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## Mariama Ba's *So long a letter* and the educational empowerment of Muslim women

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A discussion of *So long a letter* by the West African woman writer, Mariama Ba, is used as a basis for highlighting the empowering and disempowering effects of particular types of education for women in the traditional African-Muslim context of Senegal. An examination of this issue in the novella would seem to indicate that the marginalization of Muslim women in this and other countries could be alleviated by a religious education which would investigate the differences between Islamic principles and cultural practices as one of its key focus areas. Combined with a secular education taking cognisance of present-day hybrid identities in postcolonial and other states, this approach has the potential to empower Muslim women to become socially and politically active and thereby to reconstruct their status in societies in which the forces of traditionalism often overpower both basic Islamic principles and state legislation designed to promote women's rights.

### Mariama Ba se *So long a letter* en die opvoedkundige bemagtiging van Moslem-vroue

'n Bespreking van *So long a letter* deur 'n Wes-Afrikaanse vroueskrywer dien om die bemagtigende en ontmagtende uitwerkinge wat bepaalde tipes onderrig op vroue in die tradisionele Afrika-Moslem-konteks van Senegal het, te belig. 'n Ondersoek van hierdie aspek in die novelle skyn aan te dui dat die marginalisering van Moslem-vroue in hierdie en ander lande verlig kan word deur godsdiensonderrig met die verskille tussen Islamitiese beginsels en kulturele praktyke as een van sy sleutelfokusareas. Gekombineer met 'n sekulêre onderrig wat huidige kruisidentiteite in postkoloniale en ander state betrek, het hierdie benadering die potensiaal om vroue sosiaal te bemagtig om sosiaal en polities te aktiveer. Sodoende kan hulle status gerekonstrueer word in Moslemgemeenskappe waarin die krag van tradisionalisme dikwels basiese Islamitiese beginsels asook staatswetgewing wat ontwerp is om vroueregte te bevorder, oorweldig.

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The importance of women's education in a Muslim context is reflected in Mariama Ba's acceptance speech for the Noma Award for the novella, *So long a letter*, in which she said: "People must be instructed, cultured and educated, so that things can advance" (Stringer 1996: 74). The theme of education forms the connecting link between the three parts of *So long a letter*, which focuses on the emotional journey of Ramatoulaye, a French-educated school-teacher in the postcolonial West African society of Senegal. The epistolary form of the novella facilitates its confessional mode, and the ostensible recipient of the long "letter" is Ramatoulaye's best friend and confidante Aissatou, who has improved her educational qualifications, obtained a divorce and moved to the USA after her husband (like Ramatoulaye's) entered into a polygynous marriage with a much younger woman. Ramatoulaye is widowed after thirty years, having spent the last five years of her marriage as a co-wife. The novella focuses on her reminiscences during her *iddat*, the mourning period of four months and ten days prescribed for Muslim widows. Her experience provides a unique insight into the conflicts and dilemmas which characterise nations emerging from a colonial past. Postcolonial identities are not static but shifting, and religion plays a key role in defining these shifts (Loomba 1998: 227). Senegal is characterised by Blair (cited in Lang 1991: 306) as a country with a high degree of homogeneity, in which the Muslim majority cohabits easily with the Catholic minority and has a strong tolerance of traditional beliefs (Lang 1991: 306). According to Khatami (2001: 53), traditions in predominantly Muslim societies generally comprise the "habituated thoughts, beliefs and deeds of a people that have become institutionalized in society on the basis of past practices".

In order to investigate the effects of education on women in a traditional African-Muslim context, it is necessary to consider the way in which the novella is arranged around a series of images of the entrapment of women. Khatami (1995: 255) states that postcolonial women writers' searches for alternatives to existing levels of oppression and their stances on glorifying/denigrating traditions vary in accordance with their class, background, level of education, political awareness and commitment. Born into a French-educated family in Senegal, as a Muslim woman Mariama Ba was expected to conform to the expect-

tations of traditional Senegalese society. Likewise, her protagonist's Muslim Senegalese identity is underscored by specific references to the "Koran" (Ba 1980: 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 57), and her general religious references culminate in a specific identification of her religion as Islam (Ba 1980: 27, 46). Although Ba was not a victim of polygyny,<sup>1</sup> Miller (1997: 6) affirms that the novella contains other widely recognized parallels to the author's own life. *So long a letter* may thus be read as a semi-autobiographical depiction of the life of a woman living in the specific socio-cultural milieu of a particular time in her country's history. The novella is prevented from becoming a socio-political tract by its constant movement between conscious deliberations on culture and society and the personalised, intimate thoughts revealed in the epistolary form, enabling the protagonist to explore specific aspects of her life from both the inside and the outside (Latha 2002: 183).

Ashcroft *et al* (1998: 66) affirm that decolonisation is a complex and continuing process, rather than something automatically achieved on independence. In Mariama Ba's construction of her imagined reader the small group of elite, mainly Muslim readers and the international francophone audience have many points of convergence. Thus, although the novella focuses on a specific socio-cultural milieu, it also reflects the contemporary concerns of women on a much broader scale. Set in a postcolonial context, the novella is characterised

1 The Quran states, "But if ye do good/And practice self-restraint/God is well acquainted/With all that you do. Ye are never able to be just/As between women/Even if it is/Your ardent desire" (Ali 1945: Sura 4 verses 128-129). In effect, a Muslim male is often deterred from entering into polygynous union by the fact that his conduct has to be governed by very stringent rules based on promoting justice and equality at all levels (including the emotional and the material) among his wives. Dr Lois Lamy al-Faruqi (1998) asserts that the feminist demand for separate legal status for women is equally espoused by Islamic traditions and contends that polygyny is certainly not imposed by Islam, nor a universal practice. It is instead regarded as an exception to the norm of monogamy, and its exercise is strongly controlled by social measures. If utilised by Muslim men to facilitate or condone sexual promiscuity, it is not less Islamically condemnable than adultery, and no less detrimental to society. Muslims view polygyny as an institution which is to be called into use only under extraordinary circumstances. Moreover, any woman who wants her marriage to remain monogamous can provide for this condition under Islamic law.

by the factor of cultural ambivalence. Rather than suggesting that some colonised subjects are “complicit” and others are “resistant”, ambivalence describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterises the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. It suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the postcolonial subject (Ashcroft *et al* 1998: 12-3). This is noticeable when Ramatoulaye expresses her admiration for “the great culture” of France (Ba 1980: 14), and later contradicts this sentiment by her reference to “a society shaken to its foundations, torn between the attractions of imported vices and the fierce resistance of old virtues” (Ba 1980: 73).

Thus, despite a certain amount of acculturation to French norms and values, her protagonist has a strong awareness of her Senegalese identity. In an interview, Mariama Ba declared that *So long a letter* is a cry from the heart of all women, though first and foremost from that of Islamic Senegalese women (Stringer 1996: 58). The oppression of Muslim women often arises from the blurring of distinctions between traditional and religious practices that overpowers basic Islamic principles as well as state legislation designed to promote women's rights in Senegal and other countries. Ahmed (1992: 241) states that most Muslim countries set up governments which bear no relation to an Islam reinterpreted to give precedence to its ethical voice. Despite the attainment of civil and political rights, cultural prejudices and inadequate resources continue to frustrate women's advancement. In *So long a letter*, Ba examines the effects of religious and traditional practices on women not only on the basis of her commonalities with her elite contemporaries, but also in relation to the majority of her countrywomen, as well as women in other societies. Rahman (1982: 285) believes that the disabilities which many Muslim women suffer are primarily due to the social milieus that have resulted from the interpenetration of many diverse cultural traditions in Muslim countries over the centuries. He also states that Islamic modernity expresses an approach to social reform through a new interpretation of Islamic sources. An insistence on reform based solely on modern Western principles often proves counterproductive, especially in countries in which Islam has considerable societal significance. Lila Abu-Lughod (2001: 105) affirms that many women activists in the Middle East are

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working from within the Islamic tradition to produce new interpretations of religious texts and to find an alternative modernity that is not secular. I will therefore use Islamic modernity as a paradigm to suggest an approach to education that has the potential to empower Muslim women to become socially and politically active and thereby reconstruct their status in the societies (both Western and non-Western) in which they reside. Despite differences based on particular traditions and practices of Islam in specific cultural contexts, there are connections and commonalities between Muslim women in many parts of the world. As Mohanty (2003: 502-3) points out in *Under Western Eyes revisited: feminist solidarity through anti-capitalist struggles*:

In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities, because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. It is this intellectual move that allows for my concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities between borders.

This article will focus on the tenets of Islamic feminism as a way of addressing the malpractices and inequalities that are common to Muslim women worldwide, since there are many who believe that Islam as it is practised in present times is fair and just to women, while others believe that these practices are utterly patriarchal, but that true Islam is not (Al-Hibri 1982: 207, Muhsin-Wadud 1992: 32). Badran (2001: 44) defines an Islamic feminist as one who is concerned about being an observant believer, and looks to the sacred texts, paramount among which is the Quran, exercising *ijtihad* (independent investigation) to explicate how Islam advocates gender equality and to expose repressive gender practices wrongly claimed to be Islamic. It is possible for Muslim women to build coalitions across borders to overcome gender repression. As Badran (2001: 49) points out:

Islamic feminist discourse as a feminism within the universe of Islam or the community of Muslims (the *umma*) definitionally transcends the confines and concerns of the nation-state.

## 1. Education in *So long a letter*

In the first part of the novella (chapters 1-5), Ramatoulaye reveals to her childhood friend that she has been widowed and describes the funeral proceedings and mourning rituals which accompanied the death of her husband. The second part of the novella (chapters 6-16) deals with the past, as the protagonist recalls the French colonial education which she and Aissatou received, their marriages and subsequent abandonment, as well as their differing responses to their victimisation by their spouses.

The third and last section (chapters 17-27) focuses on the choices Ramatoulaye makes as a single woman and mother in the patriarchal socio-cultural milieu of Senegal. Throughout the novella, there is mention of the education of male characters such as Mawdo, Aissatou's husband, who graduates from the African School of Medicine and Pharmacy, and Modou Fall, Ramatoulaye's husband, who graduates in France with a degree in law. Ramatoulaye also discusses with pride and concern her son Mawdo's progress at school, as well as the career prospects of Ibrahima Sall, a law student who becomes engaged to one of her daughters. However, there is a greater focus on the educational experiences of the female characters in *So long a letter*.

Male nationalists in newly independent African states often took up the issue of women's education, "charting a parallel process of education and reform, one which would simultaneously improve the women's lot and protect them from becoming decultured" (Loomba 1998: 219). However, as events in this novella set in this West African state indicate, reform of the status of women is not automatically achieved within the education systems of such countries, as the bid to prevent women from becoming "decultured" often conflicts with the attempt to empower them. In addition to the Family Code of 1972, Senegal adopted a National Plan of Action in 1982 which was directed at women and based on the official goal of making legal equality a *de facto* reality. According to the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow (1982: 35) these measures have not always been successful, despite the fact that they have the education and training of women as one of their main focus areas. Ramatoulaye's question to Daouda Dieng, a member of the predominantly male national assembly, "When will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex

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but of talent?”(Ba 1980: 61) reveals the existence of gender discrimination in terms of educational opportunities for women in Senegal.

Van Allen lists some of the following cultural factors which contribute to a lack of interest in formal secular education for women in West African societies. First, an investment in a girl’s education is not considered fruitful because she is lost to her in-laws when she marries. Secondly, even educated men prefer a wife with at most a secondary school education, since too much education is widely believed to make a woman disobedient. Thirdly, most women who marry are expected to devote themselves exclusively to their families, even if they are educated (Stringer 1996: 9). These factors are often used to demonstrate the so-called “backwardness” of Muslim societies. Western critics such as Crowder refer specifically to Senegal as a society “where Islam as a religion retarded female education” (Stringer 1996: 8). Although West African history has accounts of influential, educated Muslim women like Asma’u Fodio (Geissenger 1999: 9) and despite the assertion by Muslim commentators such as Rahman (1982: 308) that women’s education is one of the most important forces for social change in Muslim societies, Al-Khattab (1998: 102) confirms that Islam is sometimes (mis)used to justify denying an empowering education to girls. This occurs despite a long history of scholarship among Muslim women which finds its basis in the Quranic emphasis on the importance of the acquisition of knowledge for all Muslims, male and female.

In *So long a letter*, Mariama Ba’s protagonist recalls that one of the “angry rumors” which circulated after Aissatou’s marriage to a high-caste doctor in the predominantly Muslim society of Senegal was: “School turns our girls into devils who lure men away from the right path” (Ba 1980: 17). Steady (1981: 34) reports that females in senior positions in families have a great deal of authority. Aunty Nabou, Aissatou’s mother-in-law, uses her position to coerce her educated son to marry a second wife of her choice, thereby destroying his first marriage, which had been based on love as well as intellectual compatibility. She has unambiguous ideas about the caste system and the limitations of formal higher education for women proclaiming:

To tell the truth, a woman does not need too much education. In fact I wonder how a woman can earn her living talking from morning to night (Ba 1980: 30).

Although the remark is reflective of this traditional woman's personal vendetta against her professional daughter-in-law, it also seems consonant with the negative attitude to women's education held by both men and women in many predominantly Muslim societies, as well as in communities of Muslims in other parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>

In *So long a letter* Ramatoulaye's rebellion against such attitudes is demonstrated in many aspects of her discussion of traditional oral education, secular colonial education and postcolonial education. However, although acquiring a religious education from an early age is a fundamental aspect of life in a predominantly Muslim society, there is only one fleeting reference to her attendance at the "Koranic school" as a facet of her early childhood memories in the first page of the novella. In *Senegal: an African nation between Islam and the West*, Gellar (1982: 87) points out that in many parts of rural Senegal, "Koranic" schools are expanding more rapidly than public schools. Although Mariama Ba wrote during the same period, this fact is not reflected in the novella. This gives rise to the type of problem which becomes apparent in Ramatoulaye's citing of certain so-called facts and precepts from the Quran which do not appear in it, such as:

And yet we are told in the Koran that on the third day the dead body swells and fills its tomb; we are told that on the eighth day it bursts; and we are told that on the fortieth day it is stripped (Ba 1980: 8).

and:

The *mirasse* commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what is carefully concealed (Ba 1980:9).

According to Robinson (1991: 121), the Muslim francophone authors have varying degrees of Quranic experience, coupled with extensive French education.

- 2 Al-Khattab (1998: 98), a Canadian resident, discusses the case of a young illiterate mother whom she met at their children's school in England. This woman, who had been brought to England as an infant, confided in her that although her brothers had been sent to school, her parents, themselves uneducated, had simply seen no need to give their daughter even the most basic education. This situation had escaped the attention of education officers, and from a young age this woman had cooked and kept house and learnt to speak English by watching television.

Mariama Ba's own background in French colonial education is largely mirrored in her account of Ramatoulaye's formal education.<sup>3</sup> Ba considered herself privileged to have had a colonial schooling and both her father and grandfather had an influence in this regard. Her paternal grandfather was an interpreter for the French colonial office in Dakar and her father, who taught her to read, was the first Senegalese Minister of Health (Staunton 1994: 328). In an interview, the writer specifically mentions the influence of Mrs Le Goff, her French headmistress at the Ecole Rusfique, who "broadened her pupils' horizons" (Staunton 1994: 330). In *So long a letter*, Ramatoulaye mentions that she and Aissatou attended an educational institution in Rusfique on the outskirts of Dakar and discusses its French headmistress's very similar aims.

Although cultural nationalists like the influential Cheik Anta Diop called for a total liberation from French norms and values (Gellar 1982: 93), Ramatoulaye's ideals coincide to some extent with those of Leopold Senghor, who was the first postcolonial leader of Senegal. As a French-educated intellectual, Senghor believed in establishing the worth and dignity of African culture as complementary to Western civilization (Innes 1992: 148). Thus, although Ramatoulaye and her circle of upper-class friends were "torn between the past and the present" and despite their debates about whether formal, secular education has advantages over traditional manual work, they were "resolutely progressive" (Ba 1980: 19). Ramatoulaye expresses an opinion on each stage of the educational process: from kindergarten to primary school, secondary school and finally university, with "its own large number of despairing rejects" (Ba 1980: 18). She refers to both craftsmen and people with formal educational qualifications as pro-

3 Mariama Ba shares commonalities with some other Muslim writers in this regard. In examining issues of gender and the representation of Muslim women in a selection of modern Egyptian literature, Nadjie Al-Ali (1994: 114) says: "Unlike many writers in the West, the Egyptian writers here do not dissociate themselves from their life histories or their social environment [...] It has become evident that Western conceptualizations about authorship cannot be adopted in the context of Egyptian literature without losing a significant layer of meaning. We, as readers and critics, have to find a new position in-between the old-fashioned assumption that the text represents the author's deepest self and the postmodernist contention that promotes 'the death of the Author'."

professionals and promotes nationalist values by expounding on the importance of having a profession in the advancement of a newly independent state. These nationalist sentiments lead her to deplore “the desertion of the forges, the workshops and the shoemaker’s shops” (Ba 1980: 18). However, her valorisation of formal, secular education includes the statement:

When you are adults, if your opinions are to carry weight, they must be based on knowledge backed by diplomas. A diploma is not a myth. It is not everything, true. But it crowns knowledge, work (Ba 1980: 19).

Later, she says: “The dream of a rapid social climb prompts parents to give their children more knowledge than education” (Ba 1980: 73). The fact that she draws a distinction between the two highlights her belief that the knowledge which is linked to skills in craftsmanship should be reinforced by formal secular education. According to her, the latter is time-consuming but more rewarding as it leads to upward social mobility in professions such as teaching, medicine and the law.

## 2. The impact of competing discourses on the education of women

Colonial discourse creates a deep conflict in the consciousness of the colonised because of its clash with other knowledges of the world (Ashcroft *et al* 1998: 42). In a country newly liberated from colonialism, Ramatoulaye feels compelled to engage with the demands of competing processes of acculturation by trying to resolve the conflicts between past and current practices and knowledges of the world. Her statement “Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress” (Ba 1980: 32) underlines the emphasis she places on the use of the written word to convey cultural information and other types of knowledge. However, since only 1% of women and 15% of the entire population had the ability to read French texts in Senegal at the time (Gellar 1982: 101), it is significant that she attributes to books the ability to “knit generations together” in a culture where traditional education usually performs this type of role. Matriarchs such as Aunt Nabou collude with the forces of patriarchy

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by declaring that “the first quality of a woman is her docility” (Ba 1980: 29). The power of these forces in determining norms and values is evident in Ramatoulaye’s reflection that the traditional, informal, oral education given by Aunt Nabou to her niece, Young Nabou, is “easily assimilated, full of charm, [and] has the power to bring out the best in the adult mind, developed in contact with it” (Ba 1980: 47). Thus, the hybridity of Ramatoulaye’s identity is evident in the fact that she affirms the value of both orality (with its connotations of informality and traditionalism) and formal, written discourse.<sup>4</sup>

In expressing her admiration for her best friend, who has empowered herself with additional professional qualifications, Ramatoulaye says:

You set yourself a difficult task; and more than just my presence and my encouragements, books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you (Ba 1980: 32).

However, the effects of colonial discourse are evident in the fact that this eulogy of books does not seem to include the Quran, which is translated into native languages, read by all classes of society and regarded by many Muslim women as a text which enshrines their empowerment. Since Muslims derive systems and subsystems of knowledge from the Quran (Wan Mohd 1989: 38), this aspect of Ba’s representation can be attributed to the limitations of the type of religious education offered in most Muslim countries. As Rahman points out, learning at Islamic schools (*madrasas*) is undemanding, usually comprising reading and rote memorisation of the Quran as well as

4 Although the novella is written in French, transculturation is manifested in the rhythms and repetition characteristic of African orality and the griots of Senegalese society, in remarks such as the following: “But Daouda, the constraints remain; but Daouda, old beliefs are revived; but Daouda, egoism emerges, scepticism rears its head in the political field” (Ba 1980: 61). This is also apparent in the proverbs that are used. After Modou Fall’s second marriage, Ramatoulaye says, “I was abandoned: a fluttering leaf that no hand dares pick up, as my grandmother would have said” (Ba 1980: 52). Transculturation, which describes how subordinate or marginal groups in postcolonial societies select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture (Ashcroft *et al* 1998: 233), is also evident in the format of *So long a letter* (Latha 2002: 91).

practising specific religious rituals, and few teachers foster a spirit of enquiry or independent thought (Esposito 1982: 133). This factor is evident in smaller Muslim communities around the world as well as in larger societies like Senegal. As events in *So long a letter* reveal, the lack of focus on the principles of independent research that underlie Islamic modernity plays a strong role in determining the levels of oppression of many of the women represented.

Although Robertson & Berger (1986: 13) posit the view that, rather than paving the way for equality and greater opportunity, education for most women in West Africa functions as an instrument of oppression reinforcing subordinate roles, Miller (1990: 270) affirms that “education, modernization and the supposed coming of egalitarian values have actually proved to be a mixed blessing to many African women”. These critics are referring to the effects of formal, secular education, some of which are evident in Ramatoulaye’s question to Aissatou in her discussion of the French colonial education they received as young girls: “How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed?” (Ba 1980: 15). Whelehan (1995: 16) states that an adherence to gender identity is something endorsed and reinforced by ideological agencies outside the home, such as schools. Although the two friends agreed that “much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within [their] traditions” and were “resolutely progressive” (Ba 1980: 19), their French headmistress’s attempts “to make up for [their] inadequacies” (Ba 1980: 16) results in complex subjectivities.

Ambivalence characterises the way in which colonial discourse relates to the colonised subject, for it may be simultaneously exploitative and nurturing, or represent itself as nurturing (Ashcroft *et al* 1998: 13). The “nurturing” attention of the headmistress who tried to “lift” her young and impressionable disciples “out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom” (Ba 1980: 16) appears to aggravate the cultural conflicts and disappointments of her disciples. Her propagation of a secular type of modernity is not easily synchronised with customary and religious laws. It is significant that the glowing

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discussion of the influence of this Frenchwoman is immediately followed by the self-mockery evident in these words of Ramatoulaye:

Thus, free from frustrating taboos and capable now of discernment, why should I follow my mother's finger pointing at Daouda Dieng, still a bachelor but too mature for my eighteen years? (Ba 1980: 16).

It is ironic that Ramatoulaye's insistence on exercising the freedom to choose her own marriage partner culminates in her betrayal after twenty-five years. Although she decides not to insist on the traditional privileges of a senior wife, she and her twelve children are completely abandoned by Modou Fall in favour of a nubile teenage girl. Nevertheless, she continues to adhere to her ideal of timeless, romantic love, despite the fact that her options are not as clear-cut as those of her less-educated contemporaries who accepted "frustrating taboos" (Ba 1980: 16) such as arranged marriages. She does, however, accept that she is complicit in her own oppression by remaining in her marriage. She clarifies this in her statement:

I had made a choice that my reason rejected but that accorded with the immense tenderness I felt towards Modou Fall. Yes, I was well aware of where the right solution lay, the dignified solution. And to my family's great surprise, unanimously disapproved of by my children, I chose to remain (Ba 1980: 45).

Thus, although the hybridity of the identity engendered by her colonial education contributes to Ramatoulaye's marginalisation to some extent, the intense introspection facilitated by the epistolary form of the novella allows her to examine her own cultural ambivalence very closely. The resulting insights into herself reveal that she is compliant with, and at the same time, resistant to several aspects of colonial discourse as well as the norms and values of her African-Muslim milieu.

### 3. Gender and professional identities

In conservative Muslim communities and groups within larger societies, the pursuit of professional responsibilities by women is sometimes believed to be in conflict with customary duties as well as religious identities.<sup>5</sup> Although Ramatoulaye is free to practise her profession,

5 Saudi Arabia is a notable example. Hirst (1999: 20) states that although the number of female university graduates in Saudi Arabia outstrips the number of

she strongly believes that an education and the attainment of professional status should never preclude marriage and motherhood. Husbands and wives hold power within their own spheres in West African families (Ware 1981: xv), and it is interesting that Modou's sisters do not seem to be intimidated by Ramatoulaye or to feel in any way inferior to her, even though they are not professional women. Although Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's professional training is provided at the French teacher training college which catered for girls from "the whole of former French West Africa" (Ba 1980: 15), their careers as teachers reflect Senegalese nationalist ideals. Of her own, as well as Aissatou's professional life, Ramatoulaye says: "How faithfully we served our profession, and how we spent ourselves to do it honour" (Ba 1980: 23). This idealisation of the role of teachers reflects the goal of service to the new postcolonial nation. Teaching is referred to as a "priesthood" (Ba 1980: 23) and teachers are eulogised as a "noble army accomplishing daily feats, never praised, never decorated". This "army", according to her, everywhere plants "the flag of knowledge and morality" (Ba 1980: 23). It is significant that the role of imparting knowledge and morality is normally assigned to mothers as well as to teachers at *madrasas* in Muslim societies — Ramatoulaye sees an overlapping of her religious faith as well as her identity as a mother with her professional role as a teacher.

However, after this brief reference to her teaching experiences and responsibilities, she relegates her professional life to the background and focuses on her life as a spouse, mother and housewife in the rest of her "letter". Stringer (1996: 146) comments that although Ramatoulaye is in favour of women's liberation and a passionate believer in the formal knowledge acquired through books, she finds herself unable to violate the traditional code of behaviour with regard to marriage.

male graduates, they make up less than 2% of the workforce, due to the clergy whose initial refusal to allow women's education is now manifested in their refusal to allow women to practise their professions. Citing Afghanistan as an example, Tayob (2001) points out that the role of professional women is circumscribed by interpretations of Islamic law in some Islamic movements. For Muslim women in Northern Nigeria, gender liberation is symbolized by a woman's right to operate in public space — to determine for herself whether she will enter the workforce or run for public office (Mikell 1995: 416).

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Marriage and a professional identity are intertwined in this character's consciousness, and she seems to revel in the fact that the level of her professional training, in comparison with Modou's, conforms with widely accepted norms. Ware (1981: xv) points out that, in the West African context, the educated wife of an educated husband has to find employment which does not lower her own status or reflect poorly on her husband. Although Ramatoulaye's professional training was local while Modou Fall trained as a lawyer in France, she takes obvious pride in the fact that her husband "rose steadily to the top in trade union organizations", praising him for his "understanding of people and things [which] endeared him to both employers and workers" (Ba 1980: 24).

#### 4. Gender and traditional responsibilities

Despite being a strong proponent of secondary and tertiary education for women, Ramatoulaye does not hesitate to reveal the constraints which govern her own life as an educated, professional woman. She seems to regard her job as an economic necessity, an extension of her duties as a traditional wife and mother. The fact that she is "first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working" (Ba 1980: 20) indicates that she believes she has chosen a difficult life for herself. Loomba states that the "self-fashioning of the nationalist male required his fashioning of his wife into fresh subservience, even though this new role included her education and freedom from some older orthodoxies" (1998: 221). As members of the Western-educated intelligentsia, Modou and Mawdo find it expedient, on the one hand, to encourage Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to express a small amount of freedom from Islamic values and to embrace a Western style of modernity by dancing "the lively beguine, frenzied rumbas [and] languid tangos" (Ba 1980: 20) at Christmas parties but, on the other, and to become subservient wives and daughters-in-law. Ramatoulaye tells Aissatou that she has "never conceived of happiness outside marriage" and adds:

You know how soft-hearted I am, how much I loved Modou. You can testify to the fact that, mobilized day and night in his service, I anticipated his slightest desire (Ba 1980: 56).

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She adopts a pitying tone in her discussion of the French Technical Co-operation teacher of literature who is hospitalised with a nervous breakdown. Ramatoulaye says of her:

Old, for her unmarried status. Thin, angular even, without any charm. Her studies must have been her only form of recreation in her youth. Sour tempered, she must have put off any passionate advances (Ba 1980: 44).

Her description of this teacher clearly contrasts with her favourable characterisation of Aissatou's more traditional Senegalese rival. Young Nabou attends a few years of school and then becomes a wife and mother. The approving tone used to discuss Young Nabou's midwifery skills (which sometimes seems cruel in this "letter" to Aissatou) and of the babies who "passed again and again between her expert hands" (Ba 1980: 47) affirms a nationalist emphasis on the Mother Africa trope. This approval of motherhood and domesticity also reflects both customary and religious norms in Senegal. Ramatoulaye herself conforms with these norms as well as those of a middle-class French housewife who treats her home as an expression of her personality and is obsessive about cleanliness and order, resenting the entry of outsiders as they bring dirt and disorder (Stratton 1994: 141).

Rosalind O'Hanlon states that colonial history reveals a pattern whereby colonial officials and native men came to share very similar language and perceptions on the significance of women and their proper duties (Loomba 1998: 219). As Loomba (1998: 219) points out, the fact that many educated women in traditional societies do not rebel against these notions is evident in the example of a woman in the postcolonial context of India who states in her writing: "See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman". Although this kind of servitude is encouraged by tradition, Islamic commentators like Huda al-Khattab (1998: 28) advocate that Muslims compare custom with what Islam actually says about the rights and duties of women, adding that it is custom which demands that women do housework and encourages men to demand service rather than to be helpful. Ramatoulaye's repeated emphasis on domestic perfection would therefore seem to underscore Ba's ironic treatment of her central character, who insists on becoming a household drudge

in her over-enthusiasm about conforming to French as well as traditional Senegalese societal norms and expectations. Ba's feminisms emerge more clearly in Ramatoulye's married daughter Daba, who "does not find household work a burden" (Ba 1980: 73) since her husband, who shares duties with her, categorically states: "Daba is my wife. She is not my slave, nor my servant" (Ba 1980: 73).

Ware (1981: xv) states that educated women in West Africa often become financially dependent on their husbands, while uneducated women participate in informal trading and maintain separate incomes. Lamya al-Faruqi (1998: 2) asserts that, in accordance with Islamic principles, marriage should have no effect on a Muslim woman's legal status, her maiden name, her property or her earnings. Nevertheless, Ramatoulaye seems to regard a joint savings account as a symbol of her deep love for the man she chose to marry and she contributes equally towards major items such as the family home, which, ironically, Modou eventually mortgages without her knowledge to pay for Binetou's luxurious "Villa Fallene" with its "chic contents" (Ba 1980: 10). Several of the cultural conflicts and uncertainties Ramatoulaye experiences would thus seem to arise from a struggle to balance the three major influences in her life, namely traditionalism, religious beliefs and many of the values that she acquires through her colonial education. In contrast to Ramatoulaye, and in a bid to escape strictures such as the demand that she accept her husband's polygynous marriage, Aissatou empowers herself with additional qualifications and, like other women endowed with a formal, secular education in other predominantly Muslim societies, moves to a social milieu she considers less restrictive. Her decision to move to the West is indicative of the fact that not enough cognisance is given to the types of knowledge that would be empowering for Muslim women who have to cope with societal norms and values that are in conflict with their Islamic rights.

## 5. Religious education and reform

When the lower caste Lady Mother-in-Law, who is "more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with education" (Ba 1980: 48), forces her teenage daughter to contract a polygynous marriage and thereby aborts her attempts to complete the *baccalauréat*, Ramatou-

laye bemoans this fact. In keeping with her ideal of a sisterhood of women, she categorically states that all women have the right to “education, which [they] should be able to pursue to the furthest limits of [their] intellectual abilities (Ba 1980: 61). Thus, despite her position as a member of the French-educated elite, she often speaks for women of all classes and castes within as well as outside her own society, and this is affirmed when she tells the lower-caste<sup>6</sup> Aissatou: “We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation” (Ba 1980: 15). As Davies & Graves (1986: 13) point out, Ba’s African feminism is evident in her concern about the specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women’s lives in African societies. In addition, Ba’s mention of “mistaken and egoistic interpretations of religion” in her predominantly Muslim society marks her as an Islamic feminist who indicates her belief that religious practice plays a crucial factor in the subjugation of women. Innes (1991: 147) says that Mariama Ba, like her central character, sought religious reform within Senegalese society. Ba revealed this in an interview in which she stated that the women in her society are “heavily burdened by mores and customs, in combination with mistaken and egoistic interpretations of religion” (Schipper 1987: 46-7). Moreover, Ba’s awareness of the imagined francophone reader and her affinity with some of the ideals of Western feminism is evident in Ramatoulaye’s declaration:

I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women’s liberation that are lashing the world [...] Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have the same fate, which religion or unjust legislation have sealed (Ba 1980: 88).

It can therefore be seen that the feminisms in *So long a letter* emerge not only as separate manifestations of the central character’s identity, but also as intersecting forms which demonstrate the hybridity which

6 Caste and class distinctions remain a worldwide problem for Muslim women, and in some societies access to education is still limited to women from the higher classes. Aziza al-Hibri (1982: 218) refers to the following words of the Prophet Mohammed to dispel this type of misconception: “All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no claim of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a white over a black person or of a male over a female. Only God-fearing people merit a preference with God”.

characterises women's identities in postcolonial societies (Latha 2001: 29).

The statement about religion being one of the two factors that has sealed the fate of women draws attention to the reality of unfair religious practices and their negative impact on women. As Müller (2000: 29-30) points out, "Religious traditions often inform the content of public discourse on social issues by means of a variety of notions of the good, of norms and values and of integrity and identity". It is significant that Ramatoulaye recognizes that, while some facets of tradition, such as dress and eating codes (Ba 1980: 89) have inherent value, other facets are often used for negative purposes. During her husband's funeral, Ramatoulaye complains that she "suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom" (Ba 1980: 19). These constraints are very apparent during her marriage, when she is forced to control her deep agitation after the *imam* of the local mosque pompously declares: "There is nothing one can do when Allah the Almighty puts two people side-by-side" (Ba 1980: 36) and then blithely goes on to confirm: "Yes, Modou Fall, but happily he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks be to God. All he has done is to marry a second wife today" (Ba 1980: 37). The middle-aged Modou's sudden polygynous marriage is thus justified by the *imam* in terms of religious norms and interpreted as a divinely sanctioned event in which he had no free choice. Mariama Ba's Islamic feminism is thus demonstrated in her representation of the specific details of the type of oppression experienced by the Muslim women in her novella. Although traditional interpretations of religious precepts may vary from one society to another, they often cause hardship to women, who find it extremely difficult to oppose them in public. Due to these interpretations, the Western-educated Modou manages to cynically utilise the forces of traditionalism to contract a polygynous marriage to the "incontestably beautiful and desirable" Binetou (Ba 1980: 50). At Modou's funeral, she is "installed at [Ramatoulaye's] house, in accordance with tradition" (Ba 1980: 3) where both women are subjected to a ritual "dreaded by every Senegalese woman" in which a widow is expected to "sacrifice her possessions as gifts to the family-in-law, and worse still, give up her personality, her dignity" (Ba 1980: 4).

As Khatami (2001: 61) comments, when traditions adopt the veneer of sanctity in a Muslim society, any criticism or objection directed at these interpretations of religion is viewed as sacrilege. However, although there is an attempt in this novella to suggest reform through new interpretations of Islamic sources, a certain amount of circumspection arises from the writer's awareness that forthright criticism may be misconstrued as a revolt against religion in a patriarchal society in which women are often disadvantaged by a blurring of the distinction between custom and religion (Latha 2002: 187). Ramatoulaye is therefore very careful to refer to her conformity with the religious practices expected of widows and states in an early part of her long letter:

I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me (Ba 1980: 8).

However, this type of conformity does not reflect a reformist position since, despite restrictions on the nature of their social interaction during the mourning period, in many Muslim contexts widows who are the sole supporters of their families usually resume their professional duties about two weeks after the deaths of their husbands. Moreover, there is no necessity for Ramatoulaye to "have obtained an extension of [her] widow's leave" (Ba 1980: 88) as this goes against both customary and religious norms. Although she declares that she has "not given up wanting to refashion [her] life" (Ba 1980: 89), this extension has been interpreted as evidence that Ramatoulaye avoids "the challenge of self-definition" (Stratton 1994: 146). The emphasis on not only following the rules of *iddat* but also extending them may, however, also be seen as an indication of the problems Muslim women generally experience in gaining access to the type of religious education that encompasses known facts and precepts as well as the principles underlying Islamic modernity.<sup>7</sup> This is also reflected in the shortco-

7 While Mohanty (1991: 5) has stated: "Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within particular societies, in order to both understand it better and to effectively organize it to change it", in her latest article she clarifies: "I am misread when I am interpreted as being against all forms of generalization and as arguing for difference over commonalities. This misreading occurs in the con-

mings pertaining to the representation of religious reform in this novella by a Muslim woman writer. Trimmingham (1980: 122-3) proclaims that in the newly independent French territories, individuals with formal education did have access to the Quran in French translations and that while many of the reformists were calling for a new interpretation of Islam, different from that mediated by clerics, their attempts at reconciling the new ideas they were acquiring with the religious thought and practice of Islam were generally without guidance so that they were "very much at sea". Nonetheless, there is evidence in *So long a letter* of an effort to go beyond the accepted type of religious education in order to gain a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of religion. Ramatoulaye demonstrates her cognisance of the rights of a woman whose husband enters into a polygynous marriage in her declaration: "I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life" (Ba 1980: 46). She is also aware that she has the right to express her complete repudiation of the situation by divorcing her husband. In urging her mother to follow this course of action, Daba declares: "The wife can take the initiative to make the break" (Ba 1980: 74). Her pronouncement is not necessarily a manifestation of a Western style of feminism, but refers to the classical Islamic law of *khul*, which allows a woman to end an undesirable marriage (Rahman 1980: 460). However, this right is often obfuscated by male clerics in most Muslim contexts.

text of hegemonic postmodernist discourse that labels as "totalizing" all systemic connections and emphasises only the mutability and constructedness of identities and social structures" (Mohanty 2003: 502). In her review of Al-Ali's *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, Rebecca Torstrick (2003: 162) focuses on Al-Ali's proposal that Egyptian activists for women's rights should use the phrase "strategic essentialism", in which the essential difference being appealed to is fluid, depending upon the particular historical and political needs of the situation. Thus, activists might sometimes make common cause with Islamic women, while at other times the larger category of "Third World feminist" may be more relevant. In an interview, Spivak (1993: 35) said that she had given up on the phrase "strategic essentialism", since people had seized on the word "essentialism", without apparently considering what she had meant by "strategic". However, she added that she had not given up "strategic essentialism" as a project.

In discussing the larger vision of Muslim women worldwide, Badran (2001: 125) states that Islamic feminism has manifested itself as a core set of global ideas with specific local forms of activism, needs and priorities, as there are local Islamic feminisms articulated at particular national or communal sites. Thus, while Ba's representation encompasses the unique customs practised in her country, the perpetuation of the oppression of women through androcentric interpretations of religious principles is a problem commonly experienced by Muslim women, and the measures needed to remedy the situation are therefore not dissimilar. Rahman (1982: 301) believes:

[T]he specific legal rules of the Quran are conditioned by the socio-historical background of their enactment and what is eternal therein is the social objectives or moral principles explicitly stated or strongly implied in that legislation.

Many Muslims agree with this viewpoint, and although the focus on an interpretation of religious texts based on moral principles which affirm the rights of women is one of the cornerstones of Islamic modernity, the clash between tradition and religion remains a major obstacle. This discord underlies many of the tribulations experienced by the female characters in *So long a letter*.

## 6. Education for meaningful empowerment

In spite of the obstacles she faces as a single mother of twelve children in her society, Ramatoulaye's "search for a new way" (Ba 1980: 89) epitomises her continuing quest for positive changes in her own circumstances within the confines of her society. Her profession proves to be an invaluable asset after her abandonment as it allows her to support her family financially. She becomes resourceful and self-reliant as she learns to drive, ventures out into the social sphere on her own and finds creative solutions to her children's problems, although these are sometimes in conflict with customary or religious norms. Sarvan (1988: 464) states that position of women is an element in a total culture, and there is growing awareness in traditional societies that change is not only inevitable but welcome and that societies and culture should not be static but dynamic.

However, in a predominantly Muslim society, the status of women is dependent on a re-interpretation of religious sources and a building up of educational resources to promote an understanding of women's issues. It is significant that, although Ramatoulaye and Aissatou respond differently to their immediate circumstances, their cultural conditioning seems to deflect both of them from moving into the public sphere to make a determined effort to initiate gender reforms for the benefit of women of all classes within their society. This is highlighted in Ramatoulaye's discussion with Daouda Dieng, who, as a member of the National Assembly, astutely points out:

Whom are you addressing, Ramatoulaye? You are echoing my speeches in the National Assembly, where I have been called a 'feminist'. I am not, in fact, the only one to insist on changing the rules of the game and injecting a new life into it. Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered, or calmed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a greater interest in the destiny of the country. Even you who are protesting: you preferred your husband, your class, your children to public life. If men alone are active in the [political] parties, why should they think of women? It is only human to give yourself the larger portion of the cake when you are sharing it out (Ba 1980: 62).

Despite Daouda's perceptive comments about women's complicity in their own oppression, Ramatoulaye later goes on to agree with Daba, who says: "But when I look at the fruitless wranglings even within the ranks of the same party, when I see men's greed for power, I prefer not to participate" (Ba 1980: 74). She does not seem to subscribe to the motto that the personal is the political; instead, she idealises the structures and aims of women's groups "whose only reward is inner satisfaction" (Ba 1980: 74). There is a separation between the writer and the protagonist in this regard, as Ba's own feminisms would seem to be expressed in the male character's espousal of feminism and the viewpoint that, although the membership of women's groups may be a starting-point, women also have to become involved in the political arena in order to overcome their marginalisation, to initiate and try to enforce gender reforms. Ba's utilisation of Daouda Dieng as her spokesperson in this instance reiterates her belief that the implementation of gender reforms cannot succeed without the co-operation and participation of men, particularly in predominantly

Muslim societies imbued with traditional male power. Archer (cited in Blackledge & Hunt 1995: 331-2) explains that interest groups outside education can either negotiate with those inside it to develop forms of education which meet their real needs, or use their power as citizens to “manipulate the political machine” in order to overcome the tight control exercised by the political centre. However, Hassan (1989: 98) cautions that even when a woman is able to acquire an education and secure a job, the absence of any social support structure makes it very difficult for the majority of self-aware Muslim women to deal with the kind of oppression that prevails in Muslim social contexts. In order to develop forms of education which meet their real needs, women have to utilise their right to elect their fellow women and enlightened men to political positions from which they may gain the power to have a positive impact on the systems and structures within their communities or societies that inhibit the empowerment of women.<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Although *So long a letter* emanates from a specific socio-cultural milieu at a particular time in its history, it reflects many of the present-day concerns of Muslim women worldwide, as the strong forces of traditionalism often overpower both basic Islamic principles and state legislation designed to promote women's rights in many Muslim socio-cultural contexts. Thus, in spite of differences arising from particular traditions and various interpretations of religious precepts

8 Many African women have stressed that they would never be able to address gender problems directly unless they stepped up to the challenge of direct self-representation and involvement in the political realm. In countries like Nigeria and the Sudan, some Muslim women are making use of new political spaces in order to achieve increased status in many areas of life by affirming that their activism does not constitute a rejection of religion or culture but that material or legal rights for women can influence their culture in more equitable ways (Mikell 1995: 412). Since feminist hermeneutics (interpretation) of the Quran forms the core of Islamic feminist discourse, some women have found both the space and the imperative to argue for readings that affirm equality and justice for citizens in a state such as Iran, where the Quran functions virtually as the constitution of the republic (Badran 2001: 49).

that impact on Islamic practices, there are universal concerns that unite Muslim women. Islamic feminist discourse within the community of Muslims therefore transcends borders. The social conditioning which allows professional and non-professional women to accept traditional, gender-based expectations; class and caste divisions, and strong matriarchal figures who collude with the forces of patriarchy are some of the factors which prevent Muslim women from understanding their religious and political rights more comprehensively in order to organize effectively for positive change. In predominantly Muslim postcolonial societies such as Senegal, the situation is made more complex by the cultural ambivalence of Muslim women, exacerbated by the congruencies and conflicts between colonial discourse and the native discourses of nationalism and traditionalism. An examination of the issue of women's education in Mariama Ba's *So long a letter* indicates that the prevailing types of education in a traditional society do not always succeed in promoting the meaningful empowerment of women.

In general, proponents of both Western and Islamic modernity see formal, higher education as a vital stepping-stone to the emancipation and empowerment of women in traditional societies. By contrast, many traditional men and women in these societies are joined by some Western researchers and critics in viewing this type and level of education as disempowering, arguing that women did have power in the traditional societies of the past, and that formal education is often inimical to their interests. This novella by an African-Muslim woman writer points to the fact that education in a traditional African Muslim society can be both empowering and disempowering. The empowerment attained by women through formal education is symbolised in the self-articulation in this semi-autobiographical novella written within the bounds of a conservative society. It is radical for a self-confessedly devout Muslim who observes religious laws and customs to position herself against the Senegalese religious leaders (Edson 1993: 16). This clearly attests to the potential for women in all Muslim socio-cultural contexts to reconstruct their identities and to move the debate on women's issues out of the margins and into the centre, where it belongs.

However, the limited religious education available to both males and females in these contexts is disempowering as it does little to clarify the laws governing religious practice, particularly with regard to women, so that women have to rely on self-education to combat the customs and traditions that often prove detrimental to them. It would seem that, although religious education encompasses memorisation and the teaching of particular rituals, it should also examine the differences arising from particular interpretations of Islamic principles and the influence of traditions and customs as some of its key focus areas. The disempowerment that women often suffer may thus be addressed by an adherence to the principles of Islamic modernity and a concerted effort to integrate traditional, secular and religious education in a manner incorporating a spirit of inquiry and independent thought. In addition, the education of Muslim women in all socio-cultural milieus, both Western and non-Western, would have to demonstrate cognisance of the impact of increasing globalisation, hybridisation and intersecting feminisms on present-day identities. If all these factors are taken into account, the implementation of a holistic educational experience including an awareness of effective ways in which to balance gender inequalities would have the potential to promote the empowerment of Muslim women in various parts of the world.

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