

The Hill of Love Is Different From the Hill of Marriage: Re-Reading Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*

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Abstract

The task of this paper is to discover the wisdom behind this Wolof proverb: "When one abandons one's own hill, the next hill which one climbs will crumble". This paper has shown that the hill is the environment, race, cultural precepts, maternal bond, and values of the characters themselves that inhibit intercultural marriage. The theoretical framework used in this article is mainly deconstructionist theory, nonetheless eclectic approach is accommodated because of the interpretation of the concept *hill*. The interpretations of what constitutes a hill affected some characters negatively so that they did not achieve their goals fully. Other characters did not allow cultural pull and family ties to overwhelm them. Cultural precepts like the formidable power wielded by mother in-laws, maternal bond, mother's culinary art, polygamy overwhelmed the protagonist to insanity. This paper recommends that mothers in-law should relax their maternal hold on their sons when they are married. The men who are not emotionally strong to withstand cultural pull should marry their own kinswomen.

Keywords: hill, maternal bond, mother's culinary art, culture, race, mother in-law

1. Introduction: The Proverb

A hill is a geographical area of land or landform rising above the surrounding land but not as high as a mountain. Some countries are hilly like northern Nigeria and Senegal. A people's proverbs are coined from their geographical realities or the people's response to them. A proverb is a short traditional expression of truth proper for an ethnic community about everyday life. Many proverbs are allegorical and they are highly imbued with extended meanings. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958), describes a proverb thus: "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten (p.6). Thus, as palm oil is essential in the kitchen, proverbs are not only essential to conversation but they are an expression of the linguistic competence of the users.

"When one abandons one's own hill, the next hill which one climbs will crumble" (*Scarlet Song* p. 168), is a Senegalese Wolof proverb, that admonishes intending couples of the need to think about socio-cultural compatibility before they enter into marriage contracts. This proverb is used in Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song* by Djibril Gueye the husband of Yaye Khady and the father of Ousmane Gueye towards the end of the novel when Ousmane was hospitalized after being stabbed several times by Mireille. This proverb is an allusion to the one used by Yaye Khady about Mireille, after her arrival from France: "This white woman who came down from her own hill to intrude into the black people's world would see what she would see..." (p. 74). This means that Mireille has abandoned her own culture and people in France to venture into an alien Senegalese culture in Africa. It is important to recall that Mireille is of a patrician birth, the only child of the French diplomat, Jean de La Vallee, working in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Her patrician heritage contrasts greatly with Ousmane Gueye's pauperism. Ousmane's father retired from the army disabled from an auto mishap in France during World War II: "He had returned from war with one leg shorter than the other and with numerous decorations." (*Scarlet Song* p. 6 & p. 59). His mother is a fishmonger but owns a small shop (pp. 10,13).

Chere Kar (2013), interprets the proverb thus: "To marry outside one's community is to come down from one's own hill (p.87)." For Yaye Khady, it is prophetic of an imminent marital crash in which Mireille will be extensively traumatized. Djibril Gueye shares the hill assumption when he casts the failed marriage of his son in this proverb: "When one abandons one's own hill, the next hill one will climb will crumble" (*Scarlet song* p.168). Although, Ousmane rests his courtship with Mireille on escape from poverty, he does not conceive of any hill during his courtship days with Mireille as he hums this doxology: "I'm going to get married! I'm going to get married, [to a woman from another hill p. 60]! He hums like the Wolof "Billy-goat that chooses its own mate" (*Scarlet Song*, p.60).

Ironically, he “lets his mother choose for him” (Acholonu, 1994, p. 211). Not only does he let himself bear the burden of tradition, he lacks straightforwardness. He is emotionally immature to caution his mother. In her first novel, Ba uses Ramatoulaye to reject tradition and polygamy thus: “You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change” (*So Long a Letter*, p.68).

Hill as Maternal Bond in Ba’s *Scarlet Song*

The proverbial ‘hill’ in the *Scarlet Song* interrogates realities like culture, race, maternal bond and mother in-law syndrome in a society in transition. In *Scarlet Song* the hill is personified in Mireille. The narrator tethers the hill on Mireille who has been abandoned by her husband Ousmane leaving in its trail an “unrumped” bed each night because she is alone (p.121). The theme of wife abandonment is ubiquitous in Ba’s novels. Another interpretation of the hill is that Mireille abandons her aristocratic family fortune to marry Ousmane. Consequently, the marriage crumbles. Another type of hill is the fortune or the money or the class which were gains Ousmane’s family enjoyed from the ill-fated marriage. Through Mireille’s finance, Ousmane transports his family from the rural housing in Usine Niari Talli (p.3) to an urban housing estate in Gibraltar (p.80). Since they have abandoned Mireille, their fortune will crumble thereafter. Emelia Oko (1997), blames Mireille for abdicating self to love without questioning the validity of romantic love in the face of social and economic forces (p.81). On the other hand, Acholonu conceives Mireille and the other female characters in Ba’s *So Long a Letter* as women who mistake eros for absolute love which is immortal and altruistic: “Their disillusionment consists of a discovery at their cost of how quickly man’s desire burns itself out (p.202).”

From the perspective of Ousmane’s mother, the hill approximates to a hybrid of maternal self-centredness, culture and racism. The hill has encroached into her maternal-filial bond. “From an early age, Ousmane has been prepared to be [his mother’s] arms and legs” (*Scarlet Song*, p.8). With the arrival of Mireille, her relationship with her son is becoming diffused so the hill must be trimmed or razed down. Whatever interpretation the hill takes, it is ominous to the marriage. First and foremost, Mireille meets resistance from Ousmane’s mother on her arrival at the airport. The narrator describes this first meeting like a contest:

Mireille let go of her husband’s arm and came forward smiling to greet her mother in-law. She kissed her with all the warmth that she left. Yaye Khady’s coldness was all the more shocking in view of Mireille’s affectionate greeting. Nevertheless, they embraced and exchanged greetings in French or Wolof (p.80).

Mireille’s beauty is prodigious. To Yaye Khady, Mireille is a spirit who has left her ethereal abode to bewitch and snatch her first and beloved son from her (p.80). To recapture the monopoly of her son’s affection, Yaye Khady unleashes hills of hostility from her ethnic Wolof arsenal, to dismantle the usurper (p.60). The first onslaught is to defile Mireille’s aristocratic, personal hygiene and individualized living. Secondly, Mireille must endure hot peppery dinner. The episode is captured thus:

[Mireille] made an effort to get used for the time being to the community life, which upset her. The meals were always served in a large aluminum dish from which everyone helped themselves. After every meal the table cloth was folded up and pushed into a corner of doubtful cleanliness. The water which everyone used to wash their hands was dirty after the first person. That did not prevent the others from dipping their hands in and Mireille did not dare to be the exception (p.81).

Ousmane does not come to her rescue. He is emotionally ill equipped to stop his mother. Here Oko’s explanation is instructive:

With Ousmane and [his] mother we experience what the poor mean to themselves. . . In the economic climate of Ousmane as the provider of emotional and economic stability, Mireille introduces Western marital consent of forming a world alone for her husband and herself. The futility of romantic love, the pull of eros and psyche as a social force is dispelled by a social force of a long tradition of sharing which Parts I and II of the novel has established coherently (“Eros, Psyche and Society. . .p. 82).”

Ousmane’s attachment to his mother traps both of them in a fixation maze. He fills Yaye Khadi’s life as expected of a traditional woman who “recoups all her repressed feelings, the renunciation of her life through her son who is a source of pride and survival: she would like to own him forever (Magida, Salman 1987, “The Arab Women ”, qtd in Dick, 2009 p.144). Yaye Khady’s frustrations are captured in this soliloquy: “ The old man of seventy remains forever his mother’s tiny infant. All the same how could Ousmane have forgotten my face bathed in perspiration?

How could he forget my endless drudgery, forget our mutual love” (*Scarlet Song*, p.72)? Mireille has trespassed into the Senegalese hill, therefore, she must endure repudiation.

The Hill of Culture and Race in *Scarlet Song*

It may not be an overstatement that *Scarlet Song* demonstrates the harsh reality that Africa is not Europe and vice versa. Ousmane and his parents are Senegalese of Africa while Mireille is French of Europe. Polygyny, community life, obligatory visit (p.98), dirty habits of picking one’s teeth and spitting under the carpet (p. 85), obligatory giving or forced charity are germane to the Senegalese. To Mireille, not only are they novel, they are burdensome and unendurable. Cherekar (2013), argues that the failure of Ousmane and Mireille is the result of the fundamental differences between them. Their inflexible determination to maintain their own identities consequently results in differences with each other (p.93). Nonetheless, the barrier of culture could be overcome as the counterpoising couple, Lamine a Senegalese and Pierrette a French, have demonstrated: “Lamine did not involve his wife in his obligatory family visit which were occasions for mutual sizing up rather than socializing. Pierrette on her part kept her in-laws away from her home” (*Scarlet Song*, p.98).

Lamine and Pierrette, are witnesses to Ousmane and Mireille’s wedding in France. Nevertheless, Pierrette’s parents consent to her marriage to Lamine and pronounce blessings during her wedding, Mireille’s parents are absent during her wedding. However, parental consent does not so much constitute success in inter-racial marriage as the subsuming of ideological complexes does (as in Lamine’s marriage above). Through authorial intrusion, the principles underlying a successful inter-cultural marriage is uncovered:

Lamine had an open mind and was not tormented by ideological complexes. His negritude did not sit heavily on him. For him, it was neither a defect to be eradicated nor a value to be proved, but something to be accepted and lived with, without any obsession. None of his attitudes betrayed any sign of inner disquiet. Unlike Ousmane, he did not go about with one ear cocked for what ‘his own people’ had to say (p.98).

Perhaps Ousmane’s action is a deliberate contempt on and reversal of colonization. From Udumukwu’s insight colonization is: “a question of one dominant from a different territory moving its forces - military, intellectual, business – to rule over another by weakening the latter’s claim to power (2004, p.315)” as France did in Senegal. Ousmane’s father fought for France in World War II, with a permanent limp that qualified him for government pension (*Scarlet Song*, p. 28). Between preaching equality and practising it “there is an abyss fraught with peril” (*Scarlet Song*, p.30). The concepts of universal brotherhood and globalization are estranged in Ba’s *Scarlet Song* through the proverbial hill theorized by the parents of Ousmane Gueye. Mireille’s flamboyant concept of no hill, universal brotherhood and globalization, was not only extorted but distorted by Ousmane and his mother.

The pull of culture resonating in Senegalese marriage pattern is the most expeditious weapon that excised Mireille de La Vallee from Ousmane’s romantic memory. Polygyny is practised with religious approval. Ouleymatou Ngom, a local black Senegalese girl who has rejected Ousmane’s love proposals earlier because of poverty returns home after her first marriage has collapsed. She is born into a polygynous home and could be a co-wife. She schemes to take back Ousmane with Yaye Khadi’s approval. Progressive African men like Ali, blames Ousmane for causing Mireille to break family ties and strongly implores him to renounce Ouleymatou Ngom, his kinswoman. However, some scholars argue that “Ousmane Gueye is greatly influenced by the various male characters throughout the book” (bartley.com). Although Mireille has expanded his financial empire, pitifully, Ousmane reasons that Ouleymatou belongs to his own race and culture:

I realise now that she has always been the only woman I have ever loved and that I never stopped loving her. What about Mireille? What was I trying to prove? My manhood? My ability to attract someone so far above me? I was excited by the difficulty of the enterprise. Once I had reached my goal, I felt the immense void that separates me from Mireille (*Scarlet Song* p.136).

Mutunda’s (2007) perception about Ousmane’s mother’s plot is instructive: “That Yaye Khady openly encourages her son’s second marriage is not surprising. In fact, shortly after Ousmane’s return to Senegal, she became hostile to Mireille and vowed to dislodge her because in her opinion, Mireille is an intruder” (p. 100). Ousemane, Yaye Khady and Ouleymatou acted from selfishness and ethnocentrism.

Ba uses marital relationship to demonstrate the complex web of how gender intersects with race, class and culture. In the meeting of Africa and Europe, none of the characters fare well. While confronting faked universal brotherhood and sisterhood, Mireille is bruised emotionally and physically and she is the most bruised in the process. As Kolawole puts it:

Female writers shifted from moralistic stance to the creation of women whose level of awareness creates unease in their social relationships. . . This leads to rebellion and rejection of certain values. But since the society is not ripe enough for the radical posture, such dreams are aborted or still born (p.121).

Only Mireille deserves the reader's pity for abdicating her natal family and for the maltreatment from her Senegalese, marital family. As the novel ends, the French Embassy in Dakar takes custody of a depraved woman whose dreams have been aborted on account of the unfamiliar hill she climbs unsuccessfully, ostensibly occasioned by maternal bond, cultural prejudice and selfishness. This section of this article will be concluded with the message of Pope Francis to the world on the World Day of Peace 2021. The human "person always signifies relationship, not individualism; it affirms inclusion, not exclusion, unique and inviolable dignity, not exploitation. Each human person is an end in himself or herself, and never simply a means to be valued only for his or her usefulness" (p.1)

The Hill as Mother in-law

Mother in-law is a culturally based reality in Ba's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. The position of a mother in-law in Senegalese cosmology is exulted but intimidating to the daughter in-law. Inferences from Ba's *So Long a Letter* portray a mother in-law as commanding and insensitive to the feelings of her daughter in-law (*So Long a Letter*, p.28). Ramatoulaye narrates that her mother in-law stopped by regularly flanked by her friends "to show off her son's social success . . . and her supremacy in this beautiful house in which she did not live" (*So Long a Letter*, p.19). Aissatou is forced to flee from her marriage because of another woman brought in by her mother in-law to assist in the kitchen and in other domesticities. Her mother in-law's principal motive, however, is caste cleansing. It is in *Scarlet Song* that Ba orchestrates the influence of a mother in-law:

One of the high points in a woman's life is the choice of her daughter in-law . . . Ousmane is introducing an anomaly. And I who dreamt of a daughter in-law who'd live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over the management of the house, and now I'm faced with a woman who is going to take my son away from me. I shall die on my feet, in the kitchen . . . According to unspoken and undisputed principles, the mother in-law gives her orders, supervises, makes her demands (pp.73, 66, 72).

Insight from Dick (2009), reveals that cultural principles "allows a mother in-law much power over her daughter in-law so that there is lack of social space for the new spouses" (p.146). Yaye Khady's outcry is that of a woman fixated to her son on whom she surreptitiously realizes her personality and financial base. Mireille's outcry is that of a woman preaching universal fraternity and sisterhood, which counterpoises Yaye Khady's selfishness and patriarchal supremacy in which Ouleymatou Ngom shares. Mireille, Yaye Khady, and Ouleymatou Ngom have shown that a woman's perspective is different from a man's perspective. Trailing in the blaze of her African female forebears, Ba "feels the depth of a woman's consciousness, sensibilities, femininity, impulses and indeed her weaknesses" whether in Senegal or in France (Chukwuma, 2000, p.101).

The material gain a mother in-law gets from same-race daughter in-law diminishes with inter racial daughter in-law. In inter cultural marriages, certain cultural privileges are not accorded to the celebrant during marriage, baptism or burial ceremonies. Mbye (1987) configures Yaye Khady's predicament thus: Because of Mireille, she will not be paid back (double or triple as is customary) all the money and gifts she has invested in other people. . . . (p. 87). The proverb of the hill has adverse effect on Mireille. She is humiliated in all fronts. Consequently, she becomes mad and murders her only child. The death of her son depicts the futility of attempting to enforce inter cultural marriage on unwilling people.

2. Conclusion

A proverb is a short traditional expression of truth proper for an ethnic community about everyday life. The Senegalese Wolof proverb: "When one abandons one's own hill, the next hill which one climbs will crumble" underpins the preoccupation of this article. Hill has been categorized as culture, race, maternal bond, mother in-law syndrome and selfishness. There are so many instances of the abandonment of hill. Ousmane abandons Mireille and their marriage crumbles. Ousmane and his family abandon Mireille who is their major source of financial breakthrough. True, their fortunes will crumble as Mireille returns to France.

Nevertheless, some hills never crash because the spouses are honest. The union between Lamine and Pierrette, who are from different cultural backgrounds, stand the test of time and become a reference point for Ousmane and Mireille.

Ouleymatou Ngom abandons Ousmane when he is poor and marries another man of the same hill yet that hill

crumbles. Selfishness, cultural precepts but above all, Yaye Khadi's fixation to Ousmane's finance cause volcanic eruption on Ousmane and Mireille's hills. Mireille's position is that of a woman preaching universal fraternity and sisterhood, which counterpoises Yaye Khady's selfishness and patriarchal supremacy in which Ouleymatou Ngom shares. Ba's attack on the Senegalese mother-in-law cult in her two novels depicts her concern for mother-in-laws to allow their sons adequate social space to operate in their marriages. The proverbial hill could be managed by couples successfully without obstruction from in-laws. Nevertheless, the men who are ill equipped to manage the excesses of their mothers should marry their kinswomen.

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