

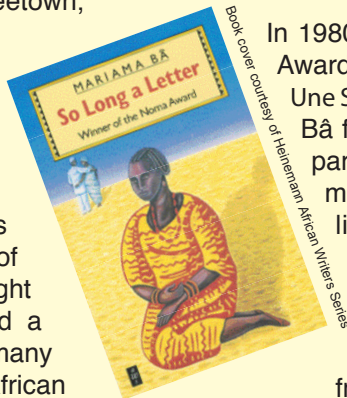
# The Right to be Different

Helen Fallon

In the early nineties I lived in a small house, not unlike a gate lodge, in a mountain village called Leicester, about five miles from Freetown, Sierra Leone. My house was in the grounds of a larger house, which belonged to Professor Jones and his wife, Marjorie. Despite the English-sounding family name, they were Sierra Leonean.

Professor Jones was for many years Principal of Fourah Bay College, a part of the University of Sierra Leone where I taught librarianship. Despite going blind, he had a very active literary career and was, for many years, the judge of the Noma Award for African writing. This award, sponsored by the Japanese

Noma Corporation, could be described as an African Booker prize.



In 1980, Professor Jones presented the first Noma Award at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The winner was Une Si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter) by Mariama Bâ from Senegal. My students read this book as part of their English studies and I noticed how much they liked it. I borrowed a copy from the library and devoured this elegant and moving story.

## IGNORED AND ISOLATED

The novel is written in the form of a letter from the recently widowed Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou. She uses the period of mourning pre-

Helen Fallon with Edward Jusufu and Amid Fonti Kanu, who studied Mariama Bâ and other African writers as part of their studies.



scribed by Islamic law to write a letter, almost a diary, reflecting on her life and the life of her friend, Aissatou. Five years before his death, and after twenty-five years of marriage, Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou, decided to take a second wife, a girl the same age as their daughter. Hurt and betrayed, Ramatoulaye resigns herself to being a co-wife. However, Modou decides to cut himself off from his first family, leaving Ramatoulaye to provide for their twelve children. "He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account", she tells her friend.

In weaving her own tale, Ramatoulaye tells of Aissatou's similar experience. Aissatou's mother-in-law contrived to get her son to take a second wife, whom she moulds into the daughter-in-law she wants. Aissatou goes to the United States with her four sons. There, she finds work in the Senegalese Embassy.

Ramatoulaye's letter explores the position of women in African Islamic society. Faced with Modou's betrayal, she herself is forced to question many of the practices in the society in which she lives. It isn't just the two women and their children who have suffered from their husbands' betrayal. The young girl, Binetou, does not want to marry the elderly Modou. She wants to continue with her studies, but is forced to obey her powerful mother.

The story is set in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, where Bâ was born in 1921. At that time, this predominantly Islamic country was a French colony. Her father was a politician who, in 1956, became the first Minister for Health of the now newly independent Senegal. Bâ's mother died when she was a child and her strict traditional maternal grandparents played a major role in her upbringing, supervising her study of the Koran during school holidays. At fourteen she was awarded first place in a West African competition for admission to a select French secondary school. She became a teacher and married a politician, a marriage that ended in divorce. Bâ's life has echoes of the lives of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Ramatoulaye survives her abandonment saying, "My love for my children sustained me. I wasn't divorced. I was abandoned, a fluttering leaf that no hand dare to pluck up."


### DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES

It was to be a number of years before I found a translation of Bâ's second and final novel *Un Chant Eclat* (*A Scarlet Song*) in a London bookshop. Also set in Dakar, Bâ captures the conflicts that arose as Senegalese society struggled to reconcile traditional cultural values

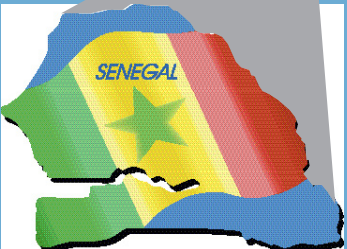
with the effects of French colonialism. The oppression of women is explored in a racial context. Ousmane, the son of a Koranic scholar and an over-protective status-conscious mother, falls in love with Mireille, the white daughter of a French diplomat. To the horror of her father, who considers it an "attack on his dignity," Mireille marries Ousmane and converts to Islam. In both *So Long a Letter* and *A Scarlet Song*, mothers-in-law are portrayed as powerful and scheming. When Yale Khaddy, Ousmane's mother, hears her son has

## SENEGAL


Present day Senegal was part of the empire of Ghana in the eighth century. In more recent times it gained independence from France in 1960. The first president of the new republic was and highly influential African art and culture, Senghor. He retired in 1980 and was replaced by Abdou Diouf who was succeeded, after being defeated in the 2000 presidential election, by the current president, Abdoulaye Wade.



the poet patron of Leopold 1880 and Diouf who being

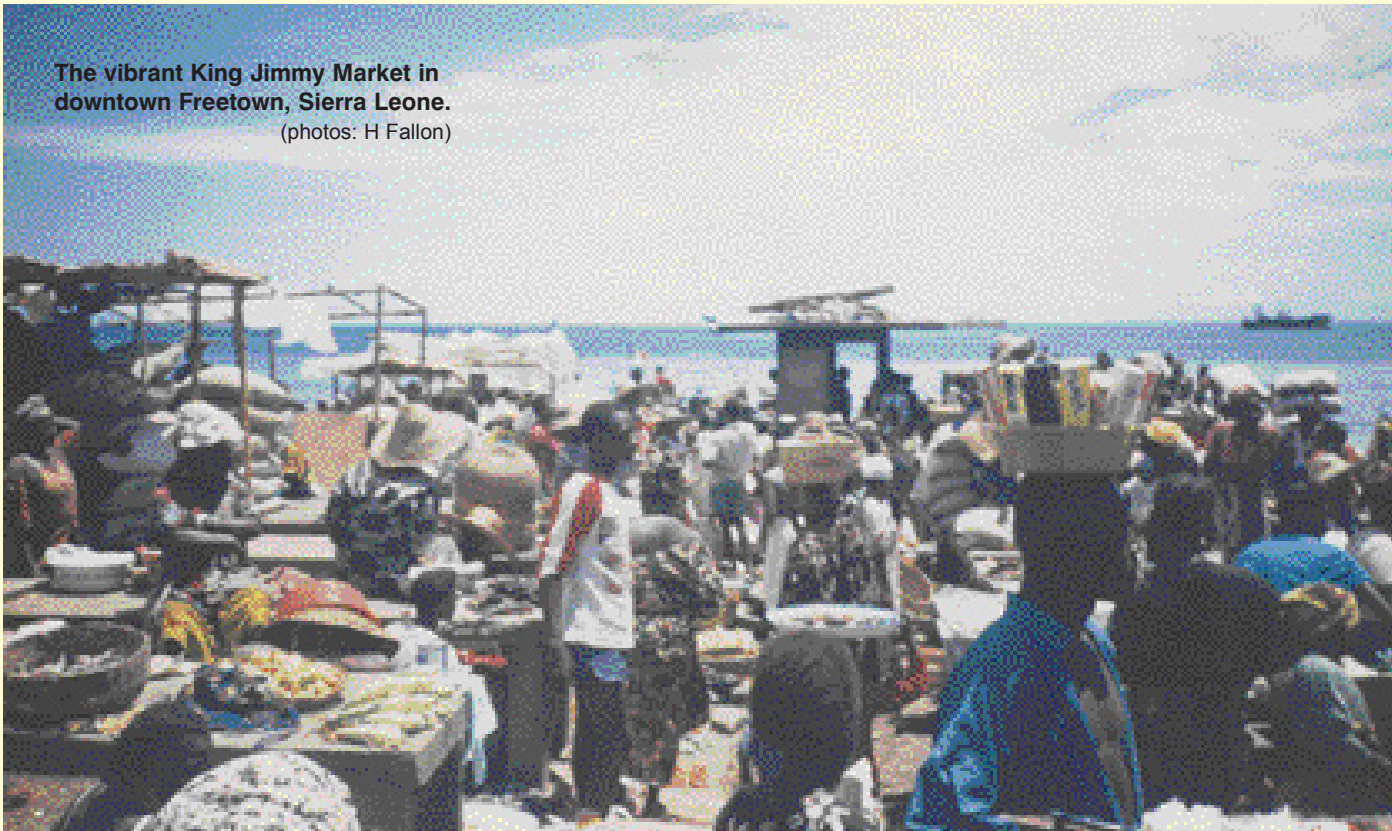


<b>Area:</b>	196,000 sq. km; three quarters the size of Great Britain
<b>Population:</b>	10.6 million
<b>Languages:</b>	French (official language), Wolof, Pulaar, Jola, Mandinka
<b>Religions:</b>	Islam, Christianity, traditional
<b>Climate:</b>	Tropical; dry season from October to May
<b>Capital:</b>	Dakar; population 2 million
<b>Government:</b>	Republic; multiparty democratic rule
<b>Exports:</b>	Fish, peanuts, petroleum products, phosphates, cotton
<b>Average Annual Income:</b>	US\$490
<b>Currency:</b>	CFA Franc



The vibrant King Jimmy Market in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone.

(photos: H Fallon)



married a white woman, her response is “a white woman does not enrich a family. She impoverishes it by undermining its unity. She can’t be integrated into the community. She keeps herself apart, dragging her husband after her. Has anyone ever seen a white woman pounding millet or fetching buckets of water?” In the end, the clash between two races and two different ways of life results in madness and murder – blood being the scarlet song which sang a confused and strangled rhythm.

Unlike Mireille, Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* survives and tells Aissatou, how in the lonely solitary nights “music lulled my anxiety. I heard the messages of old and new songs, which awakened hope. My sadness dissolved.” She copes not only with her husband’s betrayal, but also with the pregnancy of her unmarried daughter and the insult to her dignity of the prevailing system of wife inheritance. After Modou’s death, his brother, Tamsin, thinks he will inherit Ramatoulaye after she comes out of mourning. Ramatoulaye refuses, saying: “You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don’t know what marriage means to me; it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you.”

#### ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENCES

Bâ’s plea in both her novels is for understanding and respect for difference. She explores the challenges facing a post-colonial Senegal and, particularly, how women can negotiate an existence that combines both traditional Islamic values and French influences. Different ways of life can be accommodated, as is evidenced by the enduring friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Differences can be a source of strength, growth and solidarity or, as in *A Scarlet Song*, differences can be used to destroy the integrity of people. *So Long a Letter* ends with Ramatoulaye looking forward to a visit from Aissatou, who now wears western style suits and eats with a knife and fork rather than dipping her hand into a common bowl. Their friendship transforms the differences in their lives, as Ramatoulaye asserts when she says, “the essential thing is the content of our hearts.”

*So Long a Letter* was published when Mariama Bâ was fifty. Prior to that, she was very involved in women’s issues, joining several international women’s organisations, writing essays and presenting lectures on women’s position in society.

In 1981, at the age of fifty-one, Mariama Bâ died, one year after winning the Noma award. *A Scarlet Song*, her second novel, was published after her death. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *So Long a Letter* and *A Scarlet Song* are published by Heinemann.