

In The Prison House of Marriage: an Exploration of Theme of Polygamy In Miriam Bar's So Long A Letter

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Abstract:- 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's in *So Long a Letter* unveils Mariama Bâ's approach towards polygamy as practiced in Senegal, Africa. The writings of Mariama Bâ's reveal the attitude of African men and women towards the polygenic situations which they confront in life. The present research paper 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 hemorrhage and communal rearticulations. Polygamy is a marriage of one man to two or more women simultaneously or successively. In successive polygamy, the leading motive is the barrenness or infidelity of wife. Woman in these situations experiences the pangs of being forsaken for no guilt of her own. In such cases, repudiation almost always comes with a demand for the refund of dowry the man has paid to her family upon marrying a woman. Once refunded, the marriage is officially annulled. In simultaneous polygamy, a man simply marries as many women as he wishes, with all women living as co-wives under the same roof or in different houses. Many cultures around the world have practiced polygamy but today the practice has more or less disappeared, except in Africa. Polygamy is still prevalent in the West African Islamic societies where it actually predates Islam. It is an extensively discussed and debated issue in both intellectual and non-intellectual circles in Africa, with its advocates as well as critics. Nasimiyyu-Wasike (1992) indicates that some scholars are sympathetic to it and would like to see the Christian Church accept it as a legitimate form of marriage.

Among the followers of Islam in Africa, the men are required at their first marriage to declare whether they intend to be monogamous or polygamous. However, in practice many Moslems follow polygamy as part of their devotion to religion. Moreover, polygamy is considered as the mark of social status. Another factor that results in a polygenic situation is the affluence which indicates social reputation. The urban elite have more than one wife only due to the affluence, whereas the family background is the dominant factor that leads the rural folk to marry more than one wife. In Senegal, where 94% of the people are Moslems, approximately one quarter of urban marriages and a third of rural marriages are polygamous. A man who at his first marriage declares his intentions to be monogamous may change his mind. The dominant cause is the economic success that leads these men to go back on their word. Western-educated Senegalese are more likely to be polygamous whereas their female counterparts would prefer to be in monogamous relationships. For financially successful Hausa men from Nigeria, polygamy is an obligation in terms of their ability to take care of all their wives. In Mali, especially among the merchant class, a man with more than one wife is taken more seriously than a monogamous one. The Moslem Sosa men of Sierra Leone and Guinea see polygamy as a sign of prestige while in Côte d'Ivoire, the courts prohibit polygamy, although it is practiced secretly among certain ethnic groups.¹ In this connection, Obioma Nnaemeka, in her edited book *The Politics of (M)othering*, discusses the issue of polygamy in the novels of Mariama Bâ. She quotes a renowned critic Femi Ojo-Ade:

Man's basic guilt, the root cause for his vilification, the main element of his vicious behavior, is polygamy. Polygamy, the estate revered by traditionalists as a function of Africanity. Polygamy once supported and even suggested by African women as a socio-economic expediency. That, vows Aissatou, is a thing of the past. Polygamy is now the bane of society. Polygamy is a vice to be dealt with not by procrastination but by divorce. So, Aissatou Bâ leaves the beast called Mawdo. (1997: 170)²

Obioma Nnaemeka disagrees with Ojo-Ade's justification and praise of polygamy as 'a function of Africanity'.⁴ Nnaemeka opines that polygamy in the novels of Mariama Bâ is purely the outcome of the justification given by Mawdo Bâ in *So Long a Letter* and Ousmane in *Scarlet Song* to justify their infidelity and philandering. Nnaemeka argues that Bâ's works unfold the distinction between polygamy as an institution and its practice in post-independence urban Senegal. She emphasizes that the complaints of female characters in Bâ's

novels in the form of repetition of some words such as deception, betrayal and abandonment etc reflect a normal mode of women's exploitation and have nothing to do with the institution of polygamy in the African Islamic tradition. However, Nnaemeka agrees with Femi Ojo-Ade that these contradictions result in the confusion among the civilized minds. But Ojo-Ade and Nnaemeka differ in pointing out the reasons behind these contradictions. Ojo-Ade ascribes the contradictions to cultural conflict between Africa and the West, while Nnaemeka sees them at a deeper and more complex level than the tradition/modernity binary. She evaluates polygamy mainly in the light of gender politics that intensifies the confusion and contradictions. Nnaemeka further states:

In order to fully account for the ways in which these contradictions are complicated and exacerbated by the dissonances in the African environment itself, one must examine critically the ways in which the "modern" urban, African man juggles and manipulates different, sometimes conflicting, systems in an attempt to enjoy the best of all possible worlds. In many ways, the so-called modernity has intensified the masculinization of the African tradition, thereby deepening the marginalization of women and creating instances where tradition is progressive and modernity reactionary. (171)³

Nnaemeka's observation reveals that modernity has a profound impact on African males resulting in the masculinization of the African tradition. The tradition in African framework is progressive, whereas modernity is reactionary resulting in the preponderance of male power.

In the light of the above deliberations, it is evidently clear that Mariama Bâ's novels 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)⁴

The statement clearly indicates that a man is required to have a balanced personality. He should maintain a fairly balanced behavioral pattern and equity in his married life. In this connection, Rafi Ullah Sheheb 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)⁵

Sheheb emphasizes that the religion has not sanctioned polygamy for fulfilling man's sensuous physical desires. It is mainly sanctioned for checking social problems like prostitution and kidnapping. It provides need oriented space to maintain homely harmony. Polygamy is mainly recommended for extending support, safety and livelihood to helpless widows, whose husbands have lost their lives in wars. The Islamic principles mainly advocate polygamy to maintain proportion in the population of men and women. A man should marry only when he can afford it. In addition, he mentions that a man without riches is fit to marry only one wife.

A serious reading of the contents of Islamic law makes it explicit that a husband is responsible for all marriage expenses. The custom of dowry, especially practiced in India and Pakistan, is strange to Islam, evidenced by the absence of the word 'dowry' in Arabic language. Islam considers love as an essential ingredient in marriage. As a result, a man should not compel a woman, who does not love, to marry him. Marriage is a long agreement between a man and woman. The Islamic laws award equal rights of separation to both the spouses, but in reality these rights are enjoyed only by men. The obvious outcome is the distortion of the Islamic principles. Sheheb elucidates the three important conditions in Islamic marriage institution:

The main condition in Holy Quran for allowing polygamy is to solve the problem of orphans and widows, but it also mentions three conditions such as justice between the wives, sexual capability and equality in meeting expenses. It may be mentioned here that if a person is not in a position to meet the expenses of wife, he, according to Islam is not allowed to marry. (Ibid)⁶

However, as a matter of fact, the Islamic marriage institution has undergone extreme changes due to the contacts with other systems. The ultimate effect is that the Islamic principles are totally distorted by some selfish and egotistical males in the African context. The novels of Mariama Bâ present this peculiar feature of the African reality. It is, therefore, necessary to comprehend the traditional African marriage institution to get familiar with the theme of polygamy in the novels of Mariama Bâ.

The study of available critical literature on marriage in the African societies reveals that polygamy was primarily introduced as a means of providing safety and security to women. In this context, Patric Merand opines that the reasons for contracting a polygamous marriage include: numerical strength of women, female infertility, and man's crazy obsession for social prestige. Nasimiyyu-Wasike Anne in her celebrated book, *Polygamy: A Feminist Critique* discusses in detail the polygamy as practiced by traditional African societies. She asserts that there are several historic justifications for polygamy in traditional African society. Primarily, it was a way for man to ensure the attainment of his immortality. The customary wisdom was that man survives through his sons, but dies once his daughter is married. It is generally believed so because the daughters became part of some other

family after their marriage. It eventually posed a dilemma regarding the continuity of lineage. So to maintain stability and constancy in his lineage, man wanted to have as many male off springs from as many women as possible. The resultant factor is polygamy.

The second justification has connections with labor. Polygamy thrived in agrarian and pastoral cultures where production depended on the number of workers. It eventually resulted in the requirement of labors to increase the income of a family. But, in actuality, almost all the families depended on agriculture. The consequential aspect is that men required having a few wives who would bear many children to make sure that the family accumulated wealth. The size of land as well as the number of animals a family owned depended on the number of wives and children he had. Sex oriented division of labor was another justification for polygamy. In traditional agrarian cultures of Africa, work was sex-oriented. Men were involved in physically demanding jobs such as clearing the land for cultivation, felling trees and hunting, while women did planting, weeding, harvesting and domestic chores. The sex-oriented division of labor was so strict in some societies that men would not do domestic chores like cooking and cleaning the house. A man with only one wife ultimately used to argue that he would have no female to do the jobs when his only wife fell ill, gave birth or travelled to visit her family. In case the work became too much for one woman, her husband would marry another woman to share the work with the first.

Nasimiyu-Wasike further states that in Africa the very notion of marriage is another justification for polygamy. In these societies, a woman would not be considered complete until she is married, and has children. A glance at the statistical data of traditional African societies reveals that women outnumber and live longer than men. This ultimately compels a woman to allow herself to be a second, a third, or even a fourth wife in order to meet society's definition of a complete woman. At the same time, men believe that they are carrying out a social responsibility by marrying them since, without polygamy, some would be without husbands. Such women may possibly be tempted to settle for the less respectable status of concubines instead of probable wives. This is so among Hausa men of Nigeria who see in polygamy the commitment to make honest women out of would-be concubines or odd girls.

The traditional African societies, thus, followed the custom of polygamy. The polygamous family follows a particular living arrangement as the prerequisite of custom. The man lives in the same compound with all his wives and children. The men and women in these societies respect the boundaries set forth for each wife. The man has his own house and each wife lives in her house with her children. The man is accountable for the general welfare, upholding, and safeguarding of his compound while each wife is straightforwardly responsible for the betterment her children. The man seeks to maintain fairness, equity, and justice both sexually and materially among the wives. All the children grow up together and a man is always there for his total family. In this connection, Arthur Philips and Henry Morris note that polygamy is acceptable among the Africans living under their tribal law, and their duties and obligations are legally acknowledged. Further, Patrick Merand rightly observes:

The importance of rank among co-wives is emphasized. The first wife, usually the oldest, enjoys undisputed authority over her co-wives; she is only wife not chosen as "replacement." (1997: 173)⁷

Just as in the Islamic institution of marriage, the traditional African marriage system aims at the maintenance of equity, justice, harmony, and allotment of liability. In addition, the man is noticeably there for his total family.

However, the institution of marriage in Africa has undergone a change in recent times. The impact of colonialism consequently resulted in the shattering of peace and communal harmony. The later African societies pursued a course of life that has no concern with the Islamic principles or the traditional way of life. In this connection, Vincent Monteil in his study of the practice of Islam in Dakar identifies an extreme and more disruptive variant of polygamy:

Certainly, polygamy is in the decline in a big city like Dakar where it is difficult for a civil servant to maintain two or three homes. In practice what obtains is a "serial" polygamy facilitated by quick divorces and conjugal instability. (1997: 174)⁸

The statement unambiguously exposes the fact that polygamy is in the state of decline in the modern times. The impact of far reaching changes in almost all the walks of life consequently results in the vulgarization of polygamy in practice. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* presents the women characters who are the eventual victims of the institution of marriage. The women characters in her novels suffer both psychological and physical torments resulting in their subjugation in post-colonial Africa. Her novel also presents how the various other elements in society such as race, class, ethnicity and caste result in the subjugation of women.

This paper will discuss the issue of polygamy within the Islamic tradition through analyzing Bâ's novel, a literary text eloquently employed as a cultural critique. Mariama Bâ⁹ was strongly dedicated to promoting the important role which African women can play in the development of their emerging nations. As the preface of *So Long a Letter* indicates, Bâ perceived her role as a "sacred mission" that would enable her to strike out "at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage." Well versed in Qur'anic scriptures, Bâ used her knowledge of women's rights decreed in the Qur'an to write a fine cultural

critique of the exploitation of women through what she believes is a distorted interpretation of a sacred text that actually intends equality for both sexes. It is this stance that places Mariama Bâ within the Islamic feminist movement.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* present a complex and problematic inter-caste marriage system that guides a man to marry another woman from a lower caste. A man from higher caste, when marries a woman below his caste, fully takes the responsibility of his action onto himself. But the traditional obligation necessitates him to have children of 'clean' or unadulterated blood from his own caste. This finally leads him to marry another woman from a similar caste. For instance, through Aissatou's failed marriage to Mawdo Bâ in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ explores the caste system and shows how Senegal and other countries of the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa follow it to justify polygamy. Aissatou is the victim of her mother-in-law's strong caste prejudices. Aissatou's mother-in-law, a woman deeply anchored in African tradition, decides to break Aissatou's marriage from the day she enters in her household. She, therefore, raises her brother's daughter to be her son's new wife with the sole purpose of keeping the bloodline pure.

One of the main themes of *So Long a Letter* is the emotional struggle for survival of the heroine, Ramatoulaye, after her husband decides to take a second wife after thirty years of marriage and twelve children. The action is perceived by Ramatoulaye as an ultimate betrayal of her trust and a brutal rejection of their long life together. The novel, as the introduction of the 1989 Heinemann's African Writers Series edition indicates: "is a perceptive testimony to the plight of those articulate women who live in social milieux dominated by attitudes and values that deny them their proper place." Mariama Bâ explores her themes in this novel through an epistolary exchange between the heroine, Ramatoulaye, and her best friend Aissatou. Although Bâ adopts the letter-genre as the broad platform on which she builds her novel, she masterfully combines both the letter and diary genres in her novel. Ramatoulaye's long letter, as professor Katherine Frank explains, "seems to be addressed to herself as well as to Aissatou; a kind of internal monologue charting the painful process of her liberation. For Aissatou embodies the self that Ramatoulaye is struggling to become."¹⁰

So Long A Letter clearly falls under the category of an Islamic feminist novel, demonstrating the creation of a new, particularly female, literary genre, and shows how this emerging female discourse allows for the development of both women but, in particular, the one engaged in a difficult struggle against oppression. The novel further documents not only disturbing instances of men victimizing women, but of other women perpetuating that abuse. Although the female perpetrators are engaged in behavior that seems in large part a misinterpretation of Islamic teachings, the problem of women victimizing other women extends well beyond the central concerns of Islamic feminism.

Bâ's critique of polygamy is reflected not only in the protagonist Ramatoulaye's experiences, but also in the case of her best friend, Aissatou. The paper will attempt to highlight the other important theme of Bâ's novel, namely the remarkable manner in which the friendship between the two endures as their marriages fail. Throughout this analysis, I will apply Patrizia Violi's¹¹ theory of the letter as a specific genre—identified by the way its communicative function is inscribed within the text—to focus on the enormous role played by gender in the type of writing, the content, and the impact on both the specific audience, the narratee, and her audience, the reader.

In her article "Letters," Patrizia Violi discusses five elements that characterize the letter as a genre: the structure of deixis in letters (narrator/narratee, space and time); the construction of the Ideal Reader within the genre; the illocutionary force of letters; the relation between letter and conversation; and elements of a typology of letters.¹² The main determining features of the letter-genre, i.e., the exchange of a written dialogue and the way its communicative function is inscribed within the text, define Bâ's letter. In the context of narrator/narratee, the presence of Ramatoulaye, the narrator, is marked by her "Dear Aissatou" as well as the pronominal structure of the letter, as in "I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress."¹³ This also shows that the narrator in the letter is always in reality presented as complementary to the narratee. Patrizia Violi further discusses the letter as a literary genre. She argues that in some genres "the narratee performs a central role in the textual strategy, as in the case of a diary."¹⁴ Bâ's letter becomes more interesting as it combines both genres, but in the final analysis it falls within the broader category of the letter-genre.

Bâ's whole novel consists of one long letter. It is, as Katherine Frank has put it, "a long lament and meditation on the pain, anger, and despair the heroine, Ramatoulaye, suffers as a result of her husband's desertion."¹⁵ And it is addressed to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's best friend, who not long before had divorced her own husband when he also married a second wife. It is within this context that Bâ's novel, although primarily a critique of polygamy, is simultaneously a celebration of female bonding in the face of male oppression; for it is through their enduring friendship that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are able to provide the needful support for each other after having been unfairly deprived of their husbands' emotional and financial support. The unique story of these two women will gradually unfold. Through poetic qualities that give distinction to Bâ's novel, Ramatoulaye expresses the importance of their friendship as she addresses Aissatou:

*The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animates us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our children brothers and sisters. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests.*¹⁶

An understanding of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's differing reactions to their husbands' desertion is significant to the context of this discussion. While Ramatoulaye internalizes her pain and submits to her husband's second desire that she must accept the role of the silent obedient wife and stay with their children, Aissatou, conversely, reacts in an unyielding and resolute manner. Aissatou's decision is uncompromising: she walks out on her husband, immediately leaves with her children for the United States, and leads an independent and successful life as a senior embassy executive in Washington DC. The powerful letter Aissatou writes to her husband before she leaves epitomizes her reaction:

Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heart love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance, however little that may be. If you can procreate without loving . . . then I find you despicable. At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have always placed you. Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side, me, "your life, your love, your choice," on the other, "young Nabou [the new wife], to be tolerated for reasons of duty." Mawdo, man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality. I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. Goodbye.¹⁷

Within the broad epistolary form, Mariama Bâ also uses the technique of a letter within the broad concept of the letter-genre to illuminate the different aspects of her theme. In her discussion of the letter-genre, Patrizia Violi elucidates that each letter is unique in terms of the specific differences exhibited through its structure. Accordingly, different sub-genres emerge within the broad concept of the letter-genre.¹⁸ Aissatou's letter is a sub-genre within the broad form of Bâ's long letter. Bâ's masterful use of this technique not only illuminates Ramatoulaye's contrasting reaction to her husband's abandonment, but provides a brilliant exposition of some Muslim men's deliberately distorted interpretation of the Qur'an in order to give, as Fatima Mernissi argues, "their egotistic, highly subjective, and mediocre [interests] a sacred basis."¹⁹ Although the second marriage of Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's husbands is, broadly speaking, sanctioned by Islam, it does not adhere to the strict meaning intended by the Qur'an. According to the Qur'anic teachings, polygamy, as the Egyptian modernist Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) has stated, "was a response to existing social conditions and was given with the greatest possible reluctance." The practical impossibility of impartiality and justice in treating more than one wife, Abduh further maintained, shows that "the Divine Law, in its intent, contemplated monogamy as the original and ideal state of marriage."²⁰

To understand the context in which the verses about polygamy were revealed, it is important to look at the pertinent Qur'anic verses themselves. To begin with, it is important to address the premise of the argument that the primary text, the Qur'an, has provided concerning this issue. The subject matter of *Surat al-Nisa* ("Women"),²¹ the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, deals with the social problems that the Medina Muslim community had to face immediately after the Battle of *Uhud* in the early seventh century. The Qur'anic verses on polygamy are included among the 176 verses that comprise this *surah* that distinctly addresses the subject of women, orphans, inheritance, marriage, and family rights. The sudden presence of a large number of widows and captives after the aforementioned battle made the necessity of addressing the number of wives a man could marry an urgent one, with the principles laid down at this moment having since permanently governed Muslim law and social practice.²² It is also significantly important to address the logical progression and general theological environment that these verses have established as the core of gender relations between the sexes. The first verse of *Surat al-Nisa* begins as follows:

*O mankind Reverence your Lord, who created you from a single soul [min nafsin wahidah], created (out of it) its mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and be Heedful of the Wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you.*²³

It is interesting and equally important to notice that the verse on polygamy comes third in *Surat al-Nisa*. Another interesting point that has been largely overlooked by almost all translators of the Qur'an is the grammatical use of *waw al-'atf* (the connective article "and") that links the second and third verses of *Surat al-Nisa* to the first. In Arabic grammar, *waw al-'atf* ("and") always signifies that what follows it must be *ma'tuf* back to what precedes it. Before polygamy was introduced, many options were laid down to protect the orphans and only if these were impossible to meet or achieve was the alternative of conditional polygamy ever mentioned. This becomes quite clear when we read the second and third verses that continue discussing the issue of the orphans that was introduced in the first verse:

*[And] To the orphans restore their property ([until] they reach their age). And substitute [not] (your) worthless things for (their) good ones; and devour not their substance (by mixing it up) with your own. For this is indeed a great sin . . .*²⁴

What Bâ intends to expose in her novel is the fact that the two men, Ramatoulaye's husband Modou and Aissatou's husband Mawdo, twist the meaning of the text merely to gratify their sexual impulses. The fact that Modou took for his second wife his daughter's friend Binetou, and that Mawdo's new wife Nabou was of a similar younger age, establishes Bâ's claim. Mawdo's justification for having a lusty desire for the young Nabou substantiates Ramatoulaye's allegation even further: You can't resist the imperious laws that demand food and clothing for man. These same laws compel the "male" in other respects. I say "male" to emphasize the bestiality of instincts. . . . You understand. . . . A wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about "betrayals of the flesh." The important thing is what there is in the heart; that's what unites two beings inside. (He struck his chest, at the *point where the heart lies*).²⁵ This episode makes clear that, in the course of Mawdo's flawed argument, both food and his new wife, young Nabou, stimulate the same kind of desire and demand that the same bestial instinct for sex and nourishment be gratified. But Mawdo is neither apologetic for reducing men to irrational beasts nor for using a logical fallacy—a false analogy—to support his faulty reasoning. Ramatoulaye's letter to Aissatou demonstrates and invalidates this false analogy her husband uses and reveals her controlled rage in response to it:

Thus, to justify himself, he reduced young Nabou to a "plate of food." Thus, for the sake of "variety" men are unfaithful to their wives. I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But to 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?²⁶

Some men exploit Islamic teachings in order to gratify and justify their base desires under the guise of a transcendent sanction. Some Muslim men exploit, abuse, and degrade women by using the very verses that were revealed to safeguard the orphans and widows in the most benevolent and humane sense, to protect them from being victimized by a harsh world and a deeply misogynistic society. While the text clearly seems to have intended a dignified, improved situation for widows and orphans, Mawdo, the modern, French-educated Muslim, exploits the Divine Law to justify his own "bestiality of instinct."

The significance of Bâ's incandescent exposition of polygamy hinges on the fact that it discloses the evil hidden agenda of its contemporary practitioners and reveals the faulty logic behind it. It is flawed dialectic created by men and is further, as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie argues: "assented to by women untrained in the rigors of logical thought or conscious of the advantages to be gained from compliance with masculine fantasies."²⁷ Bâ's portrayal of this victimization of women as symbolized by young Nabou and Binetou, the two second wives, further exposes the sinister interests of their recourse to polygamy; and is masterfully knitted in the fabric of the novel to agitate the awareness of such heedless victims.

In her essay "The Female Writer and Her Commitment," Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, a former professor of African literature at Ogun State University, Nigeria, comments on the importance of the role played by the African woman writer to advance a genuine female point of view in an effort to deconstruct and correct misconceptions about women's lives. She maintains:

*The female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all three. As a writer, she has to be committed to her art, seeking to do justice to it at the highest levels of expertise. . . . Being committed to one's womanhood . . . would mean delineating the experience of women as women . . . destroying male stereotypes of women. . . . Being aware of oneself as a Third World person implies being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies.*²⁸

By exposing the victimization of Nabou and Binetou, Mariama Bâ as a female writer is committed to her womanhood; she is concerned with making these two oblivious women, indeed all victimized women, become aware of the deplorable condition they have been placed in by men. These two young victims have been allured by the illusion that through these marriages, they would be offered security and safety; but they are unaware that they have also been enticed into a state of passivity, silence, and acceptance. Sadly, they have been led to believe that these characteristics are part of women's nature.

Mbye B. Cham of Howard University points out that Bâ is "more interested in probing the disturbing phenomenon of victims victimizing victims."²⁹ Ironically, in *So Long A Letter*, it is the mothers of Nabou and Binetou who encourage and convince their daughters to accept the situation of a second wife. Sadly, Islam is not only misinterpreted by men, but by some greedy women as well—women who use their own daughters as a means to exit their state of poverty and to gain access to materialism. Even in her troubled and stressful situation, Ramatoulaye is able to see clearly that Binetou, her rival and her daughter's friend, is a "lamb sacrificed, like many others, on the altar of materialism."³⁰ Binetou's mother, or Lady Mother-in-Law as Ramatoulaye prefers to call her, and Nabou's mother—victims themselves as they were of their own circumstances—become the new

victimizers who, for material gain, use their own offspring to victimize other women and devastate their lives. However, the actual tragedy lies with Binetou and Nabou, who have been doubly victimized, first by their own mothers, and then by their husbands. Cham makes a brilliant analysis of this complex interaction of victimization:

For Modou Binetou is seen less than a partner with whom to build a life committed to a social, political, philosophical or moral ideal than a mechanism for “rejuvenating” himself. . . . For Binetou’s mother, . . . Binetou is seen less than a daughter to be steered and encouraged to fulfill herself in all areas of life than a bait to land a big catch, Modou, who will deliver her and her kin from poverty. [Lady Mother-in-Law] finds in Modou a milk cow that will instantly catapult her to the social category of “women with heavy bracelets whose praises are sung by griots.”³¹

Through Bâ’s effective use of the epistolary form, we as readers are able to know the details about the community of women Ramatoulaye has created in her intimate written dialogue with Aissatou. In her attempt to find analogies between the letter’s sequential structure and face-to-face conversational interaction, Patrizia Violi points out that: “Although the space-time distance between the narrator and the narratee and the shifting out which it produces profoundly differentiates the two discourses,” the fact that the letter obliges the recipient to reply is analogous, in a sense, to the kind of obligation set up at the beginning of a conversation.³² Ramatoulaye’s long letter, as will be illustrated, not only takes the form of a dialogue with Aissatou, but prompts the latter’s obligation to respond pragmatically to her friend’s agony over the emotional and material injustices inflicted on her and her twelve children by her polygamous husband, their own father.

Before illustrating Violi’s analogy between the written dialogue and the face-to-face conversation, it is important to stress at this point that Modou’s total negligence of his responsibilities towards Ramatoulaye, his first wife, and his children is illegitimate from an Islamic perspective and is considered a clear deviation from the meaning of the scriptures: “If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then [marry] only one . . . that will be more suitable to prevent you from doing injustice.”³³ But if you *must* marry a second wife, “turn not away [from your first woman] altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air).”³⁴ Ramatoulaye’s torment stems from the un-Islamic inequity demonstrated by Modou’s behavior in depriving her and her children of legitimate emotional and financial support. But she is more outraged at the unjust legislation that is based on a clear misinterpretation of the Divine Law, which intends equality as the basis of social systems.

Ironically, support comes from Ramatoulaye’s dear friend Aissatou, even though she herself is deprived of her husband’s support. But it is the obligation Violi referred to earlier in her comparison between the letter’s communicative functions and conversation that prompts Aissatou to provide considerable support in the gift of a car that would eventually help to alleviate a significant part of Ramatoulaye’s anguish. Ramatoulaye’s intimate language in the following episode illustrates this most beautifully:

I shed tears of joy and sadness; joy in being loved by my children, the sadness of a mother who does not have the means to change the course of events. . . . I told you then, without any ulterior motive, of this painful aspect of our life, while Modou’s car drove Lady Mother-in-Law to the four corners of town and while Binetou streaked along the roads in an Alfa Romeo, sometimes white, sometimes red. . . . I shall never forget your response, you, my sister, nor my joy and my surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was told to choose a car which you had paid for, in full. My children gave cries of joy when they learned the approaching end of their tribulations.³⁵ This episode perfectly illustrates the other theme of Bâ’s epistolary novel—the celebration of female bonding in the face of male oppression. In her article, “Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa,” Katherine Frank argues that:

What is crucial about the sort of friendship Ramatoulaye and Aissatou share—this world they [are forced to] celebrate apart from men—is that it entirely lacks those qualities of male-female relationships which cause women so much grief: power, restraint, and subordination. Even when one woman is stronger or more powerful than another as in the case with Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, she does not wield her power over her weaker sister. In fact the exact opposite occurs: power is used by the stronger to support and strengthen the weaker.³⁶

Although Frank’s generalization of male-female relationships is somewhat problematic here, the essence of her statement is an accurate characterization of the kind of oppression many women presumably face in their lives and that the characters of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou certainly face in theirs. Yet, Frank is quite accurate in pointing out that, through this female bonding, Aissatou is able “to lift Ramatoulaye out of her despair and dependence, to make her autonomous and whole again.”³⁷

Bâ unfolds the theme of Ramatoulaye’s liberation from feminist bondage in systematic stages. At the beginning of the liberating process, Ramatoulaye had no choice but to deal with the humiliation inflicted on her by her husband. However, some episodes in her letter reveal the full weight of her pain, deep sense of her husband’s betrayal, and inner feelings, as she confesses to Aissatou:

*I ask myself questions. The truth is that, despite everything, I remain faithful to the love of my youth. Aissatou, I cry for Modou and I can do nothing about it.*³⁸

Gradually, through her highly personalized relationship with Aissatou and through Aissatou's continued support, Ramatoulaye comes to terms with her single status. With the support of her community of women, her daughters and friends, she even begins to enjoy her un-chosen freedom. At another stage she tells Aissatou that "I was abandoned [but] I faced up the situation bravely. I carried out my duties."³⁹ Ramatoulaye learns how to handle and meet the demands of her children and family life: she goes shopping by herself, replaces locks, pays electricity and water bills, deals with the plumber, and has a job as a teacher. Then an intellectual awareness starts growing within her, she begins to read extensively. She also finds comfort in going alone to the movies: "What a great distraction from distress is the cinema! Intellectual films . . . sentimental films, detective films, comedies, thrillers, all these were very companions. I learned from them lessons of greatness, courage, and perseverance. They deepened and widened my vision of the world."⁴⁰ Listening to music also fortifies her: "the message of old and new songs which awakened hope [and] my sadness dissolved."⁴¹ Along with all these activities, Ramatoulaye turns to creative writing, writing her long letter through which all these details are vividly revealed. Then comes Aissatou's gift of a car:

*. . . A highly symbolic gift. The Fiat brings Ramatoulaye mobility and freedom; it enables her to transport herself and the children. When she learns how to drive Ramatoulaye assumes control of her new life and the direction in which she wishes to travel.*⁴²

Throughout the above discussion, the causes of female bonding and the means to new freedoms and liberation have been explored through the enduring friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. The contrasting reaction of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to abandonment by their husbands is the beginning of this process of liberation to freedom. Ramatoulaye's submission and dependence is set against the background of Aissatou's resistance and autonomy. The intolerable prospect of polygamy and desertion prods Aissatou to action: she packs up her things and leaves the traditional world of Senegal for the United States, where she soon becomes a distinguished embassy official. For Aissatou, the route to liberation is independence, wholeness, and economic power symbolized by financial autonomy. Bâ, who views "female solidarity as a crucial factor underlying women's self-determination,"⁴³ believes that helpless women such as Ramatoulaye should not be left alone, because they can also be liberated through their strong bonding with other autonomous women. For Mariama Bâ, female bonding is thus a crucial component to the process of women's liberation, wholeness, and eventual freedom. At the end of the novel, Aissatou intends to visit Senegal on vacation. As Ramatoulaye gets ready to meet the friend who has supported her since her husband devastated her, she writes her concluding remarks on the eve of their reunion, telling her friend how much she has changed her life:

*My new turn of mind is hardly surprising to you. I cannot help unburdening myself to you. I might as well sum up now.*⁴⁴

In the final pages of the book, in which Bâ elegantly combines both the letter and diary genres, Ramatoulaye demonstrates her own commitment to the current movements for women's liberation. Her hard-earned autonomy is accomplished through the unfailing support provided by her closest friend, Aissatou. Bâ's linguistic intimacy portrays Ramatoulaye's exit from bondage, writing:

*I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world. This commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities. My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable . . . all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed. . . . I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings. To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other!*⁴⁵

This further illustrates Violi's comparison between the communicative functions of the letter and conversation, when "the letter ceases to be an isolated text [but] can be considered as an element of an *interactional sequence* generated by the *epistolary exchange* between two communicating subjects."⁴⁶ Within the context of Bâ's skillful portrayal of this "epistolary exchange," every detail of the written dialogue is revealed to the generic audience, the reader. Most significantly, it is through this written dialogue between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, and the role played by gender that *So Long a Letter* has succeeded gloriously in its mission as an intimate female discourse employed as a cultural critique.

Notes

¹ It is important to mention that the prevalent practice of the day in the misogynous pre-Islamic Arabia, until the revelation of the verses on polygamy, was that a man could marry an unlimited number of wives as he wished.

² Nnaemeka: 170

³ Ibid: 171

⁴Bâ 7

⁵ Qur'an: 4:2.

⁶ Qur'an: 4:3, 129.

⁷ Patrick Merand; 173

⁸ Vincent Monteil: 174

⁹ Mariama Bâ is one of Africa's finest female writers. She was born in Dakar, Senegal in 1929 and was educated and brought up as a Muslim by her maternal grandparents. Due to the fact that Senegal was colonized by the French, Ba studied the *Holy Qur'an* during school holidays. She began writing in French, and her early essays reflect an unmistakable criticism of the different aspects of society around her. As a schoolteacher and pioneer of women's rights, she was involved in several Senegalese women's organizations. The preface of her book informs us that her commitment to eradicating inequalities between men and women and eliminating many sexist aspects of African life led to the emergence of her first novel *So Long A Letter* (1980). Originally written in French, the novel was translated into sixteen languages and won the first Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. Ba died in 1981 just before the appearance of her second novel *Le Chante Ecarlate*. (*So Long A Letter*, London: Nairobi, 1989).

¹⁰ Frank, Katherine, "Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa," in *Women in African Literature Today*, vol. 15 (London: James Currey, 1987), 18.

¹¹ Violi, Patrizia, "Letters," in *Discourse and Literature: New Approaches to the Analysis of Literary Genres*, ed. Teun A. Van Dijk (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 1985).

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³ Bâ, 1.

¹⁴ Violi, 152.

¹⁵ Frank, 18.

¹⁶ Bâ, 72.

¹⁷ Quoted in Bâ, 31–32.

¹⁸ Violi, 149.

¹⁹ Mernissi, Fatima, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991), ix.

²⁰ Quoted in Abdel Kader, Soha, *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society: 1899–1987* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1987), 53–54.

²¹ It is important to mention that the prevalent practice of the day in the misogynous pre-Islamic Arabia, until the revelation of the verses on polygamy, was that a man could marry an unlimited number of wives as he wished.

²² *al-Qur'an* as reproduced and translated by Abullah Yusuf 'Ali in *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meaning and Commentary* (Al-Madina al-Munawarah: King Fahad Holy Qur'an Printing Press Complex, 1410 A.H. [1990]), 204.

²³ Qur'an 4:1 (Yusuf 'Ali's translation); all subsequent verses from the Qur'an are from the same source.

²⁴ Qur'an: 4:2.

²⁵ Bâ, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ogunidipe-Leslie, Molar, "The Female Writer and Her Commitment," in *Women in African Literature Today* 15 (London: James Currey, 1987): 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

²⁹ Cham, Mybe B., "Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ." In *Women in African Literature Today* 15 (London: James Currey, 1987): 96.

³⁰ Bâ, 39.

³¹ Cham, 95.

³² Violi, 162.

³³ Qur'an, 4:3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:129.

³⁵ Bâ, 53.

³⁶ Frank, 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Bâ, 52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴² Frank., 21.

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⁴⁴ *Ibid.*88

⁴⁵ Violi, 162.

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