

Guiding Light: Faith and Friendship in ‘So Long a Letter’, and ‘The Color Purple’

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Abstract

The protagonists in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple, deal with various counts of social and familial injustices. In order to emerge fulfilled and triumphant from a life of struggle and strife, the female characters needed to hold on to certain mechanisms for survival. Female solidarity and religion become instrumental for these women in their search for individuality and the assertion of their humanity.

In this paper, the personal journey of Celie, the protagonists in The Color Purple, is examined through to her personal emancipation, as is the story of Ramatoulaye in So Long a Letter. The themes of friendship, even friendship with God, will be explored in depth.

Key words: Faith, Friendship, Female, Survival, religion, solidarity.

Introduction

Two prominent black female writers, Alice Walker and Mariama Bâ, deal in interestingly similar ways with the predicament of black women entrapped in abusive relationships with their male partners. In both cases, the narrative unfolds in letters written by the protagonists. In both cases, faith and female friendship plays a central role in helping the female protagonists confront and transcend their abusive relationships, attain a higher level of self-consciousness and achieve their self-emancipation. Novelist, poet and militant feminist Alice Walker, is one of the most celebrated African-American writers working today. Walker Her family had lived under the notorious ‘Jim Crow Laws’ of institutionalized racism, and she has experienced violence and racism from an early age. Her story deals with themes and issues inspired by this experience.

Mariama Bâ, was raised in predominantly Muslim Senegal and wrote in French, and her early essays reflect an unmistakable criticism of the different aspects of traditional Muslim African societies. The preface of her book tells that the novel was inspired by her commitment to fighting gender inequality and confronting the sexist aspects of African life.

God as personality healer

Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* is an epistolary novel, consisting of letters written by [Celie](#) to God and by [Nettie](#) to Celie. The latter is a young girl living with her abusive father, her sick mother, and her younger sister Nettie. Celie begins writing letters to God, who figures for her as both confidant and protector. In her early letters, she details how her father, who tells her that the only person she is allowed to tell is God, has been sexually abusing her. Celie becomes pregnant twice, and each time her father gives away the children.

A man named Albert (who she refers to throughout the novel as Mr. _____) marries Celie, instead of her sister Nettie, because she was older and a hard-worker. Mr. _____ believes Celie to be ugly, but eventually is convinced to marry her, because he has several children by his previous wife (who was murdered), and Mr. _____ needs someone to take care of them. Her sister Nettie travelled to Africa as missionary. Albert kept hiding Nettie's letters to Celie, with the result that Celie lost contact with her sister. Shug Avery, Albert's beautiful lover, who was also a singer and self-confident woman, came into Celie's life, and had a powerful and positive influence on Celie. The two women had a brief sexual relationship. Shug convinced Celie to look at herself more positively, and not accept that she was ‘ugly’ and worthless.

Celie wonders what her life will be like in her first letter to God. She believes she is a good girl and wants God to know that. She writes to God “I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker, 1983: 3). She writes to God on all occasions: when she feels happy or sad, confused or frustrated. She writes to God all the time. She pictures God as he appears in many Christian images: a bearded white man. The voice Walker establishes for Celie is both insightful and limited.

At the beginning of the book Celie announces her dependence on God by recognizing that she can “tell nobody but God” (Walker, 1983: 3) about the abuse she is receiving from her stepfather. Celie’s self-esteem is depleted by her abusive stepfather, and her equally abusive husband, who had denied her an education and separated her from the only happiness in her life, her sister Nettie. Her husband direct assaults on her self-esteem are never-ending. When she tries to stand up for her rights, he berates her: “Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (Walker, 1983: 176).

Celie seeks solace in religion. In the preface to novel, Walker identifies her religious development as the inspiration for her work, labelling religion and spiritually as the principle themes in the book, so that this theme is completed by a number of principle characters and mainly by the protagonist Celie, Walker intends to make this development journey with the courage and help of others. The theme of religion is overloaded by other factors such as personal development which helps Alice deliver her message to the reader.

The church is an important part of the social life of the community in which Celie lives. At the beginning of the novel she is a staunch member of the church, and continues to be so, working as hard there as she does for Mr --- and his children. Her letters are addressed to God and she says "As long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (Walker, 1983: 18). She looks to God as an authoritative, and dependable figure, although in practice she gets very little help from her fellow church goers. She sees God as white and old "like some white man work at the bank". Like many children, Celie confuses her father with God. Rather, she doesn't actually think her father is God, but his power over her makes him godlike. As she said:

She [Mama] got sicker an sicker.
Finally she ast where it is?
I say God took it.

He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can. (Walker, 1983: 4)

Celie directs her anger about her life not at the people who have harmed her, but at God. In her mind, God has ignored her, and therefore she will ignore him. Also, Celie sees God as a man, and men have never been good to her in her entire life. Here we have a very limited idea of what she means by God She writes to her sister Nettie:

Dear Nettie,
I don't write to God no more. I write to you.
What happen to God? ast Shug.
Who that? I say.
She look at me serious.
Big a devil as you is, I say, you not worried about no God, surely.
She say, Wait a minute. Hold on just a minute here. Just because I don't harass it like some peoples us know don't mean I ain't got religion.
What God do for me? I ast.
She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death.
Yeah, I say, and he give me a lunched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I ay, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.
She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you. Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you. (Walker, 1983: 173)

Celie's character development journey starts with Shug who tells her that the church is somewhere people go "to share God, not to find God" (Walker, 1983: 103). It is Shug who liberates Celie in all aspects of her life, her personal development helps Celie to build confidence and to break away from her stifling lifestyle including her household duties and the repressive church community. As Kumara argues:

God cannot be confined to institutional boundaries of church, it is a supreme power that pulsates through the whole creation. The Christian God in *The Color Purple* acts like other men and fails to help Celie. Her deliverance begins only when she stops looking at God for help and stress the course of her life herself. With the help of a woman of flesh and blood like Shug Avery, Celie is radically transformed and loses all faith in the image of Christian God (Kumara, 2013: 2).

She serves as source of strength and hope to Celie, so that her spiritual development starts when Shug arrives to her life. As Qun Wang puts it, "Under Shug's influence, Celie has matured into a person who has developed enough self-awareness and self-confidence to challenge tradition's hegemonic impulse" (Wang, 1994: 3). The addressee of her letters give us an idea about her gradual development. She starts with "Dear God", but as the novel progresses, her faith evolves and her perceptions change Shug convinces her that God is more than what white people say, and what church teachings confirm. She teaches her something highly significant, telling her to keep believing anyway, because God will return in the way she remembers Him. She believes that the reason Celie has lost her faith in God is because she has the wrong idea about God. Shug, though she believes in God, sees the Bible and organized religion as just another way for white society to oppress blacks. As Celie said:

Then she [Shug] tell me this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed. If you wait to find God in church, Celie, she say, that's who is bound to show up, cause that's where he live.
How come? I ast.
Cause that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible.
Shug! I say. God wrote the bible, white folks had nothing to do with it.
How come he look just like them, then? She say. Only bigger? And a heap more hair.
How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is gitting cursed?
I never thought about that.
Nettie say somewhere in the bible it say Jesus' hair was like lamb's wool, I say.
Well, say Shug, if he came to any of these churches we talking bout he'd have to have it conked before anybody paid him any attention. The last thing niggers want to think about they God is that his hair kinky.
That's the truth, I say.
Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say? (Walker, 1983: 73)

Shug also sees God in all things pleasurable, from experiencing being in nature to the enjoyment of sex. She tries to make Celie take the same view:

She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.
Shug! I say.
Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like. (Walker, 1983: 52)

Nettie's religious experience is different to Celie's. She serves as a missionary to the Olinka people in Africa, intending to spread Christianity among them. But she realizes, like her sister, that God is more pervasive, more bound up in nature, than some Christian teaching suggests. She recognizes that the shelter and safety provided by the roofleaf are godlike in a way. The Olinka people worship the roofleaf, which protects them from rain. She ends up with a more spiritual and personal relationship with God. Her definition of God begins to expand, and she quotes the Olinka: "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (Walker, 1983: 61). She writes to Celie about God and religion, and stirs a different belief in Celie, as Wang writes: "Celie's achievement of knowledge and understanding of herself is paralleled in *The Color Purple* by her sister Nettie's newly developed religious beliefs ...Nettie had a better education and live a better life than Celie does" (Wang, 1994: 3). Celie then gets to admire the natural world and its beauty, in all its richness and variety, including sexuality. She comments that she and God "make love just fine". Then Shug said to her that it "pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field... and don't notice it." (Walker, 1983: 58).

The concept of God became holistic to her instead of an old white man, and this liberates her. She has found a much more open and relaxed attitude to religious belief and a purpose in her life. Thirty years after her first letter entry, Celie has modified her address from "Dear God" to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This helps us to observe the evolution of Celie's character from her first letter to God, to the previous modification she made to everything, as she begins to doubt the God she has learnt about. She evolved her own religious beliefs, which is totally different from the images of God she was taught to accept. Her new faith helps her to gain self-confidence, and to find a new peace and a new community within this spiritual development. What gives her a strong power to cope with her problems is her letters to God. She accepts that God is not hearing her closes letter sixty-eight with "You must be asleep". Feeling freed by disassociating God from the image of a white man, Nettie is also freed by leaving old assumptions about God behind.

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than never before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us (Walker, 1983: 86).

In the case of Celie, after her lover Shug Avery instills in her the desire to find God for herself, she rejects the notion of God as a white old man commonly portrayed in Western society. She re-envisioned God as being within her. This redefinition begins her journey towards becoming a woman who finally musters the courage to stand up to an abusive husband.

Celie grows from a shy young woman into a confident, self-assertive person who stands up for herself, with gusto if necessary. She responds to her husband's insults in the rural Georgia vernacular, retorting: "I may be black, pore, ugly, but I'm here" (Walker, 1983: 187). This transformation was largely due to the influence of faith and the support and solidarity of the women in her life.

Tools for Survival

In a comparable novel, the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ, one of Africa's most prominent female writers, explores the complex difficulties facing two Muslim women as they wrestle with their husbands' second marriages. Bâ explores her themes through an epistolary exchange between two intimate friends who both suffered the abuse of their polygamous husbands and highlights the contrasting reactions of the two women in regard to the mistreatment by their husbands. Upon the death of her husband and during her 40-day customary period of mourning, Ramatoulaye begins a diary-letter to her close friend Aissatou. Reflecting on the past, she weaves together their life histories. As the letter begins, we learn that Ramatoulaye has just lost her husband to a heart attack. She resolves to write the long letter as a way of coping with the four months' seclusion mandated by Islam for widows. Although Ramatoulaye takes on several issues, such as politics and the future of the Senegalese family, polygamy is the main focus of her letter, which reflects on how it affects women. She reflects on how Islamic teachings were being exploited by some Muslim men in order to gratify and justify unfair practices. Bâ's whole novel consists of one long letter. It is, as Katherine Frank has put it, "a long lament and meditation on the pain, anger, and despair the heroine, Ramatoulaye, suffers as a result of her husband's desertion" (Frank, 1994: 16)

In this novel, the role of religion in the life of the main character, Ramatoulaye, is different from its role in the way Celie's character evolves in *The Color Purple*. Ramatoulaye's internal faith helps her to overcome her emotional distress and social struggle when her husband decides to take a second wife after thirty years of marriage and twelve children. She felt this as a betrayal and a brutal rejection after their long life together, Ramatoulaye's long letter, as Katherine Frank explains, "seems to be addressed to herself as well as to Aissatou; a kind of internal monologue charting the painful process of her liberation. For Aissatou embodies the self that Ramatoulaye is struggling to become" (Frank, 1994: 11). However, early in her letter, Ramatoulaye still exhibits her usual fatalism: "Modou is dead. How am I to tell you? One does not fix appointments with fate. Fate grasps whom it wants, when it wants" (Bâ, 2008: 2).

Ramatoulaye resigned herself to her husband's desertion, and did not ask for a divorce, even though the husband never came back to see his family. They remained separated for the next 12 years, until his death. She concentrated on raising her children and on her work as a teacher. But she nevertheless felt deep resentment at this betrayal and abandonment.

With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account (Bâ, 2008: 10).

During this period of abandonment, she had to confront on her own both modern and traditional challenges. In addition to the pressures of her demanding traditional society, her children also began to rebel. Her daughters began to wear very short skirts, influenced by the ongoing westernization of the youth. Two of her children were caught smoking. Her daughter, Aissatou's namesake, became pregnant while still a teenager at school. All these challenges took their toll on her, but she confronted them with wisdom and the resources of her faith.

Ramatoulaye's friend Aissatou, however, reacts differently when she meets the same challenge as her husband, who happens to be Modou's best friend, also takes a second wife. He did so under pressure from his mother who comes from a royal family and thinks Aissatou is not worthy of the family as a daughter of a goldsmith. Her son married Aissatou against his mother's will, and they had been happily married and had four boys. But the mother maintained the pressure until her son yielded and accepted to take a second wife of her choosing. Aissatou decided to walk out on her husband, leaving with her children for the United States, where she leads an independent and successful life as a senior embassy executive in Washington DC. The powerful letter Aissatou writes to her husband before she leaves outlines and explains her reaction:

Mawdo,
Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them.
That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heart love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance, however little that may be.

If you can procreate without loving, . . . then I find you despicable. At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have always placed you. Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side, me, "your life, your love, your choice," on the other, "young Nabou [the new wife], to be tolerated for reasons of duty."

Mawdo, man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality. I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way.
Goodbye,

Aissatou (Bâ, 2008: 31–32)

A second marriage is generally said to be sanctioned by Islam. However, what Bâ intends to expose in her novel is the fact that the two men, Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou, and Aissatou's husband, Mawdo, twist the meaning of the text merely to gratify their sexual impulses.

The fact that Modou took for his second wife his daughter's friend, Binetou, and that Mawdo's new wife, Nabou, was of a similar younger age, tends to support Bâ's claim. Mawdo's justification for his marriage to the young Nabou substantiates Ramatoulaye's point further by citing lust as the main motive:

You can't resist the imperious laws that demand food and clothing for man. These same laws compel the "male" in other respects. I say "male" to emphasize the bestiality of instincts... You understand... A wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about "betrayals of the flesh." The important thing is what there is in the heart; that's what unites two beings inside. (He struck his chest, at the point where the heart lies) (Bâ, 2008: 28).

Ramatoulaye never rebelled against the norms of the society, she has had to juggle the demands of mothering and teaching, while suffering the abuse of a patriarchal system. In her traditional Senegalese society, she is expected to resign herself to share her husband with another wife. And when her husband dies, she is expected to accept an offer of marriage from her brother-in-law. Holding on to her convictions as an educated and religiously committed Muslim woman, she accepted the presence of her co-wife. She even felt sorry for her, and thought of her as a victim. She is critical of the way her young rival was deprived of education by a ruse of her husband who exploited the family's poverty and the greed of her mother to convince her to leave school by offering a monthly salary instead.

The young girl was very gifted, wanted to continue her studies, to sit for her *baccalaureat*. So as to establish his rule, Modou, wickedly, determined to remove her from the critical and unsparing world of the young' (Bâ, 2008: 11).

In spite of her irritation at the presence of the younger wife in her home for the funeral, as dictated by tradition, she cannot help feeling sympathy for her. 'At the age of love and freedom from care, this child is dogged by sadness' (Bâ, 2008: 4). Ramatoulaye consciously decides to submit to the precepts of her faith. I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail' (Bâ, 2008: 9).

However, she draws a line at customs and traditions she does believe to be part of her faith. With the same conviction, she emphatically rejects the offer of marriage from her brother-in-law. In spite of pressures from the community, she was determined to see herself as an educated and emancipated woman, whose commitment to her religion does mean loss of self-assertion or openness to modernity. By the end of the novel, due to her faith, and the friendship and help from Aissatou, we find her in a state of self-contentment and balanced existence. Aissatou's support for Ramatoulaye was consistent and crucial. It did not stop at moral support, but included financial support as well. Aissatou even bought her a car, which was crucial for compensating for the desertion of the husband, leaving his large family to fend for themselves.

Aissatou was also a model for Ramatoulaye, who saw in her calm determination an inspiration in the way she refused to submit to shackles of tradition, and managed to transcend her victimhood.

How I envied your calmness during your last visit! There you were, rid of the mask of suffering. Your sons were growing up well, contrary to all predictions. You did not care about Mawdu. Yes indeed, there you were, the past crushed beneath your heel. There you were, an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life (Bâ, 2008: 35)

Conclusion

In a larger sense, Alice Walker and Mariama Bâ stress the importance of faith, whether in God or in comrades, as a means for social change, and stability. Both protagonists, while writing letters, see themselves in a different light. Letter writing serves as catharsis, self-revelation and self-fulfillment. Their journey represents the journey of a lot of women who struggle to find a place in a patriarchal society. The tools they use are different in form but are more or less identical in essence.

Ramatoulaye was an educated working woman, who was not in a physically abusive relationship like Celie. But in her case, the abuse took a different form of abandonment and rejection from the man she loved and trusted as a friend and a colleague. Her education and the independence provided by her employment saved her from collapsing under the weight of her troubles.

Faith is a pivotal factor in both novels. It provides a refuge in times of perplexity and suffering. It evolves and takes a more mature and universalist form as the characters progress into self-consciousness and self-realization. Self-fulfillment is reached when both faith and friendship become secure and stable, and the person reconciles herself with the environment, and embrace the challenges she faces. Friendship a supreme value in this quest. As Ramatoulaye succinctly and aptly puts it:

Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love. (Bâ, 2008: 56)

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