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Mariama Ba: An Early Intersectional Feminist

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ABSTRACT

This article looks into Mariama Ba's seminal novel, *So Long a Letter*, through the lens of intersectional feminism. Its main objective is to demonstrate that the Senegalese writer, by representing women at the intersection of multilayered and interlocking systemic oppressions, is an early intersectional feminist. Developed from the scholarship of African American Kimberle Crenshaw on intersectionality - to highlight how overlapping social identities relate to systems and structures of oppression, and discrimination - intersectional feminism examines imbricated structures of discriminations to which women are subjects, due to their ethnicity, sexuality or economic condition. Object of analyses and controversies, (Lykke, 2016; Preira, 2020; Hivon, 2019; Collins, 2000), intersectional feminism has become a paradigm of analysis used in literature and critical studies, on a transdisciplinary basis, to shed light on the *invisibilization* and exclusion of many "constituents within groups that claim them as members, but often fail to represent them" (Crenshaw, 2015). In its representation of a chain of oppressions around the neck of women from different walks of life, Mariama Ba articulates, in her narrative, principles of intersectional feminism. The work first discusses tenets of this aspect of feminism, and then foregrounds that women are at the intersection of sexism, caste system, classicism and racism, in the private and public spheres. Another conclusion focuses on the regenerative power of the author's fight for women's visibility and inclusion, through characters' positionalities within the family and society.

Keywords: *Feminism, Intersectionality, Intersectional Feminism, Mariama Ba*

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1. Introduction

Senegalese novelist, Mariama Ba, is mostly celebrated for being a pioneering figure in Francophone literature and African feminism. Following the examples of writers as Nigerians Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, or the famous Egyptian, Nawal El Sadaawi, Mariama Ba's literary output offers poignant representations of African women entrapped in a nest of systemic oppressions that are continually keeping them in an inferior position. *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (1981) are heartrending narratives of the hectic life of women in male-centered societies, where they are reduced to dependent objects. Her novels raise an outcry about gender inequality and the violation of the human rights of women, nurtured by patriarchy. Ba's first-published novel, *So Long a Letter*, "belongs among those earlier African women's writings that showed gender as a "prison house" (Treiber, 1996, p. 109), her second and last opus, *Scarlet Song*, puts on stage the intersection of traditionalism and sexual domination.

So Long a Letter is considered as an acute expression of the debilitating condition of women and the few avenues left to them to struggle and have their head above inclement socio-cultural structures. The story is a most pronounced articulation of principles of feminism, at a time when African intellectuals rebutted the label feminist¹. "In common with other African women writers, Bâ publicly rejected the term 'feminist'" (Ogundipe-Leslie as cited in Latha, 2001, p.23). However, with her first novel, the Senegalese writer achieved a reputation as a writer who adds a strong, unique and culturally relevant feminist voice to modern African literature (Ayayi, 1997, p. 35). In an insightful analysis of feminism and the quest for identity in Ba's novel, Omofolabo Ayayi looks into Ba's accurate characterization, with narrative figures who are "able to speak and act independently and have enough sense of personal identity, as they struggle, in virtual isolation, to overcome the various injustices in their society" (1997, p. 35). This opinion of the critic is well-grounded and is further



developed in our analysis, in the exploration of the multiple oppressions upon female characters and the latter's strategies of self-affirmation. Indeed, the novel being "the most deeply felt presentation of the female condition in African fiction" (Abiola Irele as cited in Waigwa, 2003, p. 64), we demonstrate that, while Ba depicts women sinking into despair and traumatic experiences, she also puts to the forefront strong-minded female figures like Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, who, at hectic moments in their marital lives, make decisive choices. Such poignant decisions are all the more symbolic because they constitute acts of defiance and self-preservation, in a social context which isolates married women, who refuse to accept polygamy, whereas it is sanctioned by Islam (d'Almeida, 1986, p.162).

In her narrative works, the Senegalese writer showcases an unwavering commitment to denounce what she considers as a male-oriented approach to Islamic teachings. Such a biased reading of the Scriptures is done with the view to giving a certain credit to cultural dictates. The caustic position of the author has been largely explored by scholars (d'Almeida 1986, Treiber 1996, Jagne 2004, Latha 2011, etc.). This combination of culture and religion as structures of a masculine domination, which the first part of our study further develops, is explicated by Souad T. Ali, in her exploration of Ba's critique of polygamy and her celebration of female bonding in the face of male oppression (2012, 179). Not only does she contend that women's cultural differences should be at the core of world feminist struggle, she also concludes that Ba's celebration of female bonding should be contemplated at a transnational level (Ali, 2012, 197). This aspect highlighted by the critic is a central feature of the intersectional feminist agenda of the Senegalese writer. Actually, sisterhood or female bonding, constitutes the backbone of the feminism of Ba, which will be illustrated essentially by the filial friendship nurtured by the protagonist and other women as Aissatou and Jacqueline. Female solidarity and a reconsideration of gender-roles in society, as guidelines of her feminism, are avenues to redress cultural biased organization in Senegal where, in spite of a relatively moderate application of Islamic tenets, women are still treated as second-class citizens. Georgia Collins correctly asserts it, in her insightful research on the positionality and feminisms in Sufi Brotherhoods in

Senegal: "Today, despite differences in the positions of individual women related to age, marital status, social class, and political involvement, it can be said that Senegalese women as a group do not hold high social status." (2016, p. 15)

Therefore, the articulation of culture and religion to dominate women in patriarchal system, is a major part of the nest of oppressions upon women in Ba's narrative world, and is also a pronounced sign of Ba's intersectional feminism. Ba's literary skills alone qualify her as a feminist writer, because, as Gabreel Kamara shows in a comparative analysis of the feminism of Ba and Sembene Ousmane, the author of *So Long a Letter* emphasizes the short comings of traditional and religious practices while hitting below the belt of economic and political disparity (2001, p.222). The sexist and social categorizations discussed by Kamara is made more strife for women to bear because "individual and collective identities are constructed on the intersecting axes of race, class, gender and religion as well as personal experiences that may defy efforts at simple categorizations (Berger as cited in Latha, 2011, p. 23).

While feminismⁱⁱ - which is said to be the Movement to end women's oppression (Hooks, 2000, p. 26) - was the spearhead of women's revolution in the western countries, it knew a less intense expression in colonial and neocolonial African nations. Those societies were still deeply sinking into patriarchy as a social norm, and where women themselves refused to appropriate the radical position of western feminists. Indeed, the western ideology of feminism does not "address the experiences of black women, especially in the context of historical and contemporary racism and imperialism." (Zulfiqar, 2016, p.11)

Under the leadership of enlightened figures such as Ba, reactions to masculine domination in Senegal were under the form of a "feminine" struggle, with women organized in associations to claim a redefinition of gender roles and an equal sharing of political power. It is no surprise then that the first African writers and activists vowed their opposition to a radical break with men in society, as outlined in mainstream feminism. For the black woman, the enemy is not black men but history. What was pegged African feminism or black feminism, or even feminism in the third world constitutes the set of beliefs, and principles, tailored according to local socio-cultural realities, by which women activists

and scholars of the continent fight against the multifarious oppressions, inherent in the patriarchal system. African women writers rebut a certain homogeneity and a universality of the subordination of women; they argue that if western women undergo a two-fold oppression, their African counterparts have to face multiple sources of maltreatment (sexism, caste system, classicism, and racism), and therefore, because of specific realities of the continent, there cannot be a convergence in strategies of resistance. Actually, they are not “writing against the grain of western feminist theories. The work of African women writers (...) underlines African women’s specific problems and their emancipation and empowerment within their own particular cultural positions” (Zulfqar, 2016, p. 12). Feminine/feminist activists are aware that they are entrapped in a web of discriminations and injustices, wrongly viewed and interpreted by western women, as the consequence of a monolithic notion of male dominance, which leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what she refers to as “Third World Difference” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 335). Through this utterance, Mohanty infers the singularity of the experiences of women out of the western context. In their reproduction in discourse of that ‘Third World Difference’, white feminists fell into the slippery terrain of arbitrary, as they represent the life of third world women as essentially truncated due to their feminine gender (sexually constrained) and their supposed ignorance, poverty, tradition-bound and domesticity and family oriented. (1984, p. 337)

Black feminist activists and scholars (in the continent and in the diaspora) brought an incisive counter-discourse to this biased interpretation of their condition, highlighting, in the same vein, the stark difference in their agenda and that of their “sisters” from abroad. Though taking as truism the existence of oppressive cultures worldwide, hampering women to bloom out of the gloom, black feminists debunk the biased contentions of white critics. Actually, African and African American feminist critics take at heart the idea that the issue confronting Africa, including the problems the woman faces, require the efforts of both genders (Kamara, 2001; Nnaemaka, 1995; Walker, 1983). Along with other women and men African writers (as Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Nuruddin Farah, etc.), they contribute to the construction of a

feminism with a small “f”, an africanization of principles of feminism, according to Emecheta, which is essentially the expression of values and realities characteristic of the “third world” woman, and of powerful resistance against oppressive beliefs and practices towards women.

Ba’s literary output displays, therefore, her commitment to make men become conscious of the lamentable condition of women, but also to put to the forefront the multiple abuses heaped upon the latter. Like other women writers, Ba impugns patriarchal/nationalist values and also western misreading/misunderstanding of their cultural practices (Zulfqar, 2016, p. 12)ⁱⁱⁱ. Both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* offer poignant insights into marital relationships. Writing in a context tinged with stereotypes and prejudices, Ba is conscious that “the woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in all its aspects... As women we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it...” (Ba, 1981, p. 6). She is convinced, as Shirley Anne Williams, that feminist theory offers not only the possibility of changing their reading of the world, but of changing the world itself (1986, p. 303). As well, she believes in the power of literacy to put into the limelight the patterns of oppressions undergone by women, whatever their origin may be, in spite of cultural specificities. *So long a Letter* unfolds the stories of female characters bending under the yoke of diverse and interrelated oppressive forces, who strive hard to confront deeply-seated traditional beliefs, made more acute with the male-oriented interpretations of Islam.

This is where lies the interest of re-reading *So Long a Letter* under the prism of intersectional feminism, the quintessential postulate of which is that women and minorities, in general, find themselves in a nest of systemic injustices and oppressions, “women who are invisible and under-represented within environment built on discursively, institutional and /or structurally constructed sociocultural categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/generation; dis/ability, nationality, mother tongue, and so on...” (Lykke, 2016, p. 51). There are levels of systemic oppressions which imbricate and intersect, and this is precisely what intersectional feminism tries to explain.



In this way, considering that Ba suggests, in her first-released novel that barriers to gender equality vary according to other aspects of a woman's identity, that women in patriarchal and colonized societies are embedded in power-laden social interactions and conditions, this study's main objective is then to demonstrate that she is an early intersectional feminist. In doing so, the analysis first re-visits the interrelated stories in the book, through key tenets of intersectional feminism, to highlight how Ba's protagonists are caught into a web of prejudicial practices. Then it moves to a next level to explore the author's fight for the visibility and inclusion of discriminated women, through the representation of figures like Ramatoulaye, who find the required strength to overcome societal, religious and economic obstacles, and emerge strong with a sense of selfhood and identity. Prior to this, the study discusses postulates of intersectional feminism, as a primal stage.

2. Analysis and Discussion

2.1 Intersectional Feminism at a Glance

Intersectional feminism, as a paradigm of analysis of the interlocking systemic oppressions upon women and other vulnerable individuals and groups, is woven from the transdisciplinary theory of intersectionality, which aims to disclose the complexity of identities and social inequalities, through an integrated approach. Coined for the first time in 1976 by African American Law Professor, Kimberlee Crenshaw, to denounce gender and race-based discrimination against black women, intersectionality is a concept, later developed into a theory to showcase what she called the "big miss" within the complex structure of anti-discrimination law and also to put a name on the total invisibility of black citizens^{iv} in their relation to the law. Indeed, as Crenshaw puts it, "racial and gender discrimination overlapped not only in the workplace but in other arenas of life; equally significant, these burdens were almost completely absent from feminist and anti-racist advocacy" (2015). Her theory of intersectionality was an attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what she thought they should: highlight the multiple avenues throughout which racial and gender oppressions were experienced so that the problems would be easier to apprehend (Crenshaw, 2015). Not only is intersectionality an "analytic sensibility", a way of thinking about identity and its

intricate relationships to power (Crenshaw, 2015), but it also rebuts any barrier or hierarchical organization of traits of social distinction around categories as sex/genre, class/caste; race, ethnicity, age, dis/abilities, or sexual orientation. For Crenshaw, the intersectional approach consists of more than a recognition of the multiplicity of systems of oppressions, working from these categories: they are interacting in the production and reproduction of social inequalities. Theories on intersectionality, then, call for an analysis of the social reality of women and men, but also the inherent social, cultural and economic and politics dynamics as being multiple and simultaneously determined by diverse axes of social organizations. (Bilge, 2009, p. 71)

Although the object of positive reception and controversies^v, the theory has grown into a well thought-out paradigm of analysis, becoming a privileged concept in academic spheres, to refer to the complex articulation of diverse identities to inequalities; it helps to put into the limelight vulnerabilities that reflect the intersections of racism, sexism, class (and caste, mostly in the African context), oppression, transphobia, able-ism and more (Crenshaw, 2015). Truly, it fosters a "resignification of categorizations and normative identity markers, and, more generally, how individual subject negotiate the power-laden social relations and conditions in which they are embedded." (Lykke, 2016, p. 52)

So, it is no surprise that the theory of intersectionality be appropriated by feminist critics, especially postcolonial and anti-racist feminists^{vi} who have always brought to the forefront the fact that oppression, based on race and caste, was overlooked in the mainstream feminist discourse. Should we say it with Nina Lykke, "what is important for many feminists when they speak of intersectionalities between gender, race, ethnicity, so on, is precisely these processes of mutual construction and transformation" (2016, p. 51). In this way, a writer like Ba, who has been particularly critical about the failure of western feminists to inscribe in their critical discourses, the interrelationship between sex/genre, race, class/caste, puts the stress on the *inter-action*,^{vii} between these social categorizations, to demonstrate that they are overlapping forces confronting vulnerable segments in communities.

Intersectional feminism is the appropriation by feminism - as a political and social movement for the defense of the oppressed individuals and groups, especially

women - of the tenets of intersectionality, to unveil the chain of oppressions, with a view to defining effective strategies to fight against power differentials and arbitrary social segmentation. It is an inclusive movement, welcoming all those who want to stand up to different systemic oppressions. The positive impact it has on feminism is a convergence of struggles, and more solidarity between the privileged and the misrepresented in socio-cultural systems. Through the thematic line and the aesthetic allure of her two-published novels, through the representation of women fighting against a myriad of social and cultural abuses, Ba acknowledges that “women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity” (Alok, 2017). As a fine observer of her society, a shrewd critic of her people’s traditions and mores, a staunch human right advocator, the Senegalese writer has well understood that women in her society and elsewhere are under layers of intersecting systems of subjection and, as such, she delineates principles of intersectional feminism well before their invention. So, this study critically analyses Ba’s efforts to represent and denounce the many ways in which power is controlled by men and exercised over mostly vulnerable women, who are at the receiving end of continual uses and abuses in Senegalese patriarchal society.

2.2 *Sex/Gender, Caste System and Polygamy: Patterns of Interlocking Oppressions*

The narrative world of Mariama Ba largely unfolds the Wolof society, in its beliefs, traditions, cultural mores and how patriarchal order sustains a social stratification based not only on sex/gender^{viii} but also on caste. The nested stories of women in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* give momentous insights into the complexity of gender relationships and the conception of superiority and inferiority between the Wolof and other ethnic groups in Senegal. Caught, as her characters, between tradition and modernity, Ba is aware that sex/gender inequalities and caste-based discrimination, deeply seated in her community, constitute the main factors of domination and persecution not only towards women but also towards all the community. Indeed, as a society based on caste and family names, the Wolof’s biggest problem in modern times, according to Siga Fatima Jagne, has been its inability to mediate between tradition and modernity (2004, p. 2). This position of the critic is further spotlighted by the

Senegalese writer who depicts, through the restless lives of some of her characters, the persistence of caste system, which as “archaic as it seems, thrives today, as much as it did in yesteryears. The reluctance of the upper caste to give up caste privilege is at the center of this perpetuation (Jagne, 2004, 2). This social ordering and division determines the society’s conception of socio-cultural belonging and, although it is not gendered, one should admit that women, socially-constructed in the patriarchal society as inferior to men, are mostly impacted by the othering process caste system is.

Truly, Simone de Beauvoir’s famous affirmation that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature” (1972, p. 18), is much more pronounced in Wolof and other West African societies running on gender-based discrimination and caste categorizations. The two forms of oppressions intersect in the way they strip women of their dignity. Gender, as the expression of power differentials between men and women, combined with caste system as a complex and biased image of the rejection of the cultural and social other, make women and minorities invisible. This interrelated form of masculine domination over women takes center stage in the novels of Ba, especially in *So Long a Letter*, where gender politics articulated with caste system in an Islamic male-oriented context, is the main cause of the disintegrated lives of women in marriage.

In the story, Ramatoulaye’s mourning gives her the opportunity to retire from her society and casts a look at traditions and mores, and above all, at the mechanisms that bring women to bear the brunt of culture contradictions and injustices. At the outset, she makes this comment about the hard condition of women who have to face and fulfil their whole life, demands and pressures:

This is the moment of [widowhood] dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behaviour is conditioned: no



sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful, or inhospitable. (Ba, 1980, p. 4)

The enumerative style in the passage is expressive of the character's determination to point out the multilayered exigencies marking marital life in Senegalese society. This socio-cultural order which demands the married woman to satisfy the whims of the spouse and all his relatives, is bred by discriminating *values* used to socialize women, at an early age, into accepting them as natural. The common lot of the female gender hovers over the passage: they relentlessly toil for the in-laws and end up at the intersection of oppressions and abuses, even in moment of sadness as widowhood. Ramatoulaye and Bintou, her co-wife, are objects in the hands of their in-laws, they are tossed from one situation to another, powerless and voiceless, in the bog of traditions. In this wise, Ba's novel "indicts the society that leaves them with a string of compromises that are very much to their own detriment" (Ayayi, 1997, p. 47). These sexist obligations over the married woman are more oppressive because they are backed up by a biased interpretation of the Islamic precepts about gender relations, a male-oriented reading of the Scriptures that deliberately keeps women in bondage, by widening the social, economic strife between both sexes. Ba opines that the fact that women are stripped of their rights in Muslim societies as postindependence Senegal, it is because of patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts, not because of the texts themselves (Collins, 2016, p. 19). This position is a key principle of Islamic feminism; it resonates in the words of Ba in an interview, affirming that the women of her society are "heavily burdened by mores and customs, in combination with the mistaken and egoistic interpretation of religion." (as cited in Latha, 2001, p. 30). Thus, the story is replete with instances where the meshing of archaic and domineering traditions and religion, overlap to reduce the feminine group into invisible beings at the disposal of powerful men.

These power-laden gender relationships are influenced and cross with another evil and debasing pattern of oppression: the caste system. If it is crystal-clear that the marriage of Ramatoulaye, the main protagonist, is broken because of the "betrayal" of her husband, that of Aissatou falls through the cracks because of her low caste. In *So long a Letter*, the multifarious injustices born of gender categorizations

intersect with this form of social othering, based on birth and family names, much ingrained in the traditional society. The tribulations of Aissatou in her wedlock – she is rejected, despised by her mother-in-law who takes it as an outrage for her noble son to have the daughter of goldsmith as wife – are one the most dramatic consequences of a stratification of society on the basis of caste. Through her characters, Ba powerfully smothers and regrets the contradictions of individuals, welcoming modernity and clinging hard to obsolete and degrading cultural practices. Ramatoulaye reminds her friend of the suffering she underwent, first as a woman in a tradition-bound society and second as an 'outcast':

You, Aissatou, you forsook your family-in-law, tightly shut in with their hurt dignity. You would lament to me: 'Your family-in-law respects you (...) As for me, they look down on me from the height of their lost nobility. (...) From then on, you (Aissatou) counted. What of the time and the love you had invested in your home? Only trifles, quickly forgotten. (Ba, 1980, pp. 20-30)

Ramatoulaye's touching recollection of the terrible moments of Aissatou confronting the biased tradition that would break up forever her marriage to Mawdo Ba, gives an idea of how entrenched these fallacious beliefs are in Senegalese society, where a daughter-in-law can be ousted from her home, simply because she is thought to bring bad luck, dearth, death. The situation is all the more dramatic as the narrator, using a pathetic tone, further tells how debilitating the impacts of such stereotypical beliefs are upon the individual and society:

In any case, could a goldsmith's daughter have any dignity, any honour? This was tantamount to asking whether you had a heart and flesh. Ah! For some people the honour and chagrin of a goldsmith's daughter count far less, much less, than the honour and chagrin of a Guelwaar. (Ba, 1981, p. 31)

These ironic words of Ramatoulaye are a resounding expression of the author's total rejection of any distribution in social organizations because the dangerous side is in falling into dichotomies and binary oppositions, which mostly goes with power relations. Obioma Nnaemeka correctly comments on this point, in an insightful analysis of the narrative productions of the Senegalese writer: "Mariama Ba's novels question, subvert, and destabilize certain dichotomies rooted in race, age, sex and

culture. The author posits that dualisms, when they do exist, coexist in a mere flexible and relational manner (...) The richness of Bâ's works emanates from the author's ability to transcend the rigidity of binary paradigms" (1990, p.14). Women in African societies are, therefore, in a web of sufferings, especially due to social and cultural ordering, and persecutions. Ramatoulaye's narration of the hitches of Aissatou but also those of the many other women, is a rebuttal of biased differences. Instead, she speaks of the need for individuals and groups to interact and connect, notwithstanding their gender or ethnic affiliations. The protagonist regrets how sexism, articulated to caste/class system, is part of the vulnerabilities that Crenshaw early identified and criticized through intersectionality.

The system of caste then reinforcing sexism causes profound distress and pain to women, especially when they are in polygamous marriage. Indeed, discriminations based on caste, gender, and race made women crisscross in social contexts where they have little room to show their discontent and loadstars. The theme of polygamy is running in all the work of Ba. Ramatoulaye writes about the lives of individual women (...) who have in some way, been abandoned by their husbands. In relating the case of Aissatou, and that of characters as Jacqueline, she demonstrates how sex/gender and culture imbricates to destroy marital relationships.

According to Ba, the plural wedlock constitutes the locus of an in-depth pain and abandonment of the married woman in African societies, essentially due to men's philandering and to a form of violence from female patriarchs. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou experience polygamy: while Modou Fall the husband of the narrator betrays their thirty-year union for the love of the friend of their elder daughter, Aissatou's husband, entrapped by the mischievous demands of a too proud mother, takes as a wife her young cousin. Both friends are neglected for young spouses. But both have different reactions, face to what they consider as a stark betrayal. Indeed, unlike Ramatoulaye and even Mireille in *Scarlet Song*, Aissatou has well understood that their condition of women, wife and mother is made an ordeal because of the multilayered dominations daily heaped on them not only by men but also other women. That is where lies the clue of her decision to step out of her

marriage with Mawdo, to strip herself of his love, his name, clothed in her dignity, the only worthy garment (Ba, 1980, p. 32). Aissatou, paying no heed to "commonplaces truths, which before had lowered the heads of many wives..." (1980, p. 31) breaks up her marriage, an act highly saluted by Ramatoulaye, which is, actually, her own way to rebel against the absurd social ranking, with its absurd divisions (Ba, 1988, p. 32). Aissatou's unexpected divorce, in a society where women are entangled in a den of socio-cultural beliefs which ask them to accept male *desiderata*, can be read as a counter discourse to a certain practice of polygamy. Ba, as well as, her characters is not acting against the grain of polygamy as an institution sanctioned by Islam. She rejects the distorted practice of it in societies which have failed to consider the embedded abuses upon the woman and which take it as a norm her submissiveness and endurance. Although some critics apprehend the treatment of polygamy in Ba's novels as the most glaring inequitable and sexist feature of traditional African society (Katherine Frank, 1987), Ramatoulaye (who seems to articulate the ambivalent position of the author on the question) understands the decision of her friend but shows a mitigated stance, faced to the betrayal and subsequent desertion of her husband. Ba's protagonist is torn between hesitation, doubts about whether she should leave, divorced, or stay and share her husband with Bintou. Her inner turmoil, distress and dilemma are here expressed:

Leave! Draw a clean line through the past. Turn over a page on which not everything was bright, certainly, but at least, all was clear. What would now be recorded there would hold no love, confidence, grandeur or hope. I had never known the sordid side of marriage. (...) When one begins to forgive, there is an avalanche of faults that comes crashing down, and the only thing that remains is to forgive again, to keep on forgiving (...) I counted the abandoned or divorced women of my generation whom I knew.

I knew a few whose remaining beauty had been able to capture a worthy man (...) I knew others who had lost all hope of renewal and whom loneliness had very quickly laid underground. (Ba, 1980, p. 40)

This passage, disclosing the dilemma lived by women in patriarchal societies where they suffocate under the shadows of men, is a mark of intersectional feminism,



because the character maps the common sufferings of women in marriage. In her mapping of the multileveled agony of vulnerable women in the marital home, Ramatoulaye tells Aissatou: “I had heard of too many misfortunes not to understand my own. There was your [Aissatou’s] own case, the cases of many other women, despised, relegated or exchanged, who were abandoned like a worn-out or an out-dated boubou” (Ba, 1980, p. 41). In such a situation, women like Ramatoulaye, but also Mireille in *Scarlet Song*, feel entrapped, being in the throes of doubts and angst, because torn between the need to meet up with the exigencies of their communities and the desperate wish to be respected, considered, loved. The case of Mireille de la Vallée in *Scarlet Song* is a resounding echo of the drama lived by women with unfaithful husbands. Again, the tragic story of Mireille’s facing a multilayered oppression - betrayal from her husband, racist and sexist attitudes from her in-laws, her break with her own family who took it as an outrage for a white aristocrat like her to live with a black “thing” - is another occasion for the author to explain that “permanent dyadic structure, generalizations, and categorization rooted in race, sex, intellectual orientation, etc. are untenable (Nneameka, 1990, p. 28). It’s because the white girl is categorized as a selfish, individualist and racist by both her mother-in-law Yaye Khady and Ousmane, that she feels marginalized in her own home, and in Senegalese society.

Additionally, after Ousmane takes Ouleymatou as a second wife, she is utterly dejected by the egoism of her husband but also by the traditionalist and sexist attitude of her in-laws and her husband’s friends. Abandoned and unable to get her head above the many-sided oppressions, she enters the zone of dementia. Therefore, with the dramatic fate of Mireille but also that of Jacqueline in *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba makes it clear that racist attitudes are not the prerogative of any particular race; both whites and blacks are perpetrators and victims of racism (Nneameka, 1990, p. 28). The plight of Jacqueline allows the Senegalese writer to show that the “oppression or repression of women is not culture-bound” (Wanga Wa Nyatet, 220, p. 64), and that too much pressure upon the individual, and especially the woman in a patriarchy-run context leads inevitably to mental disintegration. As Ramatoulaye warns Aissatou (and all women), “a nervous breakdown waits around the corner for

anyone who lets himself wallow in bitterness. Little by little, it takes over your whole being.” (Ba, 1980, p. 41)

The case of Jacqueline, the Ivorian and common friend of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou bring the author of the long letter to ponder over the sad fate of women who end up losing their mind due to abandonment by errand husbands and a lack of empathy from other women. As with Mireille and Ramatoulaye, polygamy becomes the bane of Jacqueline’s life. Like Mireille, it is for the sake of Samba Diack that she broke ties with her family. Like Mireille too, she is disappointed and cheated by her man; added to that, she is victim of scorn and racist attitudes from her in-laws. Ramatoulaye makes a compassionate comment on the tribulations of Jacqueline who pains to cope with an unwelcoming social context but also with tensed relationships with her husband’s relatives. The latter could not stand the fact that she has decided, as a married woman, to keep her Catholic faith. Consequently, she breaks down because of the ignorance and maltreatment her husband shows towards her and her children, until she needs medical care. As Ramatoulaye mentions it, Jacqueline lay prostrate in her bed, her thoughts turning to death. Thus, her suffering stems from frustrations, shattered dreams, intolerance and social pressures, which is an unbearable moral torment. Racism, and cultural essentialism, gender-based abuses influence each other and intersect to bring women, in Ba’s narrative world, to be outcast and marginalized in Senegalese society, a society built on binary oppositions, which “erect paradigms, of hierarchy, privilege, and power.” (Nneameka, 1990, p. 13)

Through the stories of many women, from different origins, embedding with that of Ramatoulaye, Ba draws attention to the various ways in which power is controlled and exclusively reserved to one caste (the Noble), one race (African), one gender (man) in her society and how this layered domination operates and works to upkeep division and injustice. She confirms the claims of universality in human sufferings, inherent in intersectional feminism. There are similarities in the mechanisms established in societies to dominate and flout the dignity of individuals and groups, in complex situations and who are the objects of specific subjectivities. “Mariama Ba herself, in her endeavors, has a sense of this universality. But at the same time she

understands the particularity of the Senegalese (mainly Wolof) experience that she is writing. She [Ba] explains ‘...there is a cry everywhere in the world, a woman’s cry is being uttered. The cry may be different, but there is still a certain unity.’” (Jagne, 2004, p. 4)

What seems to be afflicting both the Senegalese writer and her characters is the fact that such interlocking oppressions facing women in wedlock is made more agonizing by the uncaring attitude of female patriarchs and young women: mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-laws but also others who are as well victims of systemic injustices, but who, unconsciously, become causes of distress. Aunt Nabou, and Lady Mother-in-Law in *So Long a Letter* but also Yaye Khady in *Scarlet Song* embody such a dark side of women, who, by a sly twist of patriarchal system, are turned into perpetrators of gender-based violence and marginalization of members of the feminine community. This is all the more remarkable in the context of polygamous marriage in the works of Ba where wives are casted in the perverted role of rival. While Aunt Nabou left no stone unturned to marry her brother’s daughter to her son with the sole purpose of washing her indignity, and of keeping the family bloodline pure, while Lady Mother-in-Law blackmailed her daughter Bintou into being the new bride of the middle-aged Modou, Yaye Khady has the avowed aim to never let her white daughter-in-law enjoy marital life, considering her as a woman who has robbed her of her son.

Although her narrative world is fraught with “images of the troublesome, meddlesome, and constantly nagging in-laws (...) while noting that the relationship between a wife and her in-laws can be a problematic one, Mariama Ba avoids falling into stereotypes and generalizations” (Nnameka, 1990, p. 28). Indeed, the tribulations of Ramatoulaye are caused not by her in-laws who showed more respect towards her, but by the infidelity of her husband. As well, Rosalie and Ali but also Pierrette and Lamine in *Scarlet Song* experience the joys of marital life, thanks to mutual respect and understanding from their in-laws. Such a measured and unbiased position of the author is in compliance with the ideological stance of intersectional feminism which, by totally rejecting any social categorization built on complex interrelated structures of injustices, keeps itself away from taking oppressions upon vulnerabilities as valid and existing

everywhere. This equity and reserved attitude in the representation of the socio-cultural fabric of her society is the gist of the vision she nourished of human society.

2.3 *The Intersectional Feminist Agenda of Mariama Ba*

In an insightful analysis of the myriad forms of sexist dominations over women, Mohanty rightly argues that “[m]ale source of violence must be theorized and interpreted *within* specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well in order to effectively organize to change it” (1984, p. 338). This position of the feminist theorist is congruent with that of Kimberle Crenshaw in her repartee to controversial analysis holding that intersectionality is too much theoretical a concept. For her, “instead of blaming the voices that highlight problems, we need to examine the structures of power that so successfully resist change” (2015). Mariama Ba believes in the power of writing, of confidence to alleviate the sundry problems affecting not only women and children but also men. Amid the enmeshed and intermingled stories of the tragic fate of characters in her novel, Ba has pinpointed objectives and strategies as guidelines of her intersectional feminist agenda.

A central part of her agenda as an early intersectional feminist is the promotion of sisterhood and friendship, as therapy against physical and mental distress. Before exploring her stance *vis-à-vis* sisterhood, it should be noted that for the writer, “sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338). Ba demonstrates, in her characterization, that building equitable interpersonal relationships is not gender-dependent but rather it should be ingrained in the historical, social and cultural practices in the community, so that women will stop being defined (and defining themselves) as archetypal victims and men as “subjects-who-perpetrate-violence.” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338)

The choice of Aissatou as a confidante, more than representing the isolation of married women who refuse to accept polygamy as Irene d’Almeida has it, is the author’s vision of the need to have mutual understanding between women themselves, but also between men and women. Writing is believed to be highly therapeutic and, therefore, Ramatoulaye feels alleviated because, by interrelating and comparing her stories with that of Aissatou, Jacqueline and the many others, by profiting



from the caring attention of her friend, she is as well able to get above the bane of her life. Her decision to stay in a wedlock where she is abandoned is a well thought-out choice. Such a decision has been diversely read by both her own children but also by critics who take her refusal to divorce as a confirmation of the image of the third world woman, as being traditional, submissive, obedient, largely depicted in western feminist criticism. However, such an interpretation of her position does not correctly map the motivation and position of the character because, as Gabreel Kamara rightly argues, "...even though Ramatoulaye does not physically leave the house, she does psychologically leave the marriage. She opts to stay in the house – her house – after her husband abandons her. Yes, she still loves Modou, but lets him go because she cannot partake in a polygamous marriage" (2001, p. 219). Therefore, Ramatoulaye deals with polygamy neither by procrastination nor by divorce; she has well understood that a woman, oppressed and entrapped by sociological and cultural realities, once thrown away by her man, should be able to choose her own strategy to step out of the constraints of plural marriage, renew with herself and upkeep her dignity. Ramatoulaye's journey from trauma to rebirth is here delineated in this part of her letter:

I was surviving. In addition to my former duties, I took over Modou's as well. (...) *I survived.* I overcame my shyness at going alone to cinemas. (...) *I survived.* The more I thought about it, the more grateful I became to Modou for having cut all contact. I had the solution my children wanted – the break without having taken the initiative. (...) I faced up to the situation bravely; I carried out my duties; they filled the time and channelled my thoughts. (Ba, 1980, pp. 51-2) (My emphasis)

The process from indignation to self-confidence is suggested in the passage through the shift noted in the tenses ('I was surviving ... I survived'). Ramatoulaye is accompanied on the painful road to recovery by the soothing shoulder of her friend Aissatou, who gives not only an emotional support to her but a financial and material aid in the upkeep of the family. Thus, alone, abandoned, "a fluttering leaf that no one dares to pick up" (Ba, 1980, p. 53), Ramatoulaye lives up to her dignity, thanks to the love of her children and the friendship of Aissatou, the goldsmith's daughter who

helped while depriving herself. (Ba, 1980, p. 53)

In this way, sisterhood, when combined with friendship, can be a safe avenue to emotional rebirth. Ba dedicates her first opus to "Abibatou Niang, pure and constant, lucid and thorough, who shares my feelings"; this liminal device in the paratextual design of the book is much expressive of how much important friendship is to the author. More importantly, "Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kills love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (Ba, 1980, p. 54). This solidarity between women under the form of friendship – which, for Ba, should transcend gender barriers to become a code of conduct of every human being – this expression of the sameness of the suffering of oppressed women, notwithstanding their origin, urges Soukeyna, Mireille's sister-in-law, to reveal to the latter the betrayal of Ousmane. Aware that friendship is not race or culture-bound, and that it "has a more constant code of behavior than that of love", that it can be stronger than the affection born of blood-ties" (Ba, 2002, p. 152), Soukeyna stands up to the mischievous Yaye Khady and dares speak out against the lack of solidarity of the family towards Mireille and the sexist attitudes of Ousmane. Also, the compassion felt by Pierrette and Lamine but also Rosalie and Ali faced to Mireille's traumatic moments, is in discrepancy with the essentialist, and domineering behavior of Ousmane and his mother towards the French girl.

Another crucial part of the intersectional feminist agenda of Mariama Ba is the reconsideration of the roles in the couple, and this goes inevitably with the promotion of positive masculinity. The Senegalese author is convinced that an important means to ameliorate the lamentable condition of women is to reeducate men and the society into looking at women not as objects at their disposal but as complements, partners in the building of the family and, subsequently, the nation. Ramatoulaye's words in the penultimate page of the book, a condensed vision of Ba's feminist struggle, are illustrative of this preoccupation of the author:

My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest is difficult: social constraints are

ever-present, and male egoism resists. Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed". (Ba, 1980, p. 88)

Ramatoulaye is conscious that, as underlined in intersectional feminism, women (and all those who have been emotionally disabled by oppressive structures and systems) live through the same inclement realities. Truly, there is a long way to go for an absolute reconsideration of gender roles in her society. Also, Mariama Ba is conscious that "there's work to be done against *class*, against categorizations, against classifications (...) There's work to be done against (...) all schools, against, the pervasive masculine urge to judge, diagnose, digest, name..." (Cixious, 1981, p. 52). For Ba's protagonist, such social order, deprived of any trace of sexism and gender-based discrimination, can exist only if we have more gender-sensitive and emphatic men as Daouda Dieng, or her son-in-law Abdou, or even Lamine in *Scarlet Song*, men who are decided to lift their wives up to the social ladder. Ramatoulaye is persuaded of the inevitable and necessarily complementarity of man and woman (Ba, 1980, p. 88). Helene Cixious' reflection on the couple, as the locus where education for social equality and justice should sparkle, is consistent with the quintessence of Ramatoulaye's position about the necessity to redefine the biased relationships between men and women:

To be aware of the couple, that it's the couple that make it all work, is also to point to the fact that it's on the couple that we have to work if we are to deconstruct and transform culture. The couple as terrain, as space demanding, insisting on a complete transformation in the relation of one to the other. (Cixious, 1981, p. 44)

Ramatoulaye sounding a clarion call for the need of sincere love and mutual understanding in the couple, gives credit to the relevant analysis of Cixious, quoted above. This is how the friend of Aissatou calls on a stereotypes-freed society, marked by fairer interpersonal relationships:

Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings (man and woman).

To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other! If each could only melt into the other! If each would only accept the other's

successes and failures! If each would only praise the other's qualities instead of listing his faults! (...)

The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony.

The nation is made up of all the families, rich or poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family. (Ba, 1980, p. 89)

This outburst is a heartfelt cry of the author, a voicing of her lifelong commitment to bring her people and the world, through her narrative output, to stop taking women as "Universal Dependents" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338), a root principle of intersectional feminism. Truly, Ba's constant stance concerning women and gender relationships, articulated in an incisive rebuttal of ordering/othering (Jagne, 2004, p. 4), and in the account of interlaced stories of suffering women, indicates an unconscious application of intersectional feminism postulates, the most preeminent of which is the visibility and inclusion of those who are mis/under-represented by sexist and prejudices-laden social organizations.

3. Conclusion

So Long a Letter, the first opus of the pioneering figure of feminism in Africa, bears traces of the early intersectional feminism of its author, Mariama Ba. By disclosing a myriad of stories of women victimized by intersecting oppressions at the heart of unfair socio-cultural contexts, the novel offers to the reader the opportunity to appreciate Ba's unrelenting endeavours to map the multiple difficulties, overlapping and confronting women in patriarchal societies. Signs of intersectional feminism wafts through the narration and explication of the complex gender relationships, especially in the context of marriage.

Through her representation of women ensnared by embedded systemic oppressions (sexism, gender inequalities, discrimination based on caste and class systems), and through her call for a redefinition of gender roles in society, Mariama Ba is undoubtedly an early intersectional feminist. The veracity of this affirmation lies in the fact that, like the proponents of this branch of feminism, the Senegalese novelist adopts a humanist stance in the treatment of injustices in the novel. Her plea for a more accented representation and inclusion of women and minorities, maltreated, handicapped or



disabled by oppressive systems, her life-long struggle against intersectional effacements towards these vulnerable segments of communities are tangible evidences of her incorporation of postulates of intersectional feminism.

More importantly, *So Long a Letter* canvasses her vision for fairer societies, where interlocking oppressions, politics of exclusion or invisibility are finally dismantled, where stable couples are the backbone of social justice and where, ultimately, the individual, especially the woman, can flourish and fully participate in the building of the nation. The reason why the intersectional feminist writer so powerfully fights for the rehabilitation of the human dignity is her conviction that, beyond specificities, those who are at the receiving end of multileveled dominations, are facing vulnerabilities which reflect intersections between racism, sexism, classicism, and caste system.

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ⁱ The position of women writers in postcolonial societies towards Western feminism is culture-bound; like black women in United States, they criticize the elitist and even racist aspects of mainstream feminism because these failed (deliberately) to include the social and cultural realities of "third world women". While Chandra Mohanty in "Under Weston Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse", analyzes the Third World difference – "that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all women in these countries", Gayatri Spivak and Bell Hooks respectively in *French feminism* and *Ain't I a Woman?* Highlight the stark differences and difficulties with western feminism.

ⁱⁱ Feminism in the Europe and America refers to the movement inspired by writers as S.B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet, whose main focus in struggle was the social and existential problems confronting women in their countries.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zufiqar argues that African women's negotiations of motherhood, feminism, marriage and religion (...) need to be gauged within their own cultural and material realities. Otherwise, there is a danger of producing misrepresentations.

^{iv} Crenshaw explains the origin and the motivations behind the invention of concept: "In

1976 Emma DeGranffenreid and several other black women sued G Motors for discrimination, arguing that the company segregated its workforce by race and gender. Black did one set of jobs and whites did another. According to the plaintiffs' experiences, women were welcome to apply for some jobs, while only men were suitable for others." (2015) In the light of this case, she came to the conclusion that racial and gender discrimination cannot be dissociated, as they overlap not only in the workplace but in other areas of life. This was inspirational for the writing in 1989 of a paper entitled "Demarginalizing the intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." The main argument in the paper is that intersectionality is the theory of how overlapping or intersecting social identities, especially minority identities are interconnected to systems and structures of oppression, domination, and discrimination.

^v Mostly criticized by conservatives, who are according to Crenshaw, obsessed with identity politics. She talks against the grain of such position arguing that the better we understand how identities and power work together from one context to another, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture

^{vi} On the one hand, these feminisms are in critical negotiation with anti-racist and anti-colonialist discourse, which often seem to ignore gendered power differentials. On the other hand, they argue critically against white, western, middle class feminist discourses that tend to leave issues of racism and neocolonialism out of sight." (Lykke)

^{vii} Neologism by Karen Barald (2003, p. 815); for her *inter-action*, is something that exists between bounded entities, clashing against each other like billiards balls, without initiating mutual transformation. Conversely, *intra-action* refers to an interplay between non-bounded phenomena, which interpenetrate and mutually transform each other

^{viii} Feminists rebuff the argument holding that sex and gender are interchangeable in the representation of the woman and that the inferior status and role of the latter is explained by their "natural inferiority to men". Rather, they counter this biological determinism by arguing that "behavioural and psychological differences have social, rather than biological causes." (M. Mikkola).