditionally assigned to men. Characterisations such as this break the stereotype of male superiority over women in terms of custodial duties and responsibilities.

Noted Nigerian writer and scholar, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has, through story writing, particularly her novels, strongly communicated the complexities of gender-based issues in women's lives in African settings. For example, in *That Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), Adichie, through Nkem, a quite headstrong young woman, portrays the strength and resilience of a woman in a typical patriarchal society. Nkem challenges the traditional expectations of obedience and subservience, choosing rather to navigate her role in a male-dominated world. Even though displaying typical female vulnerability, she nevertheless demonstrates strength through her journey of self-discovery. Her personal experience helped in revealing her self-worth, by which she became empowered. By the end of her story, Nkem asserts her own identity, by which Adichie was able to demonstrate that women's voices are crucial in shaping cultural narratives. Another prominent female character, Ifeka, was used by Adichie to illustrate the complexities of marital relationships and the negotiation of power within them. Ifeka's experience reflects the challenges women face in finding freedom within the constraints imposed by societal expectations and marital roles for women.

Like Mariama Ba has done in *So Long a Letter*, Adichie constantly challenges and urges fellow women to call to question societal norms and practices that relegate them to the background. She makes clear calls on societies to, as a matter of urgency, and sign of modernity, embrace a more equitable and inclusive worldview regarding gender equality. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are women champions with whom Ba signposts her proof that women are important stakeholders in the stability of society, and that culture and religion should cease to endanger this balance by constantly discounting women's identity and roles.

While the focus of this paper is the African society in particular, it is nevertheless pertinent to state that female oppression was not always an African-denominated problem. Today's modern countries of the West have had their share of brazen women's oppression in the past. However, over time and with education, civilisation, women suffrage, including policies that offer women inclusivity in socio-political participation and basic civil and domestic rights, many of today's advanced democracies have moved beyond the past barbarous acts against women, while the African brand of this retrogressive practice remains largely in its gross state.

The flawed traditional belief system that energises the gender power imbalance against women and some of the attendant socio-cultural problems that it engenders is the focus of this paper.

Power and Patriarchy in African Literature

Our working definition of power in the context of this paper is the ability to do whatever is needed to achieve positive outcomes in a given situation. This definition relies on an aspect of power described by Peter van Ham as "social power" (2010). This concept is regularly used in discussions that have to do with effective and egalitarian governing or administering modern societies. The term, while not new, is more often used in sociology than in literary circles; however, its description, which aptly captures the situation under discussion here, has informed its adoption.

"Social power," as described by Ham, is conceived from the word "social", and it is said to derive from the understanding that: "power is fluid and non-linear, and that it moves through relationships and communication" (3). As such, Ham clarified "social power" as something which "is contingent upon interaction, communication, relationships, and institutions" (3). The foregoing makes clear that power is not necessarily some divine right of one (higher) species available for the control of another (lesser) species, as assumed by patriarchal practitioners. Rather, power is more like a set of `resources` compounded into an instrument or a tool, to be deployed through the channels of interaction and communication of a given society, for effective regulation of its social institutions. This clarification implies that one group in a given society may not expect to dominate or dictate to another what it alone wants or prefers, nor indeed thinks, at the expense of the other. This is because relationships and institutions of society consist of people with diverse personalities, views, opinions, and feelings. Therefore, governing instruments such as "social power" are the key tools for the achievement of equal representation. The idea of power as a social instrument, therefore, is about the mutual sharing of definable responsibilities in a given situation, such that reasonable co-existence is achieved. Otherwise, it becomes a dictatorship. And for a dictatorship to thrive, other forms of power, than "social power" have to be relied upon; whereas, as pointed out by Ham, the correct use of power as a social instrument is supposed to have:

> …the ability to set standards, create norms and values that are deemed legitimate and desirable, without resorting to coercion or payment (Ham, 2010).

While problems are a regular part of normal human life, so also is the fact of conflict resolution instruments, which help to sort out problems arising in any given society. Where the institutions adopt the mechanisms of "social power", they will have internally self-regulating systems that protect them from constant breakdown or recurrent incidents of total collapse. Secondly, the

government and its agencies would be greatly helped in their efforts to maintain socially healthy institutions that make governance easier.

Where principles of "social power" are put to proper use, specific social problems such as broken-down marriages which result in traumatised or socially mal-adjusted children and adults, widows vulnerable to labour and/or sexual exploitation and other forms of gender harassment, and other social complications will be minimised. The problems highlighted here are mainly centred on women and children because the focus of the paper is on how patriarchal societies, because they misunderstand the social functions of power and consequent misapplication of their ethics, inadvertently continue to engender avoidable relational problems in society.

The paper also examines how women can successfully confront the patriarchal prerogative of power and take effective counteractions which ensure their survival and that of their community as a whole. The selected text for this analysis is Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

"Man," "Woman" as Defective Cultural Constructs in African Societies

As already mentioned, many conservative societies are wont to concluding that male translates to "strength" or "power" while woman means "feebleness" or "helplessness." However, the unveiling of the principal male characters on the one hand, and their female counterparts on the other, in the deeply religious and patriarchal society in which the novel, *So Long a Letter* is set, reveals a reality that sharply contradicts the typical traditional evaluations of the sexes.

We closely examine the contradictions because it is the adherence to them that sits firmly at the root of many societies' low regard for woman and their excessive lionising of men. The real-life situations which placed the particular male characters Modou Fall and Madow Bâ, and the female personalities Ramatoulaye and Aissatou on the spot in this novel prove irrefutably that the cherished constructions of "man" and "woman" by belief systems feeding patriarchal sentiments are grossly faulty.

Secondly, the paper argues that except as the genders themselves determinedly cast off the one-size-fits-all constructions, thereby rebuffing the unrealistic assumptions foisted on them therefrom, they stand in constant danger of continually becoming victims of a certain cruel fate. Moreover, should men in particular persist in compromising their real personal identities in deference to so-called tradition, so will they continue to get ensnared in destructive mires of traditional practices that are otherwise avoidable.

The above summarises the circumstances that birthed the tragic life stories of Modou Fall with his wife Ramatoulaye and of Madow Bâ and his wife, Aissatou, who otherwise started with a big promise of making a difference in their highly conservative religious society, but eventually

did not make it. The two marriages crashed woefully, but ironically on the hardened rocks of the same tradition that they had hitherto jointly spurned. In each case, one marriage partner reneged on their earlier professions against tradition, while the other partner stuck to the original path. The ensuing conflicts ultimately wrecked both marriages. The high point of the conflict, however, as raised by Mariama Bâ in the novel, is that it is not the female gender who traditional society has tagged as being fickle and unstable that buckled, but the male gender who is traditionally extolled as the strong one.

Who has Power: "Man" or "Woman"? - *So Long a Letter*

As their conservative society presumed, and very likely the reason for which Modou Fall and Madow Bâ co-operated with the active players in their sad decline and personal losses, there really should be no consequence to a man's flagrant behaviour against his wife. This basic presumption precipitated the entire tragedy that befell these men, and ironically, also, released the inherent strength of their wives, which they had to deploy in salvaging the ensuing confusion triggered by the men. The typical patriarchal programming of women before marriage in this society says: "…the first quality in a woman is docility" (29). But the women to whom Modou and Madow were married were anything but docile. And this, their husbands knew quite well before marrying them.

But then, Modou Fall, after a thirty-year marriage relationship with Ramatoulaye, and which had produced twelve children, a jointly-owned home on mortgage and the joint responsibility of training their brood, without prior notice to his wife, formalised a clandestine dalliance with their teenage daughter's friend and classmate. Modou afterwards completely abandoned his family home, which disclosures following his abrupt decease revealed, he had also incurred a bank loan to finance his new lifestyle. His fall began from the moment he walked out, unprovoked, from his secure home to follow what his friend described as "the force of the instincts in man" (33).

In Madow's case, the scenario of his betrayal of his wife was quite different. The conflict emanated from his mother's total disagreement with his choice of a wife. Her problem was that Madow was: "…the son of a princess and you a child from the forges" (19). You see, Aissatou, even though as educated as Madow, her father was a goldsmith, and they were from another clan. These two issues mortally grieved Madow's mother. And, like it happened with Modou's family and now Madow's, the couples were not the ones chosen for each other by family. In this, they both offended traditional societies. While Ramatoulaye's mother ultimately acquiesced to her daughter's choice and let her be, Madow's mother was determined to get her revenge against Aissatou. And even though Madow had assured Aissatou that "his mother's

rejection did not frighten him" (19), because "marriage is a personal thing" (17), yet his mother "…swore that your existence, Aissatou, would never tarnish her noble descent" (28). So, like the sword of Damocles, Madow's mother's displeasure hung permanently over this marriage, and Madow knew this. Now, Madow, knowing the risks he had led Aissatou to take, should he not have realised how vulnerable she could become if their trust with each other was breached in any way? He was her only ally. Given these circumstances, and as a responsible man, should Madow not have realised the incumbency on him to protect his wife from his mother? But he did the exact opposite.

Madow's subsequent actions, arranged and executed for him by his mother, of course, we discover, came from his flawed thinking about "male" and "female" roles in marriage relationships, especially in male-dominated societies. And this is where Aissatou's disgust and total loss of respect for her husband came from his wife, which led to her divorcing him. Interestingly, Madow didn't 'understand' why a woman should take action against a man, thus faulting his wife's decision to leave the marriage.

His thoughts, which he candidly shared with Ramatoulaye after Aissatou had left, represent what went awry with Modou Fall's thought process, also. These kinds of thoughts in these men represent the kind of mindset regarding male prerogatives that patriarchal societies depend upon to determine and make rules and regulations for how men and women should relate, even in emotional relationships such as marriage. From Madow's words, it appears as if women are just objects, existing only to please men's pleasures, and not expected to have opinions or feelings about how they're treated by the men in their lives. It is what a man wants to do that matters.

For Madow, this presumptuous thought process cost him a formerly happy marriage and his four sons. For Modou Fall, tragically, his actions cost him his life, leaving behind twelve fatherless children, a devastated wife, and mountains of debts incurred by her late husband.

In his discussions with Ramatoulaye after his wife left him, Madow reveals an unusual insight into the workings of the "male" mind, which he submits are: "instincts that dominate him, regardless of his level of intelligence" (33), and according to him, it is this "bestiality of instincts" in the "male" (34) that compel them to commit "betrayals of the flesh" (34). In his opinion, this is "reality in its crude ugliness" (34) which women must accept and thereby "Slough off" their "dreamy sentimentality" (34). And when her husband betrays her in this fashion, "a wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive…" (34). However, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou did not "understand" this basic male arrogance, which made their husbands hurt them so badly, yet still insisted that they didn't do anything wrong.

The women's point of view, which they made clear in their subsequent actions, and which tradition also found uncharacteristic, and therefore unacceptable, was that the fashion of their marriages to their husbands was not only against tradition, but was set on the path of progressive thought. These two couples also seemed set on making their marriages an example of how to breach unhelpful traditional practices, setting new standards for coming generations of educated folk like them in this highly conservative society. The subsequent actions of their husbands, going right back to align with the same base traditional practices that they had rejected together, were a betrayal of fundamental principles of working relationships. This hurt the women so badly, and as human beings with their feelings and emotions, they reacted accordingly.

Their conservative patriarchal society, nor indeed their husbands, had no rights, therefore, to feel offended or angry about what Ramatoulaye and Aissatou did in defending themselves against hurtful traditions.

On the day that Modou's ill-advised marriage was going to take place, he would not even as much as grant his wife the courtesy of a mention about it. This was the same woman that he had dated closely from her youth, and avowing to her: "It's you whom I carry within me. You are my protecting black angel" (14). But as he left home this fateful morning, Modou said to his doting wife in a clipped tone: "Don't expect me for lunch" (38). To a woman familiar with her husband's busy and sometimes unpredictable schedule as a highly placed senior civil servant, such an announcement wasn't unusual. But unknown to her, this was an ominous signal of unprecedented, tragic consequences ahead for both husband and wife. For one, this formerly close, highly admired power-couple never saw eye-to-eye again after that day. And exactly five years later, when everything that could go wrong had gone wrong, she received the tragic news that Modou was dead.

On the evening of this eventful day Ramatoulaye was visited by a set of men comprising her husband's closest friend, Madow Bâ, his senior brother, Tamsir, and their Imam, who had popped in to inform her that not only had her husband of thirty years married a new wife that morning, but that:

> We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place (37).

This bombshell announcement, in Ramatoulaye's words, marked the beginning of her crisis (35). It was from this delegation that Ramatoulaye also learned the identity of her husband's "new" wife. She was no other than Binetou, her daughter Daba's friend and classmate, who had been a frequent visitor to their home. Ironically, Binetou used to constantly confide in her

friend about a certain "sugar daddy" who was not only spending lavishly on her (35), but whom her mother wanted her to withdraw from school to marry, even though she personally detested him. What she, however, came short of disclosing was that this infamous beau was no other than her own dear friend's father!

When this impending but unwanted wedding was fixed to a date, Binetou also informed her friend. Daba, in turn, informed her mother, seeking how to help her friend:

> The sugar-daddy of the boutique dresses wants to marry Binetou. Just imagine. Her parents want to withdraw her from school, with only a few months to go before the *bac*, to marry her off to the sugar-daddy (35)

And Ramatoulaye's advice? "Advise her to refuse'" (35). She never knew who this unkind man was that was planning to rob a child of her youth, which in Ramatoulaye's educated view was her own "capital" (35), and which cannot be replaced with materialism. Coupled with the humiliation of her husband's action, Ramatoulaye pointed out that she never had the privilege of asking him the questions that kept agitating her heart until news of his sudden death was brought to her exactly five years afterwards. But what *killed* Modou? A combination of two main pressures, both directly from his new bride. The first was the young girl's bitterness about her "forced" marriage. She therefore felt compelled to punish Modou for conniving with her mother to take her future away from her. Her situation, like the author described it through Ramatoulaye's letter, was that: "Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (39). Binetou's subsequent treatment of Modou became a condition in his life, which, like a debilitating disease, he had to continue coping with, hoping it would not kill him in the end:

> …sharply aware of what she was sacrificing by her marriage. A victim, she wanted to be the oppressor. Exiled in the world of adults, which was not her own, she wanted her prison gilded. Demanding, she tormented. Sold, she raised her price daily. What she renounced, those things which before used to be the sap of her life and which she would bitterly enumerate, called for exorbitant compensations, which Modou exhausted himself trying to provide.
>
> The seductive power of mature age, of silvery temples, was unknown to Binetou. And Modou would dye his hair every month. His waistline painfully restrained by old-fashioned trousers, Binetou would never miss a chance of laughing wickedly at him. Modou would leave himself winded trying to imprison youth in its decline, … He was afraid of disappointing, … he would create daily celebrations during

> which the bright young thing would move, an elf with slender arms who with a laugh could make life beautiful or with a pout bring sadness (48).

Binetou was also completely set against Madow having anything to do with his first family again. Ramatoulaye told her friend in her letter:

> One of the new couple's neighbours explained to me that the 'child' would go 'all-a-quiver' each time Modou said my name or showed any desire to see his children (46).

This development, no doubt, created an emotional strain of its own for Modou. The second major contributory factor that ended Modou's life so abruptly was: "the mire of expenses by which he was engulfed" … "A pile of them" (9). The sordid details of this problem came to light after Modou was dead, and a reckoning of his debts and assets had to be made before his entire family. Ramatoulaye was present, and she was aghast at what she described as "the extent of Modou's betrayal" of their former joint financial life (9), which she bitterly observed has now left him "Dead without a penny saved" (9).

But how exactly did Modou come to incur so much indebtedness? The *mirasse* (Islamic procedure for estate reckoning of the dead) revealed it all:

> …cloth and gold traders, home delivery grocers and butchers, car-purchase instalments" (9). "…the elegant SICAP villa, four bedrooms, two bathrooms, pink and blue, large sitting-room, a three-room flat, built at his own expense …for Lady Mother-in-Law. And furniture from France for his new wife and furniture constructed by local carpenters for Lady Mother-in-Law. This house and its chic contents were acquired by a bank loan granted on the mortgage of 'Villa Fallene,' where I live. …Four million francs borrowed …which had enabled him to pay for Lady Mother-in-Law and her husband to visit Mecca to acquire the titles of *Alhaja* and *Alhaji*… (10).
>
> And then having withdrawn Binetou from school, he paid her a monthly allowance of fifty thousand francs, just like a salary due to her (10).

Modou further imperilled himself:

> The young girl, who was very gifted, wanted to continue her studies, to sit for her *baccalauréat*. So as to establish his rule, Modou, wickedly, determined to remove her from the critical and unsparing world of the young. He therefore gave in to all the conditions of the grasping Lady Mother-in-Law and even signed a paper committing himself… (10).

Presuming that his "maleness" was only being fêted, Modou foolishly committed his entire life resources, family, career, and even his life in the end into the hands of Binetou's scheming mother, who desperately needed to avoid poverty, and became the ultimate loser. Surely, this is not how to be a "man."

Although Madow Bâ did not die physically like his friend, he suffered heavy losses of his own, too, which he constantly regretted. Aissatou's severance letter as she sadly departed their marriage revealed that not only had their joint dreams become a mirage, but that she had also lost all respect for this man who had personally brought her up on the progressive principles that she still held on to:

> Mawdo,
>
> Princes master their feelings to fulfil their duties. 'Others bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them.
>
> That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. …
>
> If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable. At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have always placed you. Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side, me, your life, your love, your choice,' on the other, 'young Nabou, to be tolerated for reasons of duty.' …
>
> I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way (31-32).

Madow's non-resistance to his mother's cleverly contrived scheme earned him this blighting memoir. Secondly, he became a defeated man. Now a shadow of his real self, he constantly railed at everything about his mother's choice for him, but he felt helpless to do anything about.

> I am completely disoriented. You can't change the habits of a grown man. I look for shirts and trousers in the old places and I touch only emptiness." (33).
>
> My house is a suburb of Diakhao. I find it impossible to get any rest there. Everything there is dirty. Young Nabou gives my food and my clothes away to visitors (33)

Whenever he visited with Ramatoulaye, he constantly asked after his departed family:

> Somebody told me he'd seen you with Aissatou yesterday. Is it true? Is she around? How is she? What about my sons? (33).

Madow cut a pitiable picture here, but we blame only him. His instability and inconsistency brought this anguish upon him. The same firmness with which he had resisted his mother to be able to marry his choice of wife should have been followed through. The argument here is, if he did it that time, and his mother didn't die, like she was threatening him now, and which he was using to buy Aissatou over, she wouldn't die either if he maintained his path, like his mother had maintained hers. This means he had the power to refuse his mother's foisting of Nabou on him. But Madow's mother won, and he lost because her position of staunch opposition to Aissatou as his wife was never shifted. It was Madow who shifted, thereby exposing his wife and children to the floods of tradition which swept them away from him. Tradition exposed Madow to be not a real man.

On the day that Ramatoulaye's crisis, precipitated by her husband, and aided by Tamsir and the Imam, would commence, Madow was present, but despite his eloquent self, he was dumb. As Ramatoulaye related it to his wife:

> Madow said nothing. He was reliving his own experience. He was thinking of your letter, your reaction, …. He was being wary. He kept his head lowered, in the attitude of those who accept defeat before the battle (37).

From the above, one could judge that Madow did not believe in the mission that had brought them to Ramatoulaye's house. He had been through that path and had been scarred badly. Yet, he remained silent, standing with other men to execute that same kind of hatchet job. Why? So, who has power here? Madow, who kept silent, or Ramatoulaye, who spoke out against the wrong that was being perpetrated? Like Ramatoulaye pointed out, even though these men did not seem to realise it, the final decision of what becomes of her life lay with her, not with them (39). She rose courageously in defence of herself and of every woman facing her kind of ordeal. Tradition was dazed and embarrassed by the unanticipated, but to them, very bewildering actions of these betrayed women in this story. Yet the questions remain- what should they have done in the face of the calamities that their husbands had created for them? How fair was it of their husbands to try to use cultural proxies to get their wives to compromise now?

Where was tradition when Modou convinced Ramatoulaye to spurn her mother's choice and invariably her family's preference of Dauoda Dieng as her marriage candidate? (16). And where was tradition when Madow, impressing on Aissatou that marriage was "a personal thing" (17), had a "controversial" wedding ceremony with her that broke all cultural norms? (17).

The best that tradition offered a woman like Ramatoulaye, after thirty years in marriage and twelve children, was to be acquired as property by her late husband's senior brother, who

already had three wives of his own that he could hardly provide for. She vehemently rejected this tradition.

The scene took place in her house, and during the fortieth-day ceremony of mourning for her late husband. Her response, borne out of a mixture of anger and, in her words, the urge for revenge against these men, sent all of them reeling. This same set of men had been nothing else in her life but constant harbingers of pain. She had her opportunity to hit back at them now. Tamsir hit her first:

> When you have "come out" (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife, …you are my good luck. I shall marry you (57).

In a typical, egoistic patriarchal attitude, Tamsir, so sure that this was a foregone conclusion, added:

> I prefer you to the other one, too frivolous, too young. I advised Modou against that marriage (57).

This self-same Tamsir had said to the same Ramatoulaye in the presence of the same characters present now, five years before, that:

> Modou … 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 (37).

He had professed at that time that "fate" was joining his brother to a child-bride that he had removed from school to marry, and also agreed with the Imam that the marriage was the immutable "will of Allah" (36), which "no one" could do anything about. But now, just to support his greedy grab for his brother's grieving wife, he was singing a new song of fate. Fate had transmuted now to "good luck" in his favour.

Apart from his flagrant male sauciness, Tamsir also shamelessly revealed the treachery of this uncertain tradition. But really, nothing else was going on other than that an idle man was just playing games of chance with the emotions of a woman, who became his potential toy in the name of some tradition.

Like Ramatoulaye told him and the other men present today, she had had enough: "My voice had known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment" (58). She hit back so hard; they hardly could remain in her presence afterwards: Tamsir was hit first:

> Did you ever have any affection for your brother? Already you want to build a new home for yourself, over a body that is still warm. …
>
> 'Ah, yes! Your strategy is to get in before any other suitor…You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. …

> What of your wives, Tamsir? Your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children. To help you out with your financial obligations, one of your wives dyes, another sells fruit, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine. You, the revered lord, you take it easy, obeyed at the crook of a finger. I shall never be the one to complete your collection. My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis: no extra burden; my "turn" every day; cleanliness and luxury, abundance and calm! No, Tamsir (58)

In utter shock, Madow frantically "signalled with his hand for me to stop, screaming at her to: "Shut up! Shut up" Stop! Stop'" (58). But it was too late, Ramatoulaye was determined to fight for her life this time, and fight she did. When she had finished, the Imam in consternation, "prayed God to be his witness" as he exclaimed: "Such profane words…!'" (58). Tamsir, on his part, in utter shame: "got up without a word" (59).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper discovers, through the character portraits of Modou Fall and Madow Bâ, that men, being pre-conditioned by cultural presumptions and religious sentiments, may discountenance, discount, and thereby mishandle their marriage partners. As a result, as we find through the characters, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, they will fail to harness the potential strength of women and the value it could add to their lives, including even prolonging their lives. Modou Fall's sudden, untimely death and debt-ridden life were remotely caused by his discarding of Ramatoulaye, a prudent planner of their economic and financial future, an efficient mother to their children, and above all, his honest lover. As Ramatoulaye concluded in her letter to her friend, Aissatou, the men figure in her husband's family, not realising that they were dealing with a "thinking woman" (20), whose best "quality" as a wife was not "docility" (29), presumed that just as they had assisted her (now) late husband in destroying himself, they could do same to her, in full assurance of no consequence. They were proceeding to take their own decisions as if Ramatoulaye didn't exist, even though it was her life situation that they were discussing and deciding, but they got the shock of their lives. Aissatou stood up to them, asserted her rights and stated in clear tones that she had well taken care of the consequences of her husband's ill-informed actions, which could have jeopardised her future and those of her children. She was the one left standing after the whole encounter. This showed who had "power"- between the "man" and the "woman", as the patriarchal society had tried to determine it.

The paper, therefore, concluded that the concept of absolute male power and female feebleness is only a false contrivance of the patriarchal system. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, by their strong actions in the face of overwhelming societal opposition and hostility, proved that when women strategically confront cultural stereotyping, the status quo is reversible.

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