

Letters In The Field Of Literature; A Study Of Mariama Ba's Epistolary Novel; "So Long a Letter"

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ABSTRACT:

Letters and letter writing has given rise to several studies that examine the cultural reasons of exchanging letters for ages. Thus, the paper gives an overview to some scholarships on epistolary discourse in early modern culture. The main traditional area of study, deals with the idea of writing letters as epistolary novels in the field of literature. Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter is chosen a field of the study. Moreover, the paper focuses on the reasons behind writing epistolary novels as a form that has given rise to many different genres across the centuries.

Keywords: Letters, Letter Writing, epistolary letters, feminism,

المستخلص

تعتبر دراسة الدوافع الإجتماعية لممارسة كتابة الرسائل وتبادلها إحدى المجالات التي شملت عدة دراسات على مر العصور. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الوقوف على بعض المواضيع المتعلقة بكتابة الرسائل المسلسلة في المجتمعات الحديثة. يتمحور المجال الرئيس للدراسة على فكرة صياغة الخطابات المسلسلة بصورة روائية في مجال الأدب الروائي. يعد عمل الكاتبة السنغالية ماريام با نموذج لمثل تلك الاعمال لذلك تعتمد عليها هذه الدراسة. أيضاً تناولت الدراسة الأسباب التي تقف وراء كتابة مثل تلك الروايات التي تنامي ظهورها في كثير من الحقب الزمنية على مر العصور.

INTRODUCTION:

The idea of exchanging letters or leaving messages for others is an ancient idea. It therefore passes through different forms; sending messengers, leaving carvings on walls, or even a small piece of leather on a bird. For that importance, great interest has given to this field from many literary scholars as letter writing and the letter as genre become socially and culturally practiced and used as an undeniable communication tool. In today's life, the epistolary genre becomes a remarkable socio-cultural object as a form of communication and expression. It is, however, in the early modern period that correspondence acquired the characteristics and uses that were to become typical of the

genre in the whole modern period. (Del Lungo, 2014). Consequently, the letter as a form of communication has given rise to many different genres across the centuries.

The statement of the problem:

The importance of exchanging letters in people's lives through ages, and the reasons of imposing the idea of writing letters in the field of literature represent a tool in which through, great effects and changes happen to the novelists as they began practicing epistolary.

Research questions:

1. Why writing letters as literary expressions on the field of literature?
2. Who is to read the letter?
3. Why does Ba write in a form of a letter to express her ideas?

Objectives of the study:

This paper is intended to examine the power of writing letters in the field of literature. Consequently, a special attention was given to the reasons that led women writers to try epistolarity in writing novels.

Methodology:

The researcher makes a sociohistorical investigation to examine Mariama Ba's epistolary novel; "*So Long a Letter*" to stand on the changes that happen to the idea of writing novels.

Literature Review:

This work has based on Ba's epistolary novel; '*So Long a Letter*' taking advantages of its writing structures, themes, and characterizations. It also takes advantages of many studies, papers and researches done about Mariama and her work.

Writing novels as epistolary letters is an interesting topic to investigate, as people practice letter writing for ages. Laura Patch states that;

"The epistolary novel has existed in various forms and understandings since the Roman poet Ovid first used epistles in his writings, but it truly began in its traditional form in the 1600s and hit peak popularity in the eighteenth century." (2014, p2)

Moreover, "The letter, is a much older form, dating from antiquity when ambassadors from one kingdom to another sent dispatches home, and, later, when travelers of various kinds reported on their journeys and even the modern novel arose from the letter's particularity and sharp attention to place and character." (Stowe, 2000). Therefore, because of

its importance in people's lives, letter writing has being taught as a main syllabus at schools worldwide almost until now. Catherine Gubernatis sheds light on that indicating, "Letter writing was part of the curriculum in schools, and letter-writing manuals taught individuals how to use correspondence to deal with tricky social situations." (2007:p7). In fact, "A letter is a written message from one person to another, usually put in an envelope and sent by the post." (Cambridge Adv L Dic). Additionally, Letters are defined by Del Lunge as; "Genuine interaction between correspondents in which their identities are linguistically and discursively produced." (2014: p20) Thus, its ease and popularity help in raising its exchanges everywhere because, "... letter writing is a particularly rewarding object of study since epistolary discourse is perhaps the most ancient form of attested writing, thus allowing the investigation of its features across time and cultures." (Petrucci 2008 and Del Lungo: 2014). Through ages, the usage of letters as a communication tool has developed to be used as an epistolary novel in the eighteenth century. (Del Lungo, 2014) However, why writing letters as literary expressions on the field of literature?

Catherine Gubernatis in her thesis "*The Epistolary Form In Twentieth-Century Fiction*" indicates one of the reasons that shows the development of novels in the 18th century because of the important role that played by imposing letters and letter writing in literature.

“One of the reasons the epistolary form played a large role in the development of the novel in the eighteenth-century was that letters and letter writing were a pervasive communicative medium at the time; they were a necessary activity in order to continue traditional relationships in a changing society, and their influence stretched beyond just personal correspondence.” (2007: p7)

Catherine also notes that, the development of using letters in fictions further extends to the 20th century for that it creates a relationship between its language, subjectivity, and experience, which makes novels to differ from texts in previous eras.

“Letters are used in the fiction of the twentieth century: they are a protean form that can be replicated or appropriated to comment on the relationship between written language, subjectivity, and experience.” (2007: p278)

In fact, “In the most traditional understanding, epistolary novels are series of letters.” (Laura Patch, 2014). Therefore, the idea of authoring novels in a form of epistolary letters becomes common on the last two centuries though writing letters is perhaps the oldest form of attested writing ((Petrucci 2008). In epistolary novels, the reader has a great chance to comprehend the purpose behind the exchanging message(s) hence **He** (The reader) represents the eye which glimpses upon the content because “the reader of the epistolary novel is aware that within its boundaries there is another reader” thus epistolary writers “refuse the kind of closure informing other narratives” (Campbell 333/336). On the contrary, Laura states that, “The novel reader,

however, cannot know more than the characters tell. Thus, she must imagine and understand the reader and writer both.” (2014:p3). Hence, a sender usually sends the letter to a receiver(s) with a content that should only be read by those whom allowed to obtain the intended message however, some changes occur when novels began to form as epistolary letters to be judged and criticized within a third eye. Nevertheless, who is to read the letter?

To answer this question I build this study on the literary work of Mariama Ba “*So Long a Letter*” in which the message(s) shared in females’ cycle (female → female). However, although the purposes of authoring a letter normally differ from one person/letter to another, yet the suitable structure takes place to organize the relationship between the correspondents. According to Palander-Collin; “The letter genre allows us to observe how authorial selves and participant relationships change from one letter to another and how such changes affect the linguistic style adopted by the writer”. (2009: p54). For instance, in Ba’s so long letter the messages are sent by a female and received by a female as well. However, why does Ba write in a form of a letter to express her idea?

Back to the era in which the novel was formed, women commonly had their non-spoken views unless in a form of chitchatting dialogues or secret messages, their culture makes “letters seem at first to be strikingly “private” kinds of writing.” (Stowe, 2000) therefore women began looking for individuality, Ian Watt further points that; “Letter writing as a means of creating private

relationships because individuals, especially women, became more isolated from the traditional communities they had participated in the past.” (1964: pp177-188). Consequently, to stand closer to the needs and secrets of women at the time, we (the readers) should study females’ works as women become free in expressing their own feelings, Laura states that; “Epistolary novels offer a form in which women can finally speak” (2014). Furthermore, Nevalainen Terttu articulates the importance of letter writing to women; “Letter writing is thus particularly important for the study of women’s language use and literacy; it is also important to analyze linguistic change led by female speakers/writers in this period.” (2002: pp191-209). For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, the novel circulates in the women zone, as it was a female-female text. Normally women talks focus on the general issues of life; love, hate, pleasure, etc. Gilroy and Verhoeven state that; “Female letters traditionally focused on domestic life or on love; they spoke in the private voice appropriate to women whose roles were increasingly circumscribed within the constraints of bourgeois ideology” (p2). Consequently, the novel portrays for the first time the hidden notions of a woman who tries to shout out her voice to be heard. Reuben Kehinde Akano declares that, “So Long a Letter, exemplifies an outburst and a campaign by a woman as representative of the oppressed women under a polygamous set-up. The author condemns polygamy by highlighting and exposing the many ugly sides of the practice.” (2014, p22)

Therefore, as it is a new phenomenon in the history of Senegalese literature, Ogunyemi and Tuzyline remark Mariama Ba’s work as, “A pioneer work in being one of the first novels by a Senegalese writer to give a close portrait of a woman in an Islamic African context” (2009:178).

Referring to the text of *So Long a Letter*, Mariama starts her novel (first letter) using an ordinary speech hence normally personal letters/diaries are orally formed hence “The language of personal letters has been shown to be close to spoken language in many ways.” (Biber and Finegan 1989, 1992). Compared to many other kinds of written sources, Mariama Ba has styled her novel in a form of series letters to exhale her point of view towards the traditional community that she lives in. Although the whole novel becomes visible as an ordinary letters between friends, yet it seems to represent the completely African female lifestyle, especially the lives of Muslim women at that time. Thus, it appears to represent the idea of feminism in Islam, which Ba circulates her visions through. Therefore, religion being one of the factors that has sealed the fate of women draws attention to the reality of unfair religious practices and their negative impact on women. (Latha: p72). Furthermore, Akinola and Olatipe conclude that, “*So Long a Letter* has been lexically and semantically presented, to reflect or imitate the realities of life.” (2016).

Mariama Ba in her novel focuses on the traditional ways of life especially the conflicts between traditionalism and modernism. She extremely centers her

work on the new customs that result from colonization to affect the African females' thought. Rizwana Latha sums in her study;

"In Mariama Ba's construction of her imagined reader the small group of elite, mainly Muslim readers and the international francophone audience, have many points of convergence. Thus, the novella focuses on a specific socio-cultural milieu, the contemporary concerns of women on a much broader scale, and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized." (2004: p56)

As a result, African women began to be affected by the way in which the European women live. Therefore, a clear sign of gender conflicts come into view. Such issues result the African women (especially the educated ones) to look for ways to get the right of a woman to identify and experience her own interests. Ba sends that visions through her character Ramatoulaye,

"My reflections determine my attitude to the problems of life. I analyze the decisions that decide our future. I widen my scope by taking an interest in current world affairs." (So Long: p88)

Consequently, Ba compares the life of the African woman who lives in a pure traditional life and the one who her ideas changes due to the entrance of western ideology, which will affect their future. Thus, Ba clearly declares her feminism in an interview that her work *So Long a Letter* seems as, "A cry from the heart of all women, though first and foremost from that of Islamic Senegalese women." (Stringer 1996: 58).

Referring to the main purposes of writing *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba tries to shed a light on the way that the African women were treated in their own communities. For instance, Ba focuses on the idea of feminism; therefore, she creates her literary work biographically although biographical texts do not represent the real life authentically as they (the biographical texts) usually portray past events. Ian Watt declares that, "Memoirs and biographies do not accurately depict how we experience life in the present moment, because they are written after the events we experience take place, allowing for reflection, interpretation, and the creation of a coherent narrative." (Watt: p192) Therefore, authors sometimes work on declining the time and events without focusing on the future results. Richardson "writing to the minute" names this process of writing. (Watt: p192).

"Richardson's ... however, decreases the time between when events take place and when they are recorded, as characters write about events just after they happen, sometimes while they are happening, and without any knowledge of the future." (1964: p192)

Nevertheless, Mariama Ba almost narrates her story concerning on past events. She starts her novel as a replying to her lifelong friend Aissatou's letter.

"Dear Aissatou,
"I **have received** your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress." (So Long: p1)

In addition, she ends her letter saying;

Goodbye,

Aissatou

“And you **left**. You **had** the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands. You **rented** a house and set up home there. And instead of looking backwards, you **looked** resolutely to the future.” (So Long: p32)

The two quotations above show the original form of writing a normal letter, which usually begins with salutation and ends with a conclusion. We (as readers) notice that the author uses past tense to deliver her messages through the conversation lines that sent to her friend. Therefore, she has to have enough knowledge about forming letters as to build an epistolary novel because “An author’s ability to use the epistolary form in new ways depends on their knowledge of how letters in fiction were traditionally used. Thus the moments when authors take the epistolary form in new directions, they are also simultaneously referring to the letter’s origins.” (Catherine: 2007). Accordingly, So Long a Letter is a well-organized epistolary novel. Although it arranges in a form of series letters, but it seems as coherent as one story for that it adds to the characters’ understanding of the events in the narrative, making the storyworld more coherent, and initially the letter seems to have an impact on the narrative. (Catherine: p233).

Conclusion

The conception and the strategies of writing epistolary novels have given its scholars a great chance to accomplish their communicative goals. The new attention to the form of letter as a material object has shed light on conventional epistolary aspects such as

ways of passing on messages and audience design within small and large correspondence networks. (Del lungo; 2014) This ordinary concept has therefore improved to portray the social issues of people as Mariama Ba, in which letter writing plays a great role in expressing the messages that nearly picture her own community.

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