

Tribhuvan University

Female Solidarity in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

Submitted by

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January 2016

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Letter of Recommendation

This research report entitled “Female Solidarity in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*” has been completed by Indira Pandey under my supervision. She carried out her research from October 2015 to January 2016. I, hereby, recommend it to be submitted for viva voice.

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Letter of Approval

This research entitled “Female Solidarity in *So Long a Letter*” by Indira Pandey has been submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University. It has been approved by the Undersigned members of research committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

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Acknowledgement

Without the support and help of different persons, I would not have been able to complete this research. Firstly, I am extremely grateful to my respected teacher and supervisor, Mr. Badri Prasad Acharya, lecturer at Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University for his great help, suggestion, guidelines and valuable time for the betterment of this research work. I want to express formal gratitude, for without his patience and cooperation my research work would never have appeared in this present form.

I am also indebted to Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, Head of the Central Department of English and the Research Committee for granting me the opportunity to conduct a research in my area of interest. I am also grateful to other teachers from the Central Department of English for their kind cooperation during my research work.

I would like to extend my profound gratitude to my family members and friends for their inspiration and help.

Indira Pandey

January 2016

Abstract

This research report analyzes implementation of female solidarity in the novel So Long a Letter written by Mariama Ba. It examines the impact of race, class gender and religion on women's relationship. The study sheds the light on female solidarity from Islamic Feminist perspective. Healing strength comes out of female bonding among female characters. Mariama Ba presents patriarchal institutions as a potential threat to women's relationship with each other and with men. Her novel So Long a Letter describes the plight of women owing to different forms of oppression. So Long a Letter makes a stronger plea to average women to develop female bonding and financial independence to liberate themselves from the burden of patriarchal oppression. Evidently, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, two friends are victimized by polygamous Islamic culture but their strong bonding helps them resist oppression and subjugation. As the finding, this study foregrounds the healing power of female bonding, which allows women to overcome cultural prejudices and survive to enjoy female empowerment and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that helps them fight against strict Islamic patriarchal norms and values.

This research report intends to explore Mariama Ba's novel *So Long a Letter* as women's attempt to liberate themselves from patriarchal culture, by means of female solidarity. The novel emphasizes how women face the challenges of patriarchal institution that subjugates them through polygamy, constraints of tradition, and the patriarchal subjugation. In the novel, the act of polygamy and its aftermath is the main focus. The main characters, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are being victimized in the name of Islamic religion, where their husbands are legally allowed by their religion to involve in the second marriage. This paper analyzes Mariama Ba's critique of polygamy and her celebration of female bonding in the face of male oppression. Ba explores her themes through an epistolary exchange between two intimate friends, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou who suffer from the abuse of their polygamous husbands. In Islamic culture females are taken as curse, they are not equally treated as males. Females, who are taken as the second class citizens are dominated from their birth.

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* describes the plight of women owing to different forms of oppressions. It demonstrates how women characters struggle throughout their lives in order to survive in difficult situations. The protagonist in *So Long a Letter* makes a strong plea to average women to develop female bonding and financial independence to liberate themselves from the burden of oppression. The novel also highlights how the mutual female solidarity, in effect, involves more women in the struggle against patriarchal subjugation. This female bonding demands the active participation of all women, along with men in the nation building. The post-colonial context of *So Long a Letter* demonstrates the importance of nation building as a primary concern for both men and women. In the newly independent African countries like Senegal the struggle for development requires the harmonized efforts of both men and women. Ba's novel foregrounds the healing powers of females' friendship that soothes pain and facilitates women with enough vigor to resist the male prejudices. Although other African novelists depict class to be an obstacle to women's

relationship, Ba has a different impression on the issue. *So Long a Letter* regards female friendship as a solution because it integrates the marginalized women and allows them to form bonds with the women of nobility.

Throughout the novel, Ba effectively illustrates the challenges women face in this steadily modernizing, post-colonial social context. Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent women of the new Africa, who are highly educated. Their experience breaks with the isolated experience of their predecessor. Women's social roles are multifarious. While their teaching career offers an avenue for personal meaning outside of the home, as well as contributing to their families economic well-being. They also retain their domestic roles as mothers and wives. While in many ways thriving under this added pressure, women face the added obstacles of negotiating their devout Muslim faith in Islamic religion. Both women critique the polygamous relationships that their husbands justify with Islamic axioms and biology, whereas Modou invokes Allan's intention of putting himself and his new wife side by side. After the existence of co-wife in the life of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, they find devoid of emotional connection and devotion they have with their partners. Yet, Ba highlights on the deeply felt message of the necessity of unity and solidarity between the sexes and of the inseparability of women..

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* recounts the narratives of two women and their husbands lifelong friends living in Senegal during the postcolonial period of national reformulation. The novel is written in the form of a lengthy epistle from one woman, Ramatoulaye, to her best friend Aissatou, who lives in the United States. At the beginning of the novel, Ramatoulaye is stressed. She writes to her friend to relieve the stress. She refers to her husband Modou, and Islamic religion concerning polygamy where her husband after twenty five years of marriage, marries her daughter's friend Binetou. Even though Modou abandons her and spends their money on Binetou, Ramatoulaye decides to stay with

him because of her faith. Talking to Aisatou about the hardships in her life, Ramatoulaye is actually reflecting on her own experiences. Because the two have reacted to their polygamous states differently, where Ramatoulaye wants to know if it was worth staying in this marriage.

Aisatou rises out of her position to disprove oppressive culture. She is a radical woman and an inspiration for Ramatoulaye and her daughter, Daba. Aisatou takes her life into her hands and chooses to walk out of polygamous relationship. She is a clear representation of a woman aching to free herself from the bondage of tradition. To demonstrate, how males are instinctive, Ba uses female rationality and responsibility. She also portrays man's irresponsibility through the characters like Mawdo and Modou. This novel is widely considered as one of the first female-authored Francophone novels structured around post-colonial feminist themes. GorakI. Lays emphasis and says that Ba juxtaposes male behavior based on sexual instincts and female continence and rationality. Her protagonist is a strong-willed character, who finds support for women solidarity because :

[T]he book is full of subtle advice for women, families and people in general. But it is given through example and reflection rather than presenting through admonition. The way the book goes about the condition of women in restricting social circumstances to reader is distinctively different than in other novels. It is a true testimony to the women it represents and their never failing struggle to survive for themselves and their family. (7)

While Ramatoulaye gives her friend the detail of her husband's death, she sets off on a journey of remembering the major events in her and Aissatou's lives. It traces her story and recounts how her husband, Moudou, betrays their marriage by taking a young second wife. For a moment she thinks of leaving him but then decides to stay in her marriage, preparing for equal sharing, according to the precept of Islam concerning polygamy life. Religion instructs that men should consider marrying multiple women only if they are capable of

dealing justly with all of them. This includes providing for them financially , which Ramatoulaye's husband certainly does not do.

So Long a Letter is a revealing portrait of the condition of women in a male dominated Muslim society in Africa, where the life of two women, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou has been destroyed because of the patriarchal Islamic religion which allows polygamy. Their education helps them overcome their difficulties. They can take their children and their own responsibilities even their husbands leave them after getting married with other girls. Education continues to be the most important ingredient for change, for Islamic reform in general and women's status in particular. In the role of education for resistance in *So Long a Letter* Rizwanan Habib Latha opines:

Ramatoulaye's emphasis on education throughout the novel indicates that is a vital area in the attempt to promote a positive change in the norms and values which work to the determinant of women. Although, one of the ideological functions of *So Long a Letter* is to foreground polygamy and women's education as issues in contemporary African society, these may be seen as aspects of the same issue, namely, the right of women in Senegal and other Muslim societies to be given the type of education which helps them to understand their right regarding polygamy as well as other matters which impact on them. (32)

The voiced and unvoiced differences between religious principles and practices in *So Long a Letter* make it clear that the educational backgrounds of most of the women in the novel do not equip them with the type of knowledge that would empower them to effectively challenge the cultural and religious domination by men on a social level.

Critics and readers of Ba's works have always recognized the attraction of her writing style and her capacity to transform everyday events into sacred moments of beauty.

She writes in an honest manner and conveys her stories with a style that employs spontaneity. After its publication *So Long a Letter* has undergone immense criticism. Some critics have considered the novel to be derogatory, whereas some others have appreciated the novel as a beautiful work. Katherine Frank does not acknowledge a difference between demonstrating that a woman's worth is not inextricable from her relationship with men, that a woman can take care of herself, as Ramatoulaye discovers and actually desires to live a life without men. She mentions:

In many Islamic cultures women are considered as a curse to their families from adolescence to adulthood. Ramatoulaye does not receive the same type of respect that her male counterpart receives. Her only purpose, if any is, to reproduce and care for them. Most women in these types of societies are looked upon as second rate citizens in the eyes of their male counterparts. Their existence is mainly for the gratification of the male. (148)

While female criticisms continue to broaden the literary canon by bringing literature of African women to critical attention and continue to address the representation of African women in literature, the methods used by such criticism in relation to African literatures continue to evolve. Sara Suleri talks about the treatment of 'Third World' women and Muslim woman in particular to get a feel of what Muslim women have to endure like:

Ramatoulaye is on her own with her children, as she has been for years. She is a school teacher and has always contributed financially, only to have that money taken to be used for the new wife. We can see that she is hurt and upset, and she does not know how to react. More and more we see how the customs of the culture being adhered to pushes women aside and does not give them rights or a voice. (759)

The society needs to understand the difference between what females would naturally do in

the world and what women have been told they need to do for all of history. In the name of religion and customs females are dominated and are compelled to renew their life which has been destroyed by the patriarchal society. In the novel, both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou struggle for their survival along with their children from their own position.

The two friends suffer from deception and betrayal from husbands to whom they were married for a long time. However, they adopt different attitudes towards their misfortune. While Aissatou moves forward and starts a new life as a single mother, Ramatoulaye prepares herself to accept polygamy. Coulis Shari observes, "Aissatou has known the same betrayal as her friend. And yet, she, unlike Ramatoulaye who choose to stay and remain 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). Aissatou takes Mawdo's betrayal seriously and refuses to forgive him 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 expectation.

Ramatoulaye's decision to stay as Modou's wife comes from her beliefs in the sanctity of the institution of marriage. She firmly believes that a woman needs a man in order to maintain balance in the society as she reflects: "I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form from part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage"(56). Ramatoulaye insists on the complementary bonding between men and women. Her ideals about marriage have been shattered by her husband's decision to leave her, but she is quite reluctant to take the first step, despite her children's wishes. Furthermore, even though Ramatoulaye accepts her position as a co-wife, she refuses to become a second wife to DaoudaDieng, a former suitor who renews his marriage proposal to her after the death of her husband, partly because she does not want to harm his wife. She

reflects “[A]bandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family” (68). She refuses because she understands the pain and sufferings associated with polygamy and does not wish to impose such a plight on anybody.

The novel shows both women’s experience with polygamy. It portrays the hurt, anguish and suffering of a woman after her husband takes the second wife. Ramatoulaye talks about the pain the family goes through what her husband broke off all ties and abandoned his children. She mentions of the hurt and embarrassment of her oldest daughter suffers when she finds her best friend’s ‘sugar daddy’ is her father. She also mentions the story of Aissatou, who packs up her belongingness, takes her four boys and leaves her husband when he marries for the second time. Aissatou later educates herself through books, goes to school of interpreters and works for the Senegalese Embassy in the United States.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are victimized by the traditional customs that deny women equal status to men. These women are exploited sexually for their docile duties. They take care of all household responsibilities and family obligations. Modou makes both his first and second wives only subservient being that would take care of all of the duties and comforts necessary for males. Aissatou’s husband, for example, is forced to marry again by his mother, who is offended that she is of such ‘low birth’. Thus, we see that the book is about celebration of female friendship and Ba depicts the ways in which women help to resist to other’s oppression.

Ba takes us through the life of Ramatoulaye, a woman who thought herself happily married, until her husband took the second wife. This forces her to re-evaluate her entire way of thinking about her world, her family, her friends and her husband. Thus, Brian Mac Skill writes:

Ba has created a fascinating look at postcolonial life in the former French West Africa. This portrait is decidedly from a woman’s perspective and is

focused on issues that particularly impacts women's lives. Ba explores a multigenerational web that links women and men together. Her subject matter includes motherhood, religion, education and politics. She teaches us about surviving loss and disappointment. It is also about hope and personal growth. (19)

Critics and readers of Ba's works have recognized the text in various ways, whereas the present research attempts to work on the female solidarity in *So Long a Letter*. This novel clearly depicts the term called sisterhood through Ramatoulaye and Aissatou who become each other's strength in difficult situations. In this regard, Aron says, "The term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related, but bounded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women is often refers to their feminism, their participation in the woman's movement and their support to each other"(1). In *So Long a Letter*, sisterhood is rather evident in the interaction between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Ramatoulaye embodies the dependable figure that allows the society moves forward. Yet, she and Aissatou are undermined by those who were supposed to be close to them. They represent women who are ready to revolt against the strong grips of patriarchy being held over their self-worth and independence.

This study sheds light on female solidarity from Islamic feminist perspective. Healing strength comes out of bonding and unity among female characters. Evidently, two women Ramatoulaye and Aissatou transcend the boundaries of religion, race and continue to have vigorous friendship. This mutual emotional tie between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye helps them survive in the oppression which in effects urges women of world to form mutual emotional tie in order to 'fight back'. Thus, by highlighting the possibilities of resistance, Ba in *So Long a Letter* valorizes the need for female solidarity to overcome the miseries under ruthless patriarchy.

Ba's main female characters, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye are from different castes, a tegg and a guer (castes in Africa) respectively, but their friendship is not affected by their castes or their economic status. In this respect, GayatriSpivak insists on the requirement of 'strategic essentialism' for female solidarity:

Even as we talk about feminist practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalizing it. Since, the moment of essentialising, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomological question, is irreducible, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it. (11)

The novel undeniably makes clear that the female friendship allows women to face adversity and challenge the masculine attempts to subjugate them.

The success of Ba's novel demonstrates the strength of female friendship that aims to liberate women from the burden of oppression and gives them a chance to empower each other. This triumph in patriarchy is indeed, vital and highlights the nurturing and caring qualities of female bonding that makes this liberation possible. Despite the different cultural and social realities that Ba's women characters witness, they acknowledge and strongly assert the potentiality of female friendship. This commonness in women's experiences of oppression reveals the universality of female subjugation. It reveals the universal truth that women have to fight for their fundamental human rights. This research depends on the textual analysis of *So Long a Letter*, on the basis of the theoretical tool formed by drawing the insights from feminism in general, Islamic and African feminism in particular.

Before discussing about Islamic feminism it is important to discuss about the feminism in general. Gender is just a social construction, because the traits of both males and females are created by the society. This sexual difference has been changed into gender difference long time ago by the patriarchal society. The patriarchal society has drawn big gap

between male and female. This defines male as rational, strong, decisive, intelligent, responsible, and protective, while it describes female as irrational, weak, submissive, irresponsible and dependent. From the very beginning of human civilization women are victimized by sexist oppression. They are always treated as inferior creatures while males consider themselves as superior beings.

Feminism is a movement that started in the late eighteenth century giving focus on the emancipation of women from all kinds of disparities, inequalities and injustice prevalent in the society. It is a political and an intellectual movement that seeks justice for women and ends the supremacy of male domination. Patriarchy has always been the central problem for feminism. For women, it has always been hard to survive in the patriarchal society with their own identity. As time passed, females become aware of male domination and their secondary position in the society and begin to question it. They slowly began to revolt and resist to male domination and suppression. They began to fight for their rights directly or indirectly. Thus, feminism came into practice as an attack against marginalization of females as our society and civilization is pervasively patriarchal.

Feminism as such cannot address the problems of African females and Islamic females, so the researcher applies Islamic and African feminism. Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in the Islam. It aims for the equality of all Muslims' private life. Islamic feminists advocate for women's right, gender equality, and justice. Islamic feminists ground their arguments in Islam and its teaching, seek the full equality of women and men in the personal and public spheres and can include non-Muslims in discourses and debates. In the 1990s when Muslim secular feminists-scholars, journalists and writers from various countries in Africa and Asia observed the process begun by some Muslim women to explicate gender equality and social justice grounded in re-reading of the *Quran* and other religious texts, they immediately recognized this as a new form of feminism

and called it Islamic feminism.

African/Black feminism is a school of thought which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together. Black feminists regard that the earlier feminist movement led by white middle class women largely ignored the oppression based on race and class as it narrowly overemphasizes the oppression based on sexism. Black feminists regard the black women experience more intense kind of oppression, which is completely different from that of white women. Not just for being women, they also have to suffer for being black and economically low in social status. This is why, black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression and racism are inextricably bound together in determining the overall condition of black women. With a motive of searching for the specificity of oppression, black feminist scholars reject essentialism generally found in white feminist culture and focus on political and emotional analysis of various forms of domination.

Female bonding draws the attention of some theorists who analyze and examine women's relationship and the different challenges faced by them. Clenora- Hudson Weems, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Elizabeth Abel and Obioma Nnameka study women's identities and relationships and their impact in the community. They analyze women's experiences related to race, class and gender, and how women develop strategies that allow them to survive. They foreground how women are connected in order not only to heal the pain resulting from these misfortunes but also to provide themselves with comfort and security. In this regard, Abel reflects:

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 ourselves and each other.(434)

Abel raises an important point concerning the need to highlight the struggles of women to be out of reach of oppression, secure their own survival and fight against their subjugation by patriarchal structure. Like Abel, ClenoraHudson Weems also studies sisterhood and considers it to be one of the characteristics of Africana Womanism, a concept she theorizes and prefers to the term feminism in the sense that it involves realities concerning women of African descent, reflecting their entanglement in racial, class and gender systems. She sees *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on African Womanism mainly because of the novel's focus of female friendship: "Ramatoulaye embodies many characteristics of the true African womanist, the most obvious one being genuine is sisterhood, strong, self defined, demanding of respect, family centered, male compatible ,authentic, whole, mothering and nurturing"(96-97).

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent the true nature of female solidarity in the sense that they strive to cultivate and nurture sense of sisterhood that allows them to care for one another. Each helps the other in difficult times and encourages to make positive changes that allow her to face the challenges of polygamy and patriarchy in general. Because they go through similar experiences, they understand and empathize with each other. Aissatou understands Ramatoulaye's pain because she has lived almost the same problem. She knows that her friend is going through the suffering with which she had to cope when her husband took a second wife victims of the systems of polygamy, they join forces and comfort each other. Thus, friendship gives them an opportunity to strengthen their connection and ease the pain of betrayal. Betty Taylor Thompson joins in characterizing *So Long a Letter* as an African womanist novel:

The protagonist continues to long for a family centered existence and for a loving companion. In fact, she misses her husband even though he has rudely

cast her outside. Notably, according to the postulates defines as characteristic of African women, there is the desire to have fulfilling relationship with African men, contrasting with the feminists desire to free themselves entirely from male influence.(179)

Ramatoulayes's willingness to tolerate polygamy and her accommodating views about men's and women's relationships explains the different strand of feminism.

As an epistolary novel that consists of serious exchanges, sharing of experiences and mutual counseling, *So Long a Letter* foregrounds the nurturing bonding that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou strive to build and maintain. These women form bonds, they may not even believe in feminist principles, but their experiences or environment urge them towards female solidarity.

Ba's novel focuses on polygamous male characters and their various motivations. As the novel begins, Ramatoulaye is beginning a letter to her friend Aissatou. The occasion of the writing is the former's recent widowhood. She talks about the stress of being a working mother trying to support her household and twelve children, especially after her husband abandons her for a second wife. Ramtoulaye decides to stay married. It means never seeing her husband and being humiliated and ashamed by the fact that he is squandering money on a young girl, who is a friend of their daughter. Her husband's second marriage functions more like a total abandonment of her and her children. In her series of letters, Ramatoulaye exposes her life and that of other women of Senegal. She talks about their upbringing and training and the cultural restrictions placed upon them. On the other hand, Aissatou divorces her husband and leaves Senegal, presently residing in the United States. Ramatoulaye is nostalgic and remembers her time with Aissatou saying:

And you left. You had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands. You rented a house and set up home there. And instead of looking

backwards, you looked resolutely to the future. You set yourself yourself a difficult task and more than just my presence and my encouragements, book saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you. (32)

Aissatou is a courageous character in Ba's novel. She resists against cultural and patriarchal values, leaves them behind by taking divorce from her husband, after his attempt to get second marriage. She takes all her children's responsibilities on her own. She chooses divorce over polygamy and writes in a note she leave for Mawdow, "I am stripping myself of your love, your name clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (32). Her difficult decision to leave and start a new life results from her determination to fight polygamy in all, its forms and a desire to claim her independence. She considers her husband's acceptance of young Nabou as a second wife to be a denial of the commitment they made to each other many years ago. Felling betrayed she refuses to get involved in polygamy and prefers divorce, despite the difficulties of single parenting.

Ba also sheds light on the unequal representation of men and women in national Assemblies in Africa. She ironically criticizes the number of women in comparison to their men counterparts: "Four women Daouda, four out of a hundred deputies, what a ridiculous ratio!" (63). In an attempt to justify this masculine degrading philosophy, Daouda Diang, an old suitor who is trying to retrieve his love, tells Ramatoulaye that "you women are destructive beings that you are not worthy to be representatives because you are like mortar, you demolish, you destroy" (63). Then he sarcastically asks to imagine a large number of women in Assembly asserting that, "everything would explode, go up in flame" (63). This sickening and cheap justification gives her a courage to claim for women's stolen right. She argues that, "we have a right just as you have, to education, which we 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" (*So Long*, 63). By doing so

Ba stirs the still bond in her community especially “the core of social feminism right to education, wage and vote” (Verta and Nancy 107). Moreover, she fosters on female solidarity and awareness.

Ramatoulaye helps Aissatou overcome her painful experience; Aissatou also shows a tremendous support to her friend throughout her ordeal even though they different answers to the question of polygamy. Because she understands her friend’s predicament, her situation, thereby helping her overcome this challenge. When Modou leave Ramatoulaye after twenty-five years of marriage with twelve children, the failure is not only real but also dramatic. However, Aissatou will always be there to help her friend’s coming back and their friendship in general:

Friend has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resist time , which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love. The success of the family is born of the couple’s harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. Friendship, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings.(88)

Ramatoulaye’s story transcends cultural boundaries and speaks to the universal ideas of betrayal, heartbreak and emotional divorce. The continual suffering of her might be felt by anyone who has experienced severe emotional trauma, who has to live with the consequences day after day. Thus, we can see that even in most traumatic situations, friendship can triumph. There is hope. It seems that women’s shared experience can offer the greatest support necessary for recovery. We recall Ramatoulaye’s words “our longer association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain” (37). This capacity is crucial in understanding of the epistolary relationship. The narrator recognize the healing capacity of the written words: “These caressing words, which relax me, are indeed from you”(71). Words inscribed in letter

connect the two women and comfort both of them

The novel deals with male- female relations in patriarchal society, the tradition of polygamy and its effects on modern African family where the act of polygamy is the main focus. It is portrait of a society in transition where several strands come together at Modou Fall's funeral. Ramatoulaye's letter recounts the funeral's aftermath, as well as the events leading up to her husband's departure till his death. Ramatoulaye is a teacher, has 12 children, and has combined European- style education with a traditional life. Her husband decides to take on a second wife without informing her. Aissatou knows all too well what Ramatoulaye is experiencing. She also has to deal with this heartbreaking ordeal when her husband decides to take on a second wife. Unlike Ramatoulaye, Aissatou also come up with same situation. Despite her Islamic background, she decides to leave village and her problem behind. Aissatou's example inspires Ramatoulaye, who must in her own life deal with the consequences of polygamy. The novel exposes the double standard between men and women in Africa. Sanctioned by the laws of Islam, Modou's action is a calculated betrayal of her trust and abrupt rejection of their life together. She records her anger at both Moudou and the customs that allow polygamy in her long letter. She questions how Aissatou's marriage ruined, also by polygamy. Polygamy was and is the exploitation of women. If a woman is unhappy in this relation, some people judge her as being demanding or disrespectful to her husband. Polygamy causes a lot of unnecessary pain to females and here Ramatoulaye frustratingly says:

I was irritated. He was asking me to understand. But to understand what?

The supremacy of instinct? The right to betray? The justification of the desire for variety? I could not be ally to polygamist instincts. What, then was I to understand? Thus, for the sake of variety, men are unfaithful to their wives. Driven to the limits of my resistance, I satisfy myself with what is

within reach (34).

Although polygamy is acceptable in Senegalese society, the two women are dazed by their husbands' actions. While polygamy may be an African or Muslim custom that sometimes has its defenders even among women, the situation for an older woman but it is different with educated women because they want a happy married life where their husband is not making her a victim of polygamy in the name of custom.

Since the ancient time females have been dominated culturally and religiously. In every religion there are restrictions and burdens for women where they are not allowed crossing the border sketched by the patriarchal society in the name of religion and culture. The patriarchal society has its own norms, values and culture. By imposing these norms, values and culture upon women, they dominate women. Unjustified, is the condition under which most women live. So, feminists are ultimately in pursuit of more radical change for enlightening women of a patriarchal society that exploited women from long history in the name of culture. Relating the condition of female with the cultural institutions in the book *Dislocating Cultures* Uma Narayan opines:

Many third-world women who do not consider themselves feminists know and acknowledge that women face mistreatment within their social contexts and cultural institutions. Feminists' daughters are not the only ones who see that motherlands are spaces where fathers still have most of the privileges and power, and that mothers and mother-cultures relate differently to their sons, imposing different demands and different forms of conformity.(9)

Culture can be understood as a system of symbols and meanings that even their creator contests, that lack fixed boundaries, that are constantly in flux, and that interact and compete with one another. This culture imposes unnecessary burdens on females where they are being oppressed. In the novel *Ramatoulaye* and *Aissatou* are the examples who resist against this cultural

burden and make their own choice to live their life.

The patriarchal society constructs a discourse that says women are naturally inferior to men. Women internalized this subordinate position and accepted their role to be meek and passive as their duties were to please men. They had to be useful to men and had to win their love. These were women's duties throughout the ages and were taught to women from childhood. Women followed their duties set by patriarchal society without any question and they never tried to challenge it. In order to revolt against these patriarchal norms feminism emerged.

Feminism as a phenomenon engaging with issues of women's right, women's liberation and gender equality as part and parcel of the rights, liberation and equality of all constructed and shaped concurrently by Muslims and others. In the 1990s when Muslim secular feminists-scholars, journalists and writers from various countries in Africa and Asia observed the process begun by some Muslim women to clarify gender equality and social justice grounded in re-reading of the *Quran* and other religious texts, they immediately recognized this as a new form of feminism and called it Islamic feminism. The term Islamic feminism was well established by the turn of the 21st century when in 2002 Asma Barlas published *Believing Women in Islam: Un-reading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran*, dis-entangling patriarchal meanings projected onto *Quran*, which was immediately heralded as another work of Islamic feminism.

In the novel, Ba clearly reveals the pain and suffering women experience through polygamy. She portrays polygamy as an agent of patriarchy that keeps women oppressed through the daily injustices imposed on them. The two friends, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, have known the discomfort of polygamy and undergone its dreadful consequences. Indeed, after many years of happy marriage and the birth of three sons, Assatou's husband, Madow Ba, takes a second wife to make his mother happy, who is unhappy with the social background of

Aissatou. In case Ramatoulaye, she is also betrayed by her husband, Moudow, after twentyfive years of marriage. Both women became the victim of polygamous culture where in the name of religious right male are showing disrespect toward their conjugal life. Margot Bardonalims:

For muslim women under the domination of patriarchal restrictions imposed in the name of religious prescription, the insights of Islamic modernism helped them to expose the patriarchal intrusions into Islam and their own lives. The early feminists were not equipped by education and training to engage in direct examination of religious sources, themselves. (29)

The Islamic aspect of the novel shows the men of the novel interpreted their own selfish needs. A prime example of this is when Ramatoulaye is told about her husband's second wife. Gerald Mac Lean asserts, "all the messengers were influential men in the village, they showed no tact in their explanation because they simply passed it off as something God wished; as something that Ramatoulaye should accept it with no question" (193). African society has strong cultural and traditional ways that influenced how one viewed or understood the religion of Islam. Therefore, the acts of cultural traditions are often mistaken for Islam.

The main point that Ba describes in *So Long a Letter* is the healing powers of female friendship. Women's relationship allows them to fight against polygamy, colonialism, the caste system and any form of prejudice. Indeed, Ba emphasizes the way female friendship, through mutual support and sincere commitment, helps them to overcome any attempt at subjugation and heals the pain resulting from oppression. Consequently, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye succeed in extending their bonds into a type of female solidarity that reaches more women and that even contributes to nation building. Ba's protagonists also gain female empowerment and build new identities that allow them to survive their husbands' betrayal

and assume their new lives as single mothers. Their bonding represents an example of female solidarity that impacts their lives in numerous ways. The moral support they offer each other is complimented by material assistance as the car Aissatou buys for her friend restores dignity and offers her possibilities to express herself. The novel shows that friends need to share joy and sorrows but also abundance and deprivation. Aissatou's generosity in buying her friend a car saves Ramatoulaye from humiliation of having to take public transportation while her co-wife drives her own car. This act gives Ramatoulaye her confidence back as she learns driving. The strength of their bonding allows them to care for and nurture each other and to heal their wounds. Similarly, hooks states, "We must learn to live and work in solidarity, we must learn the true value of sisterhood" (43). hooks encourages women to believe in female friendship and understand its significance and the well-being it can provide them.

In the novel, Ba mainly emphasizes the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, but she also portrays the selfishness of Lady Mother-in-Law, who compels her daughter, Binetou, to steal Ramatoulaye's husband, leaving Ramatoulaye alone with twelve children. In doing so, Lady Mother-in-Law takes the side of patriarchy that imposes polygamy on women. She does not think of Ramatoulaye as a woman like herself or her daughter, rather she acts to improve her personal living conditions and raise herself to middle class status through the privileges Modou Fall will grant her by marrying her daughter. The class issue overshadows any concern for female solidarity. She only takes her immediate needs into her consideration. The example of Lady Mother-in-Law demonstrates not only a failed potential relationship between the two older women but also the destruction of an existing friendship between younger women. She recommends her daughter to put an end to her friendship with Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter and become Ramatoulaye's co-wife. She works as agent of patriarchy and causes the oppression of Ramatoulaye and her children.

Male behaviour is based on sexual instincts and female continence and rationality.

They take female body as a means of domination but the females in the novel are not ready to be dominated rather they resist against domination. Ketu H. Katrak talks about the female body as the means of domination and resistance, as she opines:

Female body is often represented in elevated terms, in terms of glorification of motherhood, or it is demoted to objectifying the female body. Female identity and struggle for autonomy is affected by the controls of female sexuality as defined by different patriarchal structures.(9)

Ramatoulaye gets her first inkling of her situation when friends of her husband stop by to say, “Your husband won’t be home tonight because he married your daughter’s friend this afternoon and must consummate the marriage” (49). Thus, this letter is an extremely powerful look at the inequality between men and women in her society. Male takes female body as an object to entertain. Mawdo whom Aissatou has married and left, defends polygamy and tells of a film in which the survivors of an air crash eat the flesh of the corpses to stay alive: “You can’t resist the imperious law that demand food and clothing for man, the same laws compel male in other respects. I say male to emphasize the bestiality of instincts” (38). Ramatoulaye later warns her daughter that the existence of means of contraception should not lead to an unhindered release of desires and instincts.

Despite the challenges, the support and comfort Aissatou and Ramatoulaye provide each other help them to overcome and demonstrate the healing powers of female friendship. The two protagonists devote themselves entirely to each other, nurture, care for one another and succeed in keeping their relationship strong. Their commitment to each other and their refusal to be subjugated help them escape the patriarchal structures that attempt to oppress them. Through the portrayal of this strong form of female bonding, Ba exposes the advantages of female friendship and invites women to follow the example of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Each of them survives the painful experiences she has been through and

therefore becomes an inspiration to other women who may live through similar situations. Their achievements may have an impact on entire communities and spread the word about female solidarity. Ba's novel shows the impact of female bonding in women's lives, and how it brings positive change in their attitude. The two friends in *So Long a Letter* give a perfect example of what female friendship should be, their relationship challenges time, as their bonding starts in their childhood and continues deeper and stronger in their middle age life. Ramatoulaye states:

Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange message daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to Koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy grandmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before. (1)

Their reliance on each other their mutual trust and dependability nourish their friendship. This multi-generational relationship, their grandmothers and aunts were friends, before them has been preserved because of their respect of the basic principles of friendship. Through this bonding, Ba's novel gives hope to those who believe in the necessity of female solidarity and who work hard in their attempt to build a strong sisterhood. Hudson-Weems see *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on womanism mainly because of the novel's focus on female friendship. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye's struggle to define and develop new selves makes them stronger and allows them to survive their predicament. Ann McElanie-Johnson notes, Both the closeness of this relationship and its healing powers become basic to the thematic texture of this novel and of female friendship" (114). Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's empowering relationship is an inspiring example that may impact of the lives of many people.

Besides highlighting female solidarity Ba also uses the examples of Aissatou and

Ramatoulye to show that women can fight and overcome patriarchal oppression if they are materially independent. Her novel encourages women to find ways and means to free themselves from financial dependence that keeps them in formal bondage. The protagonists move to get new remunerated jobs contrasts with the reality of Senegalese society where men are encouraged to seek professional success where as women expect to get husbands and raise families. They both become teachers, professional women with salaries and who can take care of themselves. Aissatou succeeds as a single mother because she strives to reach a stable financial situation that allows her to provide herself and her children without expecting any external help. Similarly, Ramatoulye's salary as a schoolteacher sustains her twelve children when her husband abandons her and then dies. The economic freedom of the friends saves them from humiliation and more suffering that requires self sufficiently. Ba's novel offers professionalism and paid labor as a solution to women's oppression and abuse.

Aissatou and Ramatoulye have challenged some aspects of their tradition like polygamy and caste prejudice, but they have also refused to be alienated from their community through the influence of colonialism. As Patricia Sehuster indicates: "while so long a letter focuses specifically on Senegalese society and on the Islamic patriarchy that controls women's lives ,by extension. It also makes a statement about the movement from colonization to independence that all of Africa has faced because of imperialism" (366). Ba's novel doesn't call for a total rejection of traditional values but invites women to make careful choices and question some aspects that may oppress them. Facing the double burden of colonialism and traditional rules, Ramatoulye and Aissatou survive because their friendship helps them face various challenges.

Through *So Long a Letter* Ba denounces the injustice perpetrated against women everywhere. This situation shows the precarious condition of women who still have to fight to liberate themselves from subjugation. As female friendship extends to female solidarity,

the suffering of Senegalese women reflects the pain of all women regardless of national origin. In an interview, Ba explains

Naturally because this book often described as “cry from the heart” is indeed a cry from the heart of all women everywhere. It is first a cry from the heart of the Senegalesewomen, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, women constrained by religion and other social constraints that weigh them down. But it is also a cry that can symbolize the cry of women everywhere. (Bond 396-97)

Despite the different experiences of women, and the forms of oppression under which they suffer, their status as victim puts them in the same category. Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate which religions or unjust legislation have sealed” (88). The commonality of different forms of injustice in different parts of the world calls attention to women’s condition. The similarity in women’s experiences requires measures likely to fight any form of injustice from which women are suffering. Ba’s novel advocates female friendship as a solution to the plight of the Islamic women.

As Islamic feminism awakens women with the new idea to struggle against male dominated society to free women from male trap, by enlightening the femaleIslamic feminist advocated for emancipation and equality. This female awareness movement helps to change the condition of women. Ramatoulaye’s healing strength comes through writing her letter to Aissatou. This story is about friendship, love and most important of all hope. Her letter depicts postcolonial Senegalese society, especially the reduced role of women, slowly coming into their own. It deals with the liberation of women in a newly independent Senegal and also with the tradition that in fact bind them. The novel provides an example of the importance of female friendship for the woman’s survival. Because friendship means so much to them. As

Ramatoulaye writes in her final paragraph:

I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything disappointments and humiliations, hope still within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me. The word 'happiness' does indeed have meaning.(89)

Ramatoulaye struggles with her newfound independence. She does not leave her husband. They do not divorce either, a fact which surprises her husband and irritates him. He never goes back to her, even though they are still married. She boldly suggests that abandoning relation is not easy or desirable, no matter the circumstance.

So Long a Letter presents a strong form of female friendship that ultimately extends to female solidarity. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye only empower each other and help each other to overcome the obstacle given by the patriarchal society. The sisterhood they build and maintain secures their survival against the constraints of patriarchy, tradition, polygamy, colonialism and any form of prejudice. Aissatou's care for her friend and generosity urge her to travel all across in order to present her condolences and provide her support. Ramatoulaye reflects on her friend's coming back and their friendship in general:

The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animate us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our children, brothers and sisters. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvest? (72)

The upcoming reunion of two friends fills both with joy as they realize their friendship has survived and overcome distance and obstacles. The meeting will strengthen their bonding and

allow them to fill the gap they may have missed in the past while enjoying their freedom. The example of Ramatoulye and Aissatou, who are liberated from the burden of patriarchal oppressions, encourages other women to fight abuse and find their way through female solidarity. This reunion will also allow them to consolidate their friendship and enjoy each other's presence. This study mainly foregrounds the way the sisterhood between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou reaches out to other women and then becomes female solidarity which in return, impact whole nations.

In this way, this research on *So Long a Letter* analyzes how female bonding helps women to resist over patriarchal institution and help them to overcome the oppressions and difficulties. Ba emphasizes on how female friendship helps women face polygamy, the impact of colonialism and patriarchy in general. Ba very tactfully strengthens her female characters and makes them united to revolt against patriarchy even though their ways of resistance are different. This form of sisterhood usually extends to female solidarity, which involves more women who benefit from this nurturing and care. Another conclusion of this research draws the attention on Muslim women of Senegal, where they have to suffer in the name of religion. In the novel both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou go through similar experiences, they understand each other's pain because both of them have lived almost the same problem. Each helps the other in difficult times and encourages to make positive changes that allow them to face the challenges of polygamy and patriarchy in general. Victims of the system of polygamy, they help and comfort each other. Thus, friendship gives them an opportunity to strengthen their connection and ease the pain of betrayal.

Ba focuses specially on Senegalese society and on the Islamic patriarchy that controls women's lives. Her female characters are strong hearted, supportive and co-operative, who are struggling to achieve independent identities beyond male domination. Although her characters are strong they come up through many obstacles in their lives. Women's strength is

celebrated in her work. Ba's female characters are strong enough to revolt against patriarchal domination by means of female solidarity.

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