



**CULTURAL TENACITY AND THE SAGA OF COMMUNAL BLEND:
A PERSPECTIVE ON MARIAMA BÂ'S SCARLET SONG PATRICK
OLOKO**

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The fanciful and optimistic terms such as 'multi-culturalism', 'multi-racialism' and 'globalisation' in the post colonial context are often used to characterise contemporary existence. This diction suggests inappropriately that society is moving beyond the friction that attends its pluralism to a benign phase of colour blindness and cultural unconsciousness. It is after 1980s that the theoreticians have attempted to present the glorious picture of the society by attempting to present the world as one entity. Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese woman writer's second novel, Scarlet Song comes as a shock. The novel proves how such holisms and their assumptions of global cultural syncretism attempt lamely to simplify the theoreticians' task at the cost of an adequate diagnosis of the competing nature of the plural sociosphere. The novel Scarlet song reveals how the commonest integrative method marriage - negates the concept of globalisation. The novel presents the conducts of characters within a trans-cultural setting. Marriage is the most revealing of institutionalised inter-personal relations, it seems to offer infinite angles. It is in fact the most appropriate site, for testing the degrees of tolerance and compromise necessary for fostering enduring cross-racial and cross-cultural relations. The context of the text undoubtedly suggest specifically that its protagonist typify different degrees of imperviousness that run counter to the post modern ideal of collapsing races, cultures and other matrices of identity.

Part of the drawbacks of assessing the novel from the singular problematic of 'mixed marriage' is the temptation to yield to stereotypical conclusions such as that of Wilson and Stringer and also to suggest that writers on inter-racial nuptial conflicts are overtly

pessimistic. In the context of events in the novel, the place of race can hardly be overlooked. But to see it as the only obstacle to a fulfilling nuptial relation does not only blur the issue of class, culture and other social differences that run their gamut through this text and *So Long a Letter*, it also implies that the postcolonial African woman of whatever orientation is unlikely to be averse to the degradations of polygynous marriages. It need not be stressed that *So Long a Letter* confutes such a view in its array of female characters who prefer personal freedom to marriage when the demands of tradition and the appetites of their husbands compel them to make choices.

As the most visible marker of difference in the cross-cultural marriage of Ousmane and Mirelle, race indeed plays a significant role in the tragic events of the novel. However, the marital demands of adjustment and integration which confront Mirelle defy a distinctly racial explanation. As Bâ herself points out,

The problem of a white wife is more interesting from the point of view of shock, from the point of view of the morality of the man's Mother and from the point of view of society. (as quoted in Abbenyi-Makuchi, 109. emphasis mine).

It is in this sense that Bâ's novels are a continuum, complementary of each other; a fact which rules out the view of one as being more successful than the other.

Citing the findings of researches conducted in Ivory Coast (sic), Nigeria, Ghana and some Arab Muslim societies, Pleil concludes that though polygyny is declining mainly for economic reasons, its social value still remains high and could in fact, increase again with improvements in the standards of living. She points to a trend in which "modern means (cash income from a good job) are being used for a traditional end (an extra wife)" and concludes that:

In societies where polygyny was prevalent, it continues to be highly valued and success in the modern sector is seen as a means to achieve it. Increased prosperity means that more of those who prefer polygyny can now afford it. It seems likely

that polygyny will continue to be important in Africa for many years to come, though various factors of social change will probably lower its incidence. (152)

Peil's findings clearly indicate that in Islamic oriented cultures in Africa, the practice of polygyny has remained relatively stable because economically endowed Muslim males consistently draw upon the resources of religion to legitimise their recourse to it.

In principle, the number of women that a Muslim male may keep as wives and concubines is limited only by his capacity both to provide for their welfare and to meet, in equal measure, their sexual and emotional needs. In practice, however, the finite character of man's economic means and the limitations which nature places on his sexuality check such 'unlimited discretion' over the woman and her body. Thus, we appear to have a balance as the freedom allowed the man is curbed by nature and duty. Since these duties are intended merely to keep the man within the bounds of reason by limiting him to a fairly manageable number of women, it seems therefore unnecessary to impose sanctions upon their violation. The assumption here is that nature and means are adequate checks on the natural human inclination to exceed the bounds of social restraints. As these checks have no force of law, what redresses are available to the woman should the man, her husband, fail in his duty to her in the state of polygyny?

Scarlet Song reveals that abuses and transgression of duties abound in polygynous marriages. In the Senegalese Muslim society on which the novel focuses, economic means dictates a man's choice of the number of wives. Various examples in other texts suggest that most male characters, despite their Western education, generally succumb to the temptation to exercise their cultural rights to polygyny after a spell in a one-man, one-wife situation. The validity of this argument that a Muslim male's recourse to polygyny is at the behest of his means - is underscored by the contrast which the situation of Ousmane's -father, Djibril Gueye, provides. Djibril Gueye returns from the war in France handicapped - one leg shorter than the other. The text is silent on whether or not that is the reason he takes up no employment or trade. We know however, that he and his family subsist on his army pension. The discerning reader sees that his avoidance of a second wife is a rational decision dictated by the limited

resources available to him. This limitation checks his exercise of the near infinite freedom of action which his religion guarantees its male devotee on matters of marriage. It constitutes as well, the basis of his wife's strength of character and self confidence, both of which constantly threaten to eclipse his personality.

Yaye Khady does not have to vie with another woman for Gueye's attention, and much of her action, untypical of the Muslim wife, can be attributed to the emotional stability that a monogamous marriage confers. Much of the cohesion that we notice in Gueye's home and which contrasts with the scheming and rancour of their neighbours, the Ngoms, is ascribable to the marital choice and discretion of Gueye. Religious duty and family cohesion appear to be more carefully balanced in a monogamous nuptial tie.

When Ousmane marries Mirelle who, unlike him has no financial obligations to her parents, the pressure on his income eases. Mirelle's frugality ensures that she and Ousmane live comfortably .despite the burden of providing for the extended family. Soon however, with his eyes on Mirelle's savings to which he has access, Ousmane's appetite for women enlarges, and Ouleymatou who he had carefully avoided all the while suddenly becomes the 'object' of his passion. He falls for her seductions and in the process, depletes Mirelle's savings as he attempts to meet the numerous demands of living a 'double life' (154).

In *Scarlet Song*, Mariama Bâ presents Mireille to be the victim of her own individual discrepancies. She adamantly refuses to participate in any of the traditional events that are part of Senegalese life. She fails to be on familiar terms with the importance of communal life, which forms the essence, the backbone of any African society. She adopts a classical attitude and loses valuable ground and comfort. Her beautifully decorated home- thick rugs covering the floors, lampshades everywhere, original paintings on the walls and a library of precious and rare books- has now become a sort of curiosity shop where weekend friends could meet:

According to Mireille's strict upbringing, the only place for food was the living-room or the kitchen. The war on cockroaches had its rules! It was unheard of to nibble a piece

of bread in the bedroom. As her husband's equal, she would challenge his ideas and decision when these did not suit her. She considered she was his partner in the marriage. Certainly that did not displease Ousmane. But no man is averse to being the leader and having the last word. A man doesn't refuse the prerogatives he is granted. (1986: 148)

Mireille fails to adjust herself with the Senegalese family and culture. She has already lost the support of her mother-in law, and is about to lose that of her husband's friends, and perhaps ultimately, Ousmane's. Ousmane was irritated by Mireille's way of life; he fails to endure it any longer. Finally, he expresses his disgust:

Cut her off... let her eat her heart from neglect and boredom...Don't react to her everlasting fault finding...make it easy for her to leave, and then there'll be no ambiguity about the role I shall be able to play; I'll be guaranteed a free hand...!" (150)

This expression of disgust is, in one way, a confession that he could not be dominated by or assimilated into Mireille's culture. Ousmane all the time supposes that Mireille is married not only to him but his habits and way of life as well. Mireille's unwillingness to accept her husband's habits end up in alienating her from her husband's family and cultural milieu. She has made herself and her biracial son as the cultural 'Other'. On the other hand, Ousmane's parents urge him to marry a local, Ouleymatou, who would give him a local son. In other words, the best antidote to foreign cultural domination and assimilation is local cultural re-entrenchment. It could be said that Ousmane is attracted to Ouleymatou because she possesses the local feminine qualities like docility, servitude and sensuality. Since her young days, Ouleymatou has learnt that a woman's power lies in her ability to exploit to the fullest her feminine attributes by being beautiful, seductive and sensual:

Then, using all her skill with cosmetics, she powdered her face, applied mascara to her eyelashes, shaved her eyebrows which she re-drew faintly with eyebrow pencil-with a brown lipstick

she emphasized the outline of her mouth. She sprinkled a few tantalizing drops of ‘Sabrina’- under her armpits and between her breasts... As she moved, a gauzy boubou allowed a glimpse, now of a plump shoulder, now of her breasts in their lacy prison, now the strings of beads, standing out round her hips. (109)

The above statement demonstrates the means adopted by Ouleymatou for seducing Ousmane. It is not surprising that once out of her cultural milieu Mireille loses the stiff competition with the Senegalese women for claiming Ousmane’s body and soul because they, unlike her, know what their men want in a woman:

What could Mireille’s lack of sophistication do in the face of the provocative tinkle of beads around the hips, or the aphrodisiac potency of gongo powder? What could Mireille do against the suggestive wiggle of an African woman’s rump, wrapped in the warm colors of her pane? (171)

The answer to this question is self-evident especially as Mireille, the invincible in all matters, becomes a victim of her own indomitable spirits. Her sense of French cultural superiority makes Ousmane turn towards the Senegalese women, Ouleymatou. He himself is more conscious of his own African identity and wants somebody to accept it in a patient manner. It is a heavy blow to Mireille who loses her mental balance. She is driven over the edge by the realization that she could be vulnerable. Marriage, for Mireille, has not brought love, understanding, tolerance, and respect. Ousmane’s act leads her to think that marriage is nothing; but the mere entrapment, abuse, exploitation and rejection. As she realizes the promises of love made by Ousmane in his love letters, it is now painfully clear to her that she has no place which she can call home.

The apparent effect is that Mireille is driven to madness because of the unreasonable decision of her husband. In the end, it leads her to the point of murdering her son and in her attempt to stab Ousmane. Mireille’s act of murdering her son and attacking the dazed Ousmane is an act of condemnation of polygamy as well as a physical genealogical repudiation. In a patriarchal

society, by murdering Gorgui, she has in a way killed her husband who would have lived on through his son. In fact, Bâ does not make clear whether Mireille's action qualifies as a premeditated crime or insanity by virtue of loneliness, rejection and desperation. According to a group of critics, Mireille's act of murdering her son brings to one's mind the feminine criminality. The society has created an image of woman to be the very embodiment of compassion, love, and sacrifice. The female who kills a member of her family has not only broken the law but has also violated gender expectations. This violent act perpetuated by a woman must be explained if the mythological image is to be maintained.

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