Cultural Hermeticism and the Myth of Global Integration: A Perspective on Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*

Patrick Oloko

Postmodern discourse often mobilises fanciful and optimistic terms such as 'multi-culturalism', 'multi-racialism' and 'globalisation' to characterise contemporary existence. In my opinion, this diction suggests inappropriately that society is moving beyond the friction that attends its pluralism to a benign phase of colour blindness and cultural unconsciousness. When taken beyond their description of the reparative, post-imperial condition of the West (see Chabal, 1996:37), such holisms and their assumptions of global cultural syncretism attempt lamely to simplify the theoretician's task at the cost of an adequate diagnosis of the competing nature of the plural sociosphere. They represent also, what Homi Bhabha sees as 'giving hegemonic normality to the uneven' (1994:171). In this paper, I attempt to show how the commonest integrative method - marriage - negates the concept of globalisation. I investigate the conducts of characters within a trans-cultural connubiality encoded in Mariama Ba's second novel, *Scarlet Song*. Being the most permeating (that is, the most revealing) of institutionalised inter-personal relations, marriage seems to me to offer infinite angles in addition to being the most appropriate site, for testing the degrees of tolerance and compromise necessary for fostering enduring cross-racial and cross-cultural relations. I situate my argument within the spatial contexts of the text and suggest specifically that its protagonists typify different degrees of imperviousness that run counter to the postmodern ideal of collapsing races, cultures and other matrices of identity.

Mariama Ba has two novels to her credit, *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. The first won the Noma Award for publishing in 1980, while the second was published posthumously in 1981. Between them, the former has received such a critical response in the glare of which the latter pales significantly. This is understandably so because *So Long a Letter* is unique both for its epistolary style and the fashionable subject of 'women's liberation'.

The overt ideological stance of the novel appears to have set the standard by which subsequent work by Ba would be assessed. Thus on the feminist template to which she seems perpetually consigned, she is adjudged to have dissipated her writing energies on the first novel. The view that...
her recourse, in *Scarlet Song*, to the 'stereotypical subject matter [of] mixed marriages in post-colonial Africa, a subject that does not bring out the depth of women - and of their very personal pains...' (Abbenyi-Makuchi, 1997:109), can only be reasoned along such lines.

Mixed marriages, in this view, is said to have exhausted itself as a thematic concern in the works of earlier writers, with the implication that it cannot be refreshed. Abbenyi Makuchi (who does not necessarily subscribe to the view) cites both Elizabeth Wilson (1985) and Susan Stringer (1987) as suggesting that 'Scarlet Song is not so successful a work as *So Long a Letter* and ... not so openly feminist' (109).

Part of the drawbacks of assessing the novel from the singular problematic of 'mixed marriage' is the temptation to yield to stereotypical conclusions such as that of Wilson and Stringer and also to suggest that writers on inter-racial nuptial conflicts are overtly pessimistic. In the context of events in the novel, the place of race can hardly be overlooked. But to see it as the only obstacle to a fulfilling nuptiality does not only blur the issue of class, culture and other social differences that run their gamut through this text and *So Long a Letter*, it also implies that the postcolonial African woman of whatever orientation is unlikely to be averse to the degradations of polygynous marriages. It need not be stressed that *So Long a Letter* confutes such a view in its array of female characters who prefer personal freedom to marriage when the demands of tradition and the appetites of their husbands compel them to make choices.

As the most visible marker of difference in the cross-cultural marriage of Ousmanc and Mirelle, race indeed plays a significant role in the tragic events of the novel. However, the marital demands of adjustment and integration which confront Mirelle defies a distinctly racial explanation. As Ba herself points out,

> The problem of a white wife is more interesting from the point of view of shock, from the point of view of the morality of the man’s Mother and from the point of view of society. (as quoted in Abbenyi-Makuchi, 109. emphasis mine).

It is in this sense that Ba’s novels are a continuum, complementary of each other, a fact which rules out the view of one as being more successful than the other.

II

Polygyny, in its peculiarly Islamic character, is at the heart of the conflict in *Scarlet Song*. Transformations in society and social behaviour, including liberal divorce laws, have led to a progressive weakening of the agrarian economy which made inevitable, a widespread practice of
this form of marriage. In spite of this, however, the institution persists, and in some societies, it appears to be the rule rather than the exception.

The sociologist, Magaret Pleil has attempted to rationalise this persistence by establishing a connection between economic prosperity and the recourse to polygyny, especially in Africa. She believes that Africans view polygyny as a status symbol:

\[ ... \text{paying the bride price for, and supporting several wives still demonstrates (sic) that a man has been successful and reinforces his status in society ... If a man is successful, people expect him to take another wife. (1977:147-8).} \]

Citing the findings of researches conducted in Ivory Coast (sic), Nigeria, Ghana and some Arab Muslim societies, Pleil concludes that though polygyny is declining mainly for economic reasons, its social value still remains high and could in fact, increase again with improvements in the standards of living. She points to a trend in which "modern means (cash income from a good job) are being used for a traditional end (an extra wife)" and concludes that:

\[ \text{In societies where polygyny was prevalent, it continues to be highly valued and success in the modern sector is seen as a means to achieve it. Increased prosperity means that more of those who prefer polygyny can now afford it. It seems likely that polygyny will continue to be important in Africa for many years to come, though various factors of social change will probably lower its incidence. (152)} \]

Following Pleil's findings, I shall show presently, drawing from the text, that in Islamic oriented cultures in Africa, the practice of polygyny has remained relatively stable because economically endowed Muslim males consistently draw upon the resources of religion to legitimise their recourse to it.

In principle, the number of women that a Muslim male may keep as wives and concubines is limited only by his capacity both to provide for their welfare and to meet, in equal measure, their sexual and emotional needs. In practice, however, the finite character of man's economic means and the limitations which nature places on his sexuality check such 'unlimited discretion' over the woman and her body. Thus, we appear to have a balance as the freedom allowed the man is curbed by nature and duty.

Since these duties are intended merely to keep the man within the bounds of reason by limiting him to a fairly manageable number of women, it seems therefore unnecessary to impose sanctions upon their violation. The assumption here is that nature and means are adequate checks on the natural human inclination to exceed the bounds of social restraints. As these checks have no force of law, what redresses are available to the woman should the man, her husband, fail in his duty to her in the state of polygyny?
Scarlet Song reveals that abuses and transgression of duties abound in polygynous marriages. In the Senegalese Muslim society on which the novel focuses, economic means dictates a man's choice of the number of wives. Various examples in other texts suggest that most male characters, despite their Western education, generally succumb to the temptation to exercise their cultural rights to polygyny after a spell in a one-man, one-wife situation. The validity of this argument - that a Muslim male's recourse to polygyny is at the behest of his means - is underscored by the contrast which the situation of Ousmane's father, Djibril Gueye, provides.

Djibril Gueye returns from the war in France handicapped - one leg shorter than the other. The text is silent on whether or not that is the reason he takes up no employment or trade. We know however, that he and his family subsist on his army pension. The discerning reader sees that his avoidance of a second wife is a rational decision dictated by the limited resources available to him. This limitation checks his exercise of the near infinite freedom of action which his religion guarantees its male devotee on matters of marriage. It constitutes as well, the basis of his wife's strength of character and self confidence, both of which constantly threaten to eclipse his personality.

Yaye Khady does not have to vie with another woman for Gueye's attention, and much of her action, untypical of the Muslim wife, can be attributed to the emotional stability that a monogamous marriage confers. Much of the cohesion that we notice in Gueye's home and which contrasts with the schemings and rancour of their neighbours, the Ngoms, is ascribable to the marital choice and discretion of Gueye. Religious duty and family cohesion appear to be more carefully balanced in a monogamous nuptial tie.

When Ousmane marries Mirelle who, unlike him has no financial obligations to her parents, the pressure on his income eases. Mirelle's frugality ensures that she and Ousmane live comfortably despite the burden of providing for the extended family. Soon however, with his eyes on Mirelle's savings to which he has access, Ousmane's appetite for women enlarges, and Ouleymatou who he had carefully avoided all the while suddenly becomes the 'object' of his passion. He falls for her seductions and in the process, depletes Mirelle's savings as he attempts to meet the numerous demands of living a 'double life' (154).

The Muslim male, in periods of economic stability is reminded of the marital discretion and liberties guaranteed by his culture. To maximise such, he recourses to polygyny and, in the conflict that ensues, the balance that the Islamic law-giver unconsciously envisaged, collapses. In the thrills and passion of that state, he often forgets his duties to his wives. For Mirelle who, in marrying Ousmane, 'burnt her bridges behind her' (162), coping with the emotional batterings of that betrayal proves too tasking. Unlike Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, she cannot readjust to life after the experience. Unlike Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, she cannot readjust to life after the experience. Nor can she return home on her own terms as her culture seems to have no place for the prodigal. Therefore she withdraws from 'reality' and from the society that has rejected her.
Mariama Ba foregrounds the events of the novel, particularly the courtship and marriage of Ousmane and Mirelle, with the social upheavals of the 1960s in France and Senegal, caused mainly by university students. The actual causes of these riots and the extent to which events in one country influenced those in the other, is difficult to ascertain. But considering the affinities between them, especially the coloniser/colonised relationship from which they had just emerged, one could say that the objectives of the students must have been quite identical. In the fictional portrayal, however, what is clear is that the youths in both countries see the principles and ideas which sustained the older generation as inadequate for their own progress. Therefore, they demand a change in the social order, believing that this change could come through revolts, demonstrations, riots and other anti-social acts.

It does seem that Ba parallels the idealism of the rampaging youth with the exuberance that leads Ousmane and Mirelle into a marriage which the reader discerns, from the copious asides, as doomed from the very beginning. But in both the civil disobedience and the marriage, the energy applied to the pursuit of the goal soon dissipates and the status quo remains.

When they fall in love, Mirelle, without being immodest, blabs the fact of her aristocratic upbringing. Ousmane, realising not only the comparative squalour of his background, but also its arrogantly rigid terms of admission to the outsider, 'treacherously' keeps it a secret from her. Difference - of race, class, religion and even of ideology - is at the heart of the conflict that erupts and shatters the 'slender thread' of emotion which the pair had cultivated. What is significant in the relationship is the pair's individual reaction to the social pressures on them. This is because it is the yardstick by which the flexibility or otherwise of their backgrounds could be assessed when applying the victim/victimiser categories on the sex relations of this society.

Mirelle professes the christian faith. But the French society in which she grew is, in many respects, secular; secular because as Mirelle herself exemplifies it, civil duty predominates religious obligation and there is no compelling need to observe 'culture', even of religion. Mirelle, in the ecstasy of love feels little compunction in repudiating her foster religion which seems, besides parental opposition, the only obstacle to her attainment of marital bliss. In the melee of passion, she discovers that she has 'sufficiently outgrown' christianity to the point that she could abandon it. Religion makes such few existential demands on her that she feels able to sustain her existence without its guiding tenets. As she rationalises it, christian doctrinal flexibility dictates:

_The religion that you wish me to adopt is neither more or less suited to me than the one you asked me to abandon. But I will accept it. Without enthusiasm. Don't make too much of this gesture. There's no nobility in it. It involves no sacrifice. There will be no wrench. It is simply the logical climax of a process set in motion before we met._ (S.S. 41)
But if Christianity has less acculturating impact on Mirelle, her temperament and character are forged and nourished by the secular tenets of European tradition which stresses individualism rather than collectivism as the basis of character valuation. This individualism is at the heart of every move she makes. It informs her choices - she chooses, for instance to marry Ousmane against the mandatory parental consent. It dictates her action - she waits patiently until she is 'of age', then repudiates her religion by her conversion to Islam to which she has only nominal allegiance. It enables her to characterise her parents opposition to her marriage in the euphemistic term of generation gap. This rationalisation gives her the leverage to feel secure in the illusion that hers represents the generation that would shatter the barriers and cleavages of race and class:

Her parent's reaction did not surprise her. The realities of life only reached that bourgeoisie elites filtered and categorized. The heritage of what it was correct to do and think had its taboos and forbidden areas. Between preaching the equality of all men and practising it, there was (for them) an abyss fraught with peril. (S.S. 30)

This same individualism enables her to state in bold terms, her conditions for the marriage:

I am determined to retain my own identity as far as essentials are concerned. The values that I believe in, the truth that lights my path. As I have no wish for you to turn into a puppet for me to manipulate. I am quite prepared for you to reject any of my ideas which your conscience will not let you accept ... I shall not tamely espouse all Africa's ideals.

Again, it is reflected in her consciousness of the risk involved in the marital adventure and her determination to brave it:

The face of Africa in this country is not just the face of the immigrant worker ... Africa also assumes the loathsome face of those who sponge unashamedly on women in order to survive. I have heard so many heart-rending stories, sobbed out by women with faces contorted with misery: women who have been the victims of promises deliberately broken; women who lost everything when their Black fiancées vanished into thin air with all their possessions. These women warn me to beware when I talk to you. (41)

While attesting to her individualism, Mirelle's consciousness of her vulnerability and her determination to take the 'risk' is, for her, a defence and attack strategy. It adumbrates the outcome of the marriage and perhaps, her indifference to it since she seems aware of the risks. At another level, it suggests that her terms for the marriage (as quoted above) are a self preservation strategy which Ousmane ought to understand in the light of precedents. In her
realism, she sees that in the matter of cross-cultural nuptiality, only fair dealings, honour and fidelity to the terms of 'agreement' could be relied upon to stave off social difficulties. Postmodernism and its concomitant, postcolonialism have tumbled the scales of power and there appears to be a reversal of the hitherto uni-directional flow of hegemony. And since the suspicions reminiscent of the coloniser/colonised relations appear to burgeon, only these ideas - fair dealings, honour and fidelity to the terms of agreement - as opposed to the emotionalism of conventional marriage vows - can be relied upon to sustain the multicultural character of existence that postmodernism envisages. The reality however, as Mirelle experiences it, is that ideas such as she constructs for a workable multicultural co-existence, tend to remain only at the frontiers of ideas in the interface of cultures.

IV

In a pre-publication interview, Mariama Ba previews Scarlet Song, spelling out the terms on which a woman could be given out in marriage to a man, and the duties that the institution imposes on the man in the predominantly Islamic Wolof culture:

What counts here in Senegal for a girl and for her family is that she gets married to a man who shows himself responsible... Here in Senegal, it is the woman who is given in marriage and who belongs to the husband's family. It is not the same thing with the man. The Man bears the family's name. He is the root of the tree which flourishes to give fruits... (cited in Abbenyi - Makuchi, 109)

Even though Ousmane is divested of a large part of the responsibilities of marriage by Mirelle's parents' non acceptance of him as son-in-law, he is nevertheless haunted by the duties he owes his family and community. His awareness that a nuptial adventure with an exotic woman could excessively task his capacity for performing such duties compels him to carefully consider the implications of his moves. Thus, while Mirelle could, on impulse, dispense with a way of life to which she has superficial attachments, Ousmane is keenly conscious of the cost of his marriage to a woman outside his culture. Though, in his fragile value scale, he considers the attractions of this adventure worthwhile, he is reduced to Hamletic proportions as he counts the costs - in religious and cultural terms - of his proposed marriage:

"On the one hand, my heart draws me to a white girl... On the other, my own people. My reason fluctuates between the two, like the arm of a balance on which two objects of equal values are weighed".
Was he to reject Usine Nairi Talli? No longer heed the pointing fingers of his father's fellow Muslims, directing him towards God's royal road? Never more be moved to a meditation at the sound of the Muezzin under the Minaret of a Mosque bathed in the purple glow of dawn? Shred the thousand pages of his ancestral heritage? Repudiate the rabs and the Jinee? Divert from his proper channel the blood which is the carrier of virtue? Decry pride in one's birth? Die for love and not for honour? Would he dare take the step? He made a supreme effort to disengage himself. But was it easy to break loose from the ties that bound him to his native boababs? Would he dare take this step? To choose a wife outside the community was an act of treason and he has been taught "God punishes traitors". (37)

In his naivety, Ousmane attempts to resolve this dilemma and to balance the conflicting demands of his Western-educated personality with that of his upbringing by insisting that, as a condition for the marriage, Mirelle renounce her religion and convert to his, possibly in the expectation that in subscribing to Islam, Mirelle would unconditionally submit to its tenets. The same pattern recurs when, foreseeing the clash between duties to his foreign wife and obligations to his mother, he soliloquises, 'All you'll have to do, is put your life as Mirelle's husband in one compartment and that as Yaye Khady's son, the son of Nairi Talli in another' (39).

This simplistic approach to resolving fundamental conflicts of personality dualism is the typical response of Western orientated characters in such situation. In Wole Soyinka's play, The Lion and The Jewel, Lakunle, the village teacher prefers to fight against the bride price system and the institution that prescribes it than save to marry the girl he claims to love. Perhaps a more germane typifier of Ousmane's situation is Oduche's, a character in Achebe's Arrow of God.

Oduche 'acquires' his 'second' personality when his father, the chief priest of Ulu and symbol of traditional religion and culture, sends him on a mission of espionage among the Christian converts and missionaries. The values and beliefs of both religions, it should be stressed, are in diametric opposition. Ezeulu, we are informed, resorts to this measure out of a pragmatic belief that 'The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place'. (A.O.G.98).

However, Oduche is soon impressed by the ways of the new religion and in his zeal seeks to undermine the old (to which his loyalty ought to lie) by acts of sabotage. He locks a python, a token of traditional religion, in a box intending the reptile to suffocate. His method is informed by the naive assumption that before his community, he would be blameless for the death of the animal since locking it up signifies no overt intention to kill it. Before the Christian God, however, he would get the credit and his zeal and commitment to the cause of the new religion would be noticed.
While Oduche's action elicits no significant result of cohesion-undermining proportions (the reptile is saved before any damage could be done), the ephemerality and therefore inadequacy of Ousmane's envisaged solution is foreshadowed in his unconscious bias and leaning towards his heritage:

*He shivered with foreboding. Tentacles held him in their crushing grips. The more he strove to break free, the tighter the coils enfolded him. How could he escape without amputating a part of himself? How could he escape without bleeding to death?* (38).

It is in these questions that the author of *Scarlet Song* situates the conflict. Mirelle carries into her marriage the concepts and principles of life prescribed by her secular culture and, in that, reveals the superficial nature of her devotion to Islam, her adopted religion. Ousmane, on his part, opts to remain faithful to his Islamic upbringing and the lifestyles it dictates - 'People may dance, to be sure, but they must keep in step. No one has the right to choose his own rhythm' (90). What follows, as these characters signify, is the confrontation between hegemonic cultural Islamic practice and the complacent secularism of European tradition. The individualism of Europe is locked in combat with the collectivism of Africa, each poised to yield no space to the other.

Mirelle's mental schism and final tragic act of infanticide and attempted murder are spill-overs of this 'ancient' quarrel illustrating, in contemporary time, the significance of 'home advantage' in the outcome. I say home advantage because the denouement perceptively favours Ousmane - what I referred to earlier as the reversal of the flow of hegemony. In the context of my argument, this advantage testifies, first, to the level nature of the postmodern play (or is it, battle) ground which is devoid of disabling binary constructions - superior/inferior, savage/civilised, self/other etc - that have little respect for territorial sovereignty. Secondly, it lays bare to our view the myth of a universal invariant existential mode fitting the frame of multiculturalism and multiracialism. While these may, in principle, freeze inter-cultural tensions and point to the possibility of a world in which, as Maccioni puts it, 'pluralism [should] foster distinctiveness without disadvantages' (1992:209), the extenuating circumstance that makes nonsense of the adjusitive efforts of Mirelle in her husband's society shows that such a world is still an ideal, receding beyond the horizon.

The narrative voice observes:

*.... habits prevail. It can be traumatic to modify one's behaviour, to aspire to a completely different goal. 'If you leave your habits at the threshold of a house, they will run after you if you don't hurry back to them'* (S.S. 97)

In her passion, Mirelle ignores precedence and common sense, marrying Ousmane in the hope that he would be gentleman enough to abide by the tacit rules of honour governing what for her should be postmodern nuptiality. She pays for this naivety, struck down by shock as she watches Ousmane make full use of his cultural right to libertinism.
WORKS CITED


