



The Marginalization of Muslim Women: Patriarchy, Polygamy, Tradition and Religion in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

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A discussion of *So long a letter* by the West African woman writer, Mariama Bâ, is used as a basis for highlighting the empowering and disempowering effects of particular types of the situation for women in the traditional African-Muslim context of Senegal. An examination of this issue in the novella indicates that the marginalization of Muslim women in Africa was the direct outcome of colonialism, polygamy and the patriarchy. These factors also posed a potential threat for Muslim women to become socially and politically active. However, irrespective of the pressing conditions women like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou develop female bonding to overcome the sufferings. Both the protagonists represent women who revolt against the strong grips of patriarchy over their self-worth and independence. The research paper concludes with the argument that the protagonist Ramatoulaye motivates the younger generation to change the status quo.

Key words: marginalization, colonialism, polygamy, patriarchy, status quo.

The research paper is an analysis of *So Long a Letter* by a prominent African woman writer Mariama Bâ which casts light on how traditional and cultural norms in Africa result in the oppression of women. The novel *So Long a Letter* also explores how the factors such as caste, class, polygamy and the patriarchy affect the African women's lives. An analysis of the novel reveals that the racial, class and gender issues exacerbate the oppression of many African women, thereby lessening the opportunities for them to attain self-realization.

As every research is the result of discussions; within the discussions, many researchers are tempted to think that Mariama Bâ has taken polygamy to the trial bench, or else, that her novella *So Long a Letter* is nothing more than a criticism of Polygamy. What

is more, as said earlier, most of those researchers do not even bother to distinguish between the tenets of polygamy as a prescribed God's Law and its abuse or misinterpretation by men to satisfy their selfish desires. Yet, in *So Long A Letter*, the abuse or misinterpretation of religious recommendations by developing hypocritical strategies to attain men's selfish desires and to justify their biased actions is what Mariama Bâ is denouncing on the pages of her novel in an Islam dominated Senegal.

I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But understand what? The supremacy of instinct? The right to betray? The justification of the desire for variety? I could not be an ally to polygamic instincts. What, then, was I to understand? (Mariama Bâ. *So Long a Letter*: 34)

The above statement by Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* unveils Mariama Bâ's approach towards polygamy as practiced in Senegal, Africa. The writings of Mariama Bâ reveal the attitude of African men and women towards the polygenic situations which they confront in life. Her work also attempts to re-examine how it is manipulated by global, historical and ideological shifts. In Bâ's works, polygamy stands as a sign of cultural haemorrhage and communal rearticulations.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* exemplify polygamy in the modern Senegalese society as the outcome of the collision of Islam and the practice followed by the traditional societies. Bâ offers some clarification regarding the Islamic provisions that guide the Muslims to follow the custom of polygamy as a cultural mandate:

A man must be like an evenly balanced scale. He must weigh out in equal measures his compliments and his reproaches. He must give equally of himself.



He must study his gestures and behavior and apportion everything fairly. (Bâ, 1986: 7)

The statement clearly indicates that a man is required to have a balanced personality. He should maintain a fairly balanced behavioural pattern and equity in his married life. In this connection, Rafi UllahSheheb quotes in *Islamic Sharia*:

And if you fear that ye will not deal fairly with orphans, marry of women, who seem to you, two two, three three, four four; and if you fear that you cannot justice (to many wives) then one only. And let those who cannot afford marriage keep themselves chaste until Allah provides them with means. (1997: 172)

Under this Koranic dictum, Moslem men have the right to marry as many as four wives. But this right must be balanced with the duty and obligation to treat women fairly and equitably. In practice, equal treatment of wives means sharing each wife's bed on three consecutive day rotations. During this period, the husband eats only eats the food prepared by the wife 'on duty' and stays that night with her. However, as there are no clear cut guidelines about what 'equal treatment of women' really means, men have interpreted it to suit their ends, consequently resulting into their abuses. For example, it is not uncommon that a husband spends more nights with the youngest and the most recent wife than the older one. This is apparently evident in the manner in which Modou and Mawdo Bâ totally neglect their first wives. These men completely devote themselves to the second wives. Such is the condition of the co-wives in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*: Ramatoulaye and Binetou, Aïssatou and petite Nabou.

In *So Long a Letter*, Muslim women are faced with sufferings due to polygamy, and various other cultural practices associated with it, which demean them. Women are not consulted by their husbands when they decide to take second wives. Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter* highlights the fact that the practice of polygamy enables men to oppress beautiful young girls who cannot make decisions on their own, by taking them as additional wives, thereby robbing them of the possibility of a bright future. This is evident in *So Long a Letter* when Modou marries the youthful, attractive Binetou and Mawdo weds young Nabou whom he cannot resist himself because of her physical appearance. For instance, Rama wonders why Modou has abandoned her in the way that he did, concluding that it might

have been due to her physical appearance. This makes her heartbroken and she feels betrayed. Aïssatou suffers a similar form of shock and betrayal for, like Rama, she thought that her relationship had a strong foundation.

Mariama Bâ attacks women for their role in polygamy. The novel presents the harsh African reality that even women do not consider themselves as a group; but look down upon other women as a commodity. Her critique of Dame Belle Mere, Binetou's mother, brings forth the reality regarding the crucial role played by women in the oppression of other women. Binetou is the victim of her mother's greed. Dame Belle-Mere's material greed leads her to compel Binetou to marry a man who was twice her age. Binetou's own greed also contributes to her victimization, eventually causing her to end education prematurely. The decision enables her to end up her identity as an individual. Tante Nabou, Mawdo Bâ's mother, on the other hand, cannot transcend the parameters set up by her society. Her traditional bent of mind does not allow her to accept the changes taking place in the outside world. Mariama Bâ, through her presentation of woman like Tante Nabou, shows the problem involved in female solidarity. Women like Tante Nabou attach undue importance to caste, age, and blood-lines. In Bâ's view, Aïssatou's crime lies in the acts of loving and marrying the man above her position. Tante Nabou disapproves this marriage. She does not want her grandchildren to suffer in future because of the inferior blood inherited from their mother.

The traditional women like Dame Belle Mere and Tante Nabou are subjugated to such an extent that they internalize their own oppression and believe it is their duty to impose these oppressive norms and practices on younger women. This is indicative of the extent to which various women are conditioned into submissiveness within patriarchal societies. For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, there are women who perpetuate the oppression of women, such as Aunty Nabou, who deprives Nabou of formal education and trains her to be a submissive wife, whilst Binetou is pushed into an early marriage as a result of her mother's greed. Farmata also encourages Rama to be a submissive woman, despite the fact that behaviour of this kind would not be in her interests.

Another form of oppression experienced by various women in the novel relate to the way in which they are treated as possessions with no feelings or desires of their own, incapable of making their own decisions and existing primarily to serve the men in their lives and the needs of their families.



Yet, however much the women contribute, their labours are taken for granted and the credit is given to men. For example, Rama works hard, contributing significantly to her family's financial and material needs, but she is humiliated in the end when her husband discards her, marrying a younger beautiful wife. As a result of attitudes of this kind, some women become viewed as commodities, existing to further the interests of others. This is particularly evident in *So Long a Letter*, in which young girls are used to enrich their parents' position, as is apparent in both Young Nabou and Binetou's cases.

Further to this, the fact that women are silenced in various respects furthers views of this nature and this diminishes their sense of selfhood. This exacerbates the extent to which women are viewed as potentially income-generating assets, as is evident in Binetou and Young Nabou's situations. Thus, women in the novel are made to feel as if they are devoid of independent selfhood, existing primarily in relation to the men around them, as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. The fact that many women are silenced is also indicative of the way women have repressed themselves by suppressing their own feelings and desires. Rama draws attention to this, describing how she only manages to find her own voice after thirty years. Meanwhile, Aissatou speaks out powerfully, for instance, in her letter to Mawdo, as does Rama, who expresses herself fully and freely in her letter.

Moreover, these two texts make clear that men also suffer as a result of these factors. Although there are no distinctive forms of colonial oppression in *So Long a Letter*, there are forms of interwoven gender and class oppression at work, as is evident in the case of Binetou who is compelled to marry a wealthy man, and also as a result of these factors, Aissatou's mother-in-law finds a new wife from a superior social class for her son.

Nonetheless, in *So Long a Letter*, Rama manages to endure and overcome her humiliation when her husband marries a second wife without her knowledge. Although she is shocked, she maintains her dignity, and triumphs over the obstacles with which she is beset. She is able to develop a sense of independent selfhood, while drawing from her culture that helps her to move on with her life and remaining married to her husband for this reason. Culture and tradition play a significant role in women's lives. Although these hold them back in some significant respects, giving rise to various forms of patriarchal oppression, they can also empower women. For instance, some women's sense of connectedness to their families, their

communities and their land relates in part to aspects of culture and tradition.

Meanwhile, Rama's friendship with Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* provides her with support in difficult times and strengthens her, as she finds a voice of her own and acquires a sense of independent selfhood. It is significant to note that these and other forms of empowerment are connected to the way women draw strength from one another sustaining each other in difficult times. For instance, Rama draws strength from Aissatou; other women such as young Nabou and Binetou in *So Long a Letter* do not attain empowerment because they lack positive bonds with other women. Instead, older women around them reinforce their oppression by pushing them into early marriages.

Hudson-Weems considers it to be one of the characteristics of Africana womanism, a concept she theorizes and prefers to the term *feminism* in the sense that it involves realities concerning women of African descent, reflecting their entanglement in racial, class and gender systems. She sees *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on Africana womanism mainly because of the novel's focus on female friendship. Of the protagonist, she insists, —Ramatoulaye embodies many characteristics of the true Africana womanist, the most obvious ones being genuine in sisterhood, strong, self-defined, demanding of respect, family centered, male compatible, authentic, whole, mothering, and nurturing (*Africana Womanism* 96-7). Hudson-Weems considers the friendship at the core of the novel, between the characters Ramatoulaye and Aissatou - to be a prototype of female solidarity and an example to be followed by Africana women. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent the true nature of female solidarity in the sense that they strive to cultivate and nurture a sisterhood that allows them to care for one another as well as provide and render moral and material support. Each helps the other in difficult times and encourages her to make positive changes that allow her to face the challenges of polygamy and patriarchy in general. Because they go through similar experiences, they understand and empathize with each other. Aissatou understands Ramatoulaye's pain because she has lived almost the same problem. She knows that her friend is going through the suffering with which she had to cope when her husband took a second wife. Victims of the system of polygamy, they join forces and comfort each other. Thus, friendship gives them an opportunity to strengthen their connection and ease the pain of betrayal. Betty Taylor Thompson joins Hudson-Weems in characterizing *So Long a Letter* as an Africana womanist novel:



The protagonist continues to long for a family centered existence and for a loving companion. In fact, she misses her husband even though he has rudely cast her outside. Notably, according to the postulates defined as characteristic of Africana women, there is the desire to have fulfilling relationships with Africana men, contrasting with the feminists' desire to free themselves entirely from male influence. (179)

Ramatoulaye's willingness to tolerate polygamy and her accommodating views about men's and women's relationships explains the different stand of feminism she adopts from that of her friend, Aissatou. Although she believes in women's emancipation, she also takes a serious consideration of African traditional values that do not always match feminist standpoints. Hudson-Weems notes,

Given that we know all too well how comforting sisterhood is, we must welcome it and its rewards for others as well as for ourselves. Thus, for the moment, let us reflect on how much more beautiful our world would be if all sisters simply loved each another. Our children would be more secure, for they would have not just one female guardian, but many to attend to their needs. (*African Woman Literary Theory* 73).

Hudson-Weems rising rhetoric is unrealistic, of course: it would take a miracle for all women to be friends. The expectations placed on female solidarity are high; some women may believe in the project and commit themselves to reaching out and helping other women, but others may not. Hudson-Weems optimism not only secures women's well being but their children's as well. She is inspired by the African proverb that states that it takes a village to raise a child, asserting that female friendship may also assure family security as a whole.

In the light of issues such as these, the extent to which the various texts contain possibilities for empowerment will now be discussed. *So Long a Letter* is a text that projects a great vision of hope, as Rama successfully embarks on her journey towards individual fulfilment. Aissatou also manages to triumph over her circumstances by choosing to leave a polygamous marriage and starting a life of her own. In order for women to attain self-actualization and fulfilment, there is need for a balanced society in which understanding and harmony prevails, as is evident in the womanish vision in *So Long a Letter*. In this text, Rama moves forward with her life and also the way she attains personal empowerment is

inspirational, giving hope to the female reader in a comparable situation that her future and also the futures of other women confronting similar obstacles will be better one.

Thus, in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye is forced to face her teenage daughter's problems. In the Senegalese school system, a pregnant girl is forced to leave school, and the consequences are enormous. Until it happened to her daughter, she had not thought of the numerous cases where teenage girl's potential success had been curtailed because of unplanned pregnancies. By the same token, Ramatoulaye is forced to see her newly married daughter, Daba, as the product of a younger generation who define liberty in their own way. For that reason, she has reluctantly accepted the fact that it is normal for Daba's husband to help with the household chores. Bâ, however, draws the reader's attention to the fact that racism and cultural intolerance are prevalent not only among the older and more conservative generation but also among the younger and liberal ones.

Bâ's major concern in her writings is about mothers' being role models to their children, especially daughters. In the light of their failed marriages, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's decisions affect their children's lives. Aissatou has decided to prevent her husband from negatively influencing her sons, by deciding to divorce Mawdo and taking her sons with her, despite society's condemnation of her action. She has taken over raising them single-handedly; but she tries her best to prevent them from an emotion of being felt as unwanted. By deciding to stay in her failed marriage, Ramatoulaye concentrates her exclusive attention on the welfare of her children. She becomes a positive role model for her children. This grand gesture on the part of Ramatoulaye shows good instincts of a good woman. It also shows cultural richness in which Ramatoulaye has been born and brought up. But this cannot be applied to all women invariably who have suffered similar painful experiences in life. This study is mainly devoted to point out the nurturing and caring, giving, receiving, and sharing experiences of women.

Mariama Bâ, accordingly, addresses the question of gender by portraying women as individual subjects, free to choose their careers, their husbands, and their destiny. She simultaneously treats women as objects, or commodities having a market value in a polygamous society. Ramatoulaye's daughter, Daba is a perfect example of the former. She is a modern woman married to an equally modern man with whom she shares the domestic tasks. Daba's husband very clearly



expresses the view that his wife is his partner and not an object of possession. He regards her as an individual who has chosen to marry him, and not as an object he has taken in marriage. As Abou tells his mother-in-law, "Daba is my wife. She is not my slave, nor my servant." (73) The statement by Abu emphasizes the impact of education on the young minds. Through this ideal couple Mariama Bâ presents the change that is taking place in the African society. The concept of equal sharing is altogether followed by Daba and her husband.

Ramatoulaye's daughters have the potential to alter their existing situation by acknowledging the values of education, economic independence and equality in marriage. She also witnesses a change in gender roles in her daughter's marriage and realizes that Daba's husband plays a more active role in domestic activities. Ramatoulaye compares and contrasts her failed marriage, characterized by the absence of communication between husband and wife, to the progressive way Daba and her husband handle their relationship.

The heroines of both the novels have a wholly affirmative attitude towards life. The patriarchal situation enables these women characters to suffer throughout their lives; however, it is towards the end of the novel that these women overcome their anguish, pain and sufferings. Suffering and pain within the patriarchal and polygamous social structure has, however, a positive effect on women: it can make them wiser, stronger,

and more humane. Bâ's projection of intellectual female protagonists is a way of assigning women more rights and authority to change the status quo. This desired transformation, the novelist believes, will certainly take place within the Senegalese society if the women adopt a cautious and affirmative attitude towards the rhythm of existence. The novelist's hopes are through the intellectually and emotionally mature women of younger generation.

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