

**Gender, Patriarchy and the New Woman: Generational Preferences  
in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter***

***Ngome Jemia Maureen***

*Faculty of Arts, The University of Buea*

&

***Adamu Pangmeshi***

*Faculty of Arts, The University of Bamenda*

**Abstract**

This paper demonstrates that female African novelists have had a great and vital influence on the understanding of the cultural constraints that exist within the patriarchal frames of reference concerning women and the choices they make. Mariama Ba offers a rich and diverse interpretation and understanding of the politics of gender and individual choices common within conservative communities as far as cross-generational differences are concerned. This work therefore underscores the fact that African societies as exemplified in Ba's *So Long a Letter* have for a long time practised systems of meanings and values in male-dominated contexts that work at the expense of women and their emotional stability. Understanding the concept of gender is therefore critical because of its dynamism in nature based on generational appraisal. It has a lot of ramifications provoked by intelligence, polemical grace, and a contagious pledge to expose the complexities of womanhood. The paper concludes that the older generation displays a complex sense of compliance and devotion to patriarchal values without challenging them, while the new generation confronts their apprehensions and despair to express their uniqueness. The feminist theory will be used to buttress my arguments.

**Keywords:** Gender, patriarchy, culture, generational, new woman

**Introduction**

In the 1960s and with the rise of feminism, there arose the consciousness of the new woman whose insight was relatively dissimilar from that of her counterpart of the former generation. This new woman syndrome is a product of exposure through education or interaction with other cultures that resulted in her being more self-aware, more self-assured, mindful and antagonistic yet open to progress. What is amazing is her smart scrutiny of her culture's conservative wisdom unveiling the biased pundit spectrum of patriarchy, providing substitute choices for survival and

definition of self. Worth noting too is that some selections disclose the new woman as a prey of partial deniability of the peculiar role of men.

Gender is the system of social stratification based on sex variations that give males an advantage in terms of materials while putting restraints on female potentials and abilities. It is a scheme of social categorization of individuals which recognizes biological differentiation and at the same time creates social differences. Gender implies that vulnerability is not the characteristic of a class, but the consequence of certain conditions; power is not personal (or God-given), it's political and it's maintained by human choice. Fernstermaker and West (2002) state:

In the beginning, there was sex and there was gender. Those of us who taught courses in the area in the late 1960's and early 1970's were careful to distinguish one from the other. Sex was what was ascribed by biology: anatomy, hormones and physiology. Gender was an achieved status; that which is constructed through psychological, cultural and social means. (125)

Therefore, what causes conflict is not the biological adjective "female", but "gender" which is a political idea. My purpose is to draw attention to an emergency, be it female or queer aimed at revealing vigour in perspective and to also investigate the development of human consciousness and self-awareness as a preface to or a part of generational viewpoint with prominence on the immediacy of experiences, causal influences and existing structures. Pilcher and Imelda (2017) state:

Recent writings on sex and gender suggest that... meanings attached to sex differences are themselves socially constructed and challengeable, in that we understand them and attach different consequences to these biological facts within our own Cultural historical contexts. (57)

Thus, the notion about the meaning of gender and gender roles is always associated with sexual differences between males and females, biologically and how these differences are perceived in a social and cultural context. Therefore, the conscious minimization of the female folk deploying ideologies, and cultural, metaphysical and religious prejudices have generated diverse interpretations of the woman. These views are

entrenched in most cultural and social backgrounds. Hence, the issue is not cognitive as much as it is ideological. This is what sociologists refer to as “gender stereotypes” fashioned by sexual allegory. Larson (1975) states:

For better or for worse each of us was born into an ethnocentrically sealed world, the purpose of any piece of literature no matter what culture it was produced in is to show us something we were previously unaware of. Just as literature is a bridge connecting life lived and life not lived, so too all literature that is effective is a voyage into previously untraveled world. (96)

In essence, cultures cannot expect stagnation in mindset because change and evolution are inevitable with time. Nevertheless, consciously and subconsciously, folks and societies have permitted and tolerated the exclusion and denial of basic human rights and social justice by labelling those outside of their circle as the “Other”. Such “out” groups are constructed when differences are identified from those at the “Centre” – “Us” whether they are rooted in gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ethnicity, education, residency, language spoken and accent. These internalized prejudices justify individual over-entitlement and also expose the degree of structural inequalities

For the sake of clarity, it is important to define some key terms or concepts in this study.

The New Woman was the term used at the end of the nineteenth century to describe women who were pushing against the limits which society imposed on them. Finney (2006) defines it thus:

The New Woman typically values self-fulfillment and independence rather than the stereotypically feminine ideal of self-sacrifice; believes in legal and sexual equality; often remains single because of the difficulty in combining, about her sexuality than the “old woman” is well-educated and reads a great deal; has a job; is athletic or otherwise physically vigorous and accordingly refers comfortable clothes to traditional female garb. (90)

Thus, the above definitions will be adopted in this discussion because they open a window to the cultural choices that emerge through diversity among different generations of women.

**Diversity in Perspective between the Old and New African Woman**

Society is evolving and women are pushing the limits previously set by male-dominated values, especially through religion and age-old traditions and customs that sometimes put women against their fellow women as evident in *So Long a Letter*. The discrepancy between the old and new generations is remarkable. We realize that the old generation women are firm practitioners of tradition; they adhere even to customs that hinder the growth of other women, which creates a clash with the new generation. Ba's *So Long a Letter* provides a justifiable portrayal of women in a traditionally, and religiously male-dominated society contrary to the subordinate roles presented by some male African novelists. This setting is remarkably a traditional Muslim space.

African traditions, customs and beliefs have a profound influence on the perception of their women. Kolawole (1997) states that "African women are products of multiple subjugations in the form of patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, and gender imperialism all combined to act against the African woman's self-assertion" (25). This accounts for the marginal role they play and how some perform it with acceptance and humble submission while others resist such docility. This brings about the multiplicity in the women's circle, which distracts the focus of emancipation against some traditional systems and values because according to the old and new generations, relegation is relative to perception. The text portrays this conflict revealing that generational consistency is congruent across time and space relationships and situations which are associated with cultural psychological adjustment as evident from the cross-generational differences in self-definition and feelings about marriage,

class, education and motherhood. This is in line with Rockwell (1974) who states that:

Fiction is not only a representation of social reality but also a necessary functional part of social control and also paradoxically an important element on social change. It plays a large part in socialization of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion. In the conduct of politics and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population particularly in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms and values and personal and inter-personal behaviours.  
(4)

Each society develops a series of ideal cultural patterns that represent social and spatial marginality which limit the range of unrestricted collaboration among men and women because it is usually partial. This promotes gender dysphonia as individuals struggle to maintain or possess assigned abilities. irrespective of whether these potentials agree to patriarchal norms. This provides a rich ground for conscious ordering and creates a category of subalterns.

### **Marriage and Illusion**

We are introduced to the marriage experiences of three ladies, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Jacqueline in the text under study. Their husbands are chauvinistic in perception because they are custodians of the tradition and have the blessings of the Islamic conscious Senegalese older generation women who rejoice over patriarchal precepts in all their guises to gain recognition as “good women” to men within the ethical norms and values. This brings out the intricacies between the women folk. These women experience successful marriages primarily but finish in dissatisfaction due to polygamy and extended family involvements and actions. New women are those who break away from the traditional approach to life as does Ramatoulaye who betrays her parents’ choice of Daouda Deing to marry Modou Fall. She recounts the incident thus:

Daouda Deing also knew how to win hearts. Useful presents for my mother, ranging from a sack of rice, appreciated in that

period of war penury, to the frivolous gift for me, daintily wrapped in paper and tied with ribbons. But I preferred the man in the eternal khaki suit. Our marriage was celebrated without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of my father, before the painful indignation of my frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of my surprised sisters in our town struck dumb with astonishment. (8)

This gives us insight into the sacrifices Ramatoulaye as a woman with new principles has to make to marry the man of her choice to the extent that her marriage was celebrated without dowry. The obvious anticipation is that she would experience petting from her husband and in-laws, especially the women folk, but regrettably, the definite experience is unfriendly because of the conflicting ideas from the women who contribute to mar the marriage. Ramatoulaye is very much attentive to the trials relating to her choice but remains expectant and contemplates it is “free from frustrating taboos... of my mother’s finger pointing at Daouda Dieng” (80). This discloses the role of mothers in traditional Islamic Senegalese societies where they choose husbands for their daughters or pressure them to marry those they prefer. The lifestyle impacted by the old on their young daughters is training that encourages them to be pests to their daughters-in-law, who have to be well-behaved to appeal to the families' support. Modou Fall is out of the action among the characters unsettling Ramatoulaye’s marriage; her sisters-in-law and mother-in-law are the actors.

We suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom. I loved Modou. I compromised with his people. I tolerated his sisters who too often would desert their own homes to encumber my own. They allowed themselves to be fed and petted. They would look on without reacting, as their children romped around on my chairs. I tolerated their spitting, the phlegm expertly secreted under my carpets. His mother would stop by again and again while on her outings, always flanked by different friends, just to show off her son’s social success but particularly so that they might see, at close quarters, her supremacy in this beautiful house in which she did not live. I would receive her with all the respect due to

a queen, and she would leave satisfied especially if her hand is closed over the banknote I had carefully placed there. But hardly would she be out than she would think of the new band of friends she would soon be dazzling. Modou's father was more understanding. More often than not, he would accept a glass of, cold water and would leave after repeating his prayers for the protection of the house. (9-10)

Ramatoulaye traces the involvement of the mother-in-law in the running of their son's home to a custom, one that constrains the woman in their own home. These customs are a burden as she says, but it is upheld by women. Modou's mother takes pleasure in parading herself in the house with different brands of friends to show off in the home of Ramatoulaye. Mariama Ba depicts the struggle of traditional women like Modou's mother who acts on their interest without consideration for the woman in the marriage thus; one is incited to query the role of the woman Modou marries. The influence of Modou's father in their marriage is very minimal he is better preferred and this preference is in contrast to the call of sisterhood among women having one another's shoulder to lean on.

Though the woman is increasingly portrayed to be married to the man, the family and tradition expect her to be at the service of his family particularly the female members as evident below:

This is the moment dreaded by any Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behavior is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable. (2)

Where common sense prevails, any woman who is forced to succumb to such expectations should be richly rewarded with appreciation, respect and gratitude. Ramatoulaye's choice is driven by love and sharing rather than wealth. She is a true romantic lover who marries

Modou, not because her mind appreciates him, but because her “heart loves him” (66). She recalls her mother’s advice that “a woman must marry a man who loves her but never the one she loves; that is the secret to lasting happiness.” (60). This explains her pain after Modou’s betrayal to marry another woman. Although Ramatoulaye is discontent with Modou’s actions, she remains married to him even when he deserts her. She can’t find another life outside marriage, as she writes to Aissatou, “even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage” (56). It has been her choice to remain in this one-sided affair reluctant to break away. Her mixed condition is in line with the new women’s condition as Ogunjide (1984) asserts:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency, complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (36)

By this, women are mostly victims and prisoners of their integrity. New women in Africa are conscious of the obstacles of convention and ethics they are going up against, and when their attempt fails, they are frightened to take another audacious step because it will only authenticate male-controlled dogmas that first stood against them. She asserts this condition when she writes:

We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the “hard sweat” that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive. (19-20)

So concerned is she about upsetting or ‘dismantling’ traditions, so much so that her attempts to do things her way have failed but she can’t continue breaking further away from norms and values. She



has become a prisoner of her choices, which have failed partly because of the influence of traditionally inclined women. The fact that Ramatoulaye's marriage ends up in a polygamous state is not the problem, but the crux of the matter is the involvement of women of older generations in destabilizing her home. Mariama Ba's portrayal of the role of the older women in this situation is relevant because it is a contemporary experience and significant to reflect. These women are staunch to the Koranic law that favours polygamy as a patriarchal value to be in control of their daughter-in-law's marriage. Lady mother-in-law initiates and supports Binetou to date and marry Modou. It is this marriage that eventually affects Ramatoulaye's mindset. Chinweizu (1990) argues that:

A man can be controlled by the hunger in the belly, and by the other hunger which flares up just below his belly. Consequently, he can be manipulated by whoever controls the kitchen which feeds him, or by who ever carries the womb through which he craves to procreate...The womb is evolution's priceless gift to woman... It is of exceptional importance to reproduction because woman has a monopoly of it, and because of man's irrepressible craving to use it. (15)

Therefore, this emotional conflict in *So Long a Letter* around the concept of marriage revolves around self-interest between women of older generations and those of the younger generations. Binetou's mother views marriage as an avenue for a social climber to change status. In the events leading to the marriage between Binetou and Modou, Ramatoulaye and Daba have this conversation about the situation:

Daba confided to me that Binetou had a serious problem: "The sugar-daddy of the boutique dresses wants to marry Binetou. Just imagine. Her parents want to withdraw her from school, with only a few months to go before the BAC, to marry her off to the Sugar-daddy."

- "Advise her to refuse" I said, "And if the man in question offers her a Villa, Mecca for her parents, a car, a monthly allowance, jewels?" None of that is worth the capital of youth.

- "I agree with you, Mum. I'll tell Binetou not to give in; but her mother is a woman who wants so much to escape from mediocrity and who regrets so much her past beauty, faded in the smoke from the wood fires, that she looks enviously at everything I wear; she complains all day long. "What is important is Binetou herself. She must not give in. (36-37)

Binetou is under the inspiration and pressure of her mother just like Ramatoulaye once was when her mother chose for her. However, the women of the older generation consider marriage as an avenue to have recognition and respect within the community. Binetou's mother has no one's interest in the marriage other than materialistic benefits, even at the expense of her daughter's youthfulness and education or another woman's happiness. Dada condemns this view of the older generation of women, and questions "How can a woman sap the happiness of another?" (71). Young Dada can apportion the victim and the victimizer in this conflict of interest between the new African women and the old generation. She sympathizes and says, 'as for Binetou, she is a victim, you victim. I feel sorry for her' (71)

Not only is Ramatoulaye's marriage affected by the influence of her mother-in-law and Lady Mother-in-law, another woman of the younger generation, Aissatou too is faced with and eventually overcome by the influence of Aunty Nabou in her marriage.

Mwado's mother, Aunt Nabou is portrayed as Binetou's mother because they share the same perception about social hierarchies and class consciousness. Aunty Nabou's refusal of the marriage between Aissatou and Mwado stems from the poor background of Aissatou, whose father is a goldsmith. In contrast to Lady Mother-in-law, Aissatou marries Mwado for the sake of love and not as a means to help her family gain nobility. Rumours surrounding this controversial marriage aptly describe the vast difference between the poor and the rich. Ramatoulaye recalls the rumours thus:

What, a Toucouleur marrying a goldsmith's daughter? He will never 'make money.' Mwado's mother is a Dioufene, a Guelewar from the sine. What an insult to her, before her

former co-wives (Mwado's father was dead). In the desire to marry a 'short skirt' come what may, this is what one gets. School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path. (17)

From the above, Mariama Ba lays bare the societal interference in the marriage choice of Mwado. The novel denounces the intrusion of public opinions into the private lives of individuals in society. This public contestation subtly urges Aunt Nabou to give heed to their suggestions that her son's choice is wrong. Mwado Ba and Aissatou start their marriage life peacefully until the demands of tradition persuade Aunt Nabou to contest her son's choice. Ramatoulaye describes Aunt Nabou as one who "lived in the past, unaware of the changing world. She clung to old beliefs" (26). Beliefs upheld by women of the older generations will empower patriarchal subjugations of other women. Mwado Ba and his wife, Aissatou, were happily married and satisfied with each other until he began to get external pressure from his mother as to how best he should manage his marriage. Mwado's mother, Aunt Nabou, cannot reconcile herself to her son's choice of a marriage partner of low social origins.

Aunt Nabou carefully sets up a crafty scheme to dislodge Aissatou. She first deceitfully asks her brother to give her one of his daughters, little Nabou: "I need a child beside me... to fill my heart ... I want this child to be both my legs and right arm. I am growing old. I will make of this child another me. Since the marriage of my own children, the house has been empty" (28). She then educates and trains Nabou to be obedient, docile, sober and knowledgeable in the traditional roles and ethics of a woman. Aunt Nabou later lies to her son Mwado that his uncle has "given" his cousin Nabou to him in marriage, as a sign of gratitude to her and the whole family: "My brother Farha has given you young Nabou to be your wife, to thank me for the worthy way in which I have brought her up" (30). She further warns that his refusal to obey her will and marry his cousin could kill her: "I will never get

over it if you don't take her as your wife. Shame kills faster than disease" (30). Thus, for Aunt Nabou to effectively control her son's choice of wife, she has to impose her own choice. Her adherence to patriarchal ethics is to preserve the old beliefs and traditions that the 'new woman' is trying to confront. African women of the new generation are prepared to take up the challenge to be accountable for their decisions in their marriage choices not through betrothal or parental influence. Modou's mother, Lady Mother-in-law and Aunt Nabou (members of the older generation) are accomplices to the patriarchal subjugation of women though they project their choice as ethical and in line with traditional norms and values. They can be blamed for destroying the marriages and lives of the new generation. Aunt Nabou plays a pivotal role in the fall of Aissatou's serene marriage, and so does Lady Mother-in-law in the emotional grief of Ramatoulaye. They are conservative in their perception, ridiculing emancipation and are "non-partisan" to the feminist group. They remain consistent against affirmative action on patriarchy because participation in such queer option is tantamount to disrespect of cultural policies and a strategy to gain favour from the chauvinist. The old-generation women do not seem to humanize the feelings of the new women.

### **Women and Education**

The women of the old generation and new women have a diverging conception of education. Their differences in ideas are the bane of their conflict. The old women would say, "School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path" (18). The question any keen reader will ask is, "what is the right path?" Education has been conceived by the New African woman as the medium of emancipation, but their traditional counterparts prefer they were docile and submissive to their old preferences. Aunt Nabou is portrayed as a symbol of old ways objecting to the rise of the new, for

destroying the future of her niece. Instead of helping young Nabou become emancipated, she wants her to remain ignorant, utterly docile and as silent as possible. She teaches her that “a woman does not need too much education” (29-30), just enough to help her manage her home. In contrast, Ramatoulaye who is educated thinks that “the working woman has a dual task, of which both halves, equally arduous, must be reconciled. How does one go about this? Therein lies the skill that makes all the difference to a home” (21). Education does not take away the commitment of married African women to their homes. She has a career to uphold and a family to take care of. This Ramatoulaye requires skill, and it makes a difference in a home.

As for Binetou, her education has been sacrificed because “Her mother was more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with education” (49). Lady Mother-in-law sees education as a mere distraction for her young daughter. In a conversation with Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye asks what is considered a taboo question even among women, “when will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex but of sex?” (62). Probably, when the older women begin to encourage their girls to be educated. The dream of a rapid climb of the social ladder through marriage has influenced the women of the old generations to shun education for their daughters in the face of marriage.

### **Women and Motherhood**

Amadiume (1987) views motherhood as a sublime privilege in creation. She states:

Maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies. And in all of them, the earth’s fertility is traditionally linked to women’s maternal powers. Hence the centrality of women as producers and providers and the reverence in which they are held “(qtd in *The Politics of Mothering-Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*. 194

This task of giving life is noble alongside the nurturing of children. *So Long a Letter* presents different facets of motherhood. Considering that it provides the woman with the reverence in which they are held, some motherhood experiences do not receive such magnitude. This explains why, Ramatoulaye recollects the pain and distress caused by Modou's second marriage, despite her giving birth to twelve children. She writes:

With consternation, 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. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account. (10)

Ramatoulaye's pain arises from Modou's lack of respect for her sacrifices as a mother to his children. Radl (1991) interrogates some of these distressful consequences and states that:

Is there a shadow of a doubt that social pressure that is strong enough to turn a woman into a mother ...effect the most important decision she will ever make...will, often without her realizing it, continue to influence her long after the physical face of motherhood is a reality? The pressure that are applied to a young woman to have children, however, are nothing compared to those that will come from all sides once she succumbed to the combined orchestration of the mass media and her friends, relatives, and acquaintances. All of the myths and pressures that were internalized prior to motherhood remain, and after they have helped to push her into motherhood, they turn into a club that can beat her senseless. (19)

This makes it difficult for the woman to escape from the 'What-Will-People-Think' trap. The only solace sometimes comes from adopting the 'isolation' option which is already built into the Contemporary nuclear family motherhood role which causes depression a lot. Thus, maternity should be a joyful experience which is accompanied by respect from the husband whose lineage is increased.

Mariama Ba's portrayal of motherhood can be looked at both from the old women's perspective and that of the new generation. Women of the old generation abide by patriarchal values that undermine the

emancipation of women by their ignorant, manipulative and self-centred inclinations to traditional ways. Aunty Nabou takes the mother figure role in the life of young Nabou, and raises her in accordance to Islamic traditional guidelines, preparing her for marriage. Motherhood has a different implication for women of the old generation: that of exercising control over the choices of their children. Aunty Nadou disrupts Nwado's marriage because she can't exercise control over her son or her daughter-in-law. Binetou's mother, nameless in the text, is among the manipulative mothers of the old generation who use motherhood to suppress their children. This is not the case for Ramatoulaye.

She has twelve children, and since her husband's rejection of her, she assumes responsibilities for them to prove that parenthood is not a title, it goes with obligations towards the family's wellbeing. Ramatoulaye outlines the reason for motherhood when she says, "one is a mother in order to love without a beginning or end" (83). The role of motherhood for new African women is to guide, love and teach unconditionally. Being a single parent, Mariama Ba uses Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to portray the role and task of the new woman, that of educating the next generation. Although the two women embrace different options, the message of motherhood remains the same: that of commitment.

The challenge of motherhood to new women is daunting, especially with the rising awareness of social injustice, but the text portrays these women as guides and not imposers on their children, especially their daughters' choices. Ramatoulaye observes that "my children who disagreed with my decision sulked. In opposition to me, they represented a majority I had to respect" (47). Importantly, she allows her children to decide and she respects their opinions. This helps to foster the bond of affection, love and mutual happiness within her space. It also gives a positive perception of motherhood.

Her approach to the cycle of crises that engulfs Arame, Yacine, Dieyraba and the impregnated Aissatou; and in the latitude, she allows her daughters to express themselves because, according to her, she wants them to discover “in a healthy way, without feelings of guilt, secretiveness or degradation” (77). Ramatoulaye is an accommodating mother of five. Her attitude is liberating and empowering, giving a high sense of self-confidence. Ramatoulaye struggles with her three daughters Arame, Yacine and Dienynaba in their non-traditional habits of smoking but she says, “I try, as much as possible, to respect their privacy” (77). Something the old generation cannot tolerate because they differ in options and regard the ‘New Woman’ as full of many ethical contradictions. This unveils the obvious clash between the two generations on the idea of dignity and restraint and the presence of many arguably deplorable phenomena.

Mariama Ba seeks to establish the link or connection between literature and morality in *So Long a Letter* societal behaviour since literature as an art is essentially and primarily moral. The moral attitude of individuals is confined by personal circumstances. We observe that although men are the perpetrators of women’s suffering in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, these men have as accomplices, women of the old generation. These women inclined to the dictates of traditions are equal participants in the oppression of women. Their actions lead to the collapse of younger women’s marriages and they set a bad precedence for the children they are nurturing. The voice of sisterhood is expressive questioning the participation of women in the plight of other women in society through Dada. She condemns the participation of women in the suffering of other women when she meets Lady Mother-in-law. “How can a woman sap the happiness of another? You deserve no pity” (72).



According to Mutunda (2017), “The oppressive mother-in-law figure is very common in African women’s writings” (117) such as Nwapa (1966), Adichie (2006) and Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*. These are all voices in the corpus of works addressing the conditions of women in the places where there exist conflicts among their folk thereby validating the triumph of patriarchy. Despite their diverging stance on tradition and modern approaches to marriage, education and motherhood, the reminder remains for women to negotiate space and identity for all women in Africa without discrimination.

### **Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: A Common Consensus**

Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* does not only expose the clash between indigenous African traditions and values of modernity but also indicates that they are reconciliatory. The African milieu of feminism is largely a reaction to colonization and pre-colonial traditions that misconceive the role of women in society as fringe subservient onlookers, upon whose foundations, its modern political, social and economic configurations have been built, and from which the African feminist strives to free both men and women.

Ashcroft et al (2001) trace the term ‘modern’ to the Latin ‘modernus’ which was used in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century to “distinguish an officially Christian present from a Roman pagan past” (130). It was used to distinguish the ancient, traditional from the modern. The modernity here means a cultural and generational shift that launches the innovation of new ways that contest traditional patterns. They go extra to contend that the indispensable nature of a phenomenon is not static or fixity, but its contingent mutability, its situated emergence and its inter-subjective interpretations are each symbolically accomplished through an interactive process. This means traditions are not static, as such; they are bound to face trials specifically as these traditions come into an interactive process with another form of awareness. Times are changing, and so is society

progressing as philosophies interconnect. This is the process of negotiation.

Pruitt (1981) describes negotiation as a decision-making process in which two or more parties talk with one another to resolve opposing interests. In addition, parties do not begin by acting up rationally or “knowing beforehand their own or other's preferences or values in a negotiation process” (27). However, communication through dialogue is open and encourages making demands, stating preferences, asking for information, offering proposals and making concessions. Mariama Ba's diverse outlooks through her characters uncover definite social injustices without necessarily sentencing all cultural practices as unfashionable. Negotiating between tradition and modernity takes place through a new stance on sisterhood, marriage and motherhood.

### **Sisterhood and Empathy**

In a bit to nurture the spirit of sisterhood among women under systems working against them, there is the call for sisterhood, the need for women to see the challenge of one woman as that of all. Sisterhood according to Hooks (1981) is “women bonding, solidarity and common oppression” (3). Difficult interactions become critical to the negotiation among women entrapped against one another. The friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou can be evaluated at the level of childhood innocence, and also their common failed marriage. In every negotiation, one party must give away as Ramatoulaye does towards Binetou. In the beginning, Ramatoulaye takes the fragment of patriarchy to see Binetou as the cause of her marital breakdown: “was it madness, weakness, irresistible love? What inner confusion led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?” (12) From this expression, Ramatoulaye does not comprehend for the sufferings of Binetou whom she describes as “thinner” considering that Modou now pays all attention to her. It is here that Ramatoulaye starts to consider Binetou as a victim of patriarchy as any other young woman. The

institutionalization of polygamy provides men with the perfect legitimizing instrument of domination of women who fight among themselves. So while Modou spends the family fortune on Binetou and her family, including a loan using the house as collateral, Ramatoulaye and her children face a possible eviction and life on the street. Ramatoulaye pities Binetou as someone unable to overcome similar situations that face young women. She like Binetou, marries Modou after overcoming her mother's pressure to marry Mwado instead. Ramatoulaye empathizes with Binetou because she sees her as a victim of the same circumstance she found herself years back. She remarks:

The young girl, who was very gifted, wanted to continue her studies to sit for her baccalaureat. So as to establish his rule. Modou, wickedly, determined to remove from the critical and unsparing world of the young. He therefore gave into all the conditions of the grasping Lady mother-in-law and even signed a paper committing him to paying the said amount. (11)

Ramatoulaye sees in Binetou a suffering young woman trapped by tradition. Instead of begrudging another woman who wants to be educated but is denied by misogynist systems and greediness, Mariama Ba brings these women as common victims. Binetou is heartbroken about marrying Modou Fall so Ramatoulaye relates to the reader all the initial rejection of Binetou against the marriage. "Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (40) Ramatoulaye acknowledges. We find that Ramatoulaye is developing an understanding of Binetou when she analyses Binetou and Young Nabou as intruders into their marriages. She says:

Aissatou my dear friend, I've told you that there can be no possible comparison between you and Young Nabou. But I also realize that there can be no possible comparison between Young Nabou and Binetou. Young Nabou grew up beside her aunt, who had earmarked her as the spouse of her son Mwado. Used to seeing him, she let herself be drawn towards him naturally, without any shock. His greying hair did not offend her, she found his thickening features reassuring. And then she loved and still loves Mwado even if their interests are not always the same (47).

Ramatoulaye concedes that Young Nabou had the chance to see Mwado, and has knowledge of her breeding by Aunty Nabou as a spouse for Mwado but she didn't reject it. Binetou's rejection of the idea of a marriage to Modou is treated as an attempt, which Ramatoulaye appreciates. The ability to see Binetou as a victim of traditional society and greed is Ramatoulaye's form of bridging the gap of hatred sparked by the activities of traditional women. However, the upbringing of Young Nabou affords her any pace to think independently about her choices. The narrator reveals that "Young Nabou, responsible and aware, like you, like me! Even though she's not my friend, we often shared the same problems" (48). The same problems Aissatou and Ramatoulaye face in choosing a life partner are the same problems Young Nabou faces. Mother intrusion on choosing a spouse is persistent in the Senegalese society, which is the more reason Mariama Ba gives the women to see their common predicament.

Even Daba, Binetou's friend who initially is annoyed with Binetou ends up understanding her fate. Daba says in objection to Lady's mother-in-law that;

Remember I was your daughter's best friend. You made her mother's rival. Remember. For five years you deprived my mother and her twelve children of their breadwinner. Remember. My mother has suffered a great deal. How can a woman sap the happiness of another? You deserve no pity. Pack up. As for Binetou, she is a victim, your victim. I feel sorry for her. (72)

We see the commencement of sisterly bonding between Daba, Ramatoulaye and Binetou. They are willing to overlook the hurts caused by Binetou's marriage to address traditional precepts as the roots of their pain. Modern women are marked by their values of self-fulfilment. We find these common traits in all the modern women in this text. There is the need then for them to see their common need as a base to rally together.

### **Marriage and the African Family**

African cultures view marriage as a union between two kinship groups, instead of an alliance of individuals. Thus, marriages follow a strict traditional set of rules that must be followed with the inclusion of extended family members. However, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* reveals that marriages are predicted to render the woman feeble. There exists the Christian and Muslim marriage between Jacqueline and Samba Diak, a Muslim marriage between Aissatou and Mwado and Ramatoulaye and Modou. The religious institution of marriage is challenged by the pair of Jacqueline and Samba. The narrative reveals that inner-faith marriages can be effective because the failed marriages are caused by a third-party intrusion, and Samba's disloyalty. Set in a principally Muslim society, Mariama Ba indicates that faith and beliefs are not hindrances provided the couples are truthful to each other. Textual evidence reveals that Mariama Ba does not censure polygamy or Islam totally, but as a traditional heritage shows the concession individuals must make in the face of modernity.

Customarily the reason a man takes another wife in African polygamy is due to barrenness of the wife, restricted numerical strength of the children or poor health condition. Some women in the traditional set-up marry wives for their husbands to fill in any gap. However, this tradition provides sexist the flexibility to overpower women. This explains why Ramatoulaye is very emotional about Modou's betrayal since she is not barren; she is a healthy mother of twelve children and well-groomed in attitude. Islam and Senegalese traditions encourage polygamy as a form of prestige, as such; men consider they are respecting the prescribed traditional ethics and obligations.

There also exists the traditional system of exclusion among social classes in marriage as obvious from the marriage between Aissatou

and Mwado. Aunty Nabou is an ardent custodian of this class consciousness idea and raises Young Nabou to linger in the marriage within the class. Provided Mwado married another girl from the upper class, Aunty Nabou should have no worries. But Aissatou being a mere “goldsmith’s daughter” is unacceptable. The author here challenges the role of men in fostering norms of relationships. Mwado as an educated African man seems handicapped in the face of traditional rudiments. However, Mariama Ba’s firmness in introducing this complex marriage set-up that contradicts traditional conception is a call for all to reconsider their stance.

Ramatoulaye from the upper class defies tradition to marry Modou from the lower class out of love. This indicates that the social class preference for marriage exists in the Senegalese society, but is bridged provided the men are willing to stand by their women. Ramatoulaye and Jacqueline put in their very best to be with the men of their choice. Jacqueline, a Christian from Ghana foregoes Christian preferences for the marriage within the circle to marry a foreigner of another religion. In negotiating intermarriage of the different social classes and religious beliefs, the author insinuates that young women should listen to their parents before choosing their husbands, keeping with traditional African ethics and the perspective that marriage is between families and not individuals. However, there is a demand for traditional precepts to take into consideration the experience of the modern African options.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have prevailing characteristics of modern women who have encountered Western education and have critical minds, but they react differently to the issues of polygamy and husband betrayal. Aissatou opts for divorce and denies any attempt to negotiate the difference between the social classes in marriage. Divorce for Ramatoulaye is an odd option in conformity

with traditional norms and customs, where women are sometimes commended to endure painful marriages for the sake of their children and also to preserve the appreciation of being married. Divorce is seen as unethical, and not part of African perception of marriage which explains why Ramatoulaye describes divorce as “a start from the zero” (60). But Aissatou’s action challenges this notion. Therefore, *So Long a Letter* is a thoughtful effort to expose the varied forms of mixed marriages from religious backgrounds and social classes within the hope of ameliorating the principles of marriage in this community from some intricacies.

### **The Power of Motherhood**

*So Long a Letter*, serves the changing role of motherhood as an instrument for changing traditional approaches to nurturing. Initially, the African woman’s motherhood was left to childbearing only. Millet (1969) captures the complexities of women. She states:

...women are both powerful through their perceived affinity to nature, their ability to reproduce and the role as the mother and powerless through their supposed frailty, their fecundity, their purported weakness: a power/ lessness maintained by the positioning of women as “other” within the misogynistic discourse. Women are represented as feeble, as weak vessels, imbued with dreadful temptation, unequal to man and bereft of intellectual capacity. It is through the misogynistic practices that women are reformed, re-invented in a different guise; our bodies distorted, reshaped in a form pleasing to men; our minds controlled, ordered, altered; any threat or independent thought neutralized. (67)

In line with Millet’s identification of female feebleness, and presumed lack of intellectual capacity, Mariama Ba cross-examines the leading traditional practices of male chauvinism erected by patriarchy and challenges the ‘othered’ position accepted by women of the older generation. Ramatoulaye sees motherhood as the chance to play the role of caretaker to her children who are exposed to modernity. Her phenomenal spirit of

resilience is remarkable. She remains thoughtful, selfless, and passionate about her motherhood obligations. She recounts an encounter with them this way:

Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba, smoking in their bedroom. Everything about their manner showed that they were used to it: their way of holding the cigarette between their fingers or raising it gracefully to their lips, of inhaling like connoisseurs. Their nostrils quivered and let out the smoke. And these young ladies inhaled and exhaled while doing their lessons and their homework. They savoured their pleasure greedily behind the closed door, for I try, as much as possible, to respect their privacy. (77)

She double-crosses the old generation's ideals of nurturing and ignores their precepts. Modernity demands that mothers change their approach to nurturing to instil discipline and also allow space for growth. To achieve this synergy, Ramatoulaye employs lessons from her grandmother who said, "Different personalities require different forms of discipline. Strictness here, comprehension there. Smacking, which is successful with the young ones, annoys the older ones. The nerves daily undergo severe trials! But that is the mother's lot" (77). Therefore, instead of treating all children with an equal approach, Ramatoulaye learns from tradition that people have different personalities.

Rosenberg and Gara (1965) assert:

Personal identity consists of a person's various social and personal roles: kinship roles, occupational roles, religious roles ...an amalgam of features- personal characteristics, feelings, values, intentions and images experienced by the individual which can be enacted in different situations. (90)

Therefore, identity is formed by the union of all these roles or functions which together can configure an individual's self. Motherhood becomes successful when mothers are well equipped on the possible changeability and flexibility of their children's attitudes. There is a need to adhere to some traditional precepts of personalities



that will not hinder modern women from self-expression. Bakhtin (2010) asserts that:

Cultural traditions are always a complex heritage, contradictory and heterogeneous, an open set of options, some of which will be actualized by any given generation, which by adopting one choice sacrifices all the others...

Identifying dynamism as a guiding tool to motherhood and ethical preferences helps to empower tolerance and unconditional acceptance providing a diverse and rich background to encourage positive change without condemnation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine the complexities derived from the diverse perception of women from the different generations to trace the role of tradition, religion and ethnicity within the gender paradigm in so far as the fate of women is concerned. Women in *So Long a Letter* are grouped into the old and new generation, with opposing values. There is therefore an urgent need to reconcile or adapt to the existing differences through social inclusion to aid them achieve emotional intelligence when faced with conflicting interests as agents of cultural identities. Her determination as an author is to effect a rigorous motion to attract attention to important sentimental responses; to minimize divorce or separation among couples which is a contemporary painful reality caused by unfinished business in a bid to safeguard the sacredness of family living in African societies which is a core of heritage.

### **References**

#### **Primary Source**

Ba, M. (1980). *So Long a Letter*, Translated by Modupe Bode, London: A. W. S, Heinemann.

#### **Secondary Sources**

Ashcroft, B. et al. (2008). *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London: Routledge.

- Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books.
- hooks, bell. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1982). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (C., Emerson, M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Chinweizu, I. (1990). *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*. Lagos: Pero Press.
- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Christian, I. (1995). *Brain Structure Explains Male/Female Differences*. In J. S. Petrikin, (ed.) *Male/Females Roles: Opposing Viewpoints*, (48-56), San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press.
- Daly, M. (1984). *Elementary Feminist Philosophy*. Boston, Ma: Beacon Press.
- Eagly, A. H. (2000). *Sex Differences in Social Behaviour: A Social Role Interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. *Annual Review of Sex Research*.
- Fagot, I. B. (1995). "Psychosocial and Cognitive Determinants of Early Gender-Role Development". *Annual Review of Sex Research* (6), 1-31.
- Fancina, A. (2004). *Literature and Society*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor.
- Fenstermaker, S. and West, C. (2002). *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Finney, G., (1950). "Ibsen and Feminism". (Edited by James Macfarlane). *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Howard, J. & Jocelyn A. (1997). *Gendered Situations, Gendered Selves: A Gender Lens in Social Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kolawole, M. (1997). *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trenton, N. J: Africa World Press.
- Larson, C. (1973). "Heroic Ethnocentrism: The Idea of Universality in Literature". *The American Scholar* (42) 2: 463-475.
- Lindsey, L. (1997) *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

**AFO-A-KOM: Journal of Culture, Performing and Visual Arts: Ngome Jemia  
Maureen & Adamu Pangmeshi**

- Mellvenny, P. (2002). *Talking Gender and Sexuality*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V.
- Millet, K. (1969). *Sexual Politics*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Mikell, G. (1997). *African Feminism: Towards a New Politics of Representation*. Pennsylvania: Penn University Press.
- Parsons, T. (1960) *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*. Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press.
- Pilcher, K. and Whelehen, I. (2017). *Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Puritt, G. D. (1981). *Negotiation Behaviour*. New York: Academic Press.
- Radl, S. I. (1991). *Mother's Survival Guide*. London: Steve Davis Publishing.
- Rockwell, J. (1974). *Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of the Society*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sabrosky, J. (1978). *From Rationality to Liberation*. London: Green Wood Press.
- Snodgrass, M. E. (2006). *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*. New York: Library of Congress Cataloguing.

**Web Sources**

- Schall, Marianne. (2019) "EnvisionEquality"  
<http://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/sojour.htm> (accessed on Nov. 20<sup>th</sup> 2022).
- Induce, Ndat (2018). "Wiktionary"  
<http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ndat%C3%A9> Yalla (14  
(accessed Jan. 27<sup>th</sup> 2023)
- Bonusu, Deneme (2019). "VerenSitelers"  
<http://www.africanrhetoric.org/pdf/Yearbook%204%20Goredema.pdf>. (accessed on Nov 2022).
- Hall, Donald (2018). "Literary History".  
<http://www.literaryhistory.com/index.html> (accessed on Dec. 21<sup>st</sup> 2022)
- Unicef Data (NP). "What are Human Rights"  
[http://www.unicef.org/crc/\(02](http://www.unicef.org/crc/(02) (accessed on Jan, 17 2023)