

EROS, PSYCHE AND SOCIETY: NARRATIVE CONTINUITY IN MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND *SCARLET SONG*

Emelia Oko

So Long a letter had its centre on the romantic pull of erotic impulses on the psyche. It seemed there that romantic love is the central human impulse. *So Long a Letter* therefore celebrates the pull between eros and psyche limiting the domain of human endeavour. In *Scarlet Song* Mariama Ba redeems the limitations of romantic enquiry by anchoring it as part of social forces. It is in the second novel that Ba situates love as part of a larger human endeavour subject to social forces. *Scarlet Song* therefore provides a needed counterpoint to the monologue of self and one dimension a view of *So Long A Letter*. An omniscient view point on many lives giving a greater density to the novel as a form is the added dimension on narrative continuity in the exploration of the pull of eros and psychic response to it as part of social action. The compelling voice of the 1st person narrator ensuring our sympathy as we travel alongside Ramatoulaye ensures that we share Rama's vision in *So Long A Letter*. *Scarlet Song* provides narrative counterpoint. To the monologue effect of *So Long a letter*, *Scarlet Song* brings the narrative diversity and variety of exposition of the 3rd person omniscient narrator that is able to do a greater justice to the variety of lives and contrary opinions that people Ba's second novel.

The singularity of vision and narrowness of Ramatoulaye's viewpoint in the first novel is countered by the greater variety of lived and larger sympathetic exploration of the second novel. *Scarlet Song* does not tell as in the letter; it shows many lives and allows the reader to arrive at his own conclusions. Where Ramatoulaye had compelled us to share her vision and values in the letter, *Scarlet Song* is more catholic in its method allowing no one dominant view; it gives scope for the proper narrative multiplicity of vision that is the novels method as a genre.

Where the letter was a sustained and intense monologue of woman as experiencing self, often a victim in patriarchy suffering from woman's powerlessness, *Scarlet Song* brings the needed counterpoint. It is a novel from the male viewpoint telling of a man's experience from maternal to erotic love. It is the tension in the growth of Ousmane, male sensitive, loving and devoted son trying to balance the claim of maternal love and the pull of egoistic self.

Ba's narrative retains the sensitivity of female exploration but questions woman's willingness to remain powerless and negate herself in love. The unifying motif in both novels is the exploration of love, which Ramatoulaye described as the spice of life. "The flavour of life is love. The salt of life is also love (Letter 3). In the first novel Ba establishes the important emotive quality of romantic love as sharing a unified vision in confronting the world. It is the break down of this romantic vision that gives pathos to Ramatoulaye's long letter recounting the breakdown of an ideal love. It is therefore essentially a woman's story full of illusion and male betrayal. It is one dimensional but it is a story of self that woman needed to tell from her past history of voiceless and self enforcement.

Scarlet Song is in a more realistic pattern questioning the validity of romantic love in the face of social and economic forces. To the illusion of eros and psyche the romantic love of Mireille and her unsocialized abdication of self to love is posed Ousmane and his social anchor in family and economic limitations that question the demands of self and eros and eventually destroys unsocialized eros. The progression of Ba's vision is from fantasy, woman's illusions and the message of the heart so adequately argued in the letter to a realistic questioning of illusion. The second novel proves the anchoring of illusion in reality. The thematic progression also makes necessary a technical progression from Ramatoulaye's one dimensional vision of unsocialized love in her letter to a many sided vision of love and social demands. The second novel is as such, the story of male variety of response as transcendent self seeing in love not a destination but a small part of living in a larger economic quest of earning a living in work and retaining a place in society. Love is part of a large social frame of existence and is therefore more adequately narrated from the standpoint of the male character Ousmane. The second novels realism carefully anchors Ousmane in the economic deprivation of his world as shared by his mother. A maternal bond is established which forming the centre of this novel can therefore not easily be broken. It is therefore the naivete of romantic love is seeking to break instead of bridge the growth from maternal to erotic love.

Scarlet Song starts with a vivid description of the formation of Ousmane, male and situated in the social district of Using Niari Talli, a poor suburb of Grand Dakar. The novel begins with Ousmane's mother waking him and the closing bond of sharing the privation established between mother and son. The diminutive of his name Oussou! Oussou is going to be a mnemonic motif recalling

the central importance of childhood and its association. He is remarkable for helping his mother with housework. A boy it seemed as the world inhabited by Oussou and the mother did not include daughters until much later. Ousmane earned the stigma of "that, the young man who used to do the sweeping and go to buy dried fish". Ba's artistic vision now does justice to the integrity of the poor as she could not do in the letter concentrating as she did there on romantic pairing. With Ousmane and mother we experience what the poor mean to themselves. It is Mireille's inability to grasp the reality of this social situating of self that leads to her disaster. Woman tries to annex man to a world of illusion, apart. Man is able to annex woman because of woman's social powerlessness. Ousmane has moved his parents from the poor quarters where he was born to government quarters. In the economic climate of Oussou as the provider of emotional and economic stability Mireille introduces Western marital concept of forming a world along for her husband and herself. The futility of romantic love, the pull of eros and psyche as a social, is dispelled by social force of a long tradition of sharing which Parts I and II of the novel established coherently.

Mireille brings a romantic illusion not of Western bourgeois marital unions that are also economic pairings. She rather brings an unlocalized erotic concept. She breaks the bonds with her family. The survival of bourgeois European union depends on building bridges cementing family relatedness ensuring that when romance fades woman is treated as part of an economic contract involving families and their reputation. To bargain as self in patriarchy is to invite dissociation. Mireille brings this form of unsocialized love. She fails to reconcile with her parents and comes to Africa in marriage in a situation prime for failure.

Ousmane retains his religion and forces her to be a Muslim. Ousmane retains his social peers. It is Mireille who sacrifices all for love renounces and independence. This novel is a V lesson in the fallacy of woman's belief in romantic love. Love unsocialized and unlocalized is doomed because marriage is love socialized, a balancing of erotic and psychic impulse with social economic forces. Marriage as a social institution is a balancing of social forces rather than the dual pull of eros and psyche. Ba's realism in *Scarlet Song* is a welcome antidote to the pathos left by male intransigence in *Letter*.

What seemed like male intransigence and betrayal to the heroine Romatoulaye is given objective exploration in the second novel. It is the normal egoistic impulse of every man to satisfy appetite that

leads from illusory love of Mireille to a return to childhood security and childhood forces that form the enduring emotional atmosphere provided by Rouleymatou, the childhood sweetheart who shares Ousmane's own economic and social vision.

She was not averse to sharing. Sharing a man was the common lot of women in her circle and the idea of finding a man for herself alone had never crossed her mind. *Scarlet Song*, 106.

Ouleymatou washed and ironed for Ousmane's mother and worked her way into the heart of the family. As a socialized consciousness, Ouleymatou is superior to Mireille but as an intellect she is highly deficient. It is therefore natural that in adolescence when Ousmane quested for ideals, Mireille represented this ideal pull of eros and psyche. Mireille was the dream, the intellectual inspiration sharing in educational ventures. Mireille satisfied youthful questing erotic dreams. When Ousmane gets older he feels a need to have a deserved rest from pulling his family out of poverty and establishing then with the new bourgeoisie. He felt his life had been "one long battle" against poverty, to come first, to escape from Connais clutches, to win Mireille.

"Must he go on struggling? He wanted to live, to live at last" and living is in an emotionally relaxed background of his childhood and therefore the regression from romantic love to a more sedate egoistic love with Ouleymatou. Human egoism is established as the normal course. Self sacrifice is the rarer phenomenon. Ousmane's story has not been of abdication of self. It was the story of the making of self. The egoism he demonstrates in love is not surprising. It is the kind of egoism woman needs to learn for self preservation. What makes it remarkable is that the victim of human egoism, Mireille, compels sympathy by her selfless abdication of home, country and social roots. But this abdication of self as the novel shows is not expected of a transcendent individual with social and human motives. Mireille committed social suicide abdicating self in marriage. The collapse of her psyche is only delayed as Ousmane passes through the stages from illusory erotic love satisfying youthful quest, to adult gratification of appetite and adult anchoring of self in a congenial emotional and economic world represented by his parents and Ouleymatou.

The journey from *Letter* is completed in *Scarlet Song*. Ramatoulaye wondered what error led Modou to Binetou renouncing

their children and youthful romance. In the second novel we see the answer. It is a human egoistic motive that leads man from one emotional to another because men dare to live their lives as transcendent beings choosing and discarding. When woman stop living as dependent beings they will also have the courage to gratify their secret desires and move to new relationships. It is because Mireille though economically independent does not assume self dependence like her mother and most women that she stays in a relationship that destroys her reason. Woman is glorying in her social powerlessness instead of annexing social power. This novel's realism is therefore a social education that qualifies and modifies the romantic lament of *So Long a Letter*. Modou Falls humanity is redeemed in Ousmane's humanly accepted failures. Ba elaborates the two truths of erotic and psychic encounter between man and woman. The pull of egoistic satisfaction is not peculiar to any. It is just human, as Ousmane's drama demonstrates. Modou falls is not pariah as the first novel tended to suggest. It is dependent woman who is illusory in not localizing and socializing passion. In woman's dependence she makes love an icon to be venerated instead of situating love pragmatically among other endeavours like the new liberated woman in America.

The second novel not only shows thematic progression in the assessment of male, female relatedness, it shows also a greater structural strength. Instead of the monologue that provokes male resentment in the *Letter* there is a greater depth in exploration of diverse characters and diverse human desires. In the *Letter*, Ramatoulaye had shown a generous nature so that the female doubles are treated with generosity. Hinetou, woman as preying mantis, who finally drives Moddou to death as he strives after youthfulness is not just a negative character. Ramatoullaye describes her as beautiful in her youthful prime especially as a school girl clean and wholesome with her beauty shining clear. It is when she becomes male prey and herself an economic object that the reader resents her. Young Nabou is also painted as a minor but respectable nurse. But these favourable images of the second woman doubling for male appetite are due to Ramatoulaye's generosity so that the final tribute must go to Ramatoulaye woman pure, intelligent with a sincere heart.

That was characterisation in an essentially romantic novel with Ramatoulaye as the romantic ideal who hates compromised erotic situations. In *Scarlet Song* the second and first woman are no longer seen as romantic stereotypes, they are given objective reality. As we have seen, Mireille is a paper copy beauty blonde beautiful but

essentially too self centred in her romantic illusion to fit into the social balancing of forces which is marriage. Ba in Mireille corrects woman's romantic illusion. Woman using herself as commodity is given realistic portrayal. We longer get Binetou's story from Ramatoulaye. In the second novel Ouleymatou's story emerges in its integrity. Used to economic privation like Yaye Khady, Ousmane's mother, Oulematou understands the essence of social mobility through marriage. Ouleymatou is not afraid of sharing, coming from a polygamous family. Coming from an unsuccessful marriage she shows great realism in ordering her second marriage. She worked out a detailed scheme to seduce Ousmane, with aromatic powders, *skillful* cosmetics and clothes that expose her female wares of breasts and buttocks. She is the real woman as commodity. Ba's narration does not despise her. Although she is not academically brilliant, she has the native intelligence for survival. In a world that prefers woman as commodity she is the answer. She takes a little money so as to attract a life income. When she cooks for Ousmane she cooks to seduce but keeping her budget realistic. So that like Yaye Kady she is also transported from the poor suburbs to a more modern suburb by Ousmane's income. Her so called love is motivated by economic realism. She dismissed her numerous suitors as "incapable of setting her up in the opulent style favoured in films", p.106. The butcher Samba and Diawarra the bus driver do not have the economic prospects of Ousmane. Ouleymatou dresses herself as male commodity but she has the social advantage of cooking the food that is emotionally congenial to Ousmane. To the artificiality of European diet for an African, she provides the food that forms an emotional climate for Ousmane since childhood. Ouleymatou is very facile but through her is dramatized the will to survive, in an economic world, love as merchandize, an attribute of clear-sightedness lacking in the romantic Mireille who fails to localized herself in an economic world of strife and self realization in projects.

Ouleymatou therefore provides an objective lesson for romantic woman. If woman is product it pays to negotiate sensibly and not burn her bridges like Mireille. If woman is going to be independent economically like Mireille then she must assume emotional and intellectual independence and not act as victim but shape her destiny. Mireille is pathetic when she begins to decorate herself as object to distract Ousmane from Ouleyatou. It is a regressive journey from intelligent vision of the world to create self as man's play thing. If illusions collapse then woman must be strong enough to chart new directions. It is because Mireille fails to chart a new direction, refuses

to cancel her failed marriage and create viable goals for herself and her child, that her brilliant mind regresses into madness. This novel therefore lows the emergence of the weaknesses and strength of woman and her double Mireille and Ouleymatou, two faces of dependent woman, one educated, the other not. Ouleymatou is not marginal like Binetou even though her answers are negative like Bineou's. She qualifies extreme romanticism in Mireille and is a strong object lesson in female emancipation by showing the strength of the negative argument.

Yaye Khady's character as old woman is unsavoury. A devoted mother but implacable in her hold on the young, refusing them independent existence. She is the image of Simone de Beavoir's old woman (587); the classic old woman who has not realized self as transcendent being in credible endeavours. She lives her life in the reflected glory of her son and is possessive, unlike her husband who is an eminent Koranic scholar and therefore retains a hold on life as an independent being.

The mother without other goals realizes herself in managing her sons and therefore is as de Beauvoir describes the old woman who refuses to live a life of ventures.

"amused or bitter, the wisdom of the old woman still remains wholly negative" (608).

Yaye Khady's display of wealth and ostentation at the baptism of Ouleymatou's son would read like a macabre display if Part I and II of the novel did not establish the poverty of their beginning. It is from this poor neighbourhood that they all strive to escape. Yaye Khady returns in triumph to her "old neighbourhood as one enters a conquered territory". She is the image of woman destroyed in her acceptance of the tradition of self negation, self sacrifice. Besides the portrait of mother she is an object lesson for every woman, woman who has accepted her existence as immanent in the service of man. It is because Ouleymatou recognizes herself in Yaye Khady that they can exist together. *Scarlet Song* unlike *Letter* does not pretend to show ideal romance. The dominant image is the many faces of woman as dependent sex living life as immanent not self-realizing as in Yaye Khady, Ouleyamntou and Mireille too who is economically independent but not emotionally independent. It is the many negative faces of Eve that is a repellent message in *Scarlet Song*. Aissatou's answer of carving a career after her failed marriage seemed so possible in *So Long a Letter* that its difficulty is obscured

inn Ramatoulaye's monologue. The second novel dramatizes the detail of three faces of female negation of self in Mireille, Ouleymatou and Yaye Khady. The images of Eve in her failure to create her own identity as self in *Scarlet Song* is a sobering lesson that brings the reader back to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, showing that woman has no choice but to follow Aissatou's difficulty path to sanity and self-realization.

After the negation of Mireille and the abdication of self in Ouleymatou and Yaye Khady leading to woman as bitter and evil at the close of life, the reader realizes that Ba's ultimate message is that woman has no choice but to integrate self as transcendent self in social endeavour, not in social flight perhaps as in Aissatou, but in self-definition. Mireille is as unacceptable as Ouleymatou and Yaye Khady. The path forward is a recognition of woman in all her variety as this novel shows towards the building of authentic self in a community of viable endeavour. Aunt Nabou seemed vengeful in *So Long A Letter*. Yaye Khady's more elaborate story helps woman see her evil self not as mother-in-law but as woman without justifiable motivation in society. Human motive of self-preservation and self-actualization must each woman to see negative self in Yaye Khady and Ouleymatou. The modern liberated women, Mireille's sisters, must learn the lesson taught in the elaborate portrait of the male Ousmane. For man love is one of other aspects of striving man, it is not a whole endeavour. Byron observes that 'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart. 'Tis woman's whole existence'. (qtd. in de Beauvoir 652). Ousmane is therefore ego centred. On the bad side he lacks generosity as the novel's conclusion condemns him. But he is typically human. He strives, he gratifies his appetite. His egocentrism was very obvious in his uncompromising attitude to religion and later in sexual gratification. There is nothing evil in Ousmane. It is healthy in human nature to gratify self. This second novel is a clarification of Modou Fall in Ousmane. There was no madness in Modou Fall's or Ousmane's betrayal of their first wives. They just gratified their appetite in a world that allows men choose and realize various goals. There is greater realism in appetite sexual tension in society in the second novel. Love for the transcendent self is gratification and ideally a compromise. Woman as immanent, non-self realizing, foolishly thinks she can create love into a separate entity from other social endeavours. Woman's sacrifice of all for love is wrong headed as we see in Mireille. Eros gives the fullness of life as Ramatoulaye says, the salt of life is love. The *Letter* seemed like a recognition of erotic love as supreme. *Scarlet Song* shows the many dimensions of

love - maternal, egoistic, narcissistic as Ousmane grows from maternal to narcissistic gratification of self. The pull of psyche is thus dominant. It is as an individual self that self is integrated finally in society not through abdication of self. The abdication of psyche to Eros as in Mireille's choices is not human but self destructive. Woman needs the balancing and socialization of self as independent self. Love is one of many human endeavours, not the absolute the unliberated female psyche makes of it.

The bourgeois orientation in *Letter* celebrated the liberalizing impact of western education in freeing woman from male bondage. This helped to create independence in Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. It is a liberal education besides an independent income that creates woman's healthy image in Ramatoulaye in contrast to her other dependent faces of the preying mantis in Binetou, young Nabou and Aunt Nabou.

Scarlet Song helps to qualify this over beneficent image of western bourgeois values. It creates intellectual independence but it also makes for arid relationship. Madam de La Vallee is French, knows her mind, but is not capable of creating a life of her own. Monsieur de La Vallee dominates her and intimidates Mireille. Bourgeois values are economic and power retentive. Love is not the central focus. Ba shows the negative aspects of western bourgeois relations from which Mireille thinks she can flee. But living is not flight but the cultivation of the world for self a selfish but realistic analysis of the world as Ba shows.

Ramatoulaye's joy in Western labour-saving devices in *Letter* is a half truth. *Scarlet Song* shows the isolation and eventual unsocialized psyche and madness of Western individualism. The second novel uncovers furthermore the dark underside of acculturation. It is the cultural and historical disparity between Africa and Europe that makes miscegenation difficult at the current historical time. Ba has finally recognized the dark side of Western cultural imperialism that frustrates human featedness from the two historical divides.

It is a healthy progression thematically and structurally from the one dimensional song of love in *Letter* to a multidimensional realistic appraisal of woman's many faces in the social education from eroticism to the integrity of psyche existence socialized in meaningful conduct. From the buildings roman of woman telling her story of love as central to her endeavours we are educated out of romance to recognize love as an aspect of independent self and his endeavours in the real world. Maternal and erotic love are social

loves, part of a climate in which self seeks realization in social endeavour. Marital betrayal loomed large in the first novel. The second novel allows us to see this failure as part of other human failings, and therefore to be understood and endured.^d

Scarlet Song loses some of the lyric beauty of Ramatoulaye's song of self, her personal vision and lament at the destruction of the illusions of romantic love. Such memorable statement in *Letter* come from Ramatoulaye monomania-woman's fixation in illusion. The spice of life is love. Her resonant call on Aissatou "my friend, my friend, is a constant pattern of her emotional narration in the *Letter*, memorable statements

"fast, fast, faster still" p.2 Oh health live in me oh health, p.12

Modou Fall, the very moment you bowed before me asking me to dance, I knew you were the one I was waiting for", p.13 Together, let us recall our school, p.15 Aissatou my dear friend, p.46 I survived, p.52 I survived, p.53 And I ask myself. I ask myself, p.56.

Ba's repetitive incantatory pattern in the letter ensured emotional empathy with Ramatoulaye's feminine illusion that love is the central human need. We travel alongside and with her and the illusion of romance is sustained.

In *Scarlet Song* the omniscient narrator allows us share Yaye Khady's quandary at the French wife who cannot share but must create division in erotic unsocialized romance. We can share the nightmare of her emotional journey into the fear of being a thing not the centre of her son's life. Yaye Khady's self-centred analysis of fate is as valied as Ouleymatou's ambitious schemes and Ousmane's egocentricism that results in selfishness. All these voices counterpoise Mireille's song of love and nullify eroticism that fails to recognize autonomous selves and society's economic forces. *Scarlet Song* loses in the lyric beauty of *Letter* but it has greater narrative intensity and meaningful exploration of diversity which justifies the novel's realism as a form.

The road as a metaphor opens the novel in *Scarlet Song* and is the central motif. This road epitomizes in its windings promise, human challenge to realize goals, as a transcendent self. Ousmane as he goes to school faces the road as a promise and a challenge.

"The street! It was life and light" p.4. The road helps him unwind and review his life, a life of hardship, and handwork "work is the only path to self advancement". The road and the poor quarters give the reality of the making of Ousmane, man who faces the challenge of creating himself in striving. It is a story of man as

achieving self, mastering and reconciling himself with his environment. The romantic love for Mireille was therefore not the ideal meeting of two independent selves. It was the annexation of Mireille the eternal woman by Ousmane, the achieving male. The pattern of annexation of an entity by another stronger psyche was to repeat itself. Mireille as woman did not enter matrimony with the integrity of herself as independent. She formally renounced her religion, her country and her home. Like dependent woman she is happy to be annexed in love, as if love is an all consuming preoccupation. Ousmane's male realism shows the fallacy of female fixation in eroticism. Love is an aspect of man's many endeavours and he naturally moves to gratify other appetites. The road and its eternal winding promise is the proper metaphor introducing and elaborating male endeavour as legitimate human endeavour.

WORKS CITED

Ba, mariama *So Long a Letter*. Trans. Modupe Bode - Thomas. New Horn: Ibadan, 1987.

Scarlet Song. Trans. Dorothy Blair, London: Essex, 1981.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. Middlesex: Penguin, 1976.