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So Long A Letter



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So Long A Letter

So Long a Letter ([French](#):) is a semi-autobiographical [epistolary novel](#) originally written in [French](#) by the [Senegalese](#) writer [Mariama Bâ](#). Its theme is the condition of women in Western African society.

So Long a Letter, Mariama Bâ's first novel, is literally written as a long letter. As the novel begins,

So Long a Letter

Ramatoulaye Fall is beginning a letter to her lifelong friend Aissatou Bâ. The occasion for writing is Ramatoulaye's recent widowhood. As she gives her friend the details of her husband's death, she recounts the major events in their lives.

The novel is often used in literature classes focusing on women's roles in post-colonial Africa. It won the first Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa in 1980.

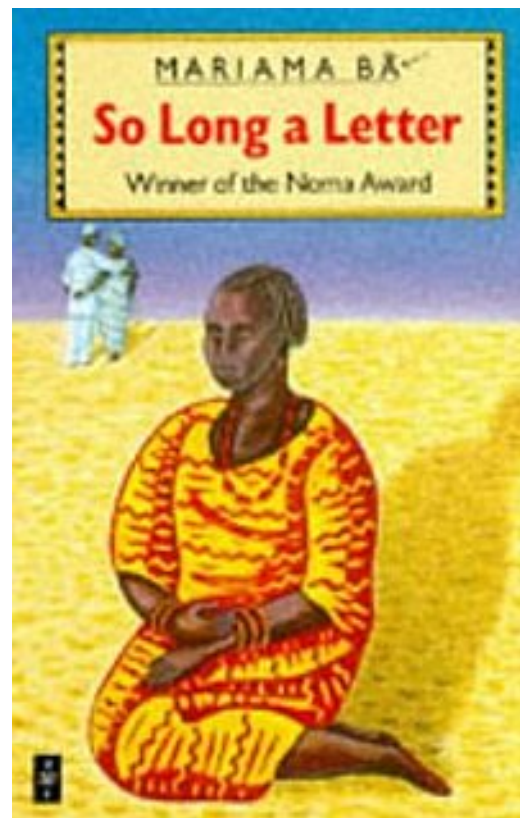
Plot summary

So Long a Letter is written as a series of letters between the main character Ramatoulaye Fall and her best friend Aissatou following the sudden death of Ramatoulaye's husband Modou from a heart attack. The letters are written while Ramatoulaye participates in 'iddah, a four

month and ten day mourning process that widows of the Muslim Senegalese culture must follow. Through the letters Ramatoulaye describes the emotions that flooded her during the first few days after her husband's death and speaks in detail about how he lost his life. She then discusses the life that she led with her husband, leading up to when Modou betrayed her by taking a second wife without her knowledge after 25 years of marriage. Ramatoulaye details to Aissatou how she dealt with this betrayal emotionally and how she grew throughout each event in her life.

Cultural History

Senegal was home to many indigenous peoples during precolonial times. Around the 9th century AD Islamization spread throughout Senegal due to the expansive trade routes throughout Western Africa. Today, roughly 90 percent of Senegalese society follows Muslim religion while the remaining 10



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Original title	<i>Une si longue lettre.</i>
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Pages	90 pp (hardback edition)
ISBN	978-2266-02-7 (hardback edition)
OCLC	9668743

percent follows forms of Christianity or mixed religions. Although many people follow Muslim religion, Arabic culture is not practiced in Senegal nor is Arabic spoken as the language. Much of their legal codes are from translated passages of the [Qu'ran](#). French colonialism came to Senegal in the 1800s and enforced a separation of church and state. However many still abide by the Qu'ran's laws which shape ideas of gender roles, family life, marriage, and the patrilineal male dominated society.

Themes

So Long a Letter deals with multiple themes, which includes the life of women in Senegal during the 1970s and 1980s, family and community life, Islam and polygamy, and death rituals.

Characters

- **Ramatoulaye**: The widowed Senegalese woman who, after 25 years of marriage and 12 children, narrates the story of her psychological abandonment by her husband, who takes a second wife. Ramatoulaye physically distances herself from Modou who dies four years after this second marriage. Ramatoulaye turns down two other marriage proposals, including that of Daouda Dieng. She is well educated and teaches at a university. After her husband's second marriage, she must work a lot, since her husband cuts off family ties and financial support.
- **Modou**: The husband of Ramatoulaye and of Binetou. He was well educated, handsome, and charming. For his own selfish desires, he marries Binetou and cuts ties with his 12 children and first wife, Ramatoulaye. He later dies of a heart attack.
- **Mawdo**: Ex-husband of Aïssatou. After being pressured by his mother Nabou, Mawdo follows tradition of polygamy and marries a young girl also named Nabou, who is his first cousin. After his marriage with Nabou, Aïssatou (his first wife) divorces him. He is Modou's long-time friend and a doctor.
- **Aïssatou**: Ramatoulaye's best friend, to whom the letters are addressed. She divorced Mawdo because she did not believe in polygamy; she left him a letter explaining her actions and never returned. She takes care of herself well and bought Ramatoulaye a car, which made life much easier for Ramatoulaye. Her divorce is symbolic because it represents a new life for her. She later leaves Senegal with her four sons and moves to the United States to start over. She succeeds in making a new life for herself.

- **Aïssatou:** Ramatoulaye and Modou's daughter, who is named after her best friend. She enters into a relationship with a boy named Ibrahim Sall, whom she calls "Iba," a poor student who impregnates her. They claim to love each other and plan their marriage after their studies. Since she is still a high school student, Iba's mother will take care of the child until she graduates.
- **Ibrahima Sall:** A student of law who impregnates Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's daughter. He is tall, respectful, well-dressed, and punctual. Aïssatou is his first and possibly only love, he says. He will marry Aïssatou if Ramatoulaye will allow it.
- **Binetou:** A young girl around Daba's age who marries her 'sugar daddy' (Modou) because her mother, who was poor, wanted to live the high life and climb the social ladder. Binetou became an outcast who never quite fit in with the younger couples or the mature adults.
- **Daouda Dieng:** A suitor of Ramatoulaye prior to her marriage with Modou who Proposes to Ramatoulaye after her husband dies, but is turned down.
- **Daba:** Ramatoulaye's and Modou's daughter. She is married and the eldest child. She is disgusted by her father's choice to take a second wife especially one of her closest friends.
- **Arame, Yacine, and Dieynaba:** Known as "the trio." They are Ramatoulaye's daughters. They smoke, drink, party, and wear pants instead of ladylike dresses. They represent the next modernized generation after liberation from France.
- **Alioune and Malick:** Ramatoulaye's young boys who play ball in the streets because they claim to have no space to play in a compound. They get hit by a motorcyclist that they drag home with the intention of having their mother avenge them. They are disappointed to find that Ramatoulaye does not get mad at the cyclist, but at the boys because they were careless to play in the streets. This shows Ramatoulaye's wisdom in raising her children in the right way.
- **Ousmane and Oumar:** Young sons of Ramatoulaye. They represent the idea that a father figure would be beneficial for Ramatoulaye's children since several of them are still so young.
- **Farmata:** The griot woman who is Ramatoulaye's neighbor and childhood friend. She noses into Ramatoulaye's business and is the one to point out Aissatou's pregnancy to Ramatoulaye. She represents

a 'Spirit of Wisdom', but doesn't always give the best advice. Ramatoulaye and her become friends despite caste barriers.

- **Jacqueline Diack:** Protestant wife of Samba Diack, a fellow doctor like Mawdo Bâ. Her husband's openly treacherous tendencies lead her to depression.
- **Little Nabou:** Raised by Mawdo's mother, Grande Nabou. She is brought up under very traditional Muslim customs and becomes a midwife. She later marries Mawdo Bâ to be his second wife. She is the niece of Grande Nabou and the first cousin of Mawdo Bâ.
- **Grande Nabou:** Mawdo Bâ's mother, who influences him to marry Little Nabou. She dislikes Aïssatou since she comes from a working-class family and her father is a jewelry maker. Grande Nabou is a princess from a royal family in Senegal and is very conservative in her views and traditions.

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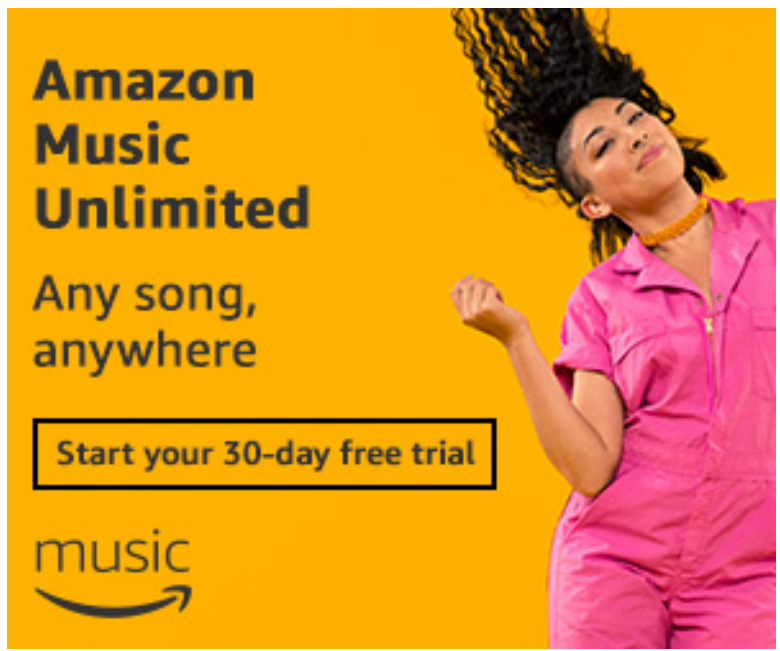
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