



## THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN MARIAMA BÂ'S SO LONG A LETTER

*Dr Jayant S. Cherekar*

*Assistant Professor*

*Arts, Commerce & Science College, Shankarnagar Tq. Biloli, Dist. Nanded (MS)*

### Abstract

*The feminist struggle and agitation for equality in society have always been a part of the literary representation of gender roles. The present research paper aims to analyze the text and determine the novelist's specific brand of feminism. The research paper focuses on the novel So Long a Letter and attempts to establish distinctiveness of Bâ's feminist stance in it. However, there are existing claims among African feminist critics that Mariama Bâ portrays the oppression of women by men through the prevalent paradigms of tradition, polygamy, patriarchy, and Islamic religion in Senegal. This paper argues that while the protagonists' revolt against polygamy, religion, and tradition is real, it posits that any claim of a collective feminist struggle in So Long a Letter is ambivalent. Their engagement with rivalry and threats to marital fulfilment, an aspect which existing scholarship on the novel has often ignored, also undermines the claim of a collective feminist struggle for change and progress. In the end, both women succeed through universalism, formal education, and Westernization in attaining poise and contentment. The present study adopts an eclectic framework that leans on the theory of deconstruction by revealing the characterization, themes and study of the text. This article concludes that Bâ' treatment of feminism in So Long a Letter is quite different as it is free from biased portraiture of a character based on gender. This sort of treatment in the text shows Bâ to be more humanist than feminist.*

**Keywords:** *gender roles, polygamy, patriarchy, feminism, education, deconstruction.*



*Aarhat Publication & Aarhat Journals is licensed Based on a work at <http://www.aarhat.com/erj/>*

### Introduction

The origin of the marginalization of women is undocumented but is evidently entrenched in the cultural practices of diverse societies. Women and females were generally assigned inferiority and insignificance in cultural values. This manifested in several forms of suppressive inequalities such as the denial of political and educational rights of women. Even in America's liberal democracy, women were barred by law from voting in elections and serving in juries until they publicly protested in 1915. Generally, female children were not sent to school like their male counterparts but were rather kept at home to serve domestic functions until they are old enough to marry and continue the cycle domestic chores and childbearing. The African traditional institution of marriage subjugates women further and treats them as adjuncts to their better male spouses through motherhood, polygamy, widowhood practices, and other anti-feminist traditions. Gender discrimination also manifested in the evils of slave trade when female slaves sold for far less than the value of their male counterparts. In religious politics,



women are even more rigidly subjugated and barred from either joining the mainstream priesthood or fully exploring their capabilities to the goal of rising to the zenith of leadership.

The concept of feminism has evolved into **one of the foremost** popular tools of **contemporary** literary criticism. **Although the concept of feminism is predominantly treated more as a movement than as a theory of criticism, its influence on literary criticism is so far-reaching that popular texts of the pre-feminist era are re-evaluated for conformity to feminist critical canons.** Presently, male writers strive to **attain** a balance in gender delineation of literary characters. Given this, feminist texts attract much attention to the discussion of the topic. Bà's *So Long a Letter* is a **vital** contribution to feminist literature from the African continent, and its importance is visible in the extensive critical attention it receives. The novel **so long** a Letter depicts how the traditional African society subjugates women to specific gender roles **like** mother, wife, friend and daughter. However, it also shows awareness among African women concerning the changing modern and western values. It depicts the **spiritual being** of a **lady** who endures physical and emotional sufferings, which help her to regain strength. The collective **alert** to African society allows the protagonist to draw emotional and spiritual potency. She is neither traditionalist nor modernist but a faithful combination of both. Therefore, she is selective in her approach and chooses **the most effective** that applies to **true**. The ever-growing changes **within the** African society enable her to critically analyse her role as a wife and mother, however, she never loses her spiritual strength and remains faithful to motherhood, family hood and a firm belief in God.

*So Long a Letter* presents dense issues of feminism, such as selfhood or ways of knowing, oppression, female education/feminist consciousness, and the tragedy of sexual politics. These issues require exploration of theoretical pluralism. In this connection Rogers (459) observes that many contemporary feminist theorists, such as Sandra Lee Bartky, Patricia J. Williams, Susan Bordo and Gloria Anzaldua adopt the eclectic or pluralistic approach in formulating their theoretical constructs. The eclectic approach is more suitable in the study of *So Long a Letter* because in eclecticism, the technical language of formal theorization is replaced with every day, informal language. Rogers (471) provides some examples of this from Bell Hooks and also cites the following lines from her to support eclecticism: For the oppressed, the exploited, the dominated, dominion is not just a subject for radical discourse, for books. It is about pain –the pain of hunger, the pain of overwork, the pain of degradation and dehumanization, the pain of loneliness, the pain of loss, the pain of isolation, the pain of exile –spiritual and physical.... oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story (471).

#### **Gender Politics:**

Gender politics is a prominent feature of contemporary literary scholarship. In grammar, “gender” means “male, female, neuter, or common” as the classification of words. But in this context, the term is taken outside grammar and is located in sexual politics. Millet Kate (13) describes sexual politics as a system of interpersonal power through which men dominate women “... as a matter of birthright priority.” The working definition of the term is a broad view of power play in gender conflict. It is an ideological struggle of male and female feminists, to achieve a balance in social, economic and political gender roles for females and thus, its exposition in literature. It is a struggle against the inherent oppressions of female Gender conflict consists of feminism and masculinism.

Feminism presupposes the domination and negative portrayal of women in the literature of patriarchal societies.



Literatures portray negative images and roles of women and seldom portray them as independent, fully developed characters. According to feminists, the female experience was not projected and celebrated alongside the male experience in literature, and this situation deepens the subjugation of womanhood in society. The domination manifests in cultural practices, sexual relations, professions, religion, economics, and politics. Feminism opposes this system, and views as 'phallogocentric'. It, therefore, imposes a deconstructionist approach to the study of literature, to the effect of not just telling but also celebrating the female experience. Feminists, therefore, adopt their assertive reading of texts and a radical critique of phallogocentrism. They vindicate the female experience as legitimate. Deconstruction views that reality is not just a single perspective but multiple. The same text yields multiple deconstructive interpretations, none of which is inferior to the others. As a result of this, feminists and other oppressed categories of persons legitimately embark on assertive interpretations of their meaning from literary texts and present these readings as mainstream criticism.

### **The Peculiar Feminist Stance of Mariama Bâ in SLL**

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is a sequence of epistolary reminiscences of Ramatoulaye. Recently widowed, she recounts her emotions through a letter to her childhood friend, Aissatou. The letter is a portrait of woman's subjugation in the Islamic milieu where polygamy is common. The thematic concern in *So Long a Letter* is the unfortunate subjugation of women in polygamous marriages. Bâ relates polygamy to a certain kind of domestic tragedy: Aissatou deserts Mawdo when the latter takes a second wife; Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou suffers financially and dies prematurely, after his controversial second marriage to his daughter's friend. Each of the two families portrayed in the story suffers shattering tragedies because of polygamy. In view of these glaring tragedies, why did Bâ's protagonist, an educated woman and teacher, remain in a polygamous and unhappy marriage? Why was she reluctant to embrace Aissatou's option of self-assertion, divorce, and freedom?

Generally, Mariama Bâ's commitment to the feminist struggle is akin to her contemporaries, as Zaynab Alkali. Bâ and Alkali create from similar Islamic social and cultural milieu. Alkali's works support the Accommodationist view that a truly liberated African woman is not dependent on her husband for everything. She portrays her feminist heroines as women that are generally educated and are also determined to make positive marks for themselves and womanhood in a male-dominated society. Alkali's Li in *the Stillborn* breaks the symbolic traditional fence to liberate herself from phallogocentrism. But when she grows into experience, she discovers that what she requires is not a radical, non-directional breakaway from phallogocentrism but rather a re-defined relationship with the same old structure. Similarly, Bâ's Ramatoulaye admits that she lacks the courage to break away from polygamy, but would rather endure it as a painful imposition from her religion and society. Notably, both writers advocate their belief in the immense liberating power of education for the female agitator.

But despite these common grounds, Bâ still stands out as a distinct crusader of a peculiar brand of feminism. She is not the fiery, raging feminist like Ama Ata Aidoo, Bunmi Sofola and Buchi Emecheta from the African brand of feminism. Nor is she the sort of a Western feminist represented by Alice Jardine, Sharon Spencer, Valerie Smith and Elaine Showalter. Mariama Bâ approaches feminism from a non-radical standpoint. Her protagonist, Ramatoulaye, compromised and tolerated her husband's people even when they intruded in her home (19). She further delineates this in *So Long a Letter* when, despite her sense of hurt and betrayal when Modou takes another wife, Ramatoulaye declares: "Yes. I was well aware of where the right solution lay, the dignified solution" (45). The statement is a sort of



reference to radical feminism and divorce, the type that her friend, Aissatou exemplified. But she chose to forgo the solution of divorce: “I had prepared myself for equal sharing according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamous life” (46). This accommodating view contrasts sharply with both African and Western feminist disposition to polygamy.

Aissatou refuses to remain in a polygamous marriage. When all her efforts to stop Madow’s second marriage fail, Aissatou declares:

If you can procreate without loving merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable. 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 to be tolerated for reasons of duty... I am stripping myself of your love, your name clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way (32).

Ramatoulaye writes to her liberated (divorced) friend, Aissatou:

Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage [male-female union]. (56).

She further articulates that she “...considers the wearing of trousers dreadful given our build, which is not that of slim Western women”. She rather feels that trousers constrict and hamper; instead of liberating. (77) The image of trousers is symbolic of alien cultures. Bâ evokes a play on meaning as the imitation of Western women’s way of dressing also metaphorically implies African women copying unsuitable feminist ideas from the west, another allusion that her message in *So Long a Letter* directs at a peculiar course. Furthermore, Bâ disproves the feminist charge of absolute patriarchy in African societies. She portrays match-making as the exclusive preserve of matriarchs; even where men benefit financially and emotionally from the union. Thus, Aissatou’s husband marries young Nabou “so as not to see his mother (Aunt Nabou) die of shame and chagrin” (30). But the reader is well aware that that marriage marks a successful realization of Aunt Nabou’s resentment to her son’s earlier marriage. It would be reasonable to deduce that Modou is a victim of his mother’s schemes as Aissatou is. With equal zeal, the stereotypical Lady Mother-in-law coerces young Binetou into marrying Modou. So, Aissatou, Modou, and Binetou are all victims of Aunt Nabou’s hatred for her daughter-in-law. It is almost an anti-feminist stance because it portrays a female character that oppresses both male and female characters.

Bâ’s Ramatoulaye is not hostile to masculine structures. She views both sexes of the present generation with compassion when she says:

Faced with this rigid moulded by the old morality, burning with the fierce ardour of antiquated laws, what could Mawdo Bâ do? (30).

So, the writer seems to believe that there are traditional areas of domination for the sexes. But she blasts on adulterous, polygamous men whom she delineates as the rigid matriarchs. It is a noteworthy point in her feminist stance in *So Long a Letter*: the balance of blames between ancient laws of morality; and matriarchy/patriarchy on the other hand for the sufferings of humanity.

Bâ demonstrates that society, comprising matriarchal and patriarchal influences is the real oppressor of woman. Modou corrupts Binetou with expensive gifts while her mother coerces her into the unfortunate marriage that ends her education. (SLL: 39) It leads to Ramatoulaye and Daba describe her as a victim of her mother's duplicity, who pushed her out of school, into a tragic polygamous marriage for material gains.



African widowhood culture has been a target of feminist agitation. African widows are subjected to dehumanizing experiences and are culturally bound to be inherited by their late husband's brother. In a feminist repudiation of this view, Bâ portrays articulate women who have a sound perception of the female situation because they are fellow sufferers of the victims. These characters, therefore, vent their individual and group misgivings against the existing oppressive structures. Tamsir tries in vain to inherit his brother's widow, Ramatoulaye, who puts up a determined opposition.

**Ramatoulaye speaks out:**

You (Tamsir) forget that I have a heart, a mind that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love (58).

So, she rejects Tamsir and the traditional domination of her kind which he represents. Ramatoulaye further proves the theme of feminist rejection of oppressive culture when she denies 'arranged marriage' and makes her own choice. Her mother had insisted on her marrying Daouda Dieng, a young medical doctor. But Ramatoulaye considers him too old for her and so, married her own choice, Modou Fall. To explain her action, she declares:

...free from the frustrating taboos and capable now of discernment, why should I follow my mother's finger pointing at Daouda Dieng, still a bachelor but too mature for my eighteen years (16).

Her resentment of polygamy further manifests in her choice of not remarrying after the death of her husband. She refuses to be inherited by Tamsir in order to reject the oppressive custom of wife inheritance and also to avoid polygamy as the following lines indicate:

And then the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation. Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot rightly bring myself between you and your family (68).

In a different dialogue with Daouda, she further pursues the feminist interest by describing the Senegalese Assembly as "that male assembly" (60) with only four women among a hundred deputies. She further asserts that:

We (females) have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities. The right to vote is an important weapon. (63).

In contrary to this, Mariama Bâ portrays feminist consciousness through feminist characters. The protagonist Ramatoulaye exhibits consciousness of the collective female dilemma. It is, in fact, a way for the effective liberation for her. Ramatoulaye shows a different kind of stature who can tolerate, intruding relatives that result in the disruption of her marriage for three decades. Aissatou, on the other hand, easily breaks away from whatever threatens her dignity as a woman.

Aissatu's husband, Mawdo Bâ, marries young Nabou; while Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, marries Binetou. Each man corrupted each young woman with expensive gifts. Mariama Bâ presents the two younger women as victims of an oppressive culture, rather than malicious home breakers. Their real oppressor is the socio-cultural inequalities of the Senegalese Islamic society which comprises patriarchs and matriarchs. Hence, each of the female protagonists embarks on a quest of self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization.

The travails of the African woman are further worsened by African widowhood tradition. Despite the sorrows of bereavement, Senegalese women are further subjected to physical and emotional torture in the name of widowhood tradition. She paints a gory picture of this: This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when





she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law. Worse still, beyond her possessions, she gives up her personality, her dignity.... (4)The physical pain of widowhood tradition is portrayed in the lines: our sisters-in-law undo our hair. My co-wife and myself are put inside a rough and ready tent made of wrapper pulled taut above our heads. (4) Ramatoulaye is not happy that tradition has made them double victims of dehumanization. She resents this practice that reduces women into objects. These themes represent a catalogue of Bâ's feminist pursuit in *So Long Letter*, and also inform her peculiar stance in the text.

### Conclusion:

The differences in feminist theories and approaches are not indications of illegitimacy or weakness of the desirability of a more equitable system that would treat males and females equally. The issues of female domination are diverse and would necessarily require different strategies to redress them. And because feminism is a broad socio-literary concept, it is normal for sub-categories to develop out of it. Bâ's *So Long a Letter* projects feminist consciousness and portrays some of the issues of female domination such as polygamy, illiteracy, rigid customs, etc. She interweaves these issues in the experiences of the characters and in the events of the story: a compelling narration that shows a number of women struggling against systems that Language, Literature, and Literacy in a Developing Nation oppress womanhood. Thus, present research paper locates Bâ's feminist stance in this setting. Her approach to the female cause in gender conflict is evolutionary, unlike Western revolutionary. She recognizes certain areas of female subjugation in African societies and portrays these in her novels. But obviously, Bâ's brand of feminism attempts to set up a standard for literature and is free from biased portraiture of individuals based on gender. Bâ did this successfully in *So Long a Letter*. Bâ's peculiar feminist stance in *So Long a Letter* is a mark of her originality and creativity in the feminine revolt.

### Works Cited

- Bâ, Mariama. 1981. *So Long A Letter*. (Trans. Modupe Thomas) Ibadan: New Horn.
- Print Chinweizu. 1990. *Anatomy of Female Power*. Lagos: Pero Press. Print. Ekpong, M. O. "Feminist Tendencies in West African Drama". 1988. Ed. Current Trends in Literature and Language Studies. E. Emenyonu. Ibadan: Heinemann. Print. Eisenstein, Zillah R. 1998. "The Problem of Theorizing Feminism". *Contemporary Feminist Theory: a Text/Reader*. Ed. Mary F. Rogers. Boston: McGraw-Hill. (484 –490). Print. Greer, Germaine. 1993. *The Female Eunuch*. London: Paladin. Print. Hagan, Kay Leigh. *Fugitive Information: Essays from a Feminist Hothead*. San Francisco: Pandora Books. Print. Heath, Stephen. 1989. "Men in Feminism". *Men in Feminism*. Eds. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. New York: Routledge. Print. Hicks, Malcolm and Biu Hutchings. 1977. *Literary Criticism*. London: Edward Arnold, 1989. Print. Lyons, John. *Semantics*. London: Cambridge UP. Print. Millet, Kate. 1972. *Sexual Politics*. London, Abacus Sphere Books. Print. Nelson, Cary. 1989. "Men in Feminism: The Materiality of Discourse" *Men in Feminism*. Eds. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. New York: Routledge. Print. Rogers. 1998. *Mary F. Contemporary Feminist Theory: a Text/Reader*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. Print. Spencer, Sharon. 1982. "Feminist Criticism in Literature" *American Writing Today*. Ed Richard Kostelanetz. Forum Series, (II).