UNESCO Series on Women in African History

Mariama Ba
And the choice of Ndeye
UNESCO Series on Women in African History

Mariama Ba
And the choice of Ndye

Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud
Illustrations: Natacha Nze Ndong
Script and dialogue: Sandra Joubeaud
So?
You won the bet Ndeye, it’s a little boy...

And he’ll have a modern daddy who knows how to hang out the wash.
Mother?

Help me dear, so that I can welcome my son.
I'm wondering where my father is today...

My memories of him are frozen, like those old photos of us...
...except that day, I was 8 years old...
...I understood as soon as we got home... I'll never forget her words.
I tried you know, but by taking a naare*, you leave me no choice but to turn my back on your love...

* second wife.
...Like that which I have for you.
They loved one another, but neither would give in and we left for another life.
Little by little, I came to understand that she had given up, in the name of dignity, a more comfortable life.
For us and for her.
Sometimes I wondered whether she regretted giving up her choice, and if she would have preferred to go to the theatre with her husband instead of her son.
But all this vanished behind her smile...
No, not yet...

Hello there Ndeye!

So, what about Amadou? have you decided?

No, not yet...
The day that Ndeye will no longer be indecisive...

while you Awa...

I can't help it, they all choose me, they want me!

And later, I sort it out.
we have finished
our analysis of the novel 'The Belly of the Atlantic' which, beyond the story has, I hope, allowed you to realise your luck in having such a perceptive professor with such good advice...
Oh! A post-it!
Ha, ha, ha!
we are going look at another woman’s views, this time that of Mariama Bâ, on our society, particularly on marriage.
'So Long a Letter' is a novel written in 1979, a time when male literature predominated in Senegal, and was born out of the intimate exchanges between the author and two of her friends whose marital troubles had thrown them into depression.
The first, who had stood by her husband for 10 years of married life...

...saw herself cast to the side with the appearance of a young rival, who became her husband's second wife. The other friend had met a similar fate...
Faced with this situation and through the life choices of these characters...

...Mariama Ba unveils the destinies of two women bound by friendship...
Hey, this is just for you...

Mind your own business!
Ndeye, did you want to say something?
No thank you Sir.

I see.

I see.
Start with the first extract, marked on page 16.
'My back propped up by cushions, legs outstretched... I follow the comings and goings of people.'
'Across from me, a new winnowing fan bought for the occasion receives the first alms. The presence of my co-wife beside me irritates me.'
With each passing hour her cheeks become more deeply hollowed, acquire ever more rings, those big and beautiful eyes which open and close on their secrets, perhaps their regrets. At the age of love and freedom from care, this child is 'dogged by sadness.'
Everything ok Ndeye? You had a look on your face just now...

It's Awa, she gets on my nerves...

Well, do you want to come study at my house?

I can't today.

Try to come later then!
You don't like the choice of the book?

I know the tune of this book by heart...

while one can very well love a married man; it can be a marriage of love.

...polygamy this, polygamy that...
But of course we can love a married man or woman, that is not the point.

And then these days, second wives are often conquerors, not victims.
Amadou, stop!
I've been staring at you for 10 minutes.

Since I've met you, Ndeye, I'm a different person. Everybody has noticed it.
Naturally, she will be sad. No one likes to feel replaced. But you're not a replacement Ndeye, or a sequel…

Babe, I've never hidden my marriage from you…

Really everybody?

But Amadou, what will your wife say?

Ultimately, she will be sad. No one likes to feel replaced. But you're not a replacement Ndeye, or a sequel…
Ndeye, come with a 'yes' on Wednesday, otherwise don't come. I can't wait any longer.

...you're my new beginning!
As we danced, your forehead, hairline already receding, bent over my own.
The same happy smile lit up our faces.

The pressure of your hand became more tender, more possessive.

Everything in me gave in and our relationship endured over the school years and during the holidays, strengthened in me by the discovery of your subtle intelligence...
...by your embracing sensitivity, of your readiness to help, of your ambition, which suffered no mediocrity.
We would walk along the Dakar Corniche, one of the most beautiful in West Africa, a sheer work of art wrought by nature...
Rounded or pointed rocks, black or ochre-coloured, overlooking the ocean. Greenery, sometimes a veritable hanging garden, spread out under the clear sky. The sea air would put us in good humour.
Careful children!
Here daddy, get this!
You remember when you were little, I would do your hair here, we had just arrived...

You would tell me stories.
And when you didn't like the ending, you would change it!

You were so funny, you had so much imagination! You know, that book that you're reading, I read it to you at the time. I helped me find strength...

...and it reminded me so much of your father; he took me often, unexpectedly, like that. He knew when I needed it.
You loved him, why did you leave then? Couldn't you have been happy anyways?
I left precisely because I loved him, because I didn't want to be happy 'anyways,' like you say.
No, but stop, it’s my question! Why do you want all the girls to think like you?

You see it the same way as in the days of Mariama Ba, as something endured, but today for many it is a choice. They defend it, and I think rightly so.

Oh yeah?!! And what exactly has changed? No, but who have you seen, huh?
Who can explain to him that no woman chooses to share her man!
Calm down, I'm only repeating what they say, and I've spoken to more than one, believe it or not! First they finish their studies and find there aren't many single men left, and then they work, they're independent, they're happy to have a few peaceful days to hang out with their friends!

So, she is right, they struggle! Starting with the social pressure! If you aren't married by the age of 30, everyone thinks there must be something wrong with you...
Well, it's true that most of my sister's friends don't want a co-wife, but without exception they all prefer a co-wife to no husband!
Enough! Be the spokespersons of the opposite sex, that will be more interesting! We'll never get anywhere like this.
Love doesn't come in limited quantities, everything I give to my third wife takes nothing away from the first...

We have far greater sexual needs. It is by the mercy of Allah that we have polygamy. I am devout, and so I can satisfy my needs lawfully.

The flame has gone out, my second wife will rekindle it, and everyone will benefit!

My first is unable to give me a son! I have no choice!
He wasn't planning on taking another wife, but he fell in love, that's all! It's out of love that he takes a second wife!

Not out of love for the first, in any case!

Yeah, another monogamist who signed a polygamous marriage contract without realising it!

I still prefer the greater sexual needs argument, it's less hypocritical!

He hasn't justified himself to me!
Out of love!
Ha ha ha ha!
Stop it!
Uh, Ndeye, calm down, it's ok...

who told you that we should only love one person our whole life? we can easily love two friends at the same time, just like our parents, or children! So why not two women? Mariama Ba writes of love! And love, it can't be controlled!
Ndeye is right.

My father often says to me 'talkative sex doesn't mean silent heart'
(Image of a comic strip with a group of people gathered around a table and one person laughing.)

He ha ha ha ha!
Well, if you don't want to talk about yourself, it's your right! As for me, I'm going to talk about myself. I hesitate to publish my writings. I tell myself it's not too late, Mariama Ba published her first book at the age of 50, so why not me?

I imagine her walking there, giving me advise, encouraging me to follow my dreams.
And then I have much in common with her: I lost my mother when I was quite young, my grandparents raised me, and I attended the same mosque...

Ndéye, you’re not listening to me.
And yet what is more important than what the professor says!

ndeeye?!
Uh, sir, I understand that she inspires you but you are not Mariama Ba.
That’s true, for example she was only married three times!

Really and so?

While I... wait... Oulimata, Sira, Alissa, Fatou, that makes four...

And all girls think you are married to your work!
Ndeye, it was my father's dream to see me return to his tire business...
I wanted to get my doctorate to become what I am today. I was so torn, impossible to make a choice between the two...

So, I threw a tire down the lane behind my house: if it went right, I would make my father happy, if it went left, I would follow my own path.

And well, it went right. I sat there for an hour staring at it and then I ended up putting it on the other side of the lane. It was at that precise moment that I understood that I couldn’t let life choose for me.
Lucky for us.

Uh sir?

Yes, what it is?

You have a post-it there!
So??
Finally!

Hello there!

So, my nephew!

Few weeks later.
Areu-areu!

He is so cute!

You're just in time!
Ok, it's ready!

Come my little darling!

what a lovely name you've chosen for him my dears...

well Ndéye, Amadou finally accepted within the family! Ha ha ha!
Hi hi hi hi!
Ha ha ha ha ha!
Mariama Ba

To educate, campaign and write in order to raise women’s awareness and promote their rights: such was Mariama Ba’s credo throughout her life. She belonged to the first generation of Senegalese women who attended French school during the interwar period. She was as much a pioneer in the domain of literature, as she was in the women’s movement. The impact of her first novel in and beyond Senegal, in which she denounced polygamy and confronted the problems of the caste-system, testifies to her emblematic status.

Women in African History

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women’s rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

For additional resources, please visit the web site www.unesco.org/womeninafrica