



The development of critical and cultural literacies in a study of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* in the South African literature classroom

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Abstract

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*The Languages, Literacy and Communication learning area of Curriculum 2005 endorses "intercultural understanding, access to different world views and a critical understanding of the concept of culture" (National Department of Education, 2001:44). Although this curriculum is learner-centred and tries to create a better balance in the previously asymmetrical relationship between teacher and student, it does place great demands on the educator to avoid reinforcing cultural and multipolitical ideals which are not concomitant with the principles of a multicultural democracy. Since learners are expected to respond to the aesthetic, affective, cultural and social values in texts, the educator has to act responsibly in choosing texts which promote the values inherent in Curriculum 2005. Implicit in the curriculum statement is a commitment to critical pedagogy in the literature classroom with the general aim of promoting societal transformation. As the cultural assumptions underlying particular texts are often not known or shared by all learners, it is important for the educator to facilitate an examination of these assumptions in order to promote cultural understanding and values such as religious tolerance. This article will therefore investigate the development of cultural and critical literacies in the South African literature classroom with particular focus on **So Long a Letter** by the postcolonial African Muslim woman writer, Mariama Ba.*

1. Introduction

In its emphasis on the enriching effects of texts in relation to knowledge, aesthetics, relationships and emotions, the Languages, Literacy and Communication Learning Area of the draft revised National Curriculum Statement endorses a vital aspect of Curriculum 2005. This is a way of conceiving curriculum studies "... which, by seeking to bring the curriculum into closer harmony with social values and political ideals, not only confirms its allegiance to the intellectual values of rational discourse, but also displays its commitment to rebuilding the good society" (Bobbit, 1993:5). This learning area requires teachers to implement year-long learning programmes which organize learning outcomes and assessment standards into teaching, learning and assessment activities. There are eight learning programmes for the senior phase which may be successfully integrated in the literature classroom. These include (*inter alia*) programmes for Languages, for Arts and Culture and for Life Orientation. The guidelines contained in teacher support material for the senior phase of the learning area for Arts and Culture by the National Department of Education (DOE, 2000:8-12) foster the recognition and implementation of the human rights embodied in the South African constitution. These guidelines include a focus on the inclusion of various perspectives, the fostering of healthy relationships and an injunction to challenge cultural stereotypes and to promote critical thinking. Learners are encouraged to use the kind of social and historical reasoning which allows them to explore the past and present from more than one perspective, and to recognize the opportunities that exist for positive change.

Facilitating the development of cultural and critical literacies in the South African literature classroom depends on the meanings which are brought to the readings of texts. A central principle of the curriculum is the integration of knowledge, skills and values to create these meanings (DOE, 2001:44). In his account of the reading process, Iser (in Thomson, 1992:12) states that this is guided by the text and influenced by the personal, cultural and literary history of the reader, his or her system of beliefs and the reading conventions he or she has internalized. With its emphasis on personal opinion and personal lives, Specific Outcome 1 in the senior phase of Language, Literacy and Communication (DOE, 1999:12) has strong elements of reception theory. However, since an unmitigated emphasis on this theory "leaves reading too much as a product of the dominant culture in which it takes place" (Thomson, 1992:13), the policy document modifies this by a strong emphasis on the negotiation of meaning by all learners in the classroom. The document clarifies that learners should identify and respond to the "ways in which

construction of meaning varies according to cultural, social and personal differences” and the “ways in which context affects meaning and understanding” (DOE, 1999:14). Educators have to recognize that, instead of reading texts on the basis of fixed theoretical formulations, academic study has to be flexible and constantly review discursive positions in relation to their effects in the world (Govinden, 2000:365). Thus, Curriculum 2005 not only extends the parameters in terms of its definition of literary texts; it also allows educators to explore and implement literary theories which encompass its underlying principles.

In the study of literature in the South African classroom, educators will have to adopt a style of pedagogy which is conducive to the promotion of both cultural and critical literacies. McLaren (1998:451) states that what is required is “a revolutionary movement of educators informed by a principled ethics of compassion and social justice”. In his discussion of the implementation of reflexive democratic discourse and critical pedagogy in a class at the University of Stellenbosch, Waghid (2001:4) posits that the understanding of knowledge which underlines such an approach to meaning-making is that knowledge is not complete, predetermined and discipline-related, but rather continuous and constructed in specific social and historical settings for the “moral good” of society. The revised South African National Curriculum Statement (DOE, 2001:46) indicates that learners are required to learn how texts take a particular view of people and events and that they should develop the critical skills to examine, and, if necessary, resist these views and the values associated with them. In order to avoid cultural stereotyping, learners’ voices can and should be challenged when these may compromise any particular group (Brady & Dentith, 2001:167). Thus, educators will have to encourage learners to avoid both essentialism, as well as what Luke (1996:302) describes as “slipping into a vacuous celebration of difference and rampant pluralism”. It is vital that educators take leadership roles in explicating these benchmarks to learners. As Thomson (1992: 230) points out:

Learners who know what their educators’ purposes are, the point of the activities they are invited to participate in, are people who can make choices. Learners who know what they know and how they came to know it are in control of their own learning processes.

Hinchey (1998:111) states that educators interested in fostering reflective practice face the central challenge of finding ways to move learners to identify and articulate common, culturally endorsed assumptions and she stresses that literature can be a powerful tool to prompt this type of critical questioning. She adds (Hinchey, 1998:117) that there are many works which can expose unconscious assumptions

we want examined but it takes some familiarity with literature and some experimentation to find texts useful in our classrooms. As these assumptions are often articulated within a particular type of representation, critical and cultural literacy skills are vital in the South African classroom, especially in the study of postcolonial fiction which is often characterized by complex subjectivities and hybrid identities. Educators therefore have the responsibility of facilitating an engagement with these aspects by encouraging learners to comprehend the ways in which their own subjectivities and identities impact on their understandings of the world of these texts. As Luke (1996:292) points out:

To pretend that social, cultural, and economic differences do not define learners' identities and lives in and out of the classroom is to abandon the political and moral responsibility and authority we have as teachers to work on learners' consciousness through critique and analysis.

These are important considerations to take into account, as Luke (1996:302) also warns against relinquishing normative benchmarks of "canonical worth" in efforts to affirm learners' equal voices, experiences and abilities. The guidelines for culture fairness in the teacher support material for Arts and Culture in the Senior Phase (DOE, 2000:9) specify that the material should contain multiple perspectives and authentic voices of people who "speak to their own issues/culture". As *So Long a Letter* by African Muslim writer Mariama Ba is taught in English and French departments at some South African universities as well as other educational sites, an examination of the cultural assumptions underlying the text is revelatory of the way in which writers speak to their own cultures as well as the ways in which learners' perceptions may be shaped by a particular type of representation.

2. Facets of representation

It may be useful for learners to recognize at the outset that self-representation is not an unproblematic tool of empowerment for women in societies which are strongly patriarchal. Harrow (1991:4) states that the act of representation turns on the issues of feminism in the Islamic world. As African Muslim feminist critic Mernissi points out, the gap between fact and word, between event and representation, is considerable in women's writing. The first she terms reality and associates with what people actually do; the latter are discourses people develop about themselves which respond to the need for self-presentation and identity-building (in Harrow, 1991:5).

So Long a Letter contains a compelling account of an African-Muslim woman's emotional journey and represents a significant attempt to portray the personal and cultural conflicts of women in African societies. As Stringer (1996:154) clarifies, if a clear distinction can be made between Senegalese and other female writing, it is associated with religion since more than 90% of the population adheres to Islam. However, because of the protagonist's French colonial education, the writing is characterized by ambivalence and this is reflected in the cultural content, format and language. Throughout the novella, there is evidence of the "complex mix of attraction and repulsion that marks the relationship between the colonizer and colonized" and the fact that "complicity and resistance exist in fluctuating relation within the postcolonial subject" (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:12-13).

The contents focuses on the emotional journey of an African Muslim woman, Ramatoulaye, whose husband, Modou Fall, acquires a second wife in a polygynous union after 25 years of marriage. Modou's death five years later precipitates the writing of the long letter to her best friend Aissatou during the *iddat* or mourning period of four months and ten days prescribed for Muslim widows.

Stringer (1996:54) states that, because of the first-person narrative and its confidential tone, *So Long a Letter* is often referred to as an autobiographical work. She lists a number of links between Mariama Ba and her protagonist, which include their ages and levels of education. Ba herself stated that although writing should awake the conscience of the reader, it should also be a work of art and should therefore be a harmonious blending of commitment and artistic values (in Stringer, 1996:50-51). Unlike her protagonist, the writer of *So Long a Letter* was not a victim of the practice which forms a central focus of the revolt against patriarchal practices in the novella, that is, polygyny, which allows a man to marry more than one wife. Huda al-Khattab (1998:40) explains that although Muslim women accept that polygamy may not be practised by females, there are many objections to the abuse of polygyny which often occurs. Despite the fact that Ba made it clear in interviews that her main crusade as a writer was against polygyny, Ramatoulaye seems unconsciously ambivalent about this institution (Stringer, 1996: 68). She avoids the option of a divorce, despite the exhortations of her daughter and the traditional *griot*, Farmata, since marriage seems to provide her with a sense of security and an acceptable identity.

So Long a Letter may therefore be read both as an act of creativity as well 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 also prevented from becoming a social and

political tract by the constant movement between conscious deliberations on culture and society and the personalized, intimate thoughts revealed in the epistolary form which enable the protagonist to explore specific aspects of her life from the inside as well as from the outside.

The central problem faced by most learners in trying to attain critical and cultural literacies in a study of this text is that there is often a lack of clarification between cultural practices and the interpretation of Islam which reflects the socio-cultural context of the novella. Statements such as “The seven metres of white muslin, the only clothing Islam allows for the dead”, and “the Zem-Zem, the miracle water from the holy places of Islam religiously kept by each family” (3) are based on the practices of Muslims around the world. However, other practices, including the undoing of the hair of Ramatoulaye and her co-wife Binetou during the funeral and the collection of money (which is then redistributed to the late husband’s family) are unique to the socio-cultural milieu of Senegalese society. These descriptions of the rituals surrounding Modou Fall’s funeral and the accompanying ceremonies thus demonstrate a mixture of both Senegalese custom and its particularized practice of religion, giving credence to the contention that it is “problematical to speak of a vision of women shared by Arab and Muslim societies (i.e. over twenty different countries) without addressing the particular historical, material, and ideological power structures which construct such images” (Mohanty, 1991:61).

The challenge for learners is to recognize authentic individual perceptions and experiences whilst avoiding the construction of essentialist cultural identities based on a particular representation. Gattas-Soliman (in Harrow, 1991:91) clarifies that although Islamic law originated from one source, variations in interpretation caused a great diversity of application. Consequently, Islamic beliefs and practice vary from one Islamic society to another. And, accordingly, the condition of women is subject to the local social structure and milieu. Responding to wide media misrepresentations of the status of women in Islam, Ahmed (1992:238) elucidates that there is a distinction between “ethical” and “establishment” Islam, stating that although the former preaches the moral and spiritual equality of women in Islam, the latter is marked by androcentric biases. A vivid example of this occurs when the *imam* (religious leader) in *So Long a Letter* demonstrates his willingness to reinforce cultural practices and negate religious principles during his callous announcement to Ramatoulaye that her husband had chosen to marry their young daughter’s schoolfriend in a polygynous union. After she has been widowed, the same *imam* supports her brother-in-law’s bid

to inherit her in terms of customary law and falsely accuses her of profanity when she firmly resists.

Colonial education and Westernization have an impact on Ramatoulaye's awareness of these injustices and intensify her cultural ambivalence. Iranian feminist Tohidi (1991:257) claims that in Muslim societies, the constant exposure of women to the values of Western culture has resulted in a dual value system which leads to dilemmas for a substantial number of them. As a young girl, the values imparted by colonial education influence her to spurn the advances of Daouda Dieng, a very eligible suitor, and to marry Modou Fall, "without dowry, without pomp", despite the "painful indignation" of her mother (16). Her refusal to defer to her mother's opinion is unusual in a society where mothers would traditionally expect compliance from their daughters, and indicates that for Ramatoulaye, a marriage based on romantic love supercedes a commitment to established cultural practices such as arranged marriages. Even after her lengthy abandonment by Modou and subsequent widowhood, she refuses Daouda's offer to marry her and to take care of her twelve children. This prompts Farmata to reprimand her by saying, "Madame wants her heart to miss a beat. Why not flowers, like in the films?" (69). The remark is not baseless, as Ramatoulaye's values are clearly influenced by Western films, which, according to her, "deepened and widened [my] vision of the world, thanks to their cultural value" (52). Although Ramatoulaye is proud of being "one of the first pioneers of the promotion of African women" (14), it is ironical that these cultural values reinforce her disempowerment in some situations. Stratton (1994:140) claims that, as a victim of French colonial education, Ramatoulaye seems to "spring full blown" from Simone de Beauvoir's analysis (in *The Second Sex*) of the condition of middle-class French women who conform with gender expectations.

It is also significant that, although only 1% of women and 15% of the entire population had the ability to read French in Senegal at that time (Gellar, 1982:101), the writer chose to express herself in the language of the colonizer, despite the fact that she was also fluent in Wolof, the language of the majority (Mortimer, 1990:156). Miller (1990:6) points out that, due to the limited literacy and knowledge of French, readers of French language texts produced by an African writer cannot always be presumed to be local. Although the protagonist states at an early point of the long letter to her friend (a fellow member of the French-educated elite group of Senegalese nationalists), "Aissatou, my friend, perhaps I am boring you by relating what you already know" (9), she later goes on to remind her friend of painful details of her origins, marriage and of the circumstances of her divorce, as though Aissatou has absolutely no

memory of these events in her own life. Ramatoulaye also gives a detailed description to her childhood friend of the customary and religious rituals surrounding Modou Fall's funeral with which a native Senegalese would be very familiar. Later, she provides geographical information which would be quite apparent to her friend. This is particularly evident when she presents events from the perspective of Aunty Nabou, Aissatou's mother-in-law, who mentions Senegalese landmarks and explains traditional customs during a visit to her ancestral home. According to Miller (1990:282), this "interlarding of information for the real reader's benefit is revelatory of the compromise between the epistolary form and the narration practised by Mariama Ba".

As most of the contents of the letter by the protagonist to her best friend Aissatou are directed at the reader, and not the ostensible addressee of the letter (Nnaemeka, 1990:7), this may compound the problem of gaining insight into the world of this novella by learners in the South African literature classroom. Although writing in a foreign language for the "real" reader would also seem to provide the writer with a small amount of leeway for interpretations of specific facets of Senegalese customs and its practice of religion from a more personalized perspective, Edward Said's contention that the "modern Orient participates in its own Orientalizing largely by adopting Western views of itself" (in Lang, 1991:304) is reflected to some extent in the African-Muslim context of the novella. In keeping with the campaign against polygyny, all the Muslim men in the novella are portrayed as being either polygynous or as having polygynous instincts. In contrast, the female victims of this practice include a Protestant woman, Jacqueline Diack, who has to deal with the additional disadvantage of being rejected by her husband's family because "she refused to adopt the Muslim religion" (42).

Mariama Ba's representation of polygyny therefore symbolizes her cultural ambivalence, conveying the impression to readers that only Muslim men are guilty of this practice. However, in her research on women and education in West African societies, Ware (1981:122) reveals, "Moslems are said to have a religious basis for being polygynous as opposed to say, the Christians. It is of interest to note here that the practice of polygyny cuts across religious groups". Mariama Ba's representation of polygyny may thus inadvertently result in a reinforcement of cultural and religious assumptions and misunderstandings. Esposito (1982:105-106) affirms that the Quran is the fundamental textual source for all Muslims and as Muhsin-Wadud (1992:83) states, many Islamic commentators assert that monogamy is the preferred marital arrangement in the Quran. Since learners in classrooms have to interrogate generalizations about the target culture in terms of supporting evidence

(Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993:8), it may be interesting to note that polygyny is a debated issue among Muslims and generally occurs in predominantly Muslim societies in which the practice is culturally sanctioned.

3. Cultural and critical literacies

Ball (2000:34) states that in classrooms which practise critical pedagogy, there is a focus on issues of power and the struggles which have historically shaped the voices, meanings and experiences of marginalized others. Luke (1996:202) points out that an ethics grounded in resistance to social injustice is already theoretically woven into feminist and other progressive pedagogy models which imply recourse to justificatory norms of right and wrong. As the implementation of a specific feminist critical pedagogy may not be feasible outside women's studies programmes at a tertiary level, learners of both genders in multicultural classrooms in which *So Long a Letter* is studied will have to try to engage with its competing discourses. Senegalese social commentator Fatou Sow (1989:32) affirms that although the discourse by women on women means that they have seized the right to speak for themselves, there are times when they have to speak cautiously, within limits. Despite the conflict between traditional and feminist discourses, there is a clear commitment to the reform of the status of Senegalese Muslim women in the novella. However, this is sometimes unrecognized by Western critics. Miller (1990:289), who correctly points out that a sound critical perspective of Ba's writing depends on a cognisance of the Senegalese context of her work, also insists that her "radicalism" is very limited. The latter indicates that his own perspective is limited by an insufficient scrutiny of the subtext in regard to custom and religion in *So Long a Letter*. This is a common perception, based on Ba's often restrained expression of her dissatisfaction with some of the practices which disempower women in Senegal.

Her circumspection arises from an 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. Lang (1991:301) believes that sometimes a core tenet of Islam is involved in a "complex web of ironies" which Western critics do not recognize and that African irony about a particular facet of Islam is too easily missed or cast out of context. Many learners in South African classrooms may not recognize that the extract below on women's roles during funeral ceremonies contains an indictment of the predominance of males in the religious affairs of the nation and may represent a implicit appeal for Islamic reform in this regard:

In the women's corner, nothing but noise, resonant laughter, loud talk, hand slaps, strident exclamations. Friends who have not seen each other for a long time hug each other noisily. Some discuss the latest material on the market. Others indicate where they got their woven wrappers from. The latest bits of gossip are exchanged. They laugh heartily and roll their eyes and admire the next person's boubou, her original way of using henna to blacken hands and feet by drawing geometrical figures on them. From time to time an *exasperated manly voice* rings out a warning, recalls the purpose of the gathering: a ceremony for the redemption of the soul. The voice is quickly forgotten and the brouhahha begins all over again, increasing in volume (6 – my emphasis).

This criticism is again implied when she refers to the “slim waistlines and prominent backsides” (8) of the women who attend the prayers on the eighth and fortieth days after the funeral. These incidents can be read as a denunciation of the fact that male religious power and influence succeed in marginalizing women during important religious gatherings and rituals, thus contributing to the resultant inappropriate and frivolous behaviour. This type of censure is reiterated more explicitly during the funeral ceremony when Ramatoulaye goes on to ask, “What then is the significance of these *joyous institutionalized* festivities that accompany our prayers for God's mercy?” (8 – my emphasis). Trimmingham (1980:46) affirms that women's participation in religious affairs in African Muslim societies is “marginal” and that men who attain positions of authority in the religious affairs of particular nations exercise a powerful influence on the day-to-day life of the inhabitants. Since the emphasis in this novella is on the unequal and inferior status of all women in Senegalese society, it can be assumed that the above extracts do not mock lower-class women, but instead point to the fact that women often comply with their own oppression by acquiescing to the status quo. It is also significant that a “manly” voice has to ring out a warning to the women to remind them of the spiritual significance of the funeral ceremony. This message about the power of the male voice in a traditional Muslim society is again evident in a conversation which highlights Mariama Ba's occasional ironical treatment of her protagonist. When Ramatoulaye indulges in rhetoric by complaining to Daouda Dieng about the lack of women's rights in Senegal, he reprimands her for eschewing political activism. Being an enlightened and successful member of the National Assembly, he goes on to point out, “Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root from which all grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country” (61-62). Since a small percentage of the imagined readers of this semi-autobiographical novella would constitute the nationalist intelligentsia, Ba is careful to use

an authoritative voice to underscore the importance of this message, which is aimed at both men and women.

Although African women's literature reflects society, it cannot be said to mirror this society in a "mechanistic" way (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994:46). As an unmitigated representation of the grievances of women in a traditional society would be problematical, Mariama Ba uses the empowerment conferred on her by her formal, secular education for careful selection and omission. However, the veiled representation of some of Ramatoulaye's emotions and needs has led to interpretations which reflect stereotypical notions of the lives of Muslim women. This is evident in Stratton's (1994:141) statement that the protagonist "remains emotionally and sexually paralysed" after she has been betrayed by her husband. On the contrary, her willingness to exercise her emotional freedom is epitomized in the final words of the novella, "The word 'happiness' does have meaning, doesn't it? I shall go out in search of it" (89). Although the semi-autobiographical nature of *So Long a Letter* dictates that the expression of sexual needs by a woman belonging to the socio-cultural milieu of a traditional Muslim society is somewhat constrained, it is nonetheless radical that she does express these needs in the words, "With all the force I had, I called eagerly to another man to replace Modou. Distressing awakenings succeeded the nights" (53). Moreover, Ramatoulaye's unwavering commitment to romantic love and her belief "in the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman" (88) indicate that she fully acknowledges her own emotional and sexual needs.

4. Critical language awareness

A focus on critical language awareness in a study of *So Long a Letter* would help to develop the learner's ability to understand the ways in which the language of a particular text is used as an instrument to reflect, shape and manipulate people's beliefs, actions and relationships. Lang (1991:303) claims that English and French "have been inhospitable to Islamic thought" and states that the barrier between European languages and Islamic traditions in Africa was a deliberate one. The writer's use of French as a medium of expression and the problems of translation exacerbate the general difficulty experienced by South African learners when trying to develop their critical and cultural literacies of this text. In the first line of Chapter 18 of the English translation, Ramatoulaye is purported to declare, "Yesterday I *celebrated, as is the custom*, the fortieth day of Modou's death" (57 – my emphasis). This sentence contains literal translations of the words *célébré* and *comme il de doit* (84) which appear in the original French text. The translation of *célébré*

as “celebrated” is repeated in the third line of this paragraph. Firstly, it is highly unlikely that a Muslim writer would speak of a celebration under these circumstances, as the fortieth day after a person’s death is commemorated by solemn prayers in many Muslim societies. Secondly, when one takes into account Ramatoulaye’s declaration early in the novella, “I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion” (8), as well as her attitude towards Modou’s abuse of customary practices to satisfy his physical desire for a young girl, the words, “as is the custom” as a translation of *comme il de doit* may convey the impression that the prayer ceremony was no more than a customary ritual which she was obligated to carry out. However, if this phrase is translated to read “as one must” or “as is one’s duty”, it reinforces the piety which underlies the statement, “I have forgiven him”, and the wish, “Modou Fall, may God accept you among his chosen few” in the following lines of this paragraph. It is significant that, in the leading sentence of the next paragraph, Ramatoulaye criticizes her husband’s brother (who is accompanied by the *imam* and Aissatou’s ex-husband) for going through “the motions of piety” (57) at the ceremony before entering her bedroom and peremptorily declaring his intention of inheriting her in accordance with traditional rites. This depiction of the conflation of custom and religion for negative purposes by a group of men may thus be contrasted with the positive observance of religious duties by a woman as a facet of the subtext that radically indicts the androcentric bias of religious practice in Senegal. It is therefore evident that the translation of *So Long a Letter* is one of the factors which may impact on the making and negotiation of cultural meanings in a study of this text in the South African classroom.

Since the cultural conflict of educated women living in postcolonial societies often finds expression in original forms of self-presentation, the promotion of critical language awareness can also serve to highlight the hybridization of language which is a distinctive aspect of African writing. Although colonial discourse constructs a particular kind of subject with which the subject itself can and often does concur because of its powerlessness, the process of subject construction can be recognized and therefore contested (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:225). As one of the primary aspects of Specific Outcome 2 in the Languages, Literacy and Communication learning area of Curriculum 2005 is the focus on power relations between the speakers of different languages as well as varieties of the same language, it is interesting to note the cultural ambivalence manifested in the language in some parts of *So Long a Letter*.

A “hot” topic of debate among Senegalese intellectuals has been the relative importance of French and other European languages *vis-à-vis* Wolof and other indigenous African languages in the educational system and cultural life of the nation (Gellar, 1982:46). As a member of the nationalist intelligentsia, Mariama Ba demonstrates her awareness of these debates and the need to assert some aspects of her Senegalese identity through her writing. Lang (1991:300) states that any language conveys a burden of predigested terminology and attitudes against which it is difficult, but not impossible, to write. Although the novella is written in French, a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the colonial system is manifested in the rhythms and repetition characteristic of African orality and the *griots* of Senegalese society. This is evident 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” (61). It 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” (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*. The departure from European literary norms which is embodied in the combination of narrative and epistolary forms is reinforced in the use of techniques normally associated with freer forms of fiction. In some instances, the first-person narrator appears to be replaced by an omniscient narrator, and in others, by multiple voices (Stringer, 1996:56-57). Miller (1990:283) describes *So Long a Letter* as “a peculiar hybrid, representing an original act of literary creativity” and believes that this allows Ramatoulaye to escape her confinement through writing, to embrace her world and Aissatou, and to reconstruct a sense of selfhood. Thus, despite a statement in the novella that the “assimilationist dream of the colonist drew into its crucible [our] mode of thought and way of life” (24), the elements of originality in the text symbolize the ability of the writer and her protagonist to resist some aspects of this process.

Couldry (2000:50) affirms that an individual’s relations to the highly structured cultural environment in which she lives is full of contradictions, and that the contradictions themselves are crucial to understanding wider questions of inequality. However, as Govinden (2000:366) points out, instead of being judgmental of a writer’s possible contradictions, learners should try to understand the contradictions in which the writers themselves are located. It is necessary to understand motivations, political necessities, even expediencies, as writers construct worlds, their own as

well as those of those of others. Thus, whilst some aspects of the language of *So Long a Letter* indicate a rejection of the effects of formal French education, other aspects display an overt compliance with these effects. In one of the two excessively formal short letters within the long letter, Ramatoulaye writes to Daouda, "Those who are involved in it [polygyny] know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change" (68). In another short letter within the long letter, Aissatou (a fellow victim of polygyny) tells her husband:

Princes master their feelings to fulfil their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it (31).

These formal missives not only underline the physical and emotional distance between the two women and their husbands, they also highlight the fact that, unlike the majority of their compatriots who suffer the same fate, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have been enabled by their education to use formal writing as a vehicle in their protests against an ubiquitous symbol of traditionalism. This type of formal discourse combines with the elements of transculturation to reflect cultural ambivalence and to augment the representation of multifaceted identities which characterize *So Long a Letter*.

5. Conclusion

Cultural ambivalence, a criticism of religious practice in Senegal, the limitations imposed on free expression and the impact of a foreign language are some of the factors which play a strong role in this representation of the life of an African Muslim woman in the postcolonial context of *So Long a Letter*. The effective implementation of critical pedagogy in a study of this text may allow learners to interrogate factors such as the impact of colonialism on the complex identities of men and women in postcolonial Muslim societies. These identities would not be regarded as unusual by many learners in present-day South African literature classrooms. As Nuttall and Michael (2000:1) state, "South Africa ... is a striking place for its imbrication of multiple identities – identities that mythologies of apartheid, and of resistance to it, tended to silence". The challenge for the educator will be to help to develop the kind of learner envisaged in the draft revised National Curriculum Statement (National Department of Education, 2001:17), namely, one who can think critically and will be "equipped with the linguistic skills and the aesthetic and cultural awareness to function effectively and sensitively in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society".

Although the policy document for Language, Literacy and Communication in the senior phase of Curriculum 2005 encourages learners to become readers and makers of culture, educators are often unaware of ways in which to facilitate this process. The provision of teacher support material (such as the guidelines on the teaching of Arts and Culture in the senior phase) therefore marks a welcome movement towards developing the practices outlined in the policy document. As Brady and Dentith (2001:169) point out, relations of power which are examined and understood as they intersect with race and ethnic affiliations must take place within the realm of educators as informed and critical thinking intellectuals who call into question subject positions and recognize the limits underlying their own views. It is crucial that educators should try to prevent a narrow application of reception theory or any other literary theory as this may result in the entrenchment of the very attitudes and beliefs which the implementation of the new curriculum is designed to eradicate. This principle is of particular significance in classrooms which do not consist of a good mix of cultures and races.

Although learners should be guided to challenge the cultural stereotyping which may arise during their study of various texts (whether these are written from “outsider” or “insider” perspectives), they should also be encouraged to recognize that there are sometimes basic tenets which guide identity-formation, especially in societies which have a large degree of religious and cultural homogeneity. Space has to be provided to recognize particular cultural patterns and religious beliefs in order to promote sensitivity to different ways of living and to unite learners from diverse backgrounds for social transformation in the South African context. Curriculum 2005 is formulated as a set of principles and outcomes rather than as content and objectives because it is understood that learners may take different routes to reach the same destination. Much will depend on whether educators will be able or willing to implement critical pedagogy effectively in order to promote cultural and critical literacies to suit the wide variety of texts to which learners will be increasingly exposed in the South African literature classroom.

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Key concepts:

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Kernbegrippe:

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 Moslemvroue in Afrika
 postkolonialisme; voortsetting van