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Review: Women in African Literature

Reviewed Work(s): So Long a Letter by Mariama Ba; Double Yoke by Buchi Emecheta; The Collector of Treasures. In: The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales by Bessie Head

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# Women in African Literature

**So Long a Letter** Mariama Ba Virago (London) 1983 ISBN 0 86068 296 X  
£2.50

**Double Yoke** Buchi Emecheta, Ogwugwu Afor Press (London and Nigeria) 1982  
ISBN 09508 1770 8 £3

*The Collector of Treasures* Bessie Head in **The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana village tales** Heinemann (London, Nairobi and Ibadan) 1974  
ISBN 0 435 90182 6 £1.75

Roots in rural sisters or ravaged urban whores. These seem to be the categories into which African women are slotted when described by their male counterparts. Both in literature and newspaper journalism in Africa women are depicted as alluring and dangerous, an anarchic force in society to be disciplined by the assertion of male authority. In much of this writing women tend to become symbols of societies in transition; they may be used to represent a romantic golden age of traditional order, strong, submissive and elemental, or alternatively they are seen as symbols of urban decay and decadence: the grasping ghetto prostitute vying with the sophisticated 'been-to' for the chief resource available to them through men — money.

Not surprisingly the representation of women in the writing of African women is quite different. By looking at *So Long A Letter*, a novel by the Senegalese writer, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* and a short story *The Collector of Treasures* by the Botswanan based writer, Bessie Head, I shall examine how these writers perceive women's struggles in Africa today.

Although the central female characters in these stories are situated in different cultural, economic, religious and political environments they face similar dilemmas: first of all how to survive and support their dependent families and secondly how to develop relationships with men based on equality, love and mutual respect. Another theme running through Mariama Ba's novel and Bessie Head's short story is that of friendship between women.

Set in rural Botswana *The Collector of Treasures* recounts the story of Dikeledi Mokopi. Semi-literate, poor and hardworking, her enterprising spirit has earned her the reputation of being 'the woman whose thatch does not leak'. Dikeledi is married to a reprobate, Garesego, who leaves her after four years of marriage to bring up their three children alone. In a life of continuous hard work the treasures Dikeledi collects are essentially friendships with women.

When a new couple, Paul and Kenalope Thebolo, come to live in the village Dikeledi and Kenalope become close friends: 'The two women had going one of those deep affectionate sharing everything kind of friendships that only women know how to have'. They share things to such an extent that Kenalope suggests that because Dikeledi is without a man she should satisfy herself sexually with Paul. Dikeledi refuses; but after her friend falls ill and is taken to hospital for a while, the strength of her platonic friendship with Paul is realized. She assumes complete responsibility for her friend's family.

Mariama Ba's central characters are educated women in Senegalese society at odds with their partners in a Muslim polygamous society. Her book *So Long A Letter* takes the form of a long reflective letter written by the recently widowed Ramatoulaye to her lifelong friend Assitou. During the traditional retreat required after the death of her husband, Ramatoulaye commits to paper her thoughts on her own and her friend's life. Their friendship is at the heart of the book. In anticipation of meeting Assitou, Ramatoulaye writes: 'When we meet, the signs of our bodies will not be important. The essential thing is the content of our hearts that flows through us. You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love.'

Both women were married to educated 'progressive' men. Just as their generation was a link between two periods of history, French colonial domination and the emergence of an independent Senegal, so their marriages, at first, denoted a break from traditional expectations and norms. Assitou's husband marries her in spite of the disapproval of his higher caste family and Ramatoulaye's marriage is celebrated without a traditional dowry to the astonishment of her family and townsfolk. Notwithstanding the early promise of their partnerships they both founder. Assitou divorces her husband when under familial pressure, he succumbs to a second marriage to a young relative of the same caste. Taking her children with her she chooses to lead a single independent life abroad. Ramatoulaye's marriage also breaks up but her reaction is different. Moudou, her husband leaves her and their twelve children for their eldest daughter's best friend. At first Ramatoulaye attempts to accommodate herself to the new situation much to the anger of her children. But Moudou further humiliates her. He rejects her and their children completely concentrating all his affection and resources on his new wife.

I told myself what every betrayed woman says: If Moudou was milk, it was I who had all the cream. The rest, well nothing but water with a vague smell of milk.

The same theme of women demanding more fulfilling relationships with men in contemporary African society is explored by Buchi Emecheta in her novel *Double Yoke*. In it she traces the friendship of two undergraduates at a Nigerian University: Ete Kamba and his girlfriend Nko. Although the book is called *Double Yoke* to signify the difficulty women like Nko have in reconciling traditional expectations of themselves as women with their own aspirations for education and equality, most of the book's action is seen through the eyes of Ete Kamba. He wants to possess Nko sexually and dominate her socially. He is painfully ambivalent in his feelings towards her because he is frightened of a woman who questions his actions, but eventually, the power of his feelings forces him to reassess his chauvinism.

Nko in contrast knows what she wants. She wants to marry Ete Kamba: 'For what is a woman if after all her degrees and what have you she is not married?'

But despite her certainty she is portrayed as a passive agent reacting to a changing environment. She says to her mother:

'I want both worlds. I want to be an academician and I want to be a quiet nice and obedient wife, the type you all want me to be'.

In similar fashion Ete desires of his future wife that she:

'would be like his mother, but with this difference, she must be well educated. Yes that was the type he would like. A very quiet submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother with a good education to match. But her education must be a little less than his own, otherwise they would start talking on the same level.'

To ease the awkwardness he feels because Nko is on the same level as him Ete

discusses their relationship with a university lecturer, Professor Ikot. Thinking Ete has betrayed her, Nko tries to ensure her own material success and that of her family by submitting to the Professor's lecherous advances, by using 'Bottom power', as it is called, to guarantee her a degree. Finally Ete and Nko manage to transcend the conflict between old and new in their relationship to achieve a better understanding of each other.

Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head are savage in their indictment of African men. Professor Ikot is a scathing portrayal of what is most loathsome in African male academics: ruthless opportunism combined with moral paucity. A Christian, Ikot is a hypocrite with a voracious appetite for debauchery typifying the male teacher who manipulates his female students for sexual gain.

*The Collector of Treasures*, like *Double Yoke*, is also about how a woman reacts to a man's desire to possess and dominate her. Bessie Head's narrative describes two types of men in village society. The first, like Garesgo Kokpi, is responsible for the complete breakdown of family life. The influences which have created him are traditional codes that relegated man to a superior position to women in tribes, and secondly colonialism in Botswana which encouraged male migratory labour to South African mines.

Bessie Head writes of this type of man:

'If one watched the village dogs chasing a bitch on heat, they usually moved around in packs of four or five. As the mating progressed one dog would attempt to gain dominance over the festivities and oust all the others from the bitches vulva. The rest of the hapless dogs would stand about yapping and snapping in its face while the top dog indulged in a continuous spurt of orgasms, day and night until he was exhausted. No doubt during that Herculean feat, the dog imagined he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it. That kind of man lived near the animal level and behaved just the same. Like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated and like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also made females abort.'

The second type of man is like Paul Thebello:

'He turned all his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life and he went on and on with his own quiet rhythm, like a river. He was a poem of tenderness'.

Becoming suspicious of Paul Thebello's friendship with his former wife, Garesepo tries to reassert his authority over her. To humour him Dikeledi cooks him a lavish meal in the hope that he will make a contribution towards their eldest son's school fees. But when he is asked Garesepo demonstrates nothing but contempt for Dikeledi and their children. In exasperation Dikeledi castrates him while he is sleeping. When she is sent to prison by the authorities she encounters several women who have committed the same crime. Together they ask themselves why 'our men do not think we need tenderness and care'.

The attitude of Ramatoulaye in *So Long A Letter* to the men who have transformed her life is more forgiving:

'Assitou', she writes, 'no matter how unhappy the outcome of our unions, our husbands were great men. They led the struggle of their lives, even if success eluded their grasp; one does not easily overcome the burdens of a thousand years.'

For Ramatoulaye the hope of a better future for women lies perhaps in her daughter Daba's generation. But it may be that Buchi Emecheta poses most succinctly the question African women are asking their men:

'Ete Kamba the question is — are you strong enough to be a modern African man? Nko is already a modern African lady, but you are still lagging... oh, so far behind.'

**Yaba Badoe**

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