

Insignia of Inferiority: The Role of African-American Women in Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*

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Abstract

Mariama Ba's Scarlet Song, dilates her volume for the welfare of the femininity especially, the blacks in the Afro-American society. She in particular, unveils the kaleidoscopic image of women in the African world, having stressed the indispensable need for their emancipation. When it comes to the femininity in the Africa, black writers usually expound the sufferings and the pathos being faced by black women in the white community. On the contrary, Scarlet Song focuses on the soreness of the white woman in the black community. In this context, Ba strongly chronicles that the so-called subjugation is not only existing in the black world by the so-called whites, but also happens to the whites by blacks. She also elucidates that malice against women hood in the society exists everywhere irrespective of their colour, caste or creed. Furthermore, she proffers a different perspective of women nattering 'women are against women' and proves the dictum by the portrayal of her women. This paper unambiguously attempts to enumerate how the insignia of inferiority has been endowed on the African women by their society in the form of colour, and caste.

Keywords: *Insignia, Inferiority, Afro-American society.*

As far as the African world is concerned, woman is commonly perceived as a symbol of oppression by her opposite gender irrespective of her profession. In that way, the problems that are being faced by Mariama Ba and an ordinary African woman are almost the same, although there are exceptions. Down the years, no proper way of recognition has been afforded to them in terms of education, social status, and moral obligation. In an ironic way, the ideas of male chauvinistic society have been imposed in the process of making them to be treated equal. In *Scarlet Song*, Mireille is being heavily tormented by her husband Ousmane, even though she is white by birth belonging to an affluent family. Women in general, face a lot of hindrances in the course of their life but, as far as African women are concerned, these are doubled. When a man does something for the welfare of his society, he is discerned and people adore him by having conferred special titles on him. At the same time, if a woman with the same spirit does the same, mostly black male writers do not accredit her. Male domination has obviously made many women writers to go to secluded places, denying them the right opportunity to come up. Male domination is not only prevailing in Africa but, it is also spreading all over the nook and corner of the world in various dimensions. Henry Louis Gates rightly puts forth how even black male writers simply brush aside the women community in Africa as:

A word that has so often been used to exclude or misrepresent women . . . why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black *man*? How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival. (05)

Mireille bulges as an insignia of inferiority in *Scarlet Song* wherein she and Yaye Khady play different impersonations like, inferior and superior in their familial life. The prominence of Afro-American family structure in the society has been well enumerated by E. Franklin Frazier as: “. . . as having two models, one in which the father is being perceived as a patriarch and the sole breadwinner, and the mother takes on a matriarchal role”(as qtd. by Stewart 12). Being a daughter of a French diplomat, Mireille, is being treated as an inferior during her stay in the family of Ousmane. In the Afro-American society, whites usually treat blacks as inferior whereas, Mariama Ba poignantly points out the pathos and the sufferings of a white woman, when she becomes a part of the black community.

When Ousmane and Mireille pursue their higher studies in France, they both fall in love. The meeting between Ousmane and Mireille is skillfully narrated by Ba as: “The face of the white girl was always before his eyes. She mouthed the words he needed to get out of his difficulties. She shook her silky golden hair . . . She smiled at him. She gazed at him” (16). Thus, it is understood that Mireille is from a well affluent family. As Mireille has an immaculate affinity with Ousmane, she does not even listen to the words of her father and finally marries him embracing Islam. However, the real problem begins at the time of her

arrival to the house of Ousmane. The inseparable love towards Ousmane makes Mireille to forsake her family joining in the family of Ousmane. The significance of the Afro-American familial system has eloquently been discussed by Ruggles as: "The modern black family has seen a change in this tradition and is now viewed as predominantly single parent, specifically black matriarchy" (151).

Ousmane sends a letter to his mother Yaye Khady stating his marriage with Mireille. Having seen that letter, she gets the maximum rupture because, she believes that a white woman is a symbol of evil. Ba elegantly explains the hatred of Yaye Khady towards Mireille as: "Yaye Khady tossed and turned in her bed. Night after night, ever since she had heard that her Oussou was married to that white woman, sleep had eluded her. . . At night, in spite of her exhaustion, she lay awake, gasping for breath"(68). However, Ba presents her white women as more power-centered, having been endowed with the powers of female bonding, which enfranchises them to surmount the prejudice and to survive with empowerment. For instance, Mireille, has been depicted as powerful white girl, having crossed beyond the boundaries set by her own society. Though she is not physically strong, she is so fervent in her ideologies, aspirations and belief that make Ousmane to fall in love with Mireille. When Ousmane comes to college, his heart is totally stolen by the mesmerizing charm of Mireille. Ba describes the impact of beauty as:

The memory of her silent figure, her discreet perfume, accompanied him everywhere. This was his treasure, his secret, which he was able to bring to life at will. To him, the white girl, with her aristocratic name was his 'princes'. His reason, on which he had always been able to rely, told him to be on his guard against his fancy, which was shattering his vows of chastity and indifference . . . He was intoxicated by his own folly. (16)

The marriage between Mireille and Ousmane erupts many problems in the society. Yaye Khady seriously discerns the new arrival of a white woman in her family. She anticipates a right chance to take retaliation on Mireille and plans to separate them in many ways. She staunchly believes that their separation would put an end to the wrong perceptions of the society on her family. Thus, she eventually becomes a real foe to Mireille, treating her as an insignia of inferiority. Her dominance as a mother-in-law and her hatred towards the white women are reflected by her denigration. Wilson, a critic, obviously elucidates this situation as: "In most African-American married families, a mother's role is dominated by her household responsibilities"(09). When the newly married couple comes Ousmane's house, neighbors deliberately visits Mireille and Yaye Khady shows Mireille to all people as if she is showing an animal inside the zoo. Ba says: "Mireille had to live several months in this locality where Yaye Khady showed her off to her woman friends as object of curiosity and did not hesitate to bring them to the house, like a visit to the Zoo" (81). Furthermore,

Yaye Khady has some pre-conceived notions on the common behaviour of the whites. That is why, She does not judge Mireille based on her approach at home rather feels:

... One of the high points of a woman's life is the choice of her daughter-in-law. A White woman manipulates her husband like a puppet. Her husband remains her property. She alone controls her household and all the income is turned to her benefit alone. Nothing goes to her husband's family. (73)

Yaye Khady's mind is full of venom and she does not like Mireille to the core. Even though Mireille does nothing against her, she is intermittently making derogatory comments against Mireille as: "she would defy this she-devil, with the golden hair of a jinnee. She would not allow herself to be supplanted. I won't let myself be destroyed to leave the field clear for her" (74). Hence, it is clearly understood that Yaye Khady is ready to go to any extent to act against her daughter-in-law. On the contrary, the love of Mireille on her husband does not change even in an iota level. She loves him more than his colour and community. Even though she is physically and psychologically tormented by the family of Ousmane, her love for her husband remains unchanged. She never criticizes her husband for his inability to control the problems. This imperturbability of Mireille is obviously proved by her letter to her father: "I cannot give up the man I love, simply because he is black. I say to myself that happiness does not fall into one's lap. My eyes are filled with tears and Ousmane shares my emotion" (76).

In most of the problems, Ousmane takes the stand with his mother. This attitude gives her a kind of frustration because, no one is ready to talk to Mireille except Ousmane. Yaye Khady totally neglects Mireille. Yaye Khady mother-in-law of Mireille, was in particular of making many complaints and comparisons on the part of Mireille. She intended to create a problem between the husband and wife for which she intentionally spat on the carpet which was cozy. Ba explains: "She would pick her teeth and spit on the carpet, fully aware that her action would spark off a quarrel after she had gone" (Ba 85).

When Mireille initially asks Ousmane about his mother's attitude, he takes the stand on his mother. She is not only deeply wounded with Yaye Khady's attitude but also with the biased approach of her husband. Ba records: "Mireille took the refuge in her bed room. Her tears did nothing to alter her husband's obstinate attitude" (87). Thus, growing distance between them is even identified by Genevieve, one of the friends of Ousmane as: "Her husband is never at home. He gets his own way in everything. She's always alone. I sometimes, catch an expression of great sadness in her eyes. I've got the impression that things are not going well" (88). Even though Mireille externally tries to create an ambiance among the other people to know that both of them live together, she internally knows that it is all waste. Her feeling is well expressed by Ba: "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. There, it's all singing and dancing. But, on my side, everything is dreary and bleak" (90).

Yaye Khady scrupulously comprehends the break between Ousmane and Mireille as she and eventually she wants to make another void between the duo with another plan. As a result, She is constantly nagging Mireille treating her as an inferior: “. . . she warned her angrily. You’re sitting my own son's money. I'll find the means of dislodging you someday” (97). As Yaye Khady is aware that Ousmane is always standing with her side, she wants to spoil the mind of her own son, exaggerating about the things that have not even happened. She complicates the situation adding many well-planned lies against Mireille as if those are real.

Ousmane on the other hand, believes and begins to scorn his wife without having balanced approach. He then asserts: “If you can't stand Yaye Khady's presence here, then you can get out. . . Mireille was speechless” (95). After listening such heinous words from her husband, her sensitivity is being shattered into pieces. In addition to this, Yaye Khady is always tormenting Mireille by her haunting words. Having been influenced with the prejudiced views on whites, She says: “You don't have to go to foreign parts to find a ‘good’ wife. Black women can compete with White girls in every respect” (97). For the first time, Mireille has two different apprenticeships in her life. first is her strained marital life and the other is being a Black man’s wife in Africa. The vacuum created by Ousmane for the replacement of Mireille is purposefully planned and executed by Yaye Khady, introducing Ouleymatou in his life. Ba has presented Yaye Khady in an opposite manner in her relationship with Mireille because, Yaye Khady belongs to the black community where as Mireille is from an affluent white family. As a result, there is a sea of differences between them in terms of social, culture, rituals, and moral code. Further, Mireille and Yaye Khady belong to the two different age groups and education is the prime factor, which separates them further so, there is naturally a dichotomy between them in various facets.

Ouleymatou, childhood friend of Ousmane, is properly felt the absence of Ousmane in her life. Therefore, she initially decides to detach the marital life between Mireille and Ousmane. Furthermore, she is also indirectly motivated by Yaye Khady to allure him towards her. Because, Yaye Khady feels that Ouleymatou would be the best choice in the life of Ousmane and she can also fill the void between Ousmane and Mireille. Ba says:

Ouleymatou was ambitious and she was in love. The difficulties in her path only increased her intent. She considered ways of renewing contact with Ousmane . . . Ouleymatou worked out in her mind a detailed scheme to seduce Ousmane who progressively came to occupy the main place in her heart and thoughts (105&108)

Ousmane eventually seduces Ouleymatou having a dutiful wife and a devoted child. Thus, the idea of Ousmane leaving Mireille reflects the view of C. Eric Lincoln stating: “The implied American idea is that poverty, teen pregnancy, and poor education have been the

struggle for the African-American community due to the absent of African-American father” (343).

Ousmane is totally defeated by the charm of the black woman, Ouleymatou. Yaye Khady is the prime reason for all these obnoxious events. It is due to her hatred attitude towards White, she offered Ouleymatou to share the body and soul of her own son. Yaye Khady’s initial intention was to take revenge against the White for which she treats her own daughter-in-law as an insignia of inferiority. Hence, ‘A woman is against another woman’ is being proved in Ba's *Scarlet Song* by the presentation of the women like Ouleymatou, Yaye Khady and Mireille.

The two dominant women Yaye Khady and Ouleymatou work together and plot against Mireille. Even though Mireille does not express any of her disinclination against the so-called blacks, the misconception and prejudiced views on whites makes Yaye Khady to opt the wrong selection of Ouleymatou as a replacement for Mireille. In this cameo, Mireille has been projected as an object and as a symbol of mockery.

Being a Black writer, Mariama Ba, stands different from the other authors. She passes out an ardent message to the society stating that the proper respect and care should be given to a woman irrespective of her caste, religion and community. By creating a white character called, Mireille and depicting her inner feelings, she deliberately records the dire need of offering the care and concern to a womanhood, brushing aside their caste and colour. In this cameo, Ba does not look Mireille either Black or White, rather she perceives her from the feminist standpoint. Hence, it is unambiguously proved that Mireille has been treated as the insignia of inferior in Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song*.

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