

Sisterhood, a Tool to Bring Women Together -A Study of Mariama Bâ's Novel *So Long A Letter*

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ABSTRACT: *So Long a Letter* is a cry from the heart of a Senegalese woman. It articulates astutely the problems of Senegalese women in general, and of a Muslim woman, in particular. On a personal level, the employment of western literary device of letter writing in this novel facilitates the marginal women like Mariama Bâ and the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, to make themselves succinctly heard to the people in the central power. The writing of a letter signifies a spiritual journey of the doubly oppressed protagonist, Ramatoulaye, to reach an emotional breakthrough. It is this journey which reveals all the aspects of African life that result in the oppression of women. These aspects include polygamy, caste, race, culture prejudices, motherhood, and various other issues. Bâ presents the complexities and intricacies involved in the African life through the conflict in protagonist's mind– the conflict between tradition and modernity. The present research paper discusses the creative act of writing as an intermediate for self- assertion. This helps Bâ in the development of a bond of sisterhood among women protagonists. It is while discussing issues like marriage and polygamy, motherhood and womanhood; Mariama Bâ makes herself heard to the patriarchal society at large. Bâ uses creative writing as a weapon for self- affirmation and makes a powerful appeal for the emancipation of African women in particular, and women across the universe, in general. The objective of the paper is to bring into global focus that understanding each other can make women morally and economically stronger in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: letter, spiritual journey, sisterhood, self-affirmation, emancipation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study analyzes female friendship in *So Long a Letter* written by black diasporic woman writer and examines the impact of race, class and gender on women's relationships. The novel emphasizes how women face the challenges of patriarchal institutions that subjugate them through polygamy, neo-colonialism, and constraints of tradition, caste prejudices, and political instability. This paper uses characterization and plot analysis to explore the message the novel reveals. As findings this study foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome prejudice and to enjoy female empowerment, and extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building. However, another conclusion focuses on the power of patriarchy which constitutes a threat to female bonding and usually causes women's estrangement.

The present research paper intends to reveal the impact of bond of sisterhood on Mariama Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter*. Mariama Bâ presents patriarchal institution in her novels as a potential threat to women's relationship with men. Her novel *So Long a Letter* describes the plight of women owing to different forms of oppressions. It demonstrates how women characters struggle throughout their lives in order to survive their predicament. However, in their struggle against the patriarchal subjugation the protagonists in *So Long a Letter* make a stronger plea to average women to develop female bonding and financial independence to liberate themselves from the burden of oppression. The novel also highlights how the mutual female bonding is ultimately converted into a bond of sisterhood, and in effect, involves more women in the struggle against patriarchal subjugation. This bond of sisterhood demands the active participation of all women, along with men, in the national building. Moreover, the post-colonial context of *So Long a Letter* demonstrates the importance of nation building as a primary concern for both men and women. In the newly independent African countries, the struggle for development requires the synchronized efforts of both men and women.

The novel *So Long a Letter* narrates protagonist Ramatoulaye's traumatic ordeals due to her husband's act of betrayal. Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou takes another wife, a classmate of his daughter Daba. Consequently, Ramatoulaye and her twelve children feel abandoned and disrespected by Modou. On the other hand, her friend Aissatou also undergoes a similar experience. Mawdo, her husband also takes another wife.

Aissatou feels betrayed by this act and decides to start an independent life with her four children. She, therefore, divorces her husband. But Ramatoulaye refuses to divorce her husband despite her children's pressure on her to do so. But immediately after marriage Modou dies. According to the "strict precepts" of her religious duties (So Long a Letter 8), Ramatoulaye has to mourn her husband for "four months and ten days" (8)¹. This moment affords her enough time to reflect on her life with Modou, her plight and tradition of her society with the prevailing realities in it and the repulsive consequences of polygamy. The mourning period also provides her with an opportunity to share her experiences with Aissatou through a long letter.

Ramatoulaye's long letter in the novel is, indeed, an indication of her sincere attempt to do soul-searching. It is through writing a long letter Ramatoulaye recollects her shared childhood experiences with her intimate friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye mentions about the kind of education that both of them received from a European teacher. The protagonist Ramatoulaye eulogizes colonial education in her letter to Aissatou. To her colonial education provided them with an opportunity to get well educated. The letter expresses her concern for the headmistress of the school in Dakar. It is due to the headmistress that Ramatoulaye understands the value of human values and ethics. It is through these lessons in the school that she develops sisterhood with Aissatou and other schoolmates. Western education is a way toward women's liberation; it also creates ideological changes that make it hard for friends to cope with their traditional values. However, Ramatoulaye manages to find the right balance between the two. On the other hand, Aissatou's rejection of polygamy² and caste prejudice, for example, shows the assertion of individual freedom, the outcome of Western education. Ramatoulaye also mentions about the multitude of girls from different countries who used to attend the school in Dakar,³ and she praises the solidarity between them: a fruitful blend of different intellectuals, characters, manners and customs. [. . .] Friendships were made that have endured the test of time and distance. We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation (*Mariama*, 15). The education provides the girls with freedom, prestige and economic independence. It is on account of liberal education that Ramatoulaye is capable of making her life pleasurable by way of reading books.

Aissatou's long-term friendship with Ramatoulaye secures Aissatou the place of a confidante. The origin of their acquaintance can be traced in the acquaintance of their grandmothers, who used to chat over the fence. It can also be traced in their mother's intimacies. Ramatoulaye mentions: "Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts." (1) Ramatoulaye and Aissatou spent their childhood together, and received the same education by a European teacher. Even their marriages are the outcome of this reality: Modou Fall introduces Mawdo Bâ to Aissatou. Furthermore, both of them are the victims of polygamy. All these shared experiences bind the two women together like sisters. This bond of friendship leads Ramatoulaye to talk in volumes about her own personal experiences and provides her enough courage to reveal her own self.

Ramatoulaye is educated and adopts a liberal attitude conscientiously; but this is possible only to a certain point. The actuality is that Ramatoulaye lives in a society that subjugates women only to the prescribed roles. Evidently, it is to be stressed here that this is the post-colonial position she has been assigned to by religion. African society, on the other hand, is dominated by the Wolof world view of fatalism. According to this world view, everyone's destiny is a fixed reality. As a result, Modou Fall sees his second marriage as something destined by God. Ramatoulaye also views it as a part of her destiny, and therefore, she should accept it without protest. She is ultimately caught between the established social order and her own intellectual renovation due to the Western education. However, Ramatoulaye's psychological dilemma is not observed in the character of her friend Aissatou. Aissatou does not allow the established social order to torture her; rather she chooses to divorce her man. Aissatou's divorce may be viewed as an act of courage; it is her moral triumph over the established social order. It as well demonstrates her concern for the changing values in society due to western education.

Ramatoulaye's letter makes clear that even their marriages are the outcome of their revolt against patriarchal subjugation. The courageous act on their part is the direct outcome of education that has provided them with enough knowledge to overcome such situations. All these shared experiences bind the two women together like sisters. This bond of sisterhood provides Ramatoulaye with an opportunity to talk in volumes about her personal experiences that provide her enough courage to reveal herself. It is after her husband Modou's death, she recollects her memories as she mentions: I lived in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends and family to bring him back to the fold proved futile. [. . .] He never came again; his newfound happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us (*Mariama*, 46).

Mariama Bâ also makes Aissatou to be the interlocutor of Ramatoulaye by establishing a contact between them in the form of a letter. Ramatoulaye mentions Aissatou to be her witness, and makes an appeal to her conscience. It is by way of revealing her true self that Ramatoulaye expects Aissatou to soothe her by way of reply. However, it is by seeking the reply again from her own self that Ramatoulaye satisfies her emotions. It is in this way that Ramatoulaye establishes the emotional link with Aissatou. As she writes: "You, very logically, may reply: 'Affections spring from nothing; sometimes a grimace, the carriage of a head can seduce a heart and keep it.'" (56)

The letter also reveals Ramatoulaye's concern for the women in society at large. Ramatoulaye's long letter expresses the feminine sensibility of the average women. However, for Ramatoulaye and others like her, feminism is not a battle between men and women for power; but it is the complementary bonding between men and women for mutual independence. She believes that the success of a nation hugely depends upon this complementary bonding. A long letter, thus, not only concerns with Ramatoulaye and her own problems; but it also reflects her acute awareness of the self of the other women.

The two friends in *So Long a Letter* show the impact of sisterhood in women's lives. It brings positive changes in their approach and viewpoint; each shares the other's decision and endeavors as they build a strong sisterhood. Bâ describes the plight of Senegalese women through both the content and form of the novel. *So Long a Letter* is an epistolary novel that presents a letter Ramatoulaye writes to her friend Aissatou. Through the epistolary form of the novel, Bâ foregrounds the sisterhood. The correspondence between the two women and the issue of female empowerment demonstrates the intimacy of the protagonist's relationship. The form also reinforces the confusion about the actual addressee of the letter. Some critics argue that Ramatoulaye may be writing to herself in order to alleviate the loneliness and pain of her seclusion. Ramatoulaye spends the whole period of her widowhood writing a letter to her friend, in which she epitomizes the joy and sorrow of their lives. In fact, talking to Aissatou, the narrator seems to be talking to herself not only because they share the same memories and experiences; but also because she feels the need to reflect on the issues troubling them.

The recollection of their shared memories makes it easy for Ramatoulaye to retain poise after the four months and ten days of seclusion. The narration of the life's experiences keeps her busy and bestows her with an opportunity to address her friend as if she were talking to her physically. The letter helps her to reduce the distance between them and establish intimate bond of pure sisterhood. The neocolonial context of *So Long a Letter*, reveals that more issues are at stake than a gender conflict. Ramatoulaye's different form of feminism does not exclude her from the movement. She identifies herself with the women's liberation group and is committed to the struggle to free women from oppression. Brandy Hayslett notes,

Ramatoulaye's decision to choose sisterhood as a way of expressing her concept of feminism is one that gains her respect as well as freedom from the orders of any man. Her assurance that knowledge, femininity, and power would gain her the freedom she desires is her own brand of feminism in a country full of women like her, who may have only slight difference in their own definitions of feminism. (Hayslett, 149)

However, the novel also reveals that not all women are willing to cultivate sisterhood, and some may even cause pain to others for their empowerment or the sake of patriarchy. Such women used as tools are victims of a situation over which they have no control and cannot liberate themselves. Neither Binetou nor Nabou has chosen to become co-wives respectively to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. The women who command the plot, Aunt Nabou and Binetou's mother, Lady Mother-in-Law,⁴ manipulate and exploit them without caring for their well being. Azodo asserts: The Binetous and the Nabous, in general, represent young girls sacrificed at the altar of materialism in modern Senegal by rapacious mothers and mother figures, who crave the good life at the expense of their wards (57).

In contrast to the conflict between mothers and daughters-in-law, Bâ portrays Ramatoulaye as an example of the perfect Mother-in-Law who initiates conversation, listens and then provides sound advice for the benefit of all. Ramatoulaye's relationship with her Sons-in-Law is remarkable because she transfers the friendship and understanding she has for her daughters to their husbands or fiancés, whom she regards as her children. Ramatoulaye also cultivates a deep sisterhood with her daughters with whom she tries to establish a sound communication. She sums up her sisterly concern in these terms: My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism resists (*Mariama* 88). She also shows a lot of concern about her friend Jacqueline,⁵ who becomes sick because she feels alien. From Ivory Coast, Jacqueline has trouble adapting to the Senegalese culture. Ramatoulaye comforts and cares for this friend who needs all the help she can get to overcome this difficult challenge, thereby accomplishing another form of female solidarity. Bâ's novel invites women to follow these examples to cultivate the challenging path of sisterhood.

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.

The main position Bâ describes in *So Long a Letter* pinpoints the healing powers of female friendship. Women's relationships allow them to fight polygamy, colonialism, the caste system and any form of prejudice. Indeed, Bâ emphasizes that the female friendship helps women overcome any attempt at subjugation and heals the pain resulting from oppression, through mutual support and sincere commitment. Consequently, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye succeed in extending their bond of friendship into a type of female solidarity that reaches more women and that even contributes to nation building. Bâ's protagonists also gain female empowerment and build new identities. This in turn allows them to survive their husbands' betrayal and assume their new lives as single mothers. Their belief in education grants them the status of professional women in a context where most women remain at home. In their struggle for freedom from the redundant taboos in society, they become successful in creating awareness about women's liberation, their own freedom and that of their community as well.

So Long a Letter explores the conditions of African woman as mother, wife, friend and daughter within the realm of traditional values. The novel, moreover, presents an awareness of African woman concerning the changing modern and western values. It focuses on the spiritual being of a woman who endures emotional and physical sufferings, which in turn help her to regain potency. Ramatoulaye draws the emotional and spiritual strength from the collective consciousness of Africa. She is an embodiment of an Ideal Mother in a contemporary African setting. She understands the inexplicable and loves without beginning or end. She has selective adherence to tradition. The inevitable changes in society make her selective in her approach. She critically analyses her role as a traditional African wife and mother in the changing value system. However, Ramatoulaye never loses her touch with cosmic and spiritual dimensions of her being. She bestows an immense importance on motherhood, family hood and a firm belief in God.

So Long a Letter is a powerful commentary on love; it is a novel about the socio-political, personal and the universal aspects of human life. The novel reads as though it was a private diary, it reveals Mariama's candor and sincerity. The novel harmoniously blends the local with the universal, exploring the themes of love, friendship, loneliness and personal. . It is through the bond of sisterhood; Mariama Bâ presents her strong belief in true love, freedom to choose and the importance of education. She hopes for a future in which the leaders of the country understand that the nation is not just the men, but the whole families, all families. In *So Long a Letter*, Bâ's intellectual project leaves the battle to the young women to change the status quo. Her hopes are through the younger generation that the archaic and negative attachment to tradition will make way for a different way of constructing knowledge within tradition. This transformation, she firmly believes, will take place within Senegalese society.

The novel presents Mariama Bâ's strong belief in true love, freedom to choose and the importance of education for the women of the world. Her positive approach connotes the fact that the nation is not just men, but also women and the whole family. She firmly believes that the leaders of the country can understand it, and allow women to participate in politics. It is through the strong sisterhood of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Bâ sets an example for young women of the world to change the status quo. This transformation, she firmly believes, will take place within Senegalese society in particular, and within all the societies of the world.

Notes

- 1) Ramatoulaye's husband dies and according to Islamic rule, she has to remain in seclusion for a period of four months and ten days. Although she can run errands inside and body and outside the house, she has to cover her whole lower her voice.
- 2) Mariama Bâ portrays a system deeply rooted in the Senegalese culture that allows men to have up to four wives.
- 3) During colonization, Dakar was the capital of the West African colonies ruled by the French system. The schools of the administration were located in Dakar which explains why the girls attend school in Dakar and not in their countries
- 4) The narrator does not give Binetou's mother a name. Ramatoulaye ironically calls her Lady Mother-in-Law because of her affiliation with Modou.
- 5) Ramatoulaye helps Jacqueline to overcome nervous breakdown.

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