

## Sisterhood as a means of resisting patriarchy in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

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### Abstract

Space and role restrictions, social disparities, cultural disintegration, and political confrontations are just a few of the difficulties that African women often face. This article aims to show how women negotiate their space within such limitations through female friendship, solidarity, and sisterhood as legitimate tools of female bonding and feasible means for the woman's educational, political and economic independence in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. This novel raises concerns about the extent to which the consciousness, or the actual experience of patriarchal abuse in its various shapes, brings women from different socio-economic backgrounds closer together, furnishing them with a device of resistance in a highly antagonistic social environment, and enabling them to appreciate women's empowerment, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building.

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## INTRODUCTION

African women writers generally center their writing on opposing all shapes of patriarchal behavior and the conviction that women can live their lives as they choose and are equally responsible for their own livelihoods and future. Due to their shared experience of discrimination, black women are compelled to unite to counteract the effects of race, class and gender. Female friendship offers women comfort, stability, and even healing in addition to helping them combat the ravages of patriarchy.

Some theorists who study and explore women's relationships and the various difficulties they face are interested in female bonding. Clenora Hudson-Weems, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Carole Boyce Davies, Elizabeth Abel and Obioma Nnameka explore women's identities and relationships and their effects on communities.

They dissect women's encounters related to race, class and gender, and how women foster tools that permit them to survive. They highlight the ways in which black women bond in order to both ease the anguish brought on by these setbacks and to provide themselves comfort and stability. Abel argues:

"In developing a theory of female friendship, I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each other". (Abel 1981, p. 434).

Abel highlights a crucial point about the need to emphasize how difficult it is for women to escape tyranny, ensure their own survival, and resist patriarchy.

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## METHODS

The Senegalese author Mariama Bâ's "*So Long a Letter*," published in 1981, is the literary work the researcher examines in this article. To study the message the novel exposes, the researcher uses plot, characterization, and thematic analysis. The researcher also employs a stylistic approach to highlight the literary work's attractiveness. Because of the influence of Western culture brought about by colonialism, there is a phenomena of demands for equality between the sexes, which is investigated by Bâ in this study. In order to study the literary works in question, the analysis is based on the following approaches: the feminist approach and the postcolonialism approach.

Since Mariama Bâ's works frequently address feminist issues, the feminist approach has been used. This approach studies "...the ways in which literature reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 2006, p. 83). By examining the economic, social, political, and psychological forces that are woven into literature, the principles of this approach seek to analyze and describe the literary works that deal with male dominance over females. Also, the political and historical themes that have an impact on literary texts are reflected using the post-colonial method. In order to connect the experiences of colonizers and colonized, this approach relies on the study of theory and literature. The analysis is therefore based on the post-colonialism approach as "post-colonialism is a broad cultural approach to the study of power relations between different groups, cultures or people, in which language, literature and translation play role" (Hatim & Munday 2004, p. 106). As a result, this approach is employed because Mariama' ideas were impacted by the Western beliefs that resulted by colonization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mariama Bâ was a female writer who made a significant contribution to African literature. She is a famous Senegalese author who is well known

for her contemporary novel *So Long a Letter*, which caught the attention of numerous critics. The book has gotten international acknowledgment because of the manner it brings female submission to the fore. Through this depiction, Bâ raises awareness of the predicament of Senegalese women who confront patriarchal restrictions and battle to transcend them.

Bâ believes that the only weapon which is valid and effective for a review of their gripes, is literature. She states that:

"As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African mother whom, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women...room we will fight with all our might" (qtd. in Schipper 1987, p. 50).

Through the novel's form and content, Bâ illuminates the dilemma of Senegalese women. In the epistolary novel *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye is writing a letter to her friend Aissatou. . Since the letter between the two women and the topic of female empowerment it discloses, reveal to the intimacy of the characters' relationship, Bâ emphasizes the female sisterhood through the epistolary form of the novel. The form also fortifies the perplexity about the factual recipient of the letter. Some critics think that Ramatoulaye might be writing to herself in an effort to lessen the loneliness and suffering of her isolation, especially since the letter will not be mailed. Throughout her whole widowhood, Ramatoulaye wrote a letter to her friend in which she shared her pleasures and grieves. In fact, the narrator seems to be talking to herself when she is talking to Aissatou because they both have similar memories and life experiences and because she feels the need to think about the problems that are troubling them. On the other hand, some critics claim that the letter depends on a recipient other than Ramatoulaye herself. This epistolary form serves to communicate their bonding and manifests the depth of the relationship. Mary Jane Androne asserts, in her letter- the most intimate and personal form of

correspondence- to her closest friend, Ramatoulaye bares her soul and divulges her innermost concerns, worries and beliefs. The confiding tone in many instances in this letter suggests the trust that exists between writer and recipient, and this carries over to the reader who often feels as if she is overhearing a private monologue. (Androne 2003, p. 38)

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is a cry from the heart of a Senegalese woman, because it discusses cleverly the issues of Senegalese women, in general and of Muslim woman in particular. The use of Western literary letter in this novel empowers the subaltern women like Mariama Bâ and the protagonist Ramatoulaye to make their voices clearly heard to the people in the central power. The writing of a letter thus suggests a spiritual journey of the doubly persecuted protagonist, Ramatoulaye to reach an emotional freedom. Ogunjipe-Leslie notes that the woman writer has two tasks: "first, to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective" (Leslie, 1987).

Throughout *So Long a Letter*, author Mariama Bâ recounts the tales of two African women who struggle with the myriad social, racial, political, religious, and gendered issues that constantly shape their identities and way of life in post-colonial Senegal. In *So Long a Letter*, Bâ uses an epistolary form to portray the reflections and battles of Ramatoulaye fall, a Senegalese woman writing to her lifetime's friend, Aissatou, who currently resides in the United States. Ramatoulaye, a new widow, writes a lengthy, personal letter to Aissatou in which she reflects on their respective positions as women, students, wives, mothers, and teachers, in order to analyze her own life and choices. Ramatoulaye's reflections assist her in examining established institutions, disparities, and colonialism's lingering repercussions to achieve peace with her past and embrace her future. Bâ is able to demonstrate how Ramatoulaye and Aissatou relate to one other's experiences and roles as women through the epistolary form, and how doing so aids them in making sense of their own evolving identities in a

post-colonial society. This novel works to examine the effects of race, class, and gender on the many interactions in these women's lives, and how these relationships can be perceived as both empowering and restricting to women.

The novel is written as a series of letters between the main character Ramatoulaye and her best friend Aissatou after the unexpected death of Ramatoulaye's husband Modou from a heart attack. Through the letters, Ramatoulaye portrays the feelings that immersed her during the first few days after her husband's passing and describes accurately how he lost his life. She then narrates the story that she led with her husband, leading up to when Modou disappointed her by wedding a second wife without her knowledge after 30 years of marriage. Though she is a teacher and has a professional life of her own, she is also a committed mother. Her tender and her patience are seen when her husband, Modou, chooses to take a young second wife; a woman the same age as one of his daughters and renounces Ramatoulaye with her twelve children. Despite Modou's treachery, Ramatoulaye decides to remain married to him. She describes to Aissatou how she managed this disloyalty emotionally and how she grew throughout each event in her life.

*So Long a Letter* was described by Betty Taylor Thompson as an Africana womanist novel: The main character still yearns for a family-centered existence and a caring companion. She actually misses her husband, despite the fact that he treated her badly. Notably, according to the postulates defined as characteristic of Africana women, there is the desire to have fulfilling relationships with Africana men, contrasting with the feminists' desire to free themselves entirely from male influence. (Thompson, 2001, p. 179) Ramatoulaye's tolerance of polygamy and her forgiving attitudes toward men's and women's relationships account for the divergent feminism she embraces from that of her friend Aissatou. Although she supports women's independence, she also takes a serious consideration of African values, which do not always coincide with feminist points of view.

The two friends have experienced delusion and treason from husbands to whom they were married for a long time. However, they behave differently toward their calamities. While Aissatou moves forward and begins a new life as a single mother, Ramatoulaye sets herself up to live in polygamy. Coulis observes that Aissatou has known the same betrayal as her friend. And yet, she, unlike Ramatoulaye who chose to stay and remain a co-wife, refuses to accept the situation and leaves. She will not accept the othering by her husband, or his attempt at colonizing her and their children (Coulis 2003, p. 31).

Aissatou takes Mawdo's treachery seriously and rejects to forgive or forget; she chooses divorce and assumes full responsibility of herself and her children. This choice is very daring and uncommon in a society where polygamy forms the normal and not the exception. Ramatoulaye's choice to remain as Modou's wife originates from her beliefs in the holiness of the institution of marriage. She thinks that a woman needs a man in order to preserve balance in the society, she reflects: "I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (Bâ 1981, p. 56).

Their different responses to polygamy only mirror their distinctive attitudes on women's issues; while Aissatou views polygamy as an enemy to battle, Ramatoulaye considers it as a curse that society puts on her with which she needs to adapt. However, their capacity to deal with this difference of point of view shows the solidity of their friendship. This situation demonstrates that differences do not always break down female solidarity; they can be cleared, and sometimes they are not even an issue. Ramatoulaye reflects: "Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (Bâ 1981, 54). Bâ's novel encourages women to simulate these examples so as to win the challenging road of sisterhood. Aissatou and

Ramatoulaye's relationship portrays a good example of female bond. The psychological help they offer each other is supplemented by concrete support, as the car Aissatou purchases for her friend re-establishes her pride and gives her new ways to express herself. The novel demonstrates that friends need to share not only delights and distresses but also plenitude and hardship. Aissatou's generosity in offering her friend a car protects Ramatoulaye from the shame of taking public transportation while her co-wife drives her own car. This gesture restores Ramatoulaye confidence as she learns to drive. This action not only gives her a means of transportation, it also cures her sorrow and restores her esteem and respect. Commenting on this relationship, Hudson-Weems asserts that the kind of friendship these women have goes beyond confiding in one another and sharing commonalities. Not only do they share their feelings, they share material things as well (Weems 2004, p. 97). *So Long a Letter*, thus, portrays a solid form of female friendship that ultimately extends to female sisterhood as Aissatou and Ramatoulaye not only empower each other but also participate in nation building. The solidarity they build and maintain secures their survival against the constraints of male chauvinism, customs, polygamy, colonialism and any form of discrimination.

This victory against patriarchy is crucial and emphasizes the protective and nurturing traits of female bonding that makes this liberation conceivable. Despite experiencing various cultural and societal realities, Bâ's female protagonists recognize and vehemently assert the possibility of female friendship. This recurrence of oppression throughout women's lives demonstrates the pervasiveness of female subjection. It reveals the universal fact that women must struggle for their basic human rights.

Obioma Nnaemeka states that women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves (Nnaemeka 1997, p. 19). In the African society, women frequently refer to one another as sisters out of a sense of togetherness. It places more emphasis on

the community and less on individual selves, and this group-oriented view offers black women a wonderful chance to develop strong bonds. Female friendship is a non-sexual connection built on sharing tales and experiences, showing care and support to one another, and providing one another with emotional and moral assistance.

After that Ramatoulaye narrates the happenings before and after Modou's death. It is through 'Mirasse', the forty-day mourning period that the narrator Ramatoulaye describes in details the depiction and interpretation of the events, which give nothing but sorrows and sufferings to the honorable soul of Ramatoulaye. She describes her loathing in a passionate way over the hypocrisy of the people. She mourns the fact that the real goal of such ceremonies is deceived due to the commercial intention of the people and their excessive significance to the issue of prestige. The accent becomes sarcastic when she comes across the total cruel behaviour of Tasmir, Modou's elder brother. His proposal disregards for religion agonies her clean soul. As in the middle of Ramatoulaye's period of mourning, Tasmir has the daring to conjure the conventional practice of spouse inheritance to ask Ramatoulaye's hand after she leaves mourning. Ramatoulaye becomes furious and she responds resentfully to Tasmir's request: " My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis: no extra burden: my "turn" every day: cleanliness and luxury, abundance and calm! No, Tasmir! " (Bâ 58). Through her anger Ramatoulaye gets the power to refuse her suitors' proposals for marriage; she recognizes that Tasmir's goals in her are absolutely financial, however Daouda Dieng, who always sustains Ramatoulaye, is also unable to induce her to wed him. In a letter to Daouda, she explains the reason for her denial: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family" (Bâ 68) by taking this attitude, Ramatoulaye deduces that a more noticeable sisterhood among women is required to diminish the suffering women experience in polygamous conditions. . She declines since she is aware of the anguish and suffering that come along with polygamy and does not want to subject anyone to

such a dilemma. Despite the different sights that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have to polygamy, Bâ shows that women's differences shouldn't stand in the way of female friendship. She encourages women to perceive their diversity as positive elements that boost harmony rather than divisiveness.

Sisterhood as defined by Hudson-Weems: This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other. With such love, trust and security, it is difficult to imagine any woman without such a genuine support system as that found in genuine sisterhood. (Weems 2044, pp. 65-66)

By doing this, Ramatoulaye denied the greed of Lady Mother-in-Law, who forces her daughter, Binetou, to steal Ramatoulaye's husband, leaving Ramatoulaye alone with twelve children. By doing this, Lady Mother-in-Law supports patriarchy, which forces polygamy on women. She does not consider Ramatoulaye as a woman like herself or her daughter; rather, she acts to ameliorate her particular living conditions and move up to the middle class through the boons Modou Fall will offer her by marrying her daughter. The class issue prevails over any concern for female solidarity. She solely considers her immediate need which includes getting a house and to ensure a car for her daughter. The story of Lady Mother-in-Law illustrates not only a failed potential relationship between the two older women but the devastation of a standing friendship between younger women. She encourages her daughter to sever her friendship with Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, and become Ramatoulaye's co-wife and competitor. She represents a factor of patriarchy and causes the abuse of Ramatoulaye and her children.

*So Long a Letter* is a realistic masterpiece. It is a fictionalized real-life experience partly of the writer herself and that of the people around. The novel proposes a solution or a way out for women in a polygamous environment through formal

education. The tone is denying and deploring as the writer sympathizes with the victims of polygamy. She similarly tries to wake up the consciousness in women all over the world to protest against polygamous practices. It is a letter intended to caution, alert and convince young men and women against polygamous practice, it portrays how women are oppressed by means of masculine society. All the more terrible: "a woman gives up her personality, her identity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her" (Bâ 4). Ramatoulaye has needed to fulfill the duties of mothering and educating, while tolerating the discrimination of a male chauvinistic environment. The disgusting and hideous avocation provides Ramatoulye with the force to assert for women's robbed rights. She contends him that: "we have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to be able 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" (Bâ 63). Thusly, Bâ blends the still security in her society. In addition, she develops female solidarity and sisterhood. Then again, she likewise addresses the foundation of African feminism. Mariama Bâ, as a famous writer, has succeeded in portraying the merciless conditions of women in Africa. This adroit depiction raises her rapidly through women's activist progressive system of African authors.

The novel also emphasizes how the mutual female solidarity eventually turns into female sisterhood. This female bonding requires that all women actively participate in nation-building with men. Moreover, the post-colonial setting of *So Long a Letter* shows how nation building is a priority for both men and women. . The fight for development in the newly established African nations necessitates the coordinated efforts of both men and women. . In her novel, Bâ emphasizes how female friendship can ease pain and give women the strength they need to face male prejudice. Despite the fact that other African novelists portray class as a barrier to women's relationships, Bâ views the situation differently; she characterizes class bias that places more emphasis on a person's

family background than their economic situation. This classification creates problems for the lower castes that are socially discriminated against by the nobles. In contrast, *So Long a Letter* sees female friendship as a solution because it merges the lower castes and permits them to bond with the nobles.

Sisterhood is one of the traits of Africana womanism, which Hudson-Weems examines and prefers to the term "feminism" in that it refers to reality pertaining to women of African origin and reflects their tangles in race, class, and gender systems. She considers *So Long a Letter* as a perfect example of her theory on Africana womanism mainly because of the novel's emphasis on female sisterhood. Of the protagonist, she argues that Ramatoulaye embodies many characteristics of the true Africana womanist, the most obvious ones being genuine in sisterhood, strong, self-defined, demanding of respect, family centered, male compatible, authentic, whole, mothering, and nurturing<sup>1</sup> (Africana Womanism 96-7). Hudson-Weems sees the central friendship in the novel, between the characters Ramatoulaye and Aissatou - as a prototype of female solidarity and a role model to be followed by Africana women. In the sense that they work to foster and grow a sisterhood that enables them to care for one another as well as offer and render spiritual and material assistance, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou embody the true nature of female sisterhood. Each supports the other in difficult times and urges her to make positive changes that allow her overcome the difficulties posed by polygamy and patriarchy in general. They can relate to one another because they share the same experiences. Ramatoulaye's suffering is recognized by Aissatou because she has had a similar issue. She is aware that her friend is experiencing the same pain as she did when her husband took a second wife. They band together as polygamy victims and support one another. Therefore, sisterhood offers them a chance to deepen their bond and lessen the hurt of betrayal.

## CONCLUSION

While women's solidarity does not imply that it is their duty to bring about the world's

healing, it does provide an illustration of the significant effects that can be achieved when women band together. It will take everyone's efforts to achieve radical change if women are to successfully demolish the structures that oppress them all; it is very important for successful global framed activism as it has the power to challenge patriarchy possibly bridging some gender gaps. Female solidarity is a positive quality and a good start toward establishing true affection among women so that men cannot turn them against themselves.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* explores the dilemma of women suffering from various forms of injustice and how female sisterhood may be used as a weapon against discrimination. The novel undeniably makes evident that the female friendship empowers women to overcome obstacles and resist attempts to dominate them. The popularity of Bâ's novel serves as evidence of the power of the female friendships that work to free women from the weight of oppression and provide them the opportunity to support one another.

*So Long a Letter*, thus, portrays a solid form of female friendship that ultimately extends to female sisterhood as Aissatou and Ramatoulaye not only empower each other but also participate in nation building. The solidarity they build and maintain secures their survival against the constraints of male chauvinism, customs, polygamy, colonialism and any form of discrimination.

In order to cultivate the arduous route of sisterhood, Bâ's novel encourages women to adopt these examples as their role models. The bond between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye is a prime illustration of female solidarity. The moral support they offer each other is complemented by material assistance. The novel shows that Sisterhood can be the powerful weapon toward oppression and

injustice only if it can be applied with sense of solidarity and empathy.

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