

GENDER POLITICS IN MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER*

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Abstract

*The feminist agitation for relevance in society and in literary delineation of gender roles is firmly established in literary criticism. The objective of this paper is to provide our perspective on the subject, especially against the backdrop of Ba's usual classification in the general category of Moderationist feminists. The paper focused on *So Long a Letter* (hereinafter, *SLL*) and attempt to establish the uniqueness of Ba's feminist stance in it; even when compared with other feminist texts either by the author or her contemporaries. It adopted an eclectic theoretical framework that leans on the theory of deconstruction, and reviewed characterization and themes through textual analysis. The analysis reveals certain areas of female subjugation in the African society portrayed in the story. But obviously, Ba's brand of feminism attempts to set up a standard for literature which is free from biased portraiture of individuals based on gender: a stance that this paper chooses to view as more humanist than feminist. The study therefore concludes that this stance is peculiar to the author; and decidedly borders on anti-feminism.*

Keywords: *Gender politics, Mariama Ba, So long a letter, feminism, African culture, and widowhood.*

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 appendages to their better male spouses through female circumcision, 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.

Early women liberation movements were largely focused on the following general areas:

- Eradication of discrimination in employment opportunities.
- Eradication of discrimination in educational/professional opportunities.
- An end to the use of women as sex objects of men.

A more radical brand of feminism developed in the 1960s and expanded the frontiers of feminist demands to include marriage and child-bearing rights. The feminists of this era initiated 'radical' demands: that child-bearing should be made optional in marriages and that female individual identity must be treated as equal and alternative to the male identity. Contemporary feminist schools of thought include Moderationists, Accommodationists, and Western Radicals (some of whom, among other things, advocate same-sex marriages between willing women).

The concept of feminism has evolved into one of the most popular tools of contemporary literary criticism. Although the concept 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 achieve a balance in gender delineation of literary characters, otherwise, such writers risk being vilified as the stereotypical malevolent masculinist. In view of this, feminist texts attract much attention in the discussion of the subject. Ba's *SLL* is an important contribution to feminist literature from the African continent, and its importance is underscored by the extensive critical attention it receives.

Obviously, Ba's works have attracted a plethora of literary evaluation and *So Long a Letter* has consistently been critiqued by several scholar-critics and researchers. The objective of this paper is to provide our perspective on the subject, especially against the backdrop of Ba's usual classification in the general category of Moderationist feminists.

SLL 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 theoretical pluralism, which we explore through eclecticism. Rogers (459) observes that many contemporary feminist theorists, such as: Sandra Lee Bartky, Patricia J. Williams, Susan Bordo and Gloria Anzaldua adopt eclectic or pluralistic approach in formulating their theoretical constructs. The eclectic approach is more suitable in the study of *SLL* 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).

However, we will avoid the more rigid form of naming feminist theorists, which often categorizes them along tags such as:

- Colonial theorists
- Postcolonial theorists
- Lesbian theorists
- Socialist theorists
- Liberal/Reformists theorists
- Radical/Reformist theorists
- Constructionist theorists
- Essentialist theorists.

Such circumscribed categorization would tend to promote differences among feminists, who may become protective of their fixed categories to the detriment of the overall feminist goal. In practical terms, such a classification may not contribute much to the present discourse, although it may form the basis of other studies similar to this.

Gender Politics

Gender politics is a prominent feature of contemporary literary scholarship. In grammar, “gender” means “male, female, neuter, or common” as classification of words. But in this context, the term is taken outside grammar and is located in sexual politics. In her view, Millet (13) describes sexual politics as a system of interpersonal power through which men dominate women “... as a matter of birth right priority” Contrary to this view, our working definition of the term is a broad view of power play in gender conflict; an ideological struggle of male and female feminists to achieve a balance in social, economic and political gender roles for females and 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. Women are given negative images and roles in literature and are seldom portrayed 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, the professions, religion, economics, and politics among other areas. Feminism then opposes this system, which it views as 'phallogentric' and imposes a deconstructionist approach to the study of literature to the effect of not just telling but also celebrating the female experience: a development that challenges the age-long myth of penis envy. Feminists therefore adopt their own assertive reading of texts and a radical critique of phallogentricism. They vindicate the female experience as legitimate. Some even go further in romantic celebration of erstwhile forbidden sensualities of womanhood. This creates a crisis in meaning since there is variance in value as well as signification in not just the two warring camps but also within the feminists themselves. It is important to emphasize the centrality of the theory of deconstruction in literary feminism. The formal literary theory of deconstruction developed from structuralism and is often referred to as a post-structuralist approach in literary criticism. Deconstruction is anchored on the view that reality is not just a single perspective but multiple in nature. The same text yields itself to multiple deconstructive interpretations, none of which

should be regarded as inferior to the others. As a result of this multiplicity of reading, feminists and other oppressed categories of persons legitimately embark on assertive interpretations of their own meaning from literary texts and present these readings as mainstream criticism.

The Peculiar Feminist Stance of Mariama Ba in *SLL*

Every writer is able to communicate his/her individual social commitments in a peculiar individual manner while working within a broader stylistic framework of the chosen genre. For Mariama Ba, the commitment in *SLL* is to the feminist struggle in gender politics.

Mariama Ba's *SLL* is a sequence of epistolary reminiscences of the protagonist, Ramatoulaye. Recently widowed, she recounts her emotions through a letter to her childhood friend, Aissatou. The letter, which indeed is a novel, is a portrait of woman's subjugation in the Islamic milieu where polygamy is common (Latha, 2002). Ba's particular rendition of this fibula portrays articulate women who have the courage and dignity to reject polygamy in a society that takes it as a norm. The thematic concern in *SLL* is the unfortunate subjugation of women in (polygamous) marriages. In her thematic treatment, Ba 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 later 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 Ba'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 Ba's commitment to the feminist struggle is akin to her contemporaries such as Zaynab Alkali. Ba and Alkali create from similar Islamic social and cultural milieu. Alkali's works tend to support the Accommodationist view that a truly liberated African woman is one that is not totally 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 phallocracy. But when she grows into experience, she discovers that what she requires is not a radical, non-directional breakaway from phallocracy but rather a re-defined relationship with the same old structure. Similarly, Ba's Ramatoulaye admits that she lacks the courage to radically break away from polygamy but would rather endure it as a painful imposition from her religion and the society. It is notable that both writers advocate their belief in the immense liberating power of education for the female agitator.

But despite these common grounds, Ba still stands out as a distinct crusader of a peculiar brand of feminism. She is not the fiery, raging feminist of the likes of Ama Ata Aidoo, Bunmi Sofola and Buchi Emecheta from the African radical brand of feminism. Nor is she the sort of 'radical' Western feminist represented by Alice Jardine, Sharon Spencer, Valerie Smith and Elaine Showalter. Mariama Ba 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 *SLL* 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). This is an obvious reference to radical

feminism and divorce, the type that her friend, Aissatu 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 antagonistic disposition to polygamy.

Aissatou refuses to remain in a polygamous marriage. When all her efforts to stop Madou'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).

Marriage in the African context is a male dominated institution at all levels; from betrothal to dissolution. Men have all the advantages in marriage. They betroth their female children and may use such betrothal and marriage to settle disputes and pay-off debtors. Female children are commonly married-off at tender ages to train or establish their 'more important' male siblings. Women marry only one husband at a time, but men are entitled to marry up to four women at the same time and may divorce these four and still re-marry at will. While men boast of their libido and of female sexual conquests, females are ruthlessly circumcised to reduce their libido and would not dare celebrate their sexuality in any manner. These facts and issues in African marriage are still prevalent in contemporary society and are hopefully not lost on Ba as a feminist. But if she chose her otherwise rationale, intelligent protagonist in a feminist text to express the lines quoted above, then, she is obviously articulating a peculiar stance.

She further articulates that she “...considers the wearing of trousers dreadful in view of our build, which is not that of slim Western women”. She rather feels that trousers constrict and hamper; instead of liberate. (77) The image of trousers is symbolic of alien cultures. Ba evokes a play on meaning as the imitation of Western women's mode of dressing also metaphorically implies African women copying unsuitable feminist ideas from the west, another allusion that her message in SLL is specifically directed at a peculiar course.

Furthermore, Ba 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 as much 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. This is almost an anti-feminist stance because it portrays a female character that oppresses both male and female characters.

Ba'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 Ba do? (30).

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

Ba demonstrates that society, comprising matriarchal and patriarchal influences is the real oppressor of woman. This is best illustrated with young Binetou's plight in *SLL*. Modou corrupts her with expensive gifts while her mother coerces her into the unfortunate marriage that ends her education. (*SLL*: 39) This is why Ramatoulaye and Daba describe Binetou as a victim of her mother, who pushed a young girl out of school and 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, Ba portrays articulate women who have sound perception of the female situation because they themselves 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 rejected 'arranged marriage' and made her own choice. Her mother had insisted on her marrying Daouda Dieng, a young medical doctor. But Ramatoulaye considers him to be 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 effect, the novelist deploys feminist consciousness in a plausible gender conflict through her fictional characters. The major female character exhibit a consciousness of the collective female dilemma and like Ramatoulaye, each maps out an articulate programme of effective liberation. The nature of the liberation is, however, personal to each character. Ramatoulaye can tolerate intruding relatives that invade the privacy of her home and even remain in a polygamy that disrupts her marriage of three decades. Aissatu would rather break away from whatever threatens her dignity as a woman.

Aissatu's husband, Mawdo Ba, marries young Nabou; while Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, marries Binetou. Each man corrupted each young woman with expensive gifts. Each man is also assisted by a collaborative martriach. The two younger women that become the co-wives of Aissatu and Ramatoulaye are presented as victims of an oppressive culture, rather than malevolent home breakers. Their real oppressor is the socio-cultural inequalities (Ejiogu, 2021) of the Senegalese Islamic society in which the story is set: and this comprises patriachs and matriarchs. Hence, each of the major female characters embarks on a quest of self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization.

But the novelist dissuades gender antagonism and separatism. Fermata the griot advises Ramatoulaye: “You don't fell the tree whose shade protects you. You water it. You watch over it.” (65) The sex-power implication of watering a tree and then relaxing under its shade is symbiosis. Patriarchy is the superstructure (tree) which sustains feminism and so provides a shade for it. Relating this to the image above, we can safely deduce that Ba advocates a feminist programme of mutual cooperation and equal opportunity; not a destructive confrontation with patriarchy.

However, Ba's approach to feminism sometimes borders on anti-feminism and may have already been construed as such in certain quarters. This can be deduced from her portrayal of both matriarchs and patriachs who oppress her female characters, thereby tacitly debunking the feminist presupposition of male domination. It may be reasonably argued that matriarchal force causes the disintegration of the two marriages in the story. Both Aunt Nabou and Binetou's

mother diligently coerce and coax the men and the younger women into polygamy.

Ba's Peculiar Treatment of Some Common Feminist Themes in *SLL*

The following are a selection of some of the themes explored in *SLL*. These themes are common in feminist writing but the following selection presents Ba's peculiar perspectives of them in the *SLL*.

Polygamy and Betrayal of Love

Polygamy is a prominent theme of the story and is portrayed as the cause of domestic tragedies. It is not just a cultural practice but also a religious norm of the social setting. It is also the conflict that develops the plot of the story. The two leading female characters (Ramayoulaye and Aissatou) feel oppressed by polygamy; the two younger women (Binetou and Young Nabou) are victimized by polygamy. Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, married Binetou, while Aissatou's husband, Mawdo Ba, married young Nabou. The two older women feel that their husbands of many years have betrayed them and this betrayal destroyed their families. Ramatoulaye mourns this betrayal in many lines such as:

I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. (9)

The flavour of life is love, the salt of life also is love. (63)

Binetou, a child the same age as my daughter Daba, promoted to the rank of my co-wife, whom I must face up to. Shy Binetou! The old man who bought

her the new off-the-peg dress to replace the old faded ones was none other than Modou. (39)

Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou? And to think that I love this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life.... (12)

Self-assertion/self-realization

This theme is realized in different ways for the lead characters. Ramatoulaye asserts herself in rejecting imposed marriage and marrying for love [The flavour of life is love, the salt of life also is love. (63)]. She demonstrates this twice with first her refusal to marry Dauda Dieng, her mother's choice suitor, and then her refusal to be inherited by Tamsir, her late husband's brother. Tamsir was already married, so Ba's refusal to marry him further underscores her self-realization and self-assertion. Aissatou's course of self-realization is more assertive. She divorces her husband when he marries a second wife and emigrates to the West.

Choice

This theme runs through the whole course of the plot. The protagonist begins by making an assertive choice of marriage partner. When the basis of that choice, her love for Modou, was threatened by polygamy, she chose to remain in the marriage. But when Modou dies, she is confronted with a worse kind of polygamy and cultural domination of her kind. She resisted

these with determination. She did not just speak out against her oppression but also matched her resentment with non-violent action. However, her friend, Aissatou makes a different kind of choice: to break away from polygamy and start on a new course of independence. Unfortunately, most of the male characters are portrayed as polygamous and treacherous in love. Both Modou and Mawdo choose to marry second wives. Their choice brings disaster to the two families.

Friendship

The theme of friendship is also prominent in the story and is explored through the relationship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. They are childhood friends. They pass through the same oppressive marital experiences. Ramatoulaye sets the high tone for the theme of friendship in the opening page of the story:

My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times. Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow. Modou is dad. How do I tell you? (1)

The common marital experience strengthened the bond between them (Cherekar, 2020). They encouraged each other and shared the love and caring, which their husbands failed to provide when each man chose betrayal and polygamy. In Ramatoulaye's analysis, love may be strong but friendship is a stronger bond: friendship is enduring but love fades. She declares:

Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, ...friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love. You, the goldsmith's daughter, gave me your help while depriving yourself.... (54)

Their friendship does not suffer the kind of betrayal that their love and married life put them through. Aissatou seals their mutual friendship with a car gift:

I shall never forget your response you, my sister, nor my joy and surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was to choose a car which you had paid for, in full. (53)

Widowhood

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 Ba's feminist pursuit in *SLL*, 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. Ba's *SLL* 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 oppress womanhood. The feminist agitation for relevance in society and in literary delineation of gender roles is firmly established in literary criticism. Mariama Ba was also a notable African feminist in her lifetime and her books continue to attract critical attention many years after her death.

Based on the foregoing analysis, Ba has articulated a peculiar stance on the subject. Obviously, there is no unity of purpose and method in both masculinism and feminism. The feminist agitation ranges from demanding a redefined relationship with males to subjugating males if they cannot be totally expelled from the social order. Some radical Western feminists advocate same-sex relations and single parenthood. They are encouraged by recent progress in scientific cloning and genetic engineering which may end the human family as we know it today. But African feminists demand, among other things, equality in economic, social, cultural and political decision making. Ba's feminist stance in *SLL* is located within this setting. Her approach to the female cause in gender conflict is evolutionary, unlike Western revolutionary approach. She recognizes certain areas of female subjugation in African societies and portrays these in her novels. But obviously, Ba's brand of feminism attempts to set up a standard for literature which is free from biased portraiture of individuals based on gender. Ba did this successfully in *SLL*. She did it in a peculiar style. Hagan (2) summarizes the state of the feminist crusade in the following lines:

Feminism is at its best on the run, in motion. Its ideas become real in the daily lives of women inventing freedom as we go. Feminism is created constantly by women questioning everything, from society that deems us inferior to men ... to the feminist movement itself.

Ba achieves most of these in *SLL*: questioning both oppressive tradition and feminism itself through the experiences of the characters. Greer (20) observes that:

The beginning of feminism in a woman is manifested in her ability to devise her own method of revolt; a revolt which will reflect her own independence and originality.

Ba's peculiar feminist stance in *SLL* is a mark of her originality and creativity in the feminine revolt.

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