

Mariama Ba. *So Long A Letter*. African Writers Series. (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1981) 90 pp., \$6.00 paper.

So Long A Letter is the story of Ramatoulaye, a recently-widowed Senegalese woman, as she writes to her long-time friend Aissatou. It is the articulate, often anguished narrative of a Muslim woman faced with the sudden second marriage of her husband of twenty-five years. Although polygamy is accepted by her religion and her society, Ramatoulaye feels rejected and betrayed. Yet she chooses to remain in her marriage and prepares to “share equally” her husband with her new co-wife, as dictated by Muslim law. Her husband, however, abandons her completely, to manage their twelve children alone. Upon his death five years later, she is faced not only with grief and confused emotion but also with enormous debts he compiled in wooing his new young wife and her greedy mother. Ramatoulaye’s dignity and quiet strength overcome her bitterness and pain, and she is able to begin forging her own happiness again while responding to her family’s changing needs.

Mariama Ba’s first novel is a sensitive portrayal of an intelligent, progressive woman caught in a slowly-evolving society and age-old traditions. Her courage and self-knowledge provide an honest touchstone for her emotional upheaval. The over-all tone of the story encourages the reader’s sympathy and understanding, for it neither smacks of righteousness nor condemnation, but rather follows Ramatoulaye’s emotional responses and reflections, and her steps for survival.

Translated from the French, *So Long A Letter* displays a vivid vocabulary, while retaining twenty idioms explained in the “Notes.” A slim volume of only ninety pages, its potential for monotony of form (one long letter) is broken by related conversations, a varying of time frames, and a spaced introduction of minor characters.

One of the most powerful themes emerging from Ramatoulaye’s story is that of the value of friendship. Indeed, she writes to Aissatou that

Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love.

(54).

Certainly Ramatoulaye’s use of the letter itself as a tool of comfort and support reinforces her tribute.

— Anne Freitas
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