

## Deconstructing Tradition and Gender in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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### ABSTRACT

The book *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba is considered to be an important piece of feminist literature since it delves into a number of topics that are associated with women's rights and gender equality. The subjugation and exclusion of women in a patriarchal society are two of the most significant ideas that are explored throughout the book. The purpose of this article is to examine how Ba's feminism dismantles gender roles and traditional gender roles. A descriptive qualitative approach is used to the analysis of the notion. Ba discovers that women endure terrible treatment at the hands of tradition, and she believes that something has to be done to remedy this.

### INTRODUCTION

*So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba is an important piece of feminist literature since it examines a variety of topics relating to women's rights and gender equality. The narrative takes place in Senegal and centers on Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, two women who are good friends and go through similar challenges in their lives.

The oppression and marginalization of women in a patriarchal society is one of the novel's major themes. Ba illustrates the different ways in which women are marginalized and repressed, including via social mores like polygamy and a judicial system that favors males. The story also examines the ways in which women may help one another and stand up to these injustices. A strong feminist writing, *So Long A Letter* examines the difficulties and complications of being a woman in a patriarchal culture. Ba's book is still a key piece of African feminist writing and makes a significant contribution to the fight for gender parity.

The female characters in *So Long a Letter* are shown as being helpless victims of Senegalese society's patriarchal ethos. The protagonist of the book and its narrator, Ramatoulaye Fall, is presented as a stereotypical Senegalese woman who is suppressed and silenced by the norms of her village and society. After the passing of her husband, Modou, Ramatoulaye writes in the work, which is written in an epistolary style, about her memories of her unhappy marriage. Before Modou Fall married his second wife, a much younger woman, the first wife did not give her consent. Ramatoulaye's persistent suffering makes it difficult for her to do her job, even if she does not express it. This is due to the fact that she not only assumed her "previous duties," but also Modou's (Ba 53). Ramatoulaye is caught in a never-ending cycle where she continues to prioritize her husband's wants above her own despite the fact that he is not there. Ramatoulaye chooses to "remain faithful to the love of (her) youth" (Ba 59), despite the fact that it was after Modou's passing, demonstrating her total reliance on her spouse. Her previous boyfriend, Daouda Dieng, makes her another marriage proposal, but she declines it. She had formerly been in love with Daouda Dieng. Even after they had been away for a very long period, Ramatoulaye continued to "cry for Modou".

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Ba uses her book to dispel a lot of false beliefs that keep women in servitude and subservience. Her ultimate objective is undoubtedly to determine whether or not giving up such a terrible lifestyle would result in a prosperous existence. The inquiry turned up several examples of women being oppressed in the African society that the story portrays. However, it is clear that Ba's treatment of feminism in the text sought to establish a standard for literature that is free from gender-biased portraiture of individuals; this chapter chose to view Ba's position as more humanist than feminist. Ba's discussion of feminism in the book also made an effort to provide a standard for writing that avoids racial prejudice in its depictions of people. The authors thus concluded that this position is unique to the author and that it clearly veers toward anti-feminism (Hooks 32).

Mariama Ba's unconventional and atypical feminism at *So Long a Letter* is of the genre that, every author may portray their own social convictions in a manner that is uniquely their own by following the greater structural rules of that genre's literary style. Mariama Ba views her participation in the book as a way to support the feminist movement in gender politics. The main character, Ramatoulaye, writes a series of epistolary recollections that make up the framework of the book. She describes the variety of emotions she has been going through since recently becoming a widow in a letter to her old friend Aissatou. The letter, which is really a novel, portrays how women are oppressed in the Islamic society, which often accepts polygamy. A powerful, knowledgeable woman with the bravery and ethics to speak out against polygamy in a society that considers it as the standard is shown in Ba's version of the fibula.

When Mawdo marries a second time, Aissatou departs; Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou, experiences financial hardship and passes away too soon as a result of his contentious second marriage to his daughter's friend. In her thematic presentation, Ba draws a comparison between polygamy and a particular kind of home tragedy. Both of the families in the novel experience heartbreaking misfortunes as a result of their polygamy. Why did the story's heroine, an intelligent woman who also works as a teacher, stay in an unpleasant marriage even if it had other partners? Why did she hesitate to take Aissatou's counsel and choose for the route that lead to independence, divorce, and self-assertion? Mariama Ba has a great deal of similarities with other women of her generation, such as Zaynab Alkali, in terms of her commitment to the advancement of women. Ba and Alkali have similar social and cultural roots in Islam. Alkali's writings often provide credence to the accommodationist position. This viewpoint holds that an African woman is really liberated when she is not totally dependent on her husband for anything.

Her feminist role models are shown as clever, educated women who are adamant about building a name for themselves and feminism in a mostly male world. Li, a character played by Alkali in the novel *"The Stillborn,"* tears down the traditional symbolic fence to liberate herself from phallocracy. But as she gains life experience, she realizes that what she really needs is a redefined connection with the same old framework rather than a dramatic and pointless breakaway from phallocracy. She comes to grips with the idea that she is an adult and mature when she has this realization. Similar to this, Ba's Ramatoulaye admits that she lacks the courage to fundamentally reject polygamy and would rather to put up with it as a dreadful imposition from both her religion and the culture in which she lives. It's noteworthy to observe that both writers assert their belief in education's immense liberating potential for female activists. In her work, Mariama Ba adopts a balanced stance toward the feminist movement.

Ramatoulaye, the main heroine, was prepared to put up with her husband's relatives even when they barged into their home (Ba 19).

Ba demonstrates how society as a whole, which consists of both matriarchal and patriarchal tendencies, is the real oppressor of women. The most glaring illustration of this is the situation that young Binetou finds herself in throughout the book. Modou buys her with expensive gifts in an effort to influence her when her mother forces her into the unfortunate marriage that would prevent her from attending school (Ba 39). Ramatoulaye and Daba refer to Binetou as her mother's victim as a result. They said that Binetou's mother forced a young girl to leave school and join a catastrophic polygamous marriage in exchange for financial gain. The emphasis of feminist campaigning has been the custom of widowhood in African communities. In Africa, widows are often subjected to humiliating circumstances and are required by society to give their deceased spouse's sibling their fortune. Ba shows strong, intelligent women who understand their place in society since they are also victims themselves (Eisenstein 487). As a consequence, these characters use the following actions to voice their individual and group concerns about the current authoritarian institutions: Tamsir makes a fruitless attempt to inherit from Ramatoulaye, the widow of his brother, but she resists him tenaciously. Ramatoulaye's voice is heard telling Tamsir, "You, Tamsir, forget that I have a heart and a thought, and that I am not an object to be transferred from hand to hand." You have no concept what marriage means to me; it's an act that involves both love and faith for me (Ba 58).

She thus rejects Tamsir and the traditional supremacy of her people that he represents. Ramatoulaye furthered the feminist idea of rejecting oppressive societies when she chose to forgo having her marriage "arranged" and go her own way. She decided to marry Daouda Dieng, a young doctor, despite her mother's advice not to. Ramatoulaye, however, thinks he is too old for her, so she marries Modou Fall, a man of her own choice. She says the following to defend what she did: "Free from the irksome 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" (Ba 16).

She has chosen not to remarry following the passing of her husband, which further demonstrates her opposition to polygamy. She refuses Tamsir's inheritance to oppose the harsh custom of wife inheritance as well as to discourage polygamy, as shown by the following words: And to make it much more difficult, your wife and kids are also there. She also objects to Tamsir inheriting her. It wouldn't be fair for me to interfere with your family after being ignored yesterday because of a lady (Ba 68).

The widowhood tradition in Africa makes an already challenging position for African women even more challenging. Widowed Senegalese women are subjected to further emotional and physical suffering as part of their culture's tradition despite the pain that comes with losing a loved one. She gives a graphic account of this circumstance: Every Senegalese woman dreads this time—the one when she must sell her possessions in order to offer them as gifts to her husband's family. It doesn't follow that the aim of a more equitable society that treats men and women equally is incorrect or that its proponents are less devoted to accomplishing their objective since multiple feminist theories and methods exist (Ekpong 45). Due to the complexity of the issues raised by female domination, a wide range of remedies must be used to solve them. In addition, as feminism encompasses such a broad socio-literary concept, it is only natural for subcategories to develop under the umbrella word. In the novel Ba exhibits feminism and illustrates some of the issues with female domination, like polygamy, illiteracy, and rigid standards, among other things. In order to create an engaging narrative that depicts a

range of women fighting against institutions that stifle femininity, she weaves these concepts into the experiences of the characters and the events that occur throughout the book. The feminist movement's demand for relevance in society and in the literary delineation of gender roles has been firmly established through literary critique.

The goal of Ba's feminism is to create a standard for writing that forbids the depiction of any characters that are subject to gender bias. Feminism has evolved due to women's constant questioning of everything. This covers everything from the feminist movement itself to society's perception of women as inferior to men. The bulk of these objectives are met by Ba, which also uses the lives of the characters to examine both feminism and restrictive tradition. Greer (20) asserts that the first indication of feminism in a woman is her ability to plan her own kind of revolt, one that would reflect her own sense of autonomy and inventiveness. When it comes to the female revolution, Ba is imaginative and creative, as seen by the unconventional feminism she adopts in *So Long a Letter*.

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