



WOMEN AND THE BATTLE OF OUSSU: A POSTCOLONIAL AFRICANA WOMANIST EXAMINATION OF MARIAMA BA'S SCARLET SONG

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ABSTRACT



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Part of Africa's continued subtly nuanced racial problems can be attributed to its history. This article critiques Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song* from a deconstructionist, neo-colonial perspective by dissecting its contested political terrains. Though we acknowledge the great strides that have taken place in race relations within Africa and the Diaspora, we avow that the continent's contemporary social conflicts are still largely haunted by what Linda Hutcheson (1988) calls "the presence of the past"(p.4). Paradoxically, Africa's progress towards modernity and racial integration depends upon the cultural spheres of influence that its black and white communities hold today. It is thus significant to note that Ba's novel revolves around the mixed race marriage between Mirelle and Ousmane. The tensions that tear their marriage apart are clearly a metonymy of the wider socio-economic conflict that has remained unresolved in the post colonial era. In designating the impact of cultural difference and identity we have also noted how the text engages with gender roles to highlight the genesis of problems that the continent has to grapple with. Thus, while the Guiye family set up remains the fulcrum of the conflict, we argue that the firing range for the battle extends beyond the domestic and psychological spaces, given that the battle is ultimately ideological. In her presentation of parents, parents –in –law and Ousmanes' friends, the writer has trained a critical eye on the varying and often conflicting perceptions of characters, whose sensibilities have been shaped by different circumstances and cultural orientations. It is in this sense, we argue, that the novel resonates with allegorical overtones. The text is a veiled attack on Africa and its erstwhile European colonisers. The metaphor of the Scarlet song seems to add credence to the view that cultural disharmony, in which everyone decides to sing their own song, is a recipe for disaster. In the text both families and individuals are seen as waging their own battles of rejection, identity and denial of choices made by their children. This is the canvas from which Ba seeks to convey her message of hope and despair, with regards to the dilemmas that mixed racial communities have to grapple with in a fractured society that is trying to come to terms with the realities of the new dispensation. We insist that Ba's exploration is a clarion call for unity in diversity; there seems to be no facile solution.

Keywords: *Betrayal, Cultural Prejudices, Female Bonding, Generational Differences, Interracial Partner Relationships, Postcolonial Feminism.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

In *Scarlet Song*, Ba has drawn characters that are eventually torn apart as a result of racial and cultural prejudices. The paper categorizes female characters in terms of their generational differences and responses to marital conflict. Furthermore, it explores Ba's silencing of male characters in an attempt to explore the causes and consequences of the tragedy that befalls the protagonist. The paper also highlights the internal contradictions within different generations of Africans, especially with regards to divergent perceptions on race relations, a feature that calls for adaptation to a new socio-political dispensation. Finally, the paper brings to view, the fact that while the writer's apparent African feminist position inaugurates a progressive trend, there remains a number of obstacles to overcome.

The women's different cultural backgrounds cause them to be embroiled in a battle for the control of the man they love. The second premise is that the novel's changes in setting, from the college to Paris and back to Usine Niari- Talli, mark the inexorable shift to a discursive field that favours Oulematou. This conflict could be seen as conflict of cultures represented by the different women in the story.

The article discusses how conflict is configured while drawing parallels and symbols from the socio-economic and political spheres of the African continent. We conclude by affirming that in Ba's *Scarlet Song*, gender conflict is beyond race and colour as it extends to being a political allegory.

The third premise is that Oulematou enjoys unfair advantage in a context where her parents ironically support a liaison (affair with a married man) they would normally object to within the African cultural tradition. Given this scenario, and the support of her mother-in-law, Oulematou summons sufficient cultural resources to seduce the man she once spurned. Ba's deliberate silencing of the male characters clears the way for an exclusively female battle. Her intention is to highlight on the one hand the tragedy of females bonding across race and culture and, on the other, the problem of women oppressing each other across the colour line. It is from this perspective that Ba's text can be read as pursuing a post colonial feminist position. The novel

uses Mirelle as a representation of white women who are revolted by the discriminatory policies of their race while at the same time become victims of the patriarchal doctrine of African culture. By extension it also represents the socio-political celebration of empowerment of African states while suffering from economic subjugation and or alienation.

THE CONFIGURATION OF THE CONFLICT

Of significance is the uneven social terrain on which the battle is fought. The African cultural setting, through the support of the Usine Niari- Talli community provides Oulematou with home ground advantage over Mirelle since it is here that she summons her resources to seduce the man she once spurned. It is argued that what makes Mirelle a target of Yaye Khady and other women's slander, and indeed Ousmane's betrayal of her, is not her lack of beauty, nor her failure to integrate into the Guiye African community, but simply her skin colour. It is a representation of an awakening call to Africans to reclaim lost pride, language and culture for fashioning and defining their future thereby challenging the Manichean ideology of moral dualism, which dichotomizes world into good and bad. In the Manichean ideology white is always good while black is bad or evil. Ousmane's betrayal of Mirelle is therefore a strong contestation likened to the affirmative action or reverse discrimination.

As in most post-colonial African states with radical policies like Zimbabwe under Mugabe everything white was bad hence the Land reform was justified on the basis of colour. Yaye Khady's intolerance of a Toubab for a daughter -in-law emanates from deeply entrenched cultural prejudices about white women. Clearly, while Oulematou can exploit these prejudices to her advantage, Mirelle's fate in the battle is that she carries the added eyesore of giving birth to a Gnolele khesole, a coloured whose birth can't be celebrated with as much pomp and lavishness as Oulematou's baby son, merely on grounds of public disgrace. One must also note that Mirelle's western cultural background does not prepare her for the possibility of sharing a husband. Thus, compared with Ramatoulaye who absorbs the shock when Modou marries another wife in *So Long A Letter*, Mirelle regards Ousmane's



infidelity as the most shattering act of betrayal in her life. This explains her madness and brutal attack on him at the end of the novel. This cultural shock symbolises the political shock experienced by the white minority rule across the African continent.

In *Scarlet Song*, Ba presents three categories of women who together constitute a formidable force around which the conflict revolves. The first comprises middle aged women, Yaye Khady and Mrs de la Valle, mothers to Ousmane and Mirelle respectively. While both women find themselves embroiled in the conflict, it is Yaye Khady in whom Ba invests the African woman's aggressive spirit. Yaye Khady represents the aggressive revolutionary spirit of the African continent. After all continents carry the feminine pronoun "she" hence these women who get embroiled in conflict are a political allegory. Naturally, as mothers who nurtured their children, both women are shocked by the unorthodox choices of their children. Of particular significance is the fact that the battle is enshrined between interracial and generational differences. Ba's intention is to expose the tensions brought into play by the generation gap as well as those stemming from the psychic violence perpetrated on the black woman in the colonial era. Furthermore, because the middle aged women have remained conservative, they find it difficult to accept the impact of socio-economic changes affecting their children's mind-sets. It must be understood that before their parents' intervention, neither Mirelle nor Ousmane have problems in their union. Even revolutions were anchored on reactions and counteractions from the colonial powers

However, it can be argued that what eventually leads to a tragedy is the force of Yaye Khady's revulsion and intervention in the marriage. This force, while aided by the cultural environment within which Yaye Khady operates, is also reinforced by Ba's deliberate silencing of Madam de la valle symbolising colonial disenfranchisement. The silencing of the white woman not only confines the battle within the African cultural setting, but also empowers Yaye Khady to take all the necessary steps to prevent her son from remaining in a mixed marriage that does not guarantee her a mother-in-law's high status. In an article entitled '*The face of Eve*' Chukwuma (1981) points out that in African

societies, women are also to blame for encouraging negative values inherent in African societies. Yaye Khady feels that Mirelle is going to supplant her in relation to Ousmane, and deny her the glorious opportunity to flaunt her son's wealth to neighbours. Decolonisation targeted socio-economic and political independence as well. In this case, Ba alludes to the problem of women oppressing each other.

Writing in Ngambike, Makward also observes that the failure of Ousmane's marriage is due to her mother's encouragement, who hopes to benefit from Oulematou's triumph. On the contrary, Mathilde de lavalles defeat, a parody of the black woman's counter violence on white women, is signalled by her collapsing upon hearing that her daughter has married a nigger. Ironically, for all her sophistication and high status, she is powerless before her less illustrious but materialistic and callous adversary, Yaye Khady. Yet, there is a sense in which the writer invites a feeling of empathy towards the white woman

As Ba observes:

Not for one moment did Yaye Khady spare a thought for the other mother. That mother was waging a different battle from that of Yaye Khady (p.74).

Indeed whatever the different battle Matilde de lla valle is fighting, it is too feeble to yield any positive results. It is a futile battle of racist rhetoric. Through the white woman, Ba deconstructs western notions of superiority in order to assert the African woman's voice in a post colonial setup. In this respect the text assumes an Africana womanist streak. According to Clenora-Hudson Weems (1997):

Africana Womanism is grounded in African culture, and therefore it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women... The primary goal of Africana women then is to create their own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and action. (p.24, 50).

In the context of Ba's text, we argue that there is need for a review of this philosophy, particularly in the context of white women who opt to be accommodated within the ambit of African culture. It is unfair for them to be excluded simply on the basis



of their colour. Exclusion should not be based on colour or race.

The second category of women in the battle of Oussu is Mirelle and Oulematou. As rivals at the centre of the battle, they exhibit different fighting strategies. However, what is crucial here are the ideological positions from which they are fighting. Initially, the university environment provides ideal conditions for helping Mirelle in ensnaring Ousmane, physically and intellectually. Apart from her dazzling beauty, which Ousmane openly admires and which Yaye Khady acknowledges, Mirelle is endowed with the natural intelligence to complement and match her lover's. Ba allows these positive factors to contribute to her initial easy victory against Oulematou, who at the time loses out because of her materialistic desires in a man. Ironically, it is with this same attitude that she relaunches her battle of seduction to win back Ousmane from Mirelle. By casting Oulematou in a negative mould, Ba may be suggesting the need for moral cleansing among African women. That African traditions still have some ugly spots is clear from this observation. It must also be noted that Mirelle, on her part has prepared herself resolutely for battle. In her castigation of her father's hypocrisy and morally reprehensible character, she is cast in the desirable mould of a progressive harmonious, interracial society Ba envisages. When Mirelle's father vehemently objects to the unholy relationship with 'that object' of hers, after discovering Ousmane's photo she remains unflinchingly devoted to him. Her brave defiance of de la valle's racist conventions is the price she pays for the man who later betrays her trust. This is her tragedy. Nevertheless, this progressive noble stance wins her the reader's sympathy and honour. Even when her father sends her back to France, in a bid to separate the two and eventually kill the affair through the distance barrier, Mirelle easily fights back to keep her lover. Yet Ba suggests that this victory is only short-lived, as another battle looms in which Ousmane is to be eventually snatched from her. Significantly, Mirelle's deep sense of affection across the colour divide is commendable in the face of opposition from her parents. Mirelle represents the younger generation who are globally connected. In her, Ba suggests that

love borne out of genuine affection can transcend racial barriers. This explains why she is determined to marry her nigger, even to the extent of embracing his religion. Mirelle's tolerance emerges from those people who are globally connected and would appreciate diversity in cultures. After her marriage she tries to integrate herself by offering to take a turn in the cooking at the brazier, to please her racist mother-in-law (p.152). According to Hill, M. et al (2000) women in interracial partner relationships have to devise survival strategies which range from blocking, transforming and generating (p.193). It would appear that Mirelle's adoption of the transforming strategy only works for a short time. The transforming strategy entails the marginalized woman's attempt to empower herself by transforming their marginalized social space into a space of resistance and opportunity (Hooks, 1990). Mirelle's tragedy is that she finds very little support from the Usine Tiali community. In fact Ousmane's defeat through Oulematou's seductive wizardry actually heralds the genesis of Mirelle's lone battle to keep him. She is left to singlehandedly fight the cultural forces mounting ominously against her. While she exhibits incredible strength of character when she sets her own conditions in the marriage contract, by maintaining her identity, she is handicapped as far as her capacity to integrate into African culture is concerned. It must be noted however, that Mirelle does have sympathizers. Oulematou's brother warns his sister against the secret liaison, an indication that her actions are an affront to authentic African values. Secondly, Mirelle finds support in Soukeyna, Ousmane's sister, who helps her to acclimatize. Despite this, Mirelle's operational space continues to shrink, particularly when Ousmane decides to turn his back to her.

In our examination of the battle, we need to look at Mirelle's adversary too. Oulematou exploits the community of Usine Tiali to win back Ousmane. Her body, her skills of African culinary art, are her major trump cards. Not only does she summon her knowledge of African aesthetics but she also timely enlists the support of her mother and the neighbourhood. But that is not all. She realizes that to win the battle convincingly she needs to match Mirelle's standard of cleanliness. This implies



incredible foresight on her part. 'The Toubabs are so clean, she said to herself, and she didn't want to be found wanting in this respect' (p.114). Capitalising on her rival's ignorance of African traditional etiquette, she is quick to understand that the first battle is to win the approval of her in-laws. Armed with her strength, she offers herself to routinely wash and iron Gibril Guiye's clothes. It is a programme that soon yields positive results, partly due to her in-law's inability to see through her sinister motives. Significantly however, it is her body that she uses as the most lethal weapon with which to strike at Ousmane's sexual desire. Thus, the thoroughness with which she grooms herself demonstrates an aggressive sensual spirit determined to exploit every part of her eroticism. Oulematou worked out in her mind a detailed scheme to seduce Ousmane (p.108). Clearly, she outmanoeuvres Mirelle, whose sexual appeal lacks the explicit adornments and provocative antics of African women. African women are renowned for their bewitching and seductive gyrations. To Ousmane, who begins to define his happiness and satisfaction by traditional parameters, Oulematou is the embodiment of true African beauty. Arguably, through her, Ba dramatizes the Afrocentric view of womanism.

What could Mirelle's lack of sophistication do in the face of the provocative tinkle of beads around the hips or the aphrodisiac potency of gongo powder? What could Mirelle do against the suggestive wiggle of an African woman's rump, wrapped in the warm colours of her paign? (p. 65) It can be argued that Oulematou's bewitching sexuality succeeds in rekindling in Ousmane, his notion of authentic African beauty. It is in her that he also begins to yearn for the beat of Africa, the tom toms, proverbs, legends, and everything that makes him find fulfilment. Thus Oulematou becomes an epitome of the irresistible allure of Africa, its history, its natural rhythms and traditions. Arguably she can be regarded as the mother Africa figure. She is the very reason why he should reject Mirelle, a representation of Europe and its colonial values. Coincidentally, by succumbing to Oulematou's embraces, Ousmane has begun the journey of retracing and reinterpreting his African origins, his roots and identity. This is what gives the text an

Afrocentric perspective. However, Ba does not seem to support this negritudist perspective. Evidence to this assertion is seen through her positive portrayal of the younger generation of intellectuals, who together with Ousmane represent the future of Africa in that they vehemently oppose his flirtation with Oulematou as irrational and out of step with modern trends. Ali points out that Ousmane's craving for Oulematou's fat thighs is simply driven by lust, with references to his return to Africa as mere diversions. What is clear from the narrative is that Ba condemns Ousmane's connivance with his mother in rejecting Mirelle. By his retrogressive actions, mistakenly construed as patriotism, Ousmane rejects progress and racial integration. His actions go against Ba's call for a negotiation of a union of diverse cultures, without destroying the integrity of either. It is a message that she espouses even in her first novel, *So Long A Letter*.

THE MARGINALISATION OF MALE CHARACTERS

A significant aspect of the cultural conflict is Ba's presentation of male characters. Both Gibril Guiye and Jean de la Valle, patriarchal custodians of their own respective cultures, are relegated to mere spectators in the love battle fought on the cultural terrain. For all their feeble protestations against the interracial marriage, it is the African women who take centre stage, rallying behind each other in the full glare of Gibril Guiye. Jean de la valle on his part, despite his love for his daughter, appears too shocked to salvage any means of wrenching her from Ousmane. While Yaye Khady and Mother Fatim's support of Oulematou is characterized by commitment, de la valle's arrangement for Mirelle to switch her affection to the white boy are not vigorously pursued. Gibril Guiye's fatalism and deep sense of the Islamic faith emasculates him further on the face of his wife's protestations. This raises a pertinent question. How strong is the Islamic faith in its doctrine? It would seem that it has a more devastating effect on African men than their female counterparts. One possible reason for this is the congested interaction space of African women which allows them to establish supportive communities. While referring to the Shona indigenous knowledge systems Holleman (1955) asserts that,



Save for the most intimate aspects of a person's life, his entire social, religious and economic life is still more or less shared with that of his neighbours, with whom he lives in intricately woven fabric of kinship and other relationships... A split between two means a cleavage between many and a potential danger to the essential collective activities in social, religious and economic life (p.42).

It is this setup that allows Yaye Khady to enlist the complicity of the community in alienating Mirelle. Ironically, Gibril's deep religiosity has cost him the privileges accompanying polygamic life unlike his other male counterparts. On his son's secret marriage he says, "Since this woman has embraced Islam, we must simply accept her into the bosom of her family. Let us welcome this marriage as the evil that is our necessary for our survival" (p. 66).

Guiye's feeble response demonstrates the extent to which he has been jettisoned out of his traditional role of final arbiter as head family. Significantly, this unusual stance foreshadows his failure to protect his white daughter-in-law when Oulematou begins to interfere with her marriage. It is therefore disheartening to note that Guiye has abdicated his moral responsibility not only to warn his wife from tormenting and casting aspersions on Mirelle's whiteness but also to restrain Ousmane from behaving in a reckless manner likely to put the family in disrepute. We note that he is too weak to protect his daughter-in-law when Oulematou begins to interfere with her marriage. He has the moral responsibility not only to warn his wife from tormenting and casting aspersions on Mirelle's whiteness but also to restrain Ousmane from behaving in a reckless manner likely to put the family into disrepute. Instead, he and Yaye Khady 'secretly condone the liaison' (p.120).

What we note here is a man who has lost control over both his son and wife. In fact, as the conflict reaches its climax, Guiye seems to withdraw into his Islamic cocoon, leaving Mirelle at the mercy of Yaye Khady, mother Fatim and other women in the community. Unlike in *So Long A Letter*, in which women share experiences of their husband's betrayal, in *Scarlet Song* Ba castigates a community

that sanctions a selfish act of betrayal of another woman. It is significant that Guiye has never been successful in exerting authority over his wife, given that earlier in the text he fails to rescue his son from being turned into a sissy. This silencing of Guiye and other men paves the way for Ba to empower and invest an authoritative voice in the women of Usine Tialli. It thus gives the text a clearly African womanist streak. African women's social environment affords them greater opportunities for forging solidarity among themselves than is the case with men. As in the case of Guiye, Ba's silencing of Jean de la valle also plays into the hands of Oulematou and Yaye Khady. Ironically, by failing to endorse his daughter's choice, he leaves her to fight her own battle against racial and cultural prejudices. To note here is the fact that Jean de la valle is the foil of Pirette's white parents, who happily endorse their daughter's marriage to Lamine, an African man. Significantly, his emotional reaction has become a mockery to his professed hypocritical call for an egalitarian society. This is also the case with his wife, who is too shocked to consider any strategy to save her daughter from the marriage she detests. From a wider perspective, Ba's silencing of the white couple foreshadows the defeat and yielding of imperialist power to the African cultural system that is embodied in Oulematou and Yaye Khady. Through the shocking disclosure of Mirelle's marriage to her nigger, de la valle is confronted with the stark reality of the humanitarian principles he has hypocritically purported to subscribe to. The only man who makes a serious attempt at warning Ousmane of the callousness of his flirtation with Oulematou is Ali. In his defence of Mirelle he unashamedly blames Ousmane for breaking the marriage vow, of failing to appreciate the sacrifices and commitment of his wife, in spite of their racial and cultural differences.

You are the cause of a woman breaking with her own family, and by creating factors for her isolation, you don't help her integrate with a new environment....you are beyond the pale of the religious morality that your father stands for.' (p.136)

Significantly, Ali's comments are shared by those of his wife Rosali, who blames Oulematou of wilfully destroying Mirelle's marriage. Rosali observes that



Oulematou's conduct is not in sync with the moral values of a modern African woman. (p.136) Lamine, who has also married a white woman, not only treats her with love and understanding but also condemns Ousmane for treating his wife as a slave (p.99). It would seem that through her presentation of a parallel young couple, Ba exposes the complexities accompanying interracial marriages. While Pirette has been happily integrated, Mirrelle's attempt at the same has been an exercise in futility. Through Mirrelle the writer examines the plight of women as double victims of oppression, first by men and secondly by other women. Mohanty and Hooks have noted that the text highlights the difficulties of females bonding across race and class. They observe that Ba's plea in *Scarlet Song* is for understanding and respect for difference. Ba is pleading for unity in diversity.

CONCLUSION

The text ends on a pessimistic tone, leaving the reader with the feeling that ultimately there is no winner. The atmosphere of pathos evoked by the elimination of Gogui, the product of the interracial marriage, symbolises the consequences of Yaye Kady and Ousmane's adoption of an irreconcilable stance. Ba makes it that in such a scenario, everyone is bound to lose. Though Mirelle endures to the very end, she too eventually gives up. On the contrary, both Yaye Kady and Oulematou lose because whether Ousmane dies or survives, they will always carry the cultural albatross as the architects of a wrecked marriage that had all the promise of paving a way for racial integration. Ousmane himself proves to be a disgrace to the community he strove to please and identify himself with. In the end, Ba's message is clear. There is need for Africa to adopt a paradigm shift. Africa has to adapt to the demands of the new post-independence dispensation, one of racial integration, not the retrogressive negritudist position.

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