

**ECO-CRITICAL FABRICS IN MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER***

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**Abstract:**

*This paper aims to bestow a panoramic view of Ecocriticism as a literary critical theory and its implications in the form of the human relationship with nature. Ecocriticism is a new critical approach, which is primarily concerned with the current political scenario to reestablish and reconfigure the human interactions with environment. It is a consciousness-raising phenomenon about environment, which excavates the literary culture to scrutinize how literary texts engage with facets of the environment such as landscapes, plants, animals, and natural resources. It unravels a cameo, which poses a moral question about human behaviour towards nature. The focal point of this new critical approach is also to probe the environment that ruminates the cultural, political, and spiritual ethos. In addition to that, it analyzes the prominent role played by ecology in the life cycle of human beings. Thus, the researcher attempts to trace the prevalence of ecocritical fabrics in Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*.*

**Keywords:** *Ecology, Environment, Ecocriticism, spiritual ethos.*

As a fast growing literary movement, Ecocriticism requires greater attention and emphasis in the twenty first century. Cheryll Glotfelty defines that Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Ecological imperialism is the main reason for the destruction of ecology. Most of the ecological crises arise due to the effects of the advancement of science, technology, and industrialization. In this regard, Glotfelty accentuates his plea for the conservation of ecology through the following lines:

We have reached the environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's life supporting system. We are there either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our head long race to apocalypse (Intro VIII).

Ecocriticism is a study that amalgamates environment and literature together. It attempts to provide a solution for the present environmental crisis from the theoretical perspective. Ecocriticism is a broad realm comprising the other facets like 'Green Studies', 'Ecopoetics' and 'Environmental Literary Criticism'. Ecocritics prudently scrutinize the ecological values and the ethics from the human perception. They also attempt to probe, how humanity plays a dominant role in protecting as well as deteriorating the wilderness. Ecocritics try to create awareness among the people regarding the impending danger that is yet to attack them because of their coarse attitude towards Nature.

After the era of colonization, the people of Africa began to eulogize about the glory of their ancestral land and nature through their writings. As a result, the cameos, which came out of Africa during that time, had been endowed with ecocentric ideas. However, in due course of time, there was a drastic shift from nature oriented writing to one that is politically and socially committed. The same idea is further

revealed by Iheka in the following lines: "Despite the shift in focus, critics have argued that postcolonial states, especially in Africa, deserve a non-western ecocritical paradigm that accommodates the dynamics of developing postcolonial societies" (29). Thus, ecocritical cameos belonging to that period, had mainly discussed regarding problems of poverty, underdevelopment, and politics of exploitation, which hinder the developing countries to appreciate and conserve the environment. The dire social responsibility of the Africans for preserving nature has become a recurring theme in the works of Mariama Ba. Charles Sarvan, famous critic observes the unique writing of Ba as: "Mariama Ba does not write from a clear and categorical standpoint; her novels are questioning and explorative rather than radical and imperative" (464).

The ecocritical fabrics are tightly interwoven in Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*. The entire novel is set in the land of Senegal, which is known for its geographical prosperity in Africa. Ba says: "Sangalkam remains the refuge of people from Dakar, those who want a break from the frenzy of the city. . . .these green, open spaces are conducive to rest, meditation and letting off of steam by children" (22). Thus, the cognate relation of the presented characters is further enhanced with the succor of nature. Ba says: "under the wondering gaze of the kids, the live fish would flip up as the long sea snakes would curve themselves inwards. There is nothing more beautiful than a fish just out of water, its eyes clear and fresh, with golden or silvery scales and beautiful bluish glints" (22). Hence, Ba eloquently elucidates the irreplaceable bond between men and nature.

As an epistolary novel, the plot of the novel construes the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou with the exchange of the letters. Nature becomes an external source, ameliorating the relationship between the two friends. When Ramatoulaye shares her experience of friendship with Aissatou through her letter, she recalls how they both spent much time, having been comforted with the presence of nature. She recalls: "And we stuffed ourselves with fruits within easy reach. And we drank the milk from coconuts. And we told 'juicy stories'! And we danced about. . . .And the lamb, seasoned with white pepper, garlic, butter, hot pepper, would be roasting over the wood fire" (23). In the similar way, Ba shows the kaleidoscopic image of the pastoral beauty of the Africa:

Coconut trees, with their interlacing leaves, gave protection from the sun. Succulent sapodilla stood next to sweet-smelling pomegranates. Heavy mangoes weighed down the branches. Pawpaws resembling breasts of different shapes hung tempting and inaccessible from the tops of elongated trunks. Green leaves and browned leaves, new grass and withered grass were strewn all over the ground. (22)

In this context, nature is serving as a mode of link to discuss the familial, social and cultural issues among the two friends. Ba describes the familial relationship between the two friends in the following lines: "we walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present. My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times"(01). Most of the Africans live as family in the suburbs of Africa and they are closely associated with nature. The land of Africa in turn, gives them compassion and solace to their hearts which have been afflicted by rapid urbanization. Ba scintillatingly expresses this concept through the following lines: "What a crowd on public holidays! Numerous families would stroll about, thirsty for space and fresh air. People would undress, without embarrassment, tempted by the benevolent caress of the iodized breeze and the warmth from the sun's rays"(21). Thus, the nature takes plethora of positions like Mother, Mentor and Guru in the life of individuals who have been afflicted with the unexpressed pain of modern world, because of social discrimination.

The rural background described in this novel eloquently elucidates the oneness of the people with nature. Most of the times, Ramatoulaye sojourns in Dakar and its outskirts. When she imagines as an aged noblewoman going home to the countryside to carry out a scheme of revenge by matchmaking, there is a conjectural portrayal of the hinterland, she says:

The baobab trees held out the giant knots of their branches toward the skies; slowly, the cows moved across the road, their mournful stare defying the vehicles; shepherds in baggy trousers, their sticks on their hands, guided the animals. Men and animals blended, as in a picture risen from the depths of time. (27)

Africans have very close proximity with their land, which is like their invisible family member, having taken part in all the aspects of their personal life. In addition to the pastoral land system, Ba is also discussing the life-associated sea, which is also an important aspect of nature giving the revenue to the people for their survival. She says: "At first simple points of horizon, the boats would become more distinct from one another as they drew nearer. They would dance in the hollows of the waves, then would lazily let themselves be dragged along" (21). The life and land of Africans are embroidered with their familial system. In this context, Ba has scintillatingly tailored the familial and geographical knots. She describes how people give much care and concern towards nature in the following lines: "Mawdo's mother had looked after the farm before her son's marriage. The memory of her husband had made her attached to this plot of land, where their joint and patient hands had disciplined the vegetation that filled our eyes with admiration" (22). When Ba explains the rustic rural life of Africa, she elucidates the early childhood life of Modou, the husband of Ramatoulaye: "they are there, his childhood playmates on the football ground, or during bird hunts, when they used catapults" (05). Thus, it is understood that the Africans are being reared up in the lap of nature and nature in turn is also having equal contribution in every facets of their life.

Ba has also discussed the unexposed story of African continent through this novel. Due to the geographical instability, the entire African land is of dust and grit. However, the people never take this disadvantage to their heart rather they feel that having different identity crisis itself as their uniqueness. Ba says: "He shook his left leg, crossed over his folded right leg. His shoes, white Turkish slippers, were covered with a thin layer of red dust, the colour of the earth in which they had walked. The same dust covered Mawdo's and the Imam's shoes" (37). In the same way, she also connects the economical status of Africa with the geographical connectivity. She says: "the grey dust from the road covers his denim outfit. Mauled by the children for whom he has become the target, a red wound on his leg, he is visibly taken aback by so much hospitality" (78). Thus, the abject status of the geographical connectivity enumerates the real social milieu prevailing in Africa. In this context, Ba underlines a strong message that the ecological status of a country will have a strong impact on the credibility and the livelihood of the people. However, they were very hyper active and always indulging themselves in doing something "... first to up in the morning, and last to go to bed, always working" (20). As their life is closely associated with nature, most of the people are depending on agriculture and fishing as the source of their income. It is well proved by the sharing of Ramatoulaye to her friend. She says: "Our favourite spot was Ngor beach, situated near the village of the same name, where old bearded fishermen repaired their nets under the silk-cotton trees. Naked and snotty children played in complete freedom when they were not frolicking about in the sea" (21).

Ba describes how nature, which is the part of geography, assists to strengthen the familial, societal, and cultural relationship among people. She also natters that nature is a guiding force to ameliorate the alliance between men and nature. Ramatoulaye's friendship is always bloomed in the cortex of nature:

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- cloured, overlooking the ocean. Greenery, sometimes a veritable hanging garden spread out under the clear sky... our favorite spot was Ngor beach situated near the village of the same name, where old bearded fishermen repaired their nets under the silk-cotton trees. (21)

The akin relation of life with nature has also been well represented by Ba. As Africa is known as the

land of misfortune by the West, they do not give any importance to the culture and customs of them. Thus, though Ba unambiguously projects the other part of Africa in a negative way, she also portrays the placid and the serene part of Africa. She enumerates with the experience of Ramatoulaye words of sharing with her friend:

Do you remember the morning train that took us for the first to Ponty-Ville, the teachers' training college in Sebikotane? Ponty-Ville is the countryside still green from the last rains, a celebration of youth right in the middle of nature, banjo music in dormitories transformed into dance floors, conversations held along the rows of geraniums or under the thick mango trees. (13)

Hence, Ba punctuates a strong message that even though the world looks down at the people of Africa, they have never underestimated themselves rather they are highly motivated to show their uniqueness in terms of colour, customs and culture to the rest of the world. In addition to that, nature is offering the ceaseless succor and courage to uplift their standard of living. The entire life cycle of the Africans revolves around nature and they are fully contented with their presence at their homeland. Though there is an imbalance in the geography itself, nature in turn cajoles them giving all the sources of their personal life.

Thus, the chosen magnum opus cameo, *So Long A Letter* vivaciously elucidates the fabrics of ecocritical aspects by examining the relationship between man and his environment. This novel depicts the natural sights and landscapes along with people's attitudes and attention towards nature. This paper also excavates the other dimension of ecocriticism stating how the characters presented in this novel have contributed towards conservation of the ecosystem for the betterment of the world.

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