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Cultural and Traditional Conundrums in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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Abstract

Since nineteenth century, the literary works have been becoming a regime culture. It has strongly been attracted to gender's problems. The attitude of the young writers of today proves that from the beginning up to now the writer has always felt he/ she has an important role to play in society. The writers from African continent, regardless of north or south, or, East or West, have no time for art for art's sake. For him or her, art has a social and political function; its primary role is not entertainment but education of the masses. As the most significant trend in the Eighties there emerged a powerful new breed of female novelists such as Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba and Aminata Sow Fall. Mariama Ba is regarded as one of the most original writers emerged from West Africa. The life and work of Ba has become emblematic of the power and creativity of black African women writers. Her frustration with the fate of African women is expressed in her first novel *So Long a Letter*. A critical reading of the novella *So Long a Letter* reveal a major source of conflicts like rapacious effect of polygamy and prohibition of girl-child education advancement. The present study concentrates to reflect the plight of an educated Muslim woman and her way out to liberation.

Keywords: Islam, Women, Culture, Polygamy, Education

Women all over the world struggle every minute with a culture or religion that imparts its harsh realities on them. They live voiceless yet still with a tinge of hope that liberation will come to their rescue as a result of their perseverance and determination. Polygamy has existed in all over the African continent as it represents an aspect of their culture and religion. These types of marriages have been more present in African countries like no other countries in the world. One of the reasons why this has happened is because these societies have managed to see that children are a form of wealth and this way a family with more children is considered to be more powerful. According to Connie M. Anderson, author of the article "The Persistence of Polygyny as an Adaptive Response to Poverty and Oppression in Apartheid South Africa", polygamy is more common in Africa than anywhere else in the world today. It is a socially accepted practice among tribes and communities in a number of African countries, particularly those in the western region. In the African context, according to R. A. Musimbi Kanyoro, "before marriage, a woman

did not have an independent identity. A woman was regarded as the daughter of her father. After marriage she became the wife of her husband" (Kanyoro).

According to the traditional mores, a woman is expected to owe to her father and then her husband, a lifetime obedience. This latter is exalted without reason. Any misbehavior, unjust attitude made by the husband has to be affronted by patience and silence from the wife. critical reading of the novella *So Long a Letter* reveal a major source of conflicts like rapacious effect of polygamy and prohibition of girl-child education advancement. Although the cultural setting of the novel is in Senegal, it is a representative and symbolic of Africa or anywhere in the globe when it comes to the attitude of polygamous practice and girl-child education. Mariama Binyavanga reflects the plight of an educated Muslim woman in this novel.

The novel takes the form of a long letter from Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese school teacher to her best friend Aissatou. The occasion is the sudden death of Ramatoulaye's husband. Yet the novel is not about death, but rather about figuring out life. Under the guise of working through her grief, Ramatoulaye uses the letter as a vehicle to reminisce her emotional journey. She writes about her emotional struggle to regain her life soon after she came to know about her husband Modou's second marriage at the age of fifty. Though the laws of Islam permit the action of Modou, it is regarded as an abrupt rejection of their thirty years of life together. It also considered as the betrayal of trust of woman.

Aissatou is the perfect target for Ramatoulaye's musings. Their grandmothers had been friends back in the village. Their mother's compounds had shared a fence over which they had gossiped and teased one another daily. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou attended school together and were attracted to a new generation of progressive thinking African women from throughout French occupied West Africa. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou went on to marry radical young activists for the cause of Senegalese independence. Each did so against the wishes of the family. Both husbands would subsequently rise rapidly to the top of their respective profession moving into the space left vacant by the receding colonial regime. And each would ultimately take on a second wife.

Although both tradition and Islamic law acknowledge the right of men to have more than one wife, Aissatou felt her husband's remarriage as an act of betrayal, a blasphemy against the own marriage vows. Aissatou immediately walked out of her husband, went back to school, forged a lucrative career, and created a new life for herself and her two sons. Years later Ramatoulaye's husband would announce his own intention to remarry. By this time Ramatoulaye was no longer the young radical. She was a well settled school teacher, mother of twelve, looking forward of growing old and more intensely in love with the man who is at the center of all her identities – wife, mother, teacher, and person. Ramatoulaye's heart now experienced the hurt that her friend Aissatou had had to endure years earlier. But Ramatoulaye's conscience led her in a different direction. She would not divorce. Though her husband's ever declining attention ultimately reduced her status of a wife, she was not ready to relinquish her status of a claim on her husband. Ramatoulaye's anguish is all the more complete when her husband's new wife is revealed to be a friend of their daughter, a mere child who had spent much time in Ramatoulaye's company.

Though both the women belong to same community, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou contrast in their decisions. But eventually they share and even respect each other's decisions. Though

Ramatoulaye is against her husband's deed, she obeys the norms of culture – where the women are always submissive. She says to Aissatou, "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" (Ba 58).

Most of the women accept the norms of the society for its sake than their own purpose. Aissatou takes the decision to leave her husband and his family when he decides to take a second wife. When Ramatoulaye learns this she advised Aissatou to compromise with him and warns her that she is trying to burn the tree that bears the fruits. This becomes a reason for Ramatoulaye to accept Modou's second marriage. Though she is ready to accompany her co-wife, Modou doesn't give her the opportunity to face the situation. He simply dumps his first wife thereby rejecting the Islamic rule. He does not bother to come back and explain his decision. Although Ramatoulaye decides to endure polygamy according to the precepts of Islam, she grieves on the fact that she was not given a choice. She is aware of her helplessness. Modou's friends and family attempt to bring him back to Ramatoulaye but it fails. His new found happiness gradually swallowed his memory. Eventually he forgot Ramatoulaye and their kids.

Binetou, the second wife of Modou, whose age is the age of Modou's first daughter, suffers in the long run. The pressure of poverty makes her accept her mother's forceful decision of marriage with the man twice her age. But ultimately she is the one who suffers more than Ramatoulaye. Binetou loses Modou at the age of nineteen. She has to start her life all alone even at this age. Ramatoulaye considers Binetou as a mere child since she grew up and studied with Daba, her first daughter. She is aware that like many others, Binetou was just a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence. The translation of Quranic verse 4:34 states that:

Men are the {qawwam} [protectors and maintainers] of women, because Allah has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are {qanitat} [submissive], and guard in the husband's absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear {nushuz} [discord, hostility, dissonance], admonish them first, then refuse to share their beds, and finally {adriboo} ['to beat' or 'to forsake, to avoid, to leave'] them; but when they {ataa:} [obedient] to you, then seek not against them means of annoyance: For Allah is Most High, great above you all. (Bogaert 1)

If ever there has been a controversial verse in the Holy *Qur'an*, it certainly is verse 4:34. Opponents of Islam use this verse to label this religion as unfriendly to women. Throughout the Holy *Qur'an*, Allah emphasizes that men and women are equal for Him. Allah will judge them in exactly the same way. But the words like *qanitat* and *adriboo* in the verse were interpreted differently to showcase women as menial and submissive to men in Islam. The word *qanitat* used exclusively in the sense of 'submissive, obedient to Allah' and not 'submissive to husband'. This verse is about pious women who, just like pious men, are obedient to Allah. A wife / husband, who are obedient to God, must live up to her / his marital duties.

Further the verse instructs a husband whose wife causes problems in their marriage to first talk to her about it, and then leave the marital bed, then *adriboo* his wife. The Arabic word used here *adriboo* has several dozens of meanings, such as: 'to beat', but also: 'to forsake, to avoid, to leave'. This context actually meant that when a wife causes a problem in the marriage,

her husband should first talk to her about it, then leave their bed (forsaking his wife's satisfaction), then avoid her even more (not talking to her anymore, leaving the room when she enters it, and possibly even leaving the house for a while), in order to prevent things in view of increasing worse, and on the contrary to let things cool down and create enough space in view of increasing chances of a reconciliation. What makes much more sense is that this verse does not allow the 'superior' husband to 'beat' his 'inferior, disobedient' wife. On the contrary, this verse appears to tell that a husband must look after his wife (an equal partner who, like he, is obedient to God). But the opponents take these words for granted to strengthen the men and making women vulnerable.

According to Islamic law men must give equal importance and rights to each wife when they marry more than one. He has to support them economically. But Modou violates these rules. He fails to support his wife Ramatoulaye and his children. Modou and Mowdo in the novella *Long a Letter* symbolize the men who take Islamic laws for granted for their own convenience. Though Mowdo loves Aissatou the impact of culture and traditions of African Muslim society made Mawdo accept his cousin Nabou as his second wife. The influence of religion made the blind to the consequences of their action. Neither Mawdo nor Modou think of their wives when they decide to go for second marriage.

In male perception, wives do not need to be informed about their husband's second marriage. It is the personal job of Imam and few family males. In Imam's words, "There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side... all he [Modou] has done is to marry a second wife today" (Ba 38). The Verse Surah Nisaa 4: 3 in the Holy Quran is an evident of Imam's words. It says, "...marry women of your choice two or three or four; but ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one" (Burhan). The only restriction that Islam puts on a person who wants to practice polygamy is justice, justice and equality in everything – in the time he spends with each of them, on the amount he spends on each of them, on the gifts he gives to each of them, etc... There is absolutely no condition in *Shariah* (Islamic law) that states that the husband needs permission from his wife or indeed her, if he chooses to marry the second time. The patriarchal society takes this for granted to practice polygamy. Allah has not commanded that every man must practice polygamy. It is a legal allowance for men, who for any reason, need to cohabit with more than one partner.

Ramatoulaye describes her humiliation on the practice of polygamy to Daouda, one of her suitors: "You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved do not know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for ephemeral joys of change" (Ba 71-72). In addition to this, Ramatoulaye's house is stripped, stolen, and spoilt by numerous in-laws and mourners after her husband's death. This dramatic twist underscores the greed, hypocrisy, contempt and victimization with which widows are treated in the Senegalese milieu. Ba views widowhood as a traumatic experience for women. It is the most dreadful moment for every Senegalese woman. She is forced to sacrifice her possessions as gifts to her family-in-laws. Women face still worse conditions than this. She gives up her personality, her dignity, ultimately becoming a thing in the service of man. Her behavior is conditioned and monitored all the time.

The two friends have suffered deception and betrayal from their husbands to whom they were married for a long time. However, they adopt different attitudes toward their misfortunes. Aissatou takes Mawdo's betrayal seriously and refuses to forgive or forget; she prefers divorce.

and takes full responsibility of herself and her children. This decision is very courageous and actually rare in a society where polygamy constitutes the rule and not the exception. Even Ramatoulaye was very much aware of this betrayal that must not to be forgotten or forgiven but she accepts it. Coulis observes: "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" (31).

Ramatoulaye's decision to stay as Modou's wife comes from her beliefs in the sanctity of the institution of marriage. She is very much aware that men become unfaithful to their wives for the sake of 'variety'. As she firmly believes a woman needs a man in order to maintain balance in the society, she forgets, forgives and accepts the 'betrayals of the flesh'. Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's different answers to polygamy reflect their different stands on women's issues. While Aissatou regards polygamy as an injustice to fight, Ramatoulaye sees it as a burden that society imposes on her with which she has to cope. However, their ability to handle this divergence of opinion demonstrates the strength of their friendship.

On one hand, those who practice polygamy underscore the place of education and cultural or religious influence in it. After the death of his brother Modou, Tamir seeks the hand of Ramatoulaye in marriage. Though Islam permits Tamsir to marry four, Ramatoulaye rejects his offer on the ground that he already has three wives. Islam set forth some economic conditions for marrying more than one woman. It is limited with the human capability – it includes being just in food, clothes, housing, interest and treatment. However the *Quran* denotes that it is very difficult: "... if you fear that you will not deal justly with (certain women)..., then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]" (An-Nisa 4:3).

In Islam, polygamy is not an essential rule but a permission that can be used when extraordinary conditions are present. Its primary intention is to maintain the family. In Islam, it is necessary for a man who wants to marry one woman or more to be able to meet the eating, drinking, clothing and housing expenses of her or them. To help Tamsir out with his financial obligation, one of his wives dyes, another sell fruits, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machines. His income cannot meet their needs with those of their numerous children. Because Ramatoulaye is educated in both Western and Koranic ways, she was able to tell Tamsir to his face this grim reality of his proposal to her.

Ba's women find succour in the power of education in shattering the barriers to bonding. The liberating influence of Western education has therefore given the talented woman a voice with which to speak out on behalf of her less talented and privileged sex. Ba fortifies her women with unlimited rebellious language as weaponry along with the wisdom of education. This is why Tamsir's exploitative declaration to Ramatoulaye regarding their marriage, was met with such a convoluted encounter and 'come down let's fight' language. According to Ramatoulaye, marriage means an act of faith and of love; the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen, and who has chosen you. This made her to bursts out to Tamsir when he offered her the marriage proposal soon after her husband's death. Ramatoulaye, full of rage decides that it is time to break the silence of thirty years of harassment, violence and sarcastic contemptuousness.

Ba represents many characters that are torn between the past and the present. The Ramatoulaye longs to break the traditional clutches, there are some aspects of modernity without the concomitant lowering of standards. Such kind of modernity can be established through education. But the very tradition does not allow education to women. This is experienced through the character Aunt Nobou, Mawdo's mother, who teaches her niece that a woman not need too much education. *So Long a Letter*, as a semi biographical depiction of women's life, draws upon the life experiences of the author and the people around her. Through narrative she clearly states that sex should not be a barrier for the acquisition of Western education.

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