

So Long a Letter Study Guide

So Long a Letter by Mariama Ba

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Plot Summary

With this work of fiction, Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ explores the inequalities between men and women in Senegal, Islam, and African society. Bâ creates a premise of a fictional letter from Ramatoulaye, a schoolteacher in Senegal, to her good friend Aissatou, now in America. Ramatoulaye, a recent widow, is sequestered in mourning for four months and 10 ten days, as is the custom when a woman's husband dies. During this time, she reminisces about hers and Aissatou's lives as students, then later adapting to their roles as wives. She pensively examines the disintegration of both their marriages using introspection and striving to look backward with equanimity.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou grew into adulthood at a time when women's liberation was gaining momentum across the globe. It was also a time of newly-acquired independence in Senegal and the struggle to find a fresh societal model in a modern world. Ramatoulaye observed: "It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence."

The two friends became teachers, contributing to the new landscape of education for girls and boys, rich and poor alike. They were cutting edge feminists and the men they married were modern in their views. Mawdo Bâ, suitor to Aissatou and a caring doctor, married Aissatou, a goldsmith's daughter, despite Mawdo's noble heritage. Ramatoulaye did not renounce her religion or customs and she still practiced many cultural traditions, yet she moved forward as a working mother and wife. Her husband Modou Fall wanted to help shape the country's future, and his work as a lawyer representing trade unions had an impact on governmental decisions.

Trouble befell the marriages that were consummated over twenty years earlier. First, Aissatou's husband wed a second wife but hoped to continue to live primarily with his first wife. Aissatou would not settle for this and divorced him. Three years later, when Modou Fall took a second wife, he abandoned Ramatoulaye and her twelve children. Ramatoulaye decided to stay legally married, though Modou never set foot in their house again.

Five years after Modou's betrayal, he had a heart attack and his friend Mawdo was unable to revive him. The mourning and burial of Modou was carried out according to tradition, and Ramatoulaye and her co-wife mourned together in one house as people visited to pay their respects. Ramatoulaye was then house-bound for the rest of her mourning period. It was during this time she found a way to make peace with the past and to embrace the future.



Chapters 1-5

Summary

Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese school teacher living near Dakar, writes a letter to her friend Aissatou in the form of a diary, during her *tenge* - a widow's isolated mourning period in Muslim Senegal. The first five chapters describe Modou's death, his burial and the traditional mourning process.

Chapter 1

Ramatoulaye fondly remembers her youthful friendship with Aissatou when they were neighbors and went to Koranic School together. Aissatou is divorced and Ramatoulaye now breaks her own news that she is newly a widow. Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou, had a heart attack and the doctor Mawdo (his friend of 40 years) was not able to revive him.

Chapter 2

Modou Falls is a National figure and the announcement of his death on the radio draws people from across the country for the burial. Ramatoulaye and her co-wife sit in Ramatoulaye's home, where they accept visitors for the next 40 days, as is the custom. The men attend the funeral procession, guiding Modou's body to his final resting place. Islamic traditions have been honored and Modou will be wrapped in 7 meters of white muslin for burial.

To ward off evil spirits, coins are thrown by the in-laws onto a makeshift fabric roof suspended over the widows' heads. The wives are rewarded with songs and praises for their generosity to their husband's family. Ramatoulaye has been married to Modou for 30 years and has borne 12 children. She is silently angry that both wives are being given equal honors, as Modou's second wife has only been married to him for 5 years and has borne only 3 children.

The men return from the burial ground and offer their condolences; sweets are distributed to the crowd.

Chapter 3

With the third day of mourning, Ramatoulaye's house fills with mats and prayer. Food is offered to all. The men silently have their own gathering area - one with a respectfully somber and weighted tone. The women's grouping is raucous and replete with chattering gossip. At times the men remind the women of the solemnity of the occasion but their admonitions are short lived and the boisterousness increases again.

The evening brings offerings to Modou's family and his widows. In the past, the offerings had customarily been goods and food but this generation brings money. The offerings



are presented on behalf of different contingents from families, friends and colleagues, and none of them want to be seen giving less than another contingent. Ramatoulaye receives the bulk of the bank notes, as she comes from a large family and she is on friendly terms with the families of the students she teaches. This annoys Modou's mother, who would have liked to have received the largest portion. Ramatoulaye's co-wife has been silent throughout the days of grieving, her lack of animation inside apparent on her face. The Falls sisters (Modou's sisters) buy the clothes of mourning for the wives, as is their duty. The widows must then impart money on each of the in-laws, and the wives must also give coins and bank notes to the other visitors as they take their leave.

The ritual of the 3rd day is repeated on the 8th and 40th days of mourning, though these subsequent days are set in an atmosphere of joy. Ramatoulaye wonders why the mood is celebratory, as according to belief, on the 3rd day the body swells, on the 8th day it bursts and on the 40th day it is stripped- certainly not a cause for joy.

At the conclusion of the 40th day, Ramatoulaye's co-wife Binetou returns to her own home, though even past the 40th day visitors continue to arrive- and each one must be given some coins when leaving. Ramatoulaye accepts the quiet routine ahead of isolation, ritual baths, and changing mourning clothing twice a week, knowing she will be sequestered in mourning for another 4 months and 10 days. Her only fear is that the time for reflection this provides will lead her to memories better left in the past.

Chapter 4

The next step in liberating Modou's soul requires a mirasse set forth by the Koran to strip the deceased of his most intimate secrets. The family gathers. Rama describes Modou's abandonment of her and her children as a rejection and a betrayal. His new life required a new wife and, as Rama writes, he "mapped out his future without taking our existence into account."

At the family meeting it becomes clear that Modou had significant debt upon his death with no savings to speak of. Modou spent a significant amount on the acquisition of his second wife. He sent her parents to Mecca for Hajj and he bought Binetou a luxurious home with extravagant furnishings. Rama now learns this was purchased using her own house as collateral. And as Binetou had her hopes set on achieving her baccalaureate, Modou had to persuade her (and more crucially, her mother) to abandon her studies for marriage, and this came at the cost of arranging a decadent monthly allowance for his young bride. Binetou's mother now holds in her hands the written allowance agreement, as she believes it is proof the estate should continue the monthly payments. Rama's own daughter, Daba, also carries a document- this one detailing the contents of Binetou's home. Rama is disappointed in the greedy nature of this behavior from both camps.

Chapter 5



Ramatoulaye fights hard to rise above her hurt, anger, and vengeful feelings towards Modou. She reveres the stoicism of those unfortunate who are blind and paralyzed, “never upsetting the established order” despite their miserable state. She sees the injustice doled out to her as tiny in comparison. And yet, though she tries, the devastation of Modou choosing a second wife cannot be forced into becoming an unobtrusive memory. Modou “burned his past, both morally and materially.” Rama’s passionate love for Modou endured 12 births and 30 years, and despite her best efforts, her profound and aching sadness persists.

Analysis

These first chapters offer a wealth of information about the Senegalese Muslim traditions of mourning and burial practices. The sister-in-laws play a particularly large role in supporting the mourning widows. There is imbalance in the practice of a woman who mourns her husband vs. a man who mourns his wife. There are rituals where women are excluded. Whatever money is contributed to the family of the deceased, it seems they must give even more away, as each visitor parts with a coin or bill. This is an illogically costly process for the widows.

Ramatoulaye is confiding through letters to an intimate friend and, as a result, her writing is uncensored. She is furious that Modou’s wife of five years is being given equal footing with herself. Rama does not blame the wife so she directs her secret rage to the new wife’s mother, who had a strong influence in bringing about the marriage that caused Rama so much pain.

Vocabulary

distress, conjure, procession, distorted, rigorous, winnowing, Islam, Koran, muslin, poignant, calabashes, henna, mourning, griot, mirasse, revolt, engulfed, brandished, fraudulent, subversive, baccalaureate



Chapters 6-8

Summary

The clock rewinds to Rama and Aissatou's days in the teachers' training college. Rama meets and marries Modou, and Aissatou weds Mawdo Bâ.

Chapter 6

Rama recalls meeting Modou. Handsome and strong, Modou is also insightful, intelligent, ambitious and tender and the two fall in love. After receiving his baccalaureate, Modou travels to France to continue his studies, sending Rama beautiful love letters while he is away. Returning with a law degree, Modou seeks out work opportunities that contribute to the improvement of his country. Rama's mother has reservations based on the spacing of Modou's incisors, but Rama does not heed her advice.

Chapter 7

Rama attends the teachers' training college with Aissatou when she meets Modou. The White headmistress of the school raises the awareness of the students "to lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom," without being patronizing, according to Rama. Rama attributes her choice of husband to her enlightenment at the school. She selects Modou rather than Daouda Dieng - the suitor her mother prefers- a wealthy sociable doctor who has everything but Rama's heart. Rama and Modou's marriage celebration is simple and without dowry, which is surprising and unsettling to the community.

Chapter 8

Aissatou marries Modou's friend Mawdo Bâ when he obtains his medical degree despite the disparity of their social classes. Mawdo is the son of a princess and Aissatou's father is a goldsmith. While Mawdo's mother rejects the couple, Mawdo shows his father-in-law no less respect for his lower status; in fact Mawdo considers Aissatou's father to be an artist and he often visits him at work to marvel at his mastery.

Here in her writing, Rama questions the conflicting issues emerging when a culture begins to modernize. What happens to these professions whose arts are passed down from father to son, now that the youth are being directed to European-style schooling and a desire for more? The forges and workshops empty of the young former apprentices who want enlightenment instead, and so begins "the disappearance of an elite group of traditional manual workers." The casualties of the progressive path must be taken in stride in order to make room for modernity.



Analysis

Rama and Modou are at the forefront of their modern generation. Educated and ambitious for change, they challenge each other. That Rama goes against her mother's wishes is a sign of the rebellion of youth and righteousness, but Rama feels it is a product of her higher education. Aissatou and Mawdo also share a strong relationship on equal footing. None of them heed their parents' warnings- not Mawdo about his lower-class choice, nor Rama about her mother's concerns. Mawdo's admiration for Aissatou's goldsmith father is a key example of reshaping the National paradigm as merit ousts bloodline, and recognition of artistry within lower-class jobs is possible. Rama does admit there is a price to offering education for all because the crafts normally passed down from father to son will be lost. Here we see Rama caught between ideologies, a dilemma in which she often finds herself.

Vocabulary

fathom, recluse, overwhelmed, fortuitous, exuded, frenzied, frivolous, indignation, astonishment, controversial, animate, apprentices, bellows, trowel, forges, elite, manual, refuge, sustained



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9

Rama relates her marital days and the encroachment of Modou's family on her home. Her mother-in-law parades friends through the house to display her son's wealth. Some of her sisters-in-law see Ramatoulaye's life as far simpler than it is, while others understand the challenges she faces as a working woman who must tend to her children, her husband, and her home. They all notice the gadgets the two-income household enjoys, and they all spend substantial amounts of time at the house with their children in tow. Only Modou's father shows restraint, visiting barely long enough to sit down, and only asking for a cold glass of water.

Aissatou does not have a relationship with her mother-in-law who does not support the marriage, so much so that Mawdo's mother wants revenge. Aissatou reminds Rama that she is fortunate to have in-laws that respect her, despite the daily challenges she faces with them.

Rama and Aissatou's crowd hold informal parties at alternating houses and take trips to the seaside suburbs. Their favorite destination is Ngor beach, where people enjoy the water and watch the water, mesmerized, as the fishing boats go out to sea and return laden with fish. The fish are then sold on the spot. Rama describes those days at the beach as reinvigorating. Another frequented spot is Aissatou and Mawdo's farm at Sangalkam, where carefree picnics are held with fruit and dances and games. These are the golden days for the families of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, which are further enriched by their roles as teachers, where they represent the national struggle attempting to overcome ignorance. "In those children we set in motion waves that, breaking, carried away in their furl a bit of ourselves."

Chapter 10

As a lawyer, Modou rises in the ranks of the trade unions, brokering fair improvements in the workers' conditions. He gains respect on both sides of the table. As a doctor, Mawdo is flooded with patients, as people transition away from traditional Senegalese medical practices. Choosing the path of Senegal's future is at the forefront of politics and everyone gets involved. Often negotiating with the government on behalf of the workers, Modou worries about the obvious wasteful spending- too many embassies sprouting up too soon, too many invitations from foreign dignitaries.

And being aware of Aissatou and her mother gaining status, wealth, and acceptance, Mawdo's mother's plans for revenge grow more compelling.



Analysis

These chapters highlight the best, happiest, most hopeful period for the two couples. The women have rewarding careers and the men have found great success in work that has meaning. Rama, Aissatou, Modou and Mawdo all work in areas benefitting others' lives. Their friendships are easy and full of adventure. There are setbacks such as when adjusting to in-laws, but most seem minor in the larger picture. Rama's in-laws' constant presence underlines a limited self-determination as well as a judging force - this is not an environment of 'live and let live.'

Vocabulary

parallel, reconciliations, burden, custom, forsook, stifling, frolicking, parasols, oasis, succulent, vigilant, taunting, concoctions, concurred, clashed, festering, inexorably, domination, infusing, hasty, vanity, resplendent



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11

Mawdo's mother, called Aunty Nabou by Rama, has not progressed with the times and is stuck in the past. She believes Aissatou's marriage to her son will compromise her family's nobility and she comes up with a plan. Aunty Nabou leaves the city to visit her brother Farba Diouf, a customary chief in the Sine. Borrowing money from Modou and a suitcase from Ramatoulaye, she brings with her fabric, toys, and food unavailable in the Sine, as a gift to her brother's family of four wives and their children. She visits the burial ground of her royal ancestors, equipped with a prayer mat and water for ablutions. She surveys the tombs and prays, swearing that Aissatou "will never tarnish her noble descent."

Aunty Nabou then asks her brother to provide her a child she can take to her home and raise. She says "I will make of this child another me." The chief fulfills her request and offers her namesake, his daughter Nabou. Aunty Nabou packs up her belongings and she and young Nabou return to Dakar with the best goods the village has to offer.

Chapter 12

Aunty Nabou introduces young Nabou to her friends and to Rama. Young Nabou learns grinding grains, cooking, and ironing under her aunt's tutelage. After a few years, Aunty Nabou pulls her out of high school and encourages the girl to apply to the State School for Midwifery. She says to her niece "To tell the truth, a woman does not need too much education" and with that, it is settled; young Nabou becomes a midwife.

After years of patience, Aunty Nabou now unrolls her plan. She tells Mawdo that her brother has offered young Nabou to be his wife as thanks for Aunty's fine job of raising her. If Mawdo refuses this request, his mother says she will never recover.

Not wanting to bring shame on his mother, Mawdo agrees to marry young Nabou, "to be tolerated for reasons of duty." Ramatoulaye suggests in her writing that Nabou's young appeal also contributes to Mawdo's decision. Mawdo plans to keep sharing his home with Aissatou and visiting his new wife every second night at his mother's place where young Nabou will continue to reside. Mawdo still loves Aissatou but she will not tolerate the duality of his love for her and his physical relations with a young bride. Aissatou writes a letter to Mawdo advising him of her decision to leave him.

Aissatou moves out and rents a house and her life begins to progress peacefully. Aissatou pursues advanced studies, first locally and then in France at The School of Interpreters. Upon her return, she is appointed to the Senegalese Embassy in the United States.



Mawdo has not fared as well in the aftermath of Aissatou's departure. Now that he is back in the fold, his relatives form a constant stream through his home, young Nabou gives family members his belongings as it suits her, and he desperately misses Aissatou and the way she used to run the house. Mawdo shares his feelings with Ramatoulaye, who remains unsympathetic to the ex-husband of her best friend. Ramatoulaye notes that none of Mawdo's so-called misery, however sincere, has compromised relations with his new wife, confirmed by the three boys she produces. Seeking understanding, Mawdo argues to Ramatoulaye that just as humans surviving a plane crash resort to cannibalism as their instincts take over, he too is dominated by his instincts.

Aissatou is able to move past the heartbreak and find peace. Her sons are growing up well and she has carved out a new life for herself with courage and dignity.

Analysis

Mawdo's mother has no doubt in her mind of what is right and wrong, with no interest in exploring modern thought. She feels a genuine concern for the purity of her bloodline and to this end she hatches her plan. Her brother thinks nothing of giving her his daughter, perhaps the most obvious example of women-as-property in a novel littered with similar examples. At first, Aunty Nabou raises her namesake as well as anyone could hope, instilling in her the highest virtuous qualities, but she denies her further academic education for fear modern ideas will get into her brain, ideas that run counter to Islam and tradition.

Mawdo's agreement to marry young Nabou devastates Aissatou. It also undoes his character in relation to modernity and women's liberation. The argued justification that he has no choice but to honor his mother adds salt to the wound. Aissatou, uncompromising, will not live in a marriage dishonoring both her and young Nabou. In this tale of Mawdo, Aissatou, Aunty Nabou and young Nabou, none of the participants are winners.

Vocabulary

privileged, solitude, reclusion, humble, henna, vulnerability, defying, lorries, grandeur, antiquated, tantamount, chagrin, juxtaposition, inflexions, imperious, bestiality, polygamy, pioneer



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13

Three years later, Ramatoulaye is faced with similar circumstances, although Modou needs no prodding from his mother. He falls in love with Binetou, a friend of his daughter Daba. Binetou shares with Daba her secret of having an older 'sugar daddy' who has been giving her gifts. Daba then relates Binetou's dilemma to her mother: the sugar daddy wants her to marry him and withdraw from school, promising money, jewels, a villa, and more. Binetou's mother is eager for the match, as it will take her family out of extreme poverty. Ramatoulaye advises that Binetou should stay strong in her resolve not to trade her youth for an early marriage, but unhappily, Binetou finally agrees to the plan when her mother begs her to accept. On the evening of Binetou's wedding, Ramatoulaye receives a trio of visitors comprised of Mawdo, Modou's brother, Tasmir, and the local Imam. They convey Modou's appreciation for their 25 years of marriage and break the news to her that he has just taken a second wife. Ramatoulaye now pieces together Modou's recent absences, his will to lose weight, his fussiness over his clothing of late. She reflects on her mother's old suspicion of Modou and on the years of marriage leading to this point. Rama does not reveal to the visitors this devastation. She asks them to convey thanks to Modou, "a good father and a good husband," and as the visitors take their leave, it is only Mawdo who knows of the pain in Rama's heart, having seen what it did to his own wife.

Chapter 14

Soon, acquaintances return from the ceremony to provide Ramatoulaye with details. This is when she is first made aware her co-wife is Binetou. Rama's daughter Daba is furious and wants her mother to send Modou away as he has shown disrespect to both Daba and Rama. Ramatoulaye reflects on her options. She tries to understand the situation as dictated by genders: A woman's devotion increases with time, while a man is always comparing what he has with what he's had before and could have in the future.

Rama considers leaving, and examines how others in her condition have fared. This leads her to the story of her friend Jacqueline, a protestant who marries a Muslim despite her parents' protestations and her in-laws lukewarm reception. In almost no time, Jacqueline's husband is unfaithful and fraternizes with many women. Jacqueline is distraught. She has horrible chest pain the doctors cannot ascribe to any disease. They offer prescriptions that do no good.

Jacqueline begs for her parents' forgiveness, which they grant her, yet her pain remains and she is admitted to the hospital's neurological ward. Eventually Jacqueline's mental state is attributed to the cause of her physical pain. The doctors give her electric shock



treatment and she is free to go, though she is counseled to get involved in life and to cultivate her own reasons for living.

Ramatoulaye returns to thoughts of her own situation. She knows the right and dignified solution but chooses to remain. Her children do not approve of her decision and they let her know it. Conversely, Aissatou does not challenge Rama's choice, opting to support her in her decision.

Ramatoulaye resigns herself to the fate ahead, but still there are surprises with the addition of a wife: she had expected an equal division of wealth among the wives, but Binetou gets everything and Rama is left with nothing. Modou avoids Rama. He cannot be persuaded by family or friends to do otherwise, though they try. Modou simply forgets about his first family and embraces the new one.

Analysis

Rama grapples with a betrayal of a man who knew better. Modou's avoidance of telling Rama his plans, in addition to his subsequent avoidance of her and her home, imply his embarrassment of his actions. His guilty conscience does not, however, manifest itself by action. Despite Rama's agreement not to leave, Modou cuts off all finances to his wife. Though Rama earns a salary, most women in the country at that time do not, and this situation puts financial control under a microscope. Not only are many women obliged to stay in compromising polygamous marriages, but even when they do, there is no guarantee their husbands will continue to provide for them.

Rama's struggle to decide again places her in the middle of modern and past, emancipation and tradition. Her ultimate decision to stay shows how deeply rooted traditional bonds can be, even for liberated and educated women.

Vocabulary

metamorphosis, dictum, incisors, seduction, gauge, slaughtered, predecessor, impenetrable, precautions, effervescent, facilitate, infectious, vexations



Chapters 15-17

Summary

Chapter 15

Rama examines the differences between the second wives- young Nabou and Binetou. Young Nabou was raised by her aunt to live virtuously. She was taught to respect elders, to provide for orphans, to be generous, to have tact. She does not have a great deal of education but she works hard as a highly skilled midwife. She also grapples with those babies she cannot successfully bring into the world of the living. Young Nabou is a fighter, responsible and aware. She sees life's hardships and has no interest in frivolities. She also sincerely loves her husband.

Binetou, an intelligent and educated girl, makes a substantial sacrifice in choosing marriage over her baccalaureate and her youth. She turns her hostility to her advantage, increasing demands on her husband constantly. Modou tries to keep up, dying his greying hair and creating celebrations as distractions, to minimize her awareness of his aging.

Many suggest potions and charms for Rama in order to be rid of Binetou, but Rama chooses not to go down that path, opting instead to '[look] reality in the face.' Part of that reality is Lady Mother-in-law (as she calls Binetou's mother) who, climbing out of poverty, luxuriates in her newfound riches and status. And there is Binetou to contend with. Binetou takes to visiting nightclubs with her husband, parading her success in front of her peers. But these opportunities to show off leave a mark on Binetou, as surrounded by others her age, she is reminded of what she has given up and will never have again. Daba, now engaged, sometimes goes to the clubs with her fiancé just to stir the pot, hoping to bring discomfort to her father and her former friend who should face what they've done.

Chapter 16

Ramatoulaye carries on alone, stepping up to fill the void left by Modou's leaving. She learns to fix latches, call plumbers, master the finances, and pay the bills. Rama also comes to terms with not having a partner. She learns to go to the movies alone, a temporary escape from her distress. The theater also provides her an ever-deeper understanding of a larger world.

Rama eventually becomes glad for the lack of contact from Modou, rather than the turbulent alternative of him dipping in and out at his leisure. She finds purpose in life, yet at night, loneliness hits: "Like opium, I missed our daily consultations." Ramatoulaye finds solace in music broadcast nightly on the radio. She also finds great strength in her children.



Ramatoulaye envisions meeting a man to take the place of Modou but she is unsure of how her children would react to him. She is also aware of the complicating detail that she is not legally divorced, merely abandoned.

As her financial situation has deteriorated, Rama takes public transportation, despite her co-wife driving through the city in her Alpha Romeo. Rama tells Aissatou of this imbalanced and intolerable situation, and Aissatou reacts by buying Rama a fiat of her choice. Rama, overwhelmed with the gesture, overcomes her fears and learns to drive. This victory is sweetest for what it means to Rama's children- that they no longer have to feel shame in front of their father's second family.

Chapter 17

Ramatoulaye examines her role in the failure of her marriage, pointing to her having given of herself more than she'd received. She acknowledges that intellectually she appreciates Aissatou's modern choice, but Rama still holds marriage as essential to her happiness. Rama moves forward with her life. She finds her way with Modou's family, and they still visit her house often. Her children grow up free of major incidents and they do well in school. And yet, she never lets go of her love for Modou, nor of the pain of that love.

Analysis

Ramatoulaye is sensitive to the realities of the new young wives of Modou and Mawdo. She understands they are at the mercy of their families' wishes and no more in control of the situation than she is. Nonetheless, Rama recognizes young Nabou's reality is far more similar to her own than Binetou's reality. Though she does not directly say this, Rama draws connections between Binetou's modern academic experience with the lightness of her world, whereas in contrast, young Nabou's role guiding souls into the world provides her an earthier knowledge of the elements of life and its tribulations. Though people suggest Rama fight to obscure Binetou, she chooses instead to accept her situation.

Rama, in the world between old and new, learns to make do without a partner, but does not rid herself of the anguish associated with the solitary and unfamiliar role.

Vocabulary

wielded, stigmatized, calumny, marabouts, docility, poise, degradation, hitherto, incontestably, bewitching, disillusioned, grotesque, attribute, lurched, preoccupations, quashes, leprosy, laurels, condescension



Chapters 18-21

Summary

Chapter 18

Rama forgives Modou for his betrayal. She now prays for him daily, hoping God will listen. Modou's brother Tasmir visits Ramatoulaye and informs her he will take her as a wife. This erupts Ramatoulaye out of her 30-year silence. Her words attack Tasmir with a vengeance, challenging his love for his brother, to be thinking of his own wedding during mourning, and trying to lock in his position before Mawdo tries to stake his claim. Rama rages on: "You forget I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love..."

Ramatoulaye is not done yet. She reminds Tasmir his three wives all have to work as he cannot support the three families he already has, while "you, the revered lord, take it easy, obeyed when you crook a finger." Rama will not become one of his wives. She relentlessly keeps going, mentioning, in contrast, Daba and her husband, who have now bought up all of Modou's properties. Tasmir yells at Rama to stop and Mawdo silently indicates she should do the same. But Rama is on a roll and reaching her peak. She demands Tasmir give up his "dreams of conquest" and swears she will not be his wife. Tasmir stands up to take his leave, defeated. Rama marks this as revenge from his visit five years prior when he was bearing news of Modou's second marriage.

Chapter 19

The next suitor to pursue Ramatoulaye after her 40 mourning days is Daouda Dieng, the suitor of her youth who had been her mother's first choice and now visits to pay his respects. He is married with a family, and although nothing comes of their exchange, their friendly discussion reveals Ramatoulaye's political opinions, which she speaks of with passion. Nearly 20 years of independence have passed and still of the sitting deputies in the Assembly, only four are women. Advancement in academics is still determined based on sex rather than intellect. Ramatoulaye wants women to be a part of the shaping of the country, and Daouda agrees. Daouda also feels that the future lies in gaining the confidence of other countries in order to bring in money for further development. Daouda visits again the next day, but as Rama's aunts are there at the time, they do not have opportunity to talk further.

Chapter 20

Daouda visits Ramatoulaye again. This time they speak of socialism and Daouda extolls the virtue of varied opinions for a country if all of the opinions stem from a true love of that country. They move on from politics and Daouda asks Rama to marry him. He loves



her, he has always loved her. He tells Rama to think about his offer and he will return tomorrow to hear her response. He leaves hurriedly.

Chapter 21

Rama carefully examines her feelings and comes to the conclusion that while she appreciates Daouda, she does not love him. She acknowledges his exceptional qualities but cannot marry him. She asks her neighbor and relation Farmata, a griot (a mixture of poet, musician, sorcerer and facilitator for family concerns) to deliver a sealed envelope to Daouda with her reply. Rama's gentle letter of rejection points out "esteem is not enough for marriage." It also explains the difficulty she would have in coming between a man and his wife, as someone had done to her so recently. The letter concludes with an offer of friendship, which Daouda flat out refuses. Farmata returns with his written reply: "All or nothing. Adieu." The griot is outraged at Rama's bold choice to turn away her good luck. Ramatoulaye never hears from Daouda again.

After Daouda, many suitors try their luck but Ramatoulaye turns them all away. Rama deduces the suitors are after the wealth at her disposal, amassed by Daba and her husband. The contents of Rama's home are hers, and the building and land are on loan from the bank. Daba, with a vengeance, had successfully procured Binetou's large villa, forcing Binetou and her mother to leave, though they kept all of the jewels and gifts given to them by Modou. Of her daughter's vengeful action, Rama says "But Daba is like all the young, without pity."

Analysis

In writing of various suitors, novelist Mariama Bâ gives Rama the opportunity to express her views on marriage and a woman's role in it.

Tasmir's assumption Rama will become his wife is natural given his cultural traditions. Here is another example of women-as-property, and what Rama may or may not want is irrelevant. While this tradition emerged from a desire to provide for widows and not leave them to fend for themselves, it feels archaic in the new Senegal. Ramatoulaye expresses her outrage at the lack of voice Tasmir offers her. She rails against marriage as something arranged by men, with no thought of the spiritual joining of souls that marriage is supposed to represent. Daouda, in counterpoint, approaches Rama with a heart full of love. Rama declines his offer as she does not share his feelings, but she also says she cannot be a person who steps between a man and his first wife.

There is no question Rama is strong in her beliefs, and her resolve not to settle grows as more suitors seek her out. Rama mentions Daba and her husband are now in a position to provide for her should she need anything, and again there is an unspoken implication that were she penniless, she would need to consider accepting a marriage proposal. As access to her daughter's wealth is one of the factors attracting her suitors, there would also be far fewer proposals.



Vocabulary

piety, initiated, heredity, conceit, aplomb, contemptuous, revered, gravity, spontaneity, meticulous, provoked, stimulants, skirmishes, interlocutor, unanimous, declaration, revelations, galvanized, accommodating



Chapters 22-24

Summary

Chapter 22

Rama will soon see Aissatou who is travelling back to Senegal. Rama wonders what differences she will see in her friend, what changes her friend will see in her.

Ramatoulaye talks of her older children- Mawdo Fall is in conflict with his teacher, who finds ways to ensure a Black student is not ranked first in the class; her twins, who play tricks on everyone; Daba, who has a strong, balanced, modern marriage; Aissatou who has taken Daba's place in looking after her siblings. Rama is grateful when Mawdo Bâ steps in with medical support when her children fall ill.

Chapter 23

Ramatoulaye grapples with being a parent of adolescents and young adults. In an effort to be modern and build trust with her children, she's allowed the girls to wear trousers, to go to the movies unescorted, to have both female and male visitors, all to cultivate an environment of openness. But now she discovers three of her children - Dieynaba, Arame and Yacine - have taken up smoking, and she will not tolerate it. Rama ponders the factors at play in these modern choices: "Does it mean one can't have modernism without a lowering of moral standards?"

Chapter 24

Rama's young sons Malick and Alioune are hit by a motorcycle. The motorcyclist is shaken and politely explains the details of the events. He expresses his genuine apology but Ramatoulaye recognizes the fault lies with her sons, who were recklessly playing soccer in the street at the time. Malick may have a broken arm and young Aissatou is summoned to take him to the hospital. They return with Malick's arm in a cast.

A larger development is in store for Rama: her daughter Aissatou is three months pregnant. Farmata has been hinting at this for some time but Rama does not catch on until finally Farmata questions the girl and young Aissatou reveals her secret. Ibrahima Sall, Iba for short, is the father. He is a law student on scholarship and loves young Aissatou. Pregnancy outside of wedlock is not tolerated in this society, but Ramatoulaye decides to support her daughter and help her through her shame, pain, and repentance. Farmata was disappointed that Rama did not treat the situation as harshly as expected in the community. Farmata warns Rama that by accepting this, her other daughters will follow suit with other sins.



Analysis

Rama's children are part of the first generation born of modern parents yet the challenges she faces with them are as old as time. How Ramatoulaye chooses to handle these challenges, however, is of a different course than her mother's generation. Rama fosters freedom and trust among her children. She does not rule with an iron fist but rather by giving her children latitude. Rama soon recognizes this can lead to a sinking of moral code but she does not change her tone. When she learns of young Aissatou's condition, she responds with love, understanding, and kindness.

Vocabulary

characteristic, caressing, seclusion, withered, tolerate, redress, mischievous, desertion, vice, degradation, ironic, slovenly, repulsive, begets, cowries, ascribed, collided, gluttony, optimism, compensate, whetted



Chapters 25-27

Summary

Chapter 25

Iba visits Ramatoulaye. His appearance pleases her – his cleanliness, eyelashes, teeth, eyes. Iba seeks Rama's consent to marry young Aissatou, and his mother will raise the child so the newlyweds can continue their studies. Rama is pleased with the plan. She is concerned her daughter will be expelled from school, but as the birth of the child lines up with the holidays, Aissatou will camouflage her belly with loose clothing as she gets bigger and hopes to go unnoticed. Rama notes, with hostility, only pregnant school girls get kicked out. The boys who played a part are never sent away. Overall, Ramatoulaye feels Iba has carefully thought through all of the details, and she feels Aissatou is already a part of a new family with him. She blesses her daughter and the path that lies ahead.

Chapter 26

Iba visits the house every day and wins over Rama and her children- all except the three girls, who are hostile to him for having compromised their sister. Iba encourages Aissatou to study, and her marks improve. Farmata does not approve of him and finds every opportunity to find fault with him. Iba's parents visit as well, concerned for Aissatou's health.

Rama learns from her mistake with young Aissatou and decides to educate her trio of girls about sex. She tells them of the "sublime significance of the sexual act." She stresses they should ensure none of their acts should compromise their path ahead. Rama feels great discomfort but her daughters are unfazed. Regardless, Rama is proud she has crossed this bridge.

Chapter 27

Rama looks forward to tomorrow's reunion with her friend Aissatou. She reflects on her feelings about being a woman in these times of action towards liberation. Rama also still believes in the "inevitable and necessary balanced pairing of a man and a woman." She holds love as the connection between these beings. Rama holds harmony to be the key to a family's success.

Rama lightly challenges her friend as she wraps up her letter- will Aissatou be wearing traditional clothing or man's trousers? Will she require the use of Western utensils, chairs, tables? Rama cautions her she will have none of it: "I will spread out a mat..." Ramatoulaye concludes stressing she still works towards reshaping her life as she still fosters hope.



Analysis

Ibrahim and young Aissatou are a symbol of the modern future, a future that does not have its share of problems but they are problems that can be surmounted with freedom, love, and understanding. Ibrahim injects hope into a house that did not have much hope left and he will be a wonderful father in time. The old values that Rama wants to carry forth into the new world are all falling into place but they are coming from a place of freedom and choice, rather than from an enforced duty.

Ramatoulaye's letter concludes with a staunch desire not to harden as a result of her experience, willing to stay open and take the chance of pain all over again.

Vocabulary

treacherous, propositions, compensate, lenient, subordinate, monotonously, regression, cocksure, broach, condemned, distinguishes, harping, carriage, vibrate



Characters

Ramatoulaye

Ramatoulaye relates the story and in doing so, reveals much about her personality. Rama writes during her sequestered mourning period, but as a young adult, Rama wanted to expand her knowledge and horizons. As a teacher, wife and mother of twelve, she delights in the fullness of her life. And when twenty five years later, the carpet is ripped out from under her when her husband abandons her, she is strong as steel and carves out a future for herself. Ramatoulaye strongly believes in the bond of marriage and that it is the foundation of society. She does not believe she must give up her belief in Islam or in many traditions of her culture, but she will not tolerate women not having a voice of their own.

Modou

Modou is a lawyer who starts his career representing trade unions. Later in life he transitions to a post in the government. In his youth he married Ramatoulaye for love, and later in life he marries again, though this time the reasons are less certain. Modou respected his educated working first wife and yet he requires his second wife to stop her studies. Modou starts out in life with the energy and ideals of youth, and as he ages he loses steam and the will to fight. He lets all of it fall by the wayside, going so far as to disrespect Rama by abandoning her physically and financially.

Aissatou

This diary in the form of a letter is written to Aissatou. This tells us of Rama's close bond with her. Aissatou has a strong thirst for knowledge and believes in equality, Aissatou grew up poor, the daughter of a goldsmith, and when she married Mawdo they had similar views on the world. Mawdo's choice of taking a second wife drives Aissatou to divorce him, and this is where she shows her mettle, her lack of compromise, and her dignity. Quite late in life, she returns to her studies and quickly rises to an outpost position at Senegal's embassy in the US.

Mawdo

Mawdo has chosen to devote his life to caring for others. He works long hard hours and he knows the work is important. He starts out a true champion of banishing bias against women and the poor. Like his friend Modou, he marries for love in his youth – against his mother's wishes - and he and Aissatou share a rich and fulfilling life together as partners. Later, he concedes to his mother's wishes and takes a second wife, driving away his first wife as a result, and shattering any illusions she'd had of a balanced



marriage. He misses Aissatou and turns to Rama to talk of his pain, though Rama supplies him with little comfort.

Binetou

Binetou, according to Rama, is “beautiful, lively, kindhearted, [and] intelligent.” Binetou is Daba’s friend who had been raised in poverty but was climbing the rungs of education, eagerly looking towards a bright future. When Modou presents himself as a suitor, Binetou’s mother pressures her to stop her studies and take a husband twice her age as he will shower wealth on their family. Binetou, not knowing how to do otherwise, consents, and this concession deadens her inside.

Lady Mother-in-law

Rama refers to Binetou’s mother as Lady Mother-in-law with disdain. Binetou’s mother is shameless, trying to get as much as she can out of her daughter’s union with Modou, even after his death.

Aunty Nabou

Aunty Nabou, a former princess, is a strong woman, having raised her two daughters and one son after the tragic early death of her husband. She is a traditionalist, of the old generation who will not bend to the changing times. She recognizes while the city of Dakar is changing, the countryside is filled with villages of more traditional values. Aunty Nabou will stop at nothing to preserve her royal bloodline, dedicating her life to raising her niece simply in order to force Mawdo’s hand into marrying the girl.

Young Nabou

Rama finds young Nabou shares many of her concerns of daily life. They can relate to each other. As a midwife, she sees life and death situations daily and this keeps her in a very real world untouched by intellectual discourse or frivolity.



Objects/Places

Senegal

Senegal is the backdrop for this story at a time of intense change in the country.

America

Aissatou, the recipient of the letter, is currently posted in America. This allows the letter to symbolize Senegal's determination to move forward toward the modern world.

Cars

Rama's lack of a car or driver's license is a symbol of a lack of mobility for the women of Senegal who do not have the support of their husbands. Binetou, in contrast, has her husband's support, and drives a car - not just any car but an Alpha Romeo. It is strong and independent Aissatou who literally and figuratively hands Rama the keys to a car and control over her life.

Teeth

Ramatoulaye's mother identifies the spacing of the incisors as an indication of trustworthiness and connectedness to sexuality. Modou's incisors are not to her liking and her suspicions bear fruit. When Rama meets Ibrahim, who will marry her own daughter, she inspects his teeth and decides that they meet the criteria for a good and loyal husband.

Food

While not directly tackled, food is an underlying presence in this book as an indicator of sharing. Rama's house is always filled with Modou's family members and she feeds them all and well. Aunty Nobou brings delicacies from the city to her brother and returns with delicacies from the countryside. The mourning visitors partake of the many offerings supplied.



Themes

Money as Power

Money runs through the many currents of this story - freedom, marriage, loyalty, choices, family. The movement to emancipate women consistently encounters the same stumbling block: money. With women uneducated and in their houses, they remain dependent on their husbands for all of their needs. Binetou and young Nabou will always be tied to their husbands - they won't have the means should they ever choose to leave. Aunty Nabou ensured Nabou's limited education, and Binetou's mother drove her to marriage for the sake of money.

The tradition of giving the visitors money when they leave the mourner's house is an expensive tradition and impractical for someone who has just lost the breadwinner of the house.

Modou betrays Rama by using their joint house as collateral for his new home, and by cutting her off from all funds.

Social Progress

Senegal is in a state of change and new ideas, modern ideas, of how to create a free and equal society are emerging. The poor will no longer be relegated to ignorance just because they are poor. Girls will be educated. And the stringent restrictions of older traditions start to recede, as with the example of Mawdo - the son of a princess - marrying the daughter of a goldsmith. Another example is when Aissatou divorces her husband because she does not agree with plural marriage. The older generation finds it difficult to adjust - Aunty Nabou in particular is set in her ways. The current generation is a mixing pot of old and new. Some of Modou's sisters understand what it is for Rama to be a working mother while others don't know why she would bother.

Education

The novel highlights education as a key to freedom and enlightenment. Modou's denying Binetou her continued studies is tantamount to taking away her potential power and freedom. Aunty Nabou limits her namesake's exposure to education, as it is counter-purpose to the traditional customs she wants to instill in the girl. Aissatou, already a teacher, continues her studies upon her divorce - first casually by reading at home, and later in formal institutions in Senegal and France. In a symbolic sense, her education provides her so much freedom it allows her to travel all the way to America, a land of hope and opportunity. Rama values education as precious, and her greatest pleasures to be her children's accomplishments

Senegal has just switched over to a system of education for all, though the system is still far from perfect, with not enough spots for everyone who wants to learn, and as we see with Rama's own son, there are incidents of teachers being biased in favor of White students.



Style

Point of View

So Long a Letter is a novel written in the first person point of view. Through the device of a letter, Ramatoulaye narrates her story to her friend as a diary, offering a first-hand account of Ramatoulaye's life and emotions, distilled in the telling by the isolation of her mourning period.

Setting

Ramatoulaye writes from Dakar, Senegal, and the recipient of the letter is in America. Dakar, the capital city, is full of the old customs as well as the changing tide of beliefs and practices. The country gained independence not 20 years earlier, and is still new, ushering in a future of hope.

Language and Meaning

The people whose lives intersect with Rama are educated for the most part, but their language is accessible to all. The people in the story speak plainly, even when heated political debate breaks out. The author of the letter, Ramatoulaye, is clearly educated and this is reflected in her writing and her vocabulary, though again she expresses herself with simplicity. The importance of the simplicity of language is that Mariama Bâ wants her novel to be accessible to everyone, even if they have not had the opportunity to enjoy further education as she did.

Structure

Mariama Bâ creates an intimate piece by structuring the work of fiction as a letter told by one good friend to another, with multiple entries, similar in tone and structure to a diary. The novel is divided into 27 diary entries. The first entries are in the present, with Modou's death as the beginning of the tale. As Rama goes further into her sequestered mourning, she also goes further back in time, and the entries turn to reflections on events that happened long ago. Rama traces the trail from those memories up to the present. The final entries arrive at the present, which coincides with the conclusion of her mourning period.



Quotes

Teachers – at kindergarten level – as at university level – form a noble army accomplishing daily feats, never praised, never decorated. An army forever on the move, forever vigilant. An army without drums, without gleaming uniforms. This army, thwarting traps and snares, everywhere plants the flag of knowledge and morality. (Chapter 9)

Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. Others bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. (Chapter 12)

Mawdo, man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality. (Chapter 12)

Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence. (Chapter 14)

When one thinks that with each passing second one's life is shortened, one must profit intensely from this second... (Chapter 14)

Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love. (Chapter 16)

The flavour of life is love. The salt of life is also love. (Chapter 20)

You don't fell the tree whose shade protects you. You water it. You watch over it. (Chapter 20)

A diploma is not a myth. It is not everything, true, but it crowns knowledge, work. (Chapter 22)

One is a mother so as to face the flood. (Chapter 24)

My heart rejoices every time a woman emerges from the shadows. (Chapter 27)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who has died? How many wives does he have and who are they? Who was he living with at the time of his death?

Topic 2

What are the similarities between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou? What are their differences?

Topic 3

What are Ramatoulaye's beliefs on marriage? How do they differ from her husband's beliefs?

Topic 4

Who is Aunt Nabou and what is her plan of revenge? Does it work? Why or why not?

Topic 5

How does money play a key factor in this story?

Topic 6

Who is Ramatoulaye writing to and why?

Topic 7

Ramatoulaye's children are all different yet all moving towards modern times. What are examples of this? What incidents do Ramatoulaye face with her children and what happens as a result?

Topic 8

Who are Rama's suitors and why does she refuse them?



Topic 9

Why did the author write this book and what was she trying to say?

Topic 10

What do you think can contribute to changing customs that prevent women's voices from being heard?