

**Tribhuvan University**

**Nexus of Gender Trauma, Epistolary Fictional Writing and Scriptotherapy: A Study of  
Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter***

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## Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled, “Nexus of Gender Trauma, Epistolary Fictional Writing, and Scriptotherapy: A Study of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*” submitted to the Central Department of English by Sarita Tamang has been approved by the members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

*This thesis delves into the nexus of gender trauma, epistolary writing and scriptotherapy through a comprehensive analysis of Mariama Ba's semi-autobiographical novel So Long a Letter. It investigates the novel's epistolary style, and its significance in the narrative's articulation and the protagonist's mitigation of gender trauma. Additionally, this study examines how Ba's protagonist, Ramatoulaye with the aid of scriptotherapy, writes out and works through her trauma. An integral component of the research incorporates Suzette A. Henke's concept of "scriptotherapy," considering the protagonist's act of letter writing as therapeutic reenactment aimed at mitigating her gender trauma. Furthermore, this study situates itself within the broader framework of trauma theory, engaging with the ideas of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and it draws from the works of scholars including Urvashi Butalia, Kali Tal, Ritu Menon, and Kamala Bhasin. The findings of the research demonstrate how self-expression, particularly scriptotherapy helps women in exteriorizing their traumatic suffering and working through their gender trauma. Through this nexus, Ba advances an anti-patriarchal discourse and calls upon women to recognize their shared adversities and develop solidarity with fellow women in order to resist to patriarchal hegemony. As a trauma narrative, the novel provokes empathetic response and prompt critical reflections on gender trauma faced by women in every patriarchal society.*

Keywords: gender trauma, working through, scriptotherapy, epistolary writing, testimonial life-writing, patriarchal hegemony

Mariama Ba's semi-autobiographical novel *So Long a Letter* (1979) is set against the backdrop of postcolonial Senegal. The narrative unfolds through a series of letters written by the protagonist Ramatoulaye to her dearest friend Aissatou. The title itself hints at the length of the letter, suggesting the profound extent of emotional and personal revelations encapsulated within the storyline. Central to *So Long a Letter* is the issue of gender bias, in a patriarchal Islamic culture, resulting into trauma. The novel presents evidence of gender trauma induced by polygamy, forced marriage and severe social stigma associated with divorce and widowhood. Ramatoulaye is miserably affected by the loss of her husband to a younger woman, and her struggle to cope with the trauma of betrayal is apparent throughout the reflective letter to her friend. The act of letter writing, as scriptotherapy, provides her with a safe space to cope with, and work through her trauma; she terms the letter "my prop in my distress" (1). Ramatoulaye uses her 'prop', (the act of writing) letters, to address and thereby mitigate her gender trauma which she calls her 'distress'. *So Long a Letter* offers an interesting realm for academic explorations on how gender trauma is poignantly portrayed, and consequently mitigated through a distinctive combination of epistolary fictional writing and scriptotherapy. It presents the complexities of gender trauma victim's life as she mitigates and then navigates through the traumatizing intersection of gender and culture with the aid of scriptotherapy.

Mariama Ba is known as one of the pioneer Senegalese writers. In 1979, Ba's first novel *So Long a Letter* was published in French language. This 1980 Noma Award winning novel received massive critical acclaim for its portrayal of African Muslim women's predicament. Ba's second novel *Scarlet Song*, published posthumously in 1986, also garnered remarkable critical recognition. Both her novels mainly address the issues of gender-based inequality. Cheryl Wall Staunton, in a

journal based on the information about Mariama Ba's background written by Ba herself, writes, "She concludes by turning to an issue that has both social and political dimensions and that exists in most cultures: the women's plight in male-dominated society" (335). To Staunton, it is typical of Ba to call upon women to speak up against gender inequality. She further states, "It is with fervor and elegance that Ba charges women writers to draw images of the African women's present state of inequality" (335).

In *So Long a Letter*, Ba draws some actual references from her own lived experiences. Brought up within the Islamic faith, Ba attended Quranic school as well as French colonial education in Senegal. The protagonist Ramatoulaye is also a Senegalese Muslim woman who received French colonial education along with Quranic schooling. After graduating in 1947, Ba worked as a schoolteacher for twelve years. Ramatoulaye, a schoolteacher, is married to a rich and powerful government official Modou Fall which is analogous to Ba's marital relationship with Obeye Diop, a Member of Parliament. After divorcing Obeye, Ba raised her nine children by herself. Ramatoulaye chooses to stay in the marriage after Modou chooses to marry a younger girl. Nevertheless, she is forced to raise her twelve children as a single mother because Modou totally abandons her side of the family. It is evident that Ba's autobiographical reflection has given a profound resonance of reality to the novel's narrative, yet there are details that are altered.

The novel starts with recently-widowed Ramatoulaye responding to a letter from her friend Aissatou who lives in the US. The beginning of the novel establishes that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou frequently confide in each other through their correspondence. Although Ramatoulaye's husband Modou is dead shortly before the beginning of the novel, the couple had been living separately for five years. After

Modou marries a younger girl, Ramatoulaye chooses to stay in the marriage hoping that he will treat both the wives equally so that she could provide better for her children. However, Modou starts living with his new wife. Their thirty years of marriage comes to an end when Modou dies. As she observes a customary seclusion period of mourning, lasting for four months and ten days, she begins to tell her story through the letter.

After Modou leaves, Ramatoulaye lives with her children in her marital home. Though there had been no communication between Modou and her, she observes the death rituals because they had not been divorced. During the death ritual, she gets irritated by her co-wife's presence. On the one hand, she is disheartened seeing her young co-wife, Binetou getting treated to be on the same level as her. On the other, she feels pity for the young girl and says, "At the age of love and freedom from care, this child is dogged by sadness" (4). She knows the fact that Binetou is suffering because of Lady Mother-in-Law (Binetou's mother)'s greed for material possession and Modou's lust for a younger woman. Nonetheless, she wrestles with a deep sense of displacement and shattered self-esteem which triggers her trauma. She gets reminded of Modou's betrayal; she starts feeling turbulent.

Ramatoulaye writes about Aissatou's marriage to Mawdo Ba, a doctor and Modou's faithful friend. She reminisces about Mawdo's mother, referred to as Aunty Nabou. Very proud of her royal lineage, Aunty Nabou strongly believed in the significance of family heritage. She was not happy at all with Mawdo's marital union with Aissatou, a goldsmith's daughter. She kept on concealing her animosity towards Aissatou until she called her son Mawdo and handed over her niece, her namesake, young Nabou to him as his wife. After Mawdo marries his cousin, young Nobou, Aissatou refuses to stay in the marriage and divorces him. She writes a goodbye letter

to Mawdo and leaves with her children, starting with a journey to France, and subsequently being designated at the Senegalese embassy in the United States.

Mawdo is upset by Assiatou's departure which Ramatoulaye admires as "surprising courage" (32) though Ramatoulaye has no pity for him.

Three years after Aissatou's departure, Ramatoulaye's daughter Daba brings her friend Binetou home. Binetou came from a less privileged family. She was beautiful, shy and very uncomfortable by their lavish lifestyle. Soon after that, Ramatoulaye notices Binetou "going through a metamorphosis" (35). Daba tells her that Binetou receives gifts and clothing from a "sugar-daddy" (35) who pressurizes her to marry him. On the day of Binetou's wedding to the sugar-daddy, Tamsir, Modou's brother and Mawdo visit Ramatoulaye's house along with the local *Imam* to inform her about the fact that Modou has married someone else without informing her. Ramatoulaye realizes that it is Binetou who has married Modou. Daba gets enraged because of the betrayal coming from her best friend. Ramatoulaye's children suggest her to divorce Modou. Yet she hesitates to give up twenty five years of marriage. She prepares herself for "equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life" (46). Regrettably, Modou abandons Ramatoulaye and her children, leaves their marital home and chooses to live with Binetou only. Five years after they get separated, Modou dies of heart attack.

As the narrative unfolds, Ramatoulaye keeps on writing and starts talking about her present. According to Islamic custom, a man's brother or a faithful friend can inherit his wife after his demise. Ramatoulaye is against this custom of commodifying women. She outrightly rejects Modou's brother Tamsir's marriage proposal. Ramatoulaye, who has avoided speaking her mind for thirty years, finally speaks out. Later, Daouda Dieng, her former admirer over whom she had chosen



Modou Fall, proposes to marry her. She rejects him as well.

Ramatoulaye continues her letter proceeding to disclose the challenges she encountered while raising twelve children on her own. Amidst the distress stemming from her husband's polygamous marriage and his subsequent death, her children serve as strong source of comfort and assistance. However, balancing the responsibilities of raising twelve children as a single mother, she confronts financial hardships, societal judgements, and emotional turmoil. She expresses her resolute aim to secure a better future for her offspring as she steadily dedicates herself to provide all her children with equal opportunities regardless of gender. Ramatoulaye struggles with her children entering adulthood specially her daughter Aissatou, named after her dearest friend. Aissatou becomes pregnant while not married. Initially Ramatoulaye gets dumbfounded but she chooses to console her daughter and welcomes her boyfriend into the family. She is not afraid to defy societal notion of shame when it comes to her children.

The ending of *So Long a Letter* marks Ramatoulaye reflecting on her journey. She acknowledges the distress faced by women in her society and the strength it takes to navigate through them. She expresses gratitude towards her friend for the support through correspondence. The closing paragraph resonates with a sense of positivity as Ramatoulaye writes, “[H]ope still lives on within me” (90). She ensures her commitment to self-love and happiness.

Since being published, the novel has received extensive critical analysis. There is a significant volume of academic explorations concerning the novel, however, the previous researches and critical analyses predominantly investigate the issues of polygamy, womanhood and gender-based inequality.

Sylvester Matunda analyzes *So Long a Letter* as a realistic representation of a

patriarchal society where women are vulnerable to the subjugation of fellow women. She asserts that Ba highlights the importance of female solidarity as a means to resist to male dominance. On the other hand, she writes that Ramatoulaye “is full of social righteousness and personal integrity while, around her, her world crumbles” (97-98). To Matunda, Ramatoulaye is ruled by her heart more than anything else. She believes that Ramatoulaye does not advocate change for herself, but she admires and acclaims it in others. Matunda maintains that the passivity displayed by Ramatoulaye is highly criticized by radical feminists, and remarks:

Ramatoulaye’s choice to stay in a polygamous marriage reveals some weakness on her part. She does not have the guts and courage to stand on her own or take care of herself without necessarily depending on a man. As an educated and professional woman, she is capable of financially supporting herself, but she underrates her ability and still thinks that she cannot start her life anew without the presence of a male partner. She is also unable to relinquish her youthful notions of living happily-ever-after, even after her Prince Charming takes another wife, then cuts himself off from her completely. (98)

Ramatoulaye’s decision of not divorcing Modou is not based on her unyielding romantic feeling for him, as Matunda states it to be. The decision is rather layered with pragmatic considerations. She cares less about being socially righteous than her twelve children’s well-being and stability. Despite being employed as a schoolteacher, providing for twelve children financially by herself is not manageable for her. As much as motherhood is blissful and fulfilling, the complexities of maintaining selfhood while navigating motherhood cannot be disregarded. The expectation of equal treatment of co-wives is another crucial factor. She expects her husband to

adhere to this Islamic principle hoping to hold him accountable for his “act of disavowal” (12). She believes that staying in the marriage allows her to advocate for her as well as her children’s rights. Ramatoulaye does not condemn divorce; she holds Aissatou’s choice to divorce Mawdo in high regard calling it Aissatou’s “surprising courage” (32).

According to Jean Wilson’s interpretation, in *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba portrays the quest for national personal identity, the role of indigenous women in postcolonial Senegal, and their difficulty in forming their identity as doubly colonized women. He addresses the intricacies of womanhood in the novel, asserting that amidst the profound responsibility of a dutiful wife and a nurturing mother, Ramatoulaye’s personal identity is lost. He posits:

For Ramatoulaye selfhood is bound up in her full commitment to a long marriage with Modou, and motherhood, a commitment in which individuality becomes blurred in a conglomerate of family relationships. She finds fulfilment living with the idealized notion of male-female relationships that romantic love supports despite its origins in patriarchy which neither demands nor inspires equality of the sexes. (86)

Ramatoulaye remains loyal to her husband of thirty years, even after he engages in a polygamous relationship. Ramatoulaye believes in the sanctity of marriage owing to her Islamic faith. She later realizes that men have selectively interpreted and disregarded Islamic ideals for their vested interest. Such patriarchal (mis)interpretations of Islamic ideals reinforce power dynamics that results into women’s subordination.

Rizwana Habib Latha examines the issue of feminisms within an African Muslim postcolonial context, using *So Long a Letter* as a primary reference. In the

novel, both the co-wives, Ramatoulaye and Binetou, are equally exploited regardless of their age, class and academic accomplishment. The only commonality between them is their gender. Regarding the representation of such all-pervasive patriarchal prejudices in the novel, Latha contends:

The second wife is thus portrayed not so much as a rival or usurper, but more as a victim of male lust and her own mother's manipulation and greed.

Moreover, Ramatoulaye is shown to be no less disadvantaged by patriarchal forces than Binetou, despite the differences in their class and educational backgrounds. Whilst the younger woman is chosen against her will by a married man old enough to be her father, the older woman is forced to accept the fact that she has been abandoned by the same man after a quarter century of marriage, despite her middle-class origins and her attainment of a professional qualification. (27)

Both Ramatoulaye and Binetou are the victims of gender bias. Ba portrays Binetou not as a rival to Ramatoulaye but as a co-victim. Binetou is a victim of forced marriage, whereas Ramatoulaye undergoes male betrayal. As much as Ramatoulaye is traumatized by her husband's infidelity, she never expresses her hostility towards Binetou. She speaks with much compassion while talking about the younger co-wife, being mindful of the coercion she has undergone to marry a man as old as her father.

Joseph Onyema Ahaotu views the novel as Ba's exploration of feminism that avoids prejudiced depictions of individuals on their gender; her perspective leans more toward humanism than a strict feminist viewpoint. Continuing with the issue of oppression, Ahaotu pronounces partially similar, and to certain extent dissimilar outlook about *So Long a Letter*. According to him, both male and female characters are oppressed by two specific elderly females in the novel. He regards Ba's

employment of the elderly ladies Aunt Nabou and Lady Mother-in-Law as an “anti-feminist stance” and claims:

Aissatou’s husband marries young Nabou “so as not to see his mother (Aunt Nabou) die of shame and chagrin” . . . that marriage marks a successful realization of Aunt Nabou’s resentment to her son’s earlier marriage. It would be reasonable to deduce that Mawdo is as much a victim of his mother’s schemes as Aissatou is. With equal zeal, the stereotypical Lady Mother-in-law coerces young Binetou into marrying Modou. So, Aissatou, Mawdo and Young Nabou are all victims of Aunt Nabou’s hatred for her daughter-in-law. This is almost an anti-feminist stance because it portrays a female character that oppresses both male and female characters. (29)

Ahaotu’s view on Aunt Nabou and Lady Mother-in-Law as oppressors is fairly compelling. Aunt Nabou’s bitterness towards Aissatou leads her son Mawdo to marry young Nabou. Similarly, Lady Mother-in-Law succeeds in pressurizing Binetou to marry Modou so that she can get “admitted into the city’s bourgeoisie” (7). Still, the people burdened by these oppressors are only the females.

Mawdo never expresses any regrets about marrying his cousin while still being married to Aissatou. He unapologetically justifies the betrayal; he labels young Nabou as a “plate of food” (34) offered to him which he cannot resist to. He even claims that men can be unfaithful since they need “variety” (34). The idea referring to Ba’s ‘anti-feminist stance’ is quite debatable. Ba characterizes these women as oppressors not to reserve an anti-feminist stance as such, but to highlight the way women unwittingly succumb to, internalize and conform to patriarchal values as patriarchal agents. In other words, the elderly women can be seen as agents of patriarchy who accept such values and endeavor to maintain them within their family.

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, in her review, examines the novel with a particular focus on its narrative strategy and the significance of the narratee's role in shaping the meaning derived from the text. She acknowledges Aissatou's irreplaceable role as the addressee. She emphasizes on the intimacy Ramatoulaye and Aissatou share while highlighting its significance within the narrative. She opines:

. . . [T]he narratee could be a major and important character in the text, whose attention the narrator craves for survival or triumph over her distress. Taking a second example from *So Long a Letter*, one could say that the narrator's interlocutor and bosom friend from childhood is irreplaceable as the confidant to hear and prolong her intimate story, for they know each other very well and have had similar experiences of deception and abandonment in adult life by their husbands. (77)

The employment of epistolary form elevates the novel's emotional depth that gives such intimate, authentic and unmediated glimpses into Ramatoulaye's inner thoughts. The relationship between Ramatoulaye and her confidant Aissatou, who is also a gender trauma victim, plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative in a way that helps the readers to empathize with her and better understand her emotional burden.

The aforementioned reviews on *So Long a Letter*, for the most part, discuss the ideas of gender inequalities, whereas this study necessitates a more integrated analysis that explores the interplay of gender trauma, epistolary narrative and scriptotherapy. The present study revolves around comprehending how gender trauma, epistolary form and scriptotherapy intertwine to unravel the relationship between individual trauma and culture, along with *So Long a Letter's* wider implications as a trauma narrative. There is a lack of comprehensive research that explores the interconnectedness of these three elements in order to analyze the novel

as a trauma narrative.

The present study undertakes a comprehensive examination of *So Long a Letter* aiming to uncover the interconnectedness of gender-based trauma, the narrative technique of epistolary writing, and the utilization of epistolary writing as a form of scriptotherapy. In so doing, the study seeks to explore the multifaceted dimensions of trauma inflicted upon individuals due to gender-based disparities, within an Islamic society, while scrutinizing epistolary writing not only as a vehicle for self-expression but also as an aid in grappling with traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the study endeavors to elucidate the role of scriptotherapy, in the form of epistolary writing, in facilitating the mitigation of such trauma.

At the core of this study lies a cognizance that *So Long a Letter* is profoundly engaged in the depiction of gender-based trauma, portraying the female protagonist battling with oppressive patriarchal structures. The narrative's epistolary structure, composed of the protagonist's intimate letters, presents a distinctive perspective for articulating and mitigating her trauma. Within this specific context, the epistolary writing serves as a literary space where the intersection of gender trauma and scriptotherapy emerges as a crucial aspect in the protagonist's articulation and mitigation of trauma, personal growth and the novel's narrative progression.

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from gender trauma theory and Suzette A. Henke's notion of "scriptotherapy". Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma, Dominick LaCapra's notions of "acting out" and "working through," and the insights of scholars such as Kali Tal, Urbashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin, who advocate for a gendered analysis of trauma will be used for the study of gender trauma in the novel.

Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an overwhelming incident which is delayed

and fragmented and often disrupts the normal process of narrative and memory. Her notion of trauma will be used to analyze the instances of gender trauma, a psychological distress experienced by individuals as a result of gender-based inequality, in the novel. Dominick LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through" offer a dynamic framework for examining how the protagonist in the novel responds to her experiences of gender-based trauma. According to LaCapra "acting out" is a psychological defense mechanism with which individuals express repressed trauma or emotions through behavior rather than reflection or understanding. On the other hand, "working through" is a process of engaging with historical trauma or difficult past experiences in a way that promotes deeper comprehension and potential healing rather than repeating destructive patterns. The inclusion of Kali Tal, Urbashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin's ideas facilitates a gender-based analysis within the context of the novel. Their perspectives encourage a deeper understanding of the intersection between trauma and gender.

In addition to this, the study will undertake an examination of the epistolary form of the novel. Analyzing the use of letters as a narrative device allows for a nuanced investigation of how trauma is communicated and mitigated through written correspondence. Epistolary form is a literary technique distinguished by its reliance on letters, written correspondence, or various personal documents as the central narrative tools, facilitating the storytelling through the exchange of these written materials among the characters. The epistolary form predominantly appears in the works of female authors, with renowned examples including Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Finally, Suzette Henke's concept of scriptotherapy, the act of re-enactment of traumatic events through writing for therapeutic purpose, will be utilized to study how



writing functions as a tool to mitigate the protagonist's trauma. By synthesizing the theoretical frameworks of trauma studies, gender analysis, and literary theory, this study illuminates how the novel operates as a form of trauma narrative, offering insights into the portrayal and potential healing of gender-based trauma within its narrative.

Ramatoulaye, along with other female characters, undergoes traumatic encounters as the result of oppressive patriarchal values. Throughout the seclusion period following her husband's death, in the letters to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye contemplates her predicament as an exploited woman. She starts with writing, "The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness" (8). As much as she is prepared to ruminate upon her past, she is equally scared to relive those traumatic encounters. Her society's patriarchal structure approves of men's authority and domination over women leading to women's marginalization. Talking about the correlation of power imbalance, marginalization, and feasibility of traumatization, Kali Tal writes:

Within a society, there may be several targeted groups, whose members are subject of traumatization in greater or lesser degrees. Targeted groups can and should be examined both in relation to the dominant group and to each other. In the United States, Jews are only one of the several targeted groups. Though discriminated against, Jews do not suffer from violent racism or systematic economic oppression. Other targeted groups women and racial minorities, for example are at higher risk of traumatic assault. (9)

As per patriarchal binary, women are the 'targeted group' since men are the dominant one. Power is distributed among men and exercised upon women; women are subject

of traumatization. In *So Long a Letter*, the trauma inflicted upon Ramatoulaye and other female characters, the members of such targeted group, is solely based on the gender biases prevalent in Senegalese patriarchal Islamic society. Her ‘memories’ are full of traumatic experiences owing to the society’s patriarchal ‘bitterness’ towards females.

Poststructuralist trauma theorist Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” (11). She states the events of this kind “are not fully grasped as they occur” (91). In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye experiences similar dreadful circumstance when her husband marries a younger girl. As she attempts to express her extreme sadness to Aissatou, her words display the complexity of her emotions:

My efforts cannot for long take my mind off my disappointment. I think of the suckling baby, no sooner born than orphaned. I think of the blind man who will never see his child’s smile. I think of the cross the one-armed man has to bear. I think . . . But my despair persists, but my rancour remains, but the waves of an immense sadness break in me! (12)

Ramatoulaye tries to divert her thoughts from this catastrophic incident. There is an ongoing struggle with grasping the trauma and regulating the emotions simultaneously. Though she strives to describe her disappointment by comparing it with many instances of helplessness, the ellipsis substantiates her plight of not being able to articulate the experience wholly.

Ramatoulaye seeks to cope with and express the emotional pain caused by the trauma. While continuing her effort to squeeze her pain out, she gets quite impulsive; she loses conscious control over her thought which is excessively repetitive. She asks, “Was it madness, weakness, irresistible love? What inner confusion led Modou Fall to

marry Binetou” (11)? And she repeats, “Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou” (12)? With a regard to such repetitive thought pattern, historical trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra’s notion of “acting out” is worth quoting: “As in acting out in general, one possessed, however vicariously, by the past and reliving its traumatic scenes may be tragically incapable of acting responsibly or behaving in an ethical manner involving consideration for others as others” (28). As the result of trauma, intrusive thoughts lead to irresponsible or irrational behavior. Ramatoulaye’s conscious intent is uncontrolled; she relives traumatic memory and that triggers her “acting out” behavior in the form of repetition which she is unaware of.

Apostrophe, a literary device with which a speaker addresses an absent person, an abstract concept, or an inanimate object as if that were a living or present entity, accentuates Ramatoulaye’s acting out practice. Progressing with the letter to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye makes a sudden shift to her deceased husband Modou. With the unexpected swap of addressee, she directly talks to her perpetrator, “Modou Fall, the very moment you bowed before me, asking me to dance, I knew you were the one I was waiting for” (13). Then she does something that she never did when Modou was alive, she confronts him, “I no longer scorn my mother’s reserve concerning you, for a mother can instinctively feel where her child’s happiness lies” (14). She reflects on the moment they first met, drawing attention to the persevering affection she held for Modou. With a strong urge to notify him of the heart-rending damage he had done to her, she recalls her mother’s intuitive warning and indicates the recognition of her mother’s wisdom since Modou’s infidelity proved it later. Ramatoulaye does not realize that her husband is deceased as she is deeply immersed in the past, reliving the traumatic events tragically hinders her ability to act sensibly. Accordingly,

incorporation of apostrophe in the narrative also adds depth and emotional resonance to the storytelling, representing Ramatoulaye's internal conflict, complex emotions and psychological impact as a person who is "acting out" trauma.

In accordance with the Islamic practice known as *mirasse*, the most unfiltered and intimate aspects of Modou's life become exposed following his demise. During the ritual, Ramatoulaye starts thinking of his betrayal:

The *mirasse* commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed. These exposures crudely explain a man's life. 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. (9)

Ramatoulaye expresses her view on his abandonment of the family in order to live with a younger woman. She feels that he had no concern about the family. To her, Modou's disregard and abandonment of her and the children is a breach of trust. The feeling of abandonment, rejection and betrayal caused by the person she loved and trusted becomes the major cause of her gender trauma in a patriarchal society.

Jenny Edkins, in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, delineates similar sort of view about trauma that involves treachery or a betrayal of trust. She argues:

. . . [T]o produce what are seen as symptoms of trauma - an event has to be more than just a situation of utter powerlessness. In an important sense, it has to entail something else. It has to involve a betrayal of trust as well. There is an extreme menace, but what is special is where the threat of violence comes from. What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are

convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger. (4)

Edkins maintains that an event becomes traumatic not only because an individual lacks the control over that specific event. Distinctively, it also requires a betrayal of trust thus a sense of threat from the trusted source of protection. Hence, trauma is marked by a fundamental breach of trust and the source of threat that is otherwise trusted in. In reference to this, Ramatoulaye's trauma is a product of painful betrayal of trust. Her husband marries a younger woman without her knowledge, fundamentally breaking the commitment in their marriage. She has no control over the incident because the patriarchal society intensifies her helplessness as a woman. Her trauma becomes even more grievous when a sense of threat emerges from her supposed source of protection, her husband.

Nobody is by her side. Her in-laws and the society persuade her to accept the fate; the local religious leader, *Imam* says, "There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side" (36). The *Imam* shows no sympathy while sharing the news about Modou's second marriage:

And the *Imam*, who had finally got hold of a leading thread, held tightly on to it. He went on quickly, as if the words were glowing embers in his mouth:

Yes, Modou Fall, but, happily, he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks be to God. All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place. (37)

The *Imam*'s words suggest that polygamy is an accepted practice, not an unusual or scandalous occurrence in their society. He justifies the second marriage because it has been conducted within the bounds of religious legitimacy. The Senegalese Islamic

setting approves of polygamy. However, ideally it is practised under certain conditions outlined in the Quran. This principle is implemented to ensure protection of widows and orphans, particularly in the situations of conflict when there is an excess of women in need of protection. The Quran allows a Muslim man to marry up to four wives, with the condition that he treats each wife equally and justly. Though Modou's second marriage is accepted by the Islamic society, a wife like Ramatoulaye feels that her husband is not loyal to her.

Nonetheless, Ramatoulaye chooses to stay in the marriage with the hope that her husband treats both the wives equally. She says, "From then on, my life changed. I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life. I was left with empty hands" (46). Ramatoulaye ultimately finds herself feeling neglected and disappointed. Modou has a perfect pretext of religious legitimacy for justifying his betrayal, still he does not conform to the directed conditions of polygamous relationship. This is how men choose to (mis)interpret and disregard the Islamic ideals for their absolute interest. Jenny Edkins brings forth similar idea of the relationship between revelation of harsh realities and traumatic experiences. She writes, "Events of the sort we call traumatic are overwhelming but they are also a revelation. They strip away the diverse commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility" (5). She claims that traumatic events expose the fragility of societal structures. To her, established norms and values may prove inadequate to provide support to the traumatized person. Despite Ramatoulaye's longing for her husband to treat his wives equally, she finds herself disillusioned by his abandonment. Modou escapes both responsibility and punishment. Her understanding of the social order is subverted; she

relies on the Islamic ideals for security and stability only to find out deeper truths about women's vulnerability in patriarchal Islamic society. Her trauma comes with a revelation of the impunity enjoyed by men in Islamic society.

With respect to Muslim men exploiting Islamic ideals, Islamic feminist Margot Badran claims, “. . . [T]he Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices” (247). Badran believes that patriarchal ideology interprets the Islamic texts and traditions to justify gender inequality and discrimination. She argues, when interpreted correctly, Islamic ideals promote gender equity and social justice.

Ramatoulaye talks about other gender trauma victims too. She writes, “I had heard of too many misfortunes not to understand my own. There was your own case, Aissatou, the cases of many other women, despised, relegated or exchanged, who were abandoned like a worn-out or out-dated *boubou*” (41). She marks her awareness of the widespread suffering faced by women in her society. The words ‘despised’ and ‘neglected’ draw attention to the marginalization and mistreatment of women in polygamous relationship. Concerning the marginalized position of women, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin remark, “Women’s are the dissonant voices which are ordinarily deflected, ignored, subordinated, excluded or destroyed” (56). Women face various pervasive challenges which devalues and actively suppresses their voices. Ramatoulaye points out the fact that women are positioned in a place of lesser importance. They are left out of important discussions regarding their husbands’ polygamous relationship which directly affects their self-esteem. Women cannot challenge or question the circumstances because they are severely silenced. They are socially devalued by the presence of their co-wives. The metaphor of being

‘abandoned like a worn-out or out-dated boubou’ brings into focus the brutal and degrading aspect of polygamy. By comparing women to a traditional robe, Ramatoulaye brings to the fore the objectification of women and their traumatic feeling of being treated as disposable and displaceable. In this manner, women are traumatized by their displacement and the lack of redress to their grievance living in a patriarchal society.

As far as women’s marginalization is concerned, Urvashi Butalia mentions the cultural silencing of women, “Women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything worthwhile to say, a stance that was often corroborated by men” (126). Butalia identifies a historical pattern of women being silenced in patriarchal cultures. Patriarchal societal norms impose a submissive role to women. Such biased societal norms have led women to underestimate their self-worth and often refrain from speaking about themselves because they are made to think that their perspectives are not worthy of consideration. Men reinforce and enjoy women’s self-denial in various forms.

Ramatoulaye’s sense of self-worth is shattered after Modou marries Binetou. The sense of displacement haunts her in such a way that she introspects her physical changes. She considers her natural physical changes and ageing the cause of Modou’s lust for another woman:

I looked at myself in the mirror. My eyes took in the mirror’s eloquence. I had lost my slim figure, as well as ease and quickness of movement. My stomach protruded from beneath the wrapper that hid the calves developed by the impressive number of kilometres walked since the beginning of my existence. Suckling had robbed my breasts of their round firmness. I could not delude myself: youth was deserting my body. (41)



The reference to a loss of a slim figure, protruding stomach, changes in breasts' firmness, and lack of agility are typical experiences of ageing. Ramatoulaye feels guilty for not maintaining the societal expectation of youthful appearance. She compares herself with Binetou; she finds herself unappealing. The society values women's appearance over their identity. A woman's worth and desirability is based on her physical appearance. Ramatoulaye's self-evaluation demonstrates how a woman's value diminishes as she ages. This is a fine specimen of patriarchal hegemony and objectification of females in patriarchal societies.

To understand patriarchal hegemony, Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" is worthwhile discussing. As stated by Gramsci the function of "hegemony" comprises:

The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (12)

Gramsci's concept of "spontaneous consent" indicates that the masses embrace prevailing social and political norms and structures without overt coercion; their compliance appears voluntary. Every society has a dominant fundamental group that tends to change the direction of social life. That dominant group, historically, holds a position of authority and privilege. Thus, Gramsci believes that hegemony is consensual, yet the 'consent' is 'historically' caused by the confidence of the dominant group.

In patriarchal societies, a dominant group of men holds significant power and influence, shaping the societal norms. The historically established authority and

privilege of men makes women to trust in men and try to conform to the roles validated by them. In the same way, Ramatoulaye's guilty feeling for not maintaining the societal expectation of youthful appearance exemplifies patriarchal hegemony. Her apparent 'consent' is more complex than it seems to be; it is influenced by historical factors and power dynamics prevailing in a patriarchal Islamic society.

The adept utilization of the structure in *So Long a Letter* serves as a channel for readers to establish an intimate connection with the protagonist, Ramatoulaye. Regarding the intimate nature of epistolary writings, Walid El Hamamsy writes, "They are forms of writing to the moment and as such lay the foundation for an uninhibited confession of intimate feelings and for an unmediated expression of thoughts" (151). As the readers immerse in the contents of Ramatoulaye's intimate letters, they are afforded an earnest glimpse into her innermost thoughts, thereby fostering a connection with her. This intimate proximity facilitates an empathy for her challenges, aspirations, and sorrows, rendering her character relatable to the readers.

Hamamsy further writes about the "undecidedness", that presents a spellbinding effect on readers, of events in an epistolary writing:

. . [T]he heart is agitated by hopes and fears, on events undecided. It is this undecidedness that gives the reader the feeling that s/he is taking part in the writing process, a feeling that naturally appeals to her/him, thus making the form become even more popular. . . This intimacy attracts both the reader and the writer of the epistle. The reader feels privileged to be able to partake in the thoughts and feelings of the writer which are expressed to her/him and the fictional reader(s) alone. The letter writer, on the other hand, is given a chance to voice feelings and thoughts that s/he might not otherwise have been able to do due to social conventions and the nature of public discourse. (152)

The utilization of the epistolary narrative introduces a captivating layer to the storytelling which effectively engages the reader and compels them to eagerly turn the pages in excitement for subsequent revelations or unexpected turns of events.

Through the lens of personal accounts, Ramatoulaye's letters provide her with a chance to voice her feelings. She engages in a thoughtful analysis of complexities that envelop gender dynamics within the society.

Aissatou's role as a confidant is indispensable in the novel. The profoundness of their friendship serves as a source of emotional sustenance amidst their individual ordeals, both having experienced the tumultuous repercussions of polygamous marriages. The friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou illustrates the idea that solidarity grows stronger in the face of adversity. These two women share the burdens of polygamy, endure abandonment by their husbands, and fight with societal norms. Remarkably, their friendship not only continues but also prospers to offer them solace throughout the novel. This dynamic exemplifies the resilience and fortitude that can be drawn from relationship with fellow women. In order to express her agony Ramatoulaye needs somebody to confide in; she seeks for Aissatou's attention. She writes, "I conjure you up. . . My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times" (1).

The novel employs the epistolary narrative style to intensify the exceptional effect in its portrayal of gender trauma. This narrative approach facilitates an introspective exploration of gender trauma, a depth of understanding that would be less attainable through conventional narrative forms. Through her letters, readers bear witness to her evolving emotional journey and the dreadful impact of societal norms on her self-esteem and identity. This direct access to her inner world cultivates a heightened sense of empathy and understanding regarding the trauma she endures.

The epistolary form also constructs a generous space for the protagonist's evolution which she might not have been able to do otherwise. While writing the letters, Ramatoulaye engages in deep introspection about her life. As Ramatoulaye articulates her emotions through these letters, readers are presented with a unique vantage point into her gradual transformation, from a sorrowful recently widowed co-wife to an empowered woman adeptly navigating the multifaceted prejudice of society. This gradual shift is eloquently communicated through her correspondence, offering readers a meticulously detailed journey of her character growth. The desperate and perplexed woman in the beginning of the novel maintains a faith in better future in the end.

Hamamsy believes that there exists a remarkable interconnectedness between epistolary genre and a traumatized person revisiting trauma in his/her writing:

In light of the therapeutic view of letter writing, it is worth considering how these letters help their writers gain a better understanding of themselves. In both novels, letter writing becomes a process of self-discovery, ending in a better understanding of oneself as well as one's surroundings and situations.

(163)

He expresses how traumatized women can use epistolary form to realize self-discovery and mitigation of trauma. It is primarily because letter writing itself functions as a therapy for letter writers. When a traumatized person engages in letter writing, the letter becomes a means of critically examining the problematics of his/her trauma and disturbing predicament in a rather structured and deliberate manner. The ultimate outcome of such exploration is the individual's psychological integration and healing. Thusly, epistolary genre per se offers such therapeutic benefits to its writers.

Likewise, with an optimistic outlook on life Ramatoulaye says, "Despite

everything---disappointments and humiliations ---hope still lives on within me” (90). There is an intersection of hope and bitter reality. While hope serves as a coping mechanism, Ramatoulaye attains the ability to balance it with a realistic understanding of the challenges she faces in a patriarchal society. This statement signals a turning point in Ramatoulaye’s journey that suggests a shift from despair to renewed determination. With respect to the significance of epistolary writing as a deliberate act of coping with adversity, Hamamsy states, “Writing letters is moved from the sphere of the physical act of holding a pen and writing on a piece of paper into that of human projection and mediated reflection” (170).

The title “So Long a Letter”, an extended letter, is a direct hint at the novel’s epistolary form. The term “so long” in the title can be interpreted as a representation of the duration and depth of the emotional journey undertaken by Ramatoulaye. Since patriarchy is an enduring and firmly established institution, gender trauma is a prolonged and ongoing struggle for women. Ramatoulaye’s long letter signifies the extended duration of time during which she has been carrying the emotional burden. It conveys that she has endured the pain and suffering for an extended period which urges her to release these emotions through writing all the more poignantly. The term “letter” demonstrates the therapeutic importance of self-expression through writing, Ramatoulaye’s use of letter-writing as a form of scriptotherapy. Within the context of gender trauma, especially in the repressive society depicted in the novel, Ramatoulaye’s letters serve as a vital tool for self-discovery and healing. The letter offers her a secure private space to confront and contemplate on the traumatic experiences. In a society where women’s voices are frequently silenced, Ramatoulaye’s letter stands as a powerful testament to the significance of breaking that silence and bearing witness to gender trauma. Through her extended letter, she

not only communicates her own pain but also creates a narrative that resonates with countless other women who have experienced similar trauma.

With relation to gender trauma and scriptotherapy, the title is justified by the novel's representation of the enduring nature of the protagonist's emotional pain, the therapeutic value of writing, and the significance of women's voices in addressing and healing from gender-based trauma. It encapsulates the central theme of prolonged oppression of women and emphasizes the power of self-expression as a tool for understanding and mitigating trauma. Thus, Mariama Ba's choice of epistolary narrative technique enriches the novel's portrayal of the intersection between the complexities of gender trauma and its assuagement through scriptotherapy.

Scriptotherapy takes on a central role in the narrative of the novel, demonstrating the therapeutic power of written communication. The act of writing the letter allows Ramatoulaye to exteriorize her feelings in a way that spoken communication or speech often cannot achieve. Ramatoulaye's initiation to write letters is similar to what Suzette A. Henke terms as scriptotherapy. Suzette A. Henke, in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-writing*, describes scriptotherapy as "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (vii). Henke's idea of the "shattered subject" pertains to the psychological and emotional condition encountered by individuals who have endured trauma or emotional turmoil. To Henke, scriptotherapy is a process that such individuals act in accordance with in order to 'work through' traumatic experiences. This process involves the deliberate act of revisiting and reenacting a traumatic event through the medium of writing, all with the ultimate aim of attaining therapeutic advantages. The act of writing allows individuals to exteriorize their emotions, confront their trauma, and potentially find a sense of healing.

Engaging in scriptotherapy Ramatoulaye with a safe and structured outlet to ‘work through’ her trauma. Concerning this matter, Dominick LaCapra writes about “working through”, that is the coping mechanism of trauma:

The processes of working through including mourning and modes of critical thought and practice involve the possibility of making distinctions or developing articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistance to un-decidability, particularly when the latter is tantamount to confuse and the obliteration or blurring of all distinction. (56)

LaCapra asserts that “working through” is a coping process of trauma that involves mourning and critical reflection. He assumes critical reflection enables a traumatized person to acquire a critical distance from a traumatic experience to analyze it and establish distinctions between past and present. However, this does not imply a complete detachment from the past. While the distinctions of past and present are recognized as complicated, “working through”, nevertheless, plays a crucial role in limiting and resisting to complete ambiguity and erasure of the differences. With an attempt to ‘work through’ gender trauma, Ramatoulaye begins with an acknowledgment of her personal distress and her primary motivation to start writing a letter. She says, “I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress” (1). Her words suggest that writing is her coping mechanism, a tool to navigate and alleviate her distress. Here, the letter is described as a ‘prop,’ implying that the letter goes beyond merely documenting her experiences; it also communicates that the letter offers her a mode of critical thinking.

Ramatoulaye starts a retrospective account to maintain a critical distance from her traumatic experience that helps her analyze her past and present, cause and effect

of the circumstances she underwent. She prepares herself for reflective thinking: “Aissatou, my friend, perhaps I am boring you by relating what you already know. I have never observed so much, because I have never been so concerned” (4). She is aware that her best friend is acquainted with her misery, even so she is determined to discuss it because reevaluating past events holds a great importance to her in relation to seeking clarity and her mental well-being.

The semi-autobiographical nature of this novel offers the consideration that both the author and the protagonist engage in scriptotherapy. Henke argues that scriptotherapy is a “subjective reconstruction” (xv) of the subject’s consciousness. She views scriptotherapy, in the form of life writing, especially autobiography, as such type of reconstruction which allows the ‘shattered subject’ to rebel against the traumatizing dominant culture:

Autobiography has always offered the tantalizing possibility of reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically inflected by language, history, and social imbrication. As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture. Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world. (xv - xvi)

Autobiography offers the possibility of reinventing one’s identity. Autobiographical narratives are not static retellings of past events but dynamic spaces where individuals can reshape their self-concept and personal history. Personal narratives are deeply



influenced by the linguistic, historical, and social contexts in which they are situated. An individual's autobiography cannot be entirely independent of these external influences. Life-writing encourages an author to critically reassess his/her past experiences. This process involves revisiting and reevaluating personal history with the aim of gaining new insights or perspectives. Henke's concept of the author instantiating the 'alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text' suggests that autobiography allows individuals to transform their marginalized or estranged identities into flexible narratives. This transformation implies a level of creativity and agency in crafting one's life story. Henke also highlights the potential for autobiographical narratives to challenge dominant cultural norms and provide a platform for personal and political empowerment. Being a woman in an Islamic Senegalese society, Mariama Ba makes an attempt to critically reexamine her past and reinvent her identity through her crafting of the 'pliable' character Ramatoulaye.

Correspondingly, in this semi-autobiographical novel, the alteration of autobiographical details allows the author to deviate from real-life events in order to craft more engaging, poignant and political narrative. Mariama Ba's life is full of miserable marital experience. Ba entered into three marriages of her own volition yet dissolved all three through divorce. In every patriarchal society, there is a severe stigma associated to divorce that views divorced women as failures in their marital duties. Despite the hardships, a woman is expected to maintain her marriage and familial harmony. In her narrative, Ba crafts her 'semifictive protagonist' who chooses to remain in her marriage though her husband abandons her. Ramatoulaye says 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). In contrast, the protagonist's friend, Aissatou, takes the step to divorce and finds

happiness. Through this comparison, Ba seeks to justify her own decision to divorce in real life and responds to the criticism she faced. Ba's protagonist refrains from entering into another marriage, while Ba herself experienced three unhappy marriages. She aims to convey the idea that women's happiness cannot solely depend on their pursuit of romantic relationships. The paradox lies in the fact that even marrying a person of one's choice does not guarantee happiness in a patriarchal society.

Ba, in her 'counternarrative', rebels 'against the values and practices of a dominant culture' of patriarchy in a myriad of ways. Most notable is the employment of the nameless character Lady Mother-In-Law who represents archetypal agent of patriarchy. She forces her daughter Binetou to marry Modou Fall, a man as old as her father, only for material gain; she treats her daughter like an object which she can exchange for a certain monetary value: "Newly admitted into the city's bourgeoisie by her daughter's marriage, she too reaps banknotes. As for her silent, haggard child, she remains a stranger in these circles" (7). Despite being the mother of a recently-widowed young girl, she withholds from offering solace to her daughter rather her primary concern is to accumulate financial resources for the price of her daughter's desirable body. The author characterizes Lady Mother-In-Law as a symbolic concept rather than a specific individual.

The politics behind not naming the character shows the yearning to demoralize the establishment of patriarchy, giving her a status as an object, symbol, or representative of a larger concept of patriarchy, which is a patriarchal agent. On the contrary, she empathizes with Binetou referring to her as a 'silent, haggard child' who is alienated in the gathering of the city's bourgeoisie. Ba portrays her not as Ramatoulaye's rival but as a victim of Modou's lust and her own mother's material

greed.

Henke claims that scriptotherapy in the form of testimonial life-writing provides individuals with a means to articulate their indescribable emotions, confront the trauma they have experienced, and potentially discover a path toward cathartic healing:

Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no-one—to a world that will judge personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or as thinly disguised fiction. No matter. It is through the very process of rehearsing and reenacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis. (xix)

The ambiguity in addressing ‘everyone or no one’ suggests that life-writers have a larger audience in mind however, they also struggle with the challenge of maintaining authenticity and appealing to a broader audience. Testimonial life-writing is neither a completely accurate historical witnessing nor a totally fictionalized narrative. It is rather a blurring of fact and fiction utilized as a medium to engage in an ongoing dialogue concerning the life-writer’s victimization. Nevertheless, testimonial life-writing involves deliberate reenacting of mental survival that assists cathartic relief. Thus, to a life-writer, writing personal trauma narrative can have both therapeutic and political value.

Likewise, Ba portrays Ramatoulaye’s experiences which resonate with larger issues of gender inequality and the subjugation of women, particularly connected to the gender dynamics in Senegalese society. The novel is Ba’s ‘discursive medium’ through which she blurs fact and fiction by drawing from her lives experience and even altering the details with her creative freedom in order to appeal to a larger

audience. Ramatoulaye's struggles in a polygamous marriage and the loss of her husband to a younger woman exemplify the deeply entrenched gender disparities. In defiance of societal norms, Ramatoulaye actively challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. Her choices, such as rejecting remarriage and prioritizing her children's education, constitute acts of rebellion against established conventions, transforming the personal into a political statement. Initiating the process of composing a letter about her experiences provides Ramatoulaye a means to reenact, comprehend and 'work through' her trauma and also to discover recovery.

Ramatoulaye's expression captures the idea of writing as a response to distress, presenting the letter as both a political tool and a symbolic supportive structure. Ramatoulaye finds her agency in writing. Through her writing, she discovers a sense of empowerment. She points at the need of patriarchy to give women their due credit:

Try explaining to them that a working woman is no less responsible for her home. Try explaining to them that nothing is done if you do not step in, that you have to see to everything, do everything all over again: cleaning up, cooking, ironing. There are the children to be washed, the husband to be looked after. 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. (20)

She addresses the dual responsibilities faced by working women in managing both their professional careers and their household duties. She emphasizes the need to communicate to others that a working woman is just as responsible for her home as anyone else. She asks for the commendation for dealing with demanding nature of these responsibilities. Women possess certain level of skill and competence to balance

these dual roles. In essence, she demands the importance of recognizing and valuing the contributions of working women in both the workplace and the domestic sphere. She boldly seeks recognition for her accomplishments and reshapes her identity, transcending the roles of a mother and a wife to asserting herself as a competent working woman.

Ramatoulaye starts acknowledging the importance of resilience and a strong will in coping with distress and adversity. Getting engaged in scriptotherapy encourages her to have a proactive and positive approach to life's difficulties. She writes:

To overcome distress when it sits upon you demands strong will. When one thinks that with each passing second one's life is shortened, one must profit intensely from this second; it is the sum of all the lost or harvested seconds that makes for a wasted or a successful life. Brace oneself to check despair and get it into proportion! A nervous breakdown waits around the corner for anyone who lets himself wallow in bitterness. Little by little, it takes over your whole being. (41)

Ramatoulaye does not dismiss the bitterness or suffering experienced by women but suggests a potential for inner transformation and healing. While women do not have control over traumatic circumstances, they can choose how to respond to with stability. The call to 'brace oneself to check despair' recognizes the significance of resisting to gender trauma's harmful impact on women's mental state. Through, Ramatoulaye's voice, Ba calls upon women to resist and rise.

While "working through" her trauma with the aid of scriptotherapy, Ramatoulaye contemplates her trauma and problematics surrounding it. The critical thinking involving retrospection brings forth the patriarchal prejudices, particularly

polygamy. She understands the complexity of the issue of polygamy. She refuses to get into a polygamous marriage with her admirer Daouda Dieng: “You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change” (68). As she is directly exploited by polygamy, she thinks of Daouda’s wife and refrains from hurting her. She acknowledges that men’s lustful benefit of variety or ‘change’ come at the cost of injustice upon the women involved.

Ramatoulaye rejects her brother-in-law’s marriage proposal as well. She writes about this to Aissatou, “Tamsir and Daouda having been rejected, there were no more barriers between the suitors and me. I then watched filing past and besieging me old men in search of easy revenue, young men in search of adventure to occupy their leisure. My successive refusals gave me in town the reputation of a ‘lioness’ or ‘mad woman’” (70). She observes old men seeking financial gain and younger men pursuing her for the excitement to spend their free time. As she continues to decline these suitors, she knows that either she gets applauded as a strong-headed woman, ‘lioness’ or criticized for defying the tradition, being called a ‘mad woman’; she does not care at all.

As stated by Henke, “narrative recovery” (xxii) is an ideal aftereffect of scriptotherapy, which is “meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject” (xxii). A ‘traumatically shattered subject’ is deeply affected by trauma to the point of fragmentation. To a traumatized person, ‘narrative recovery’ serves a dual purpose, firstly, enabling the ‘shattered subject’ to recount past experience and secondly, facilitating his/her psychological reconciliation. Ramatoulaye’s choice of defying the traditions and getting prepared for the outcome, either applause or

criticism, confirms her psychological recovery and purposefulness in challenging patriarchal norms.

To conclude, *So Long a Letter*, the novel by Mariama Ba depicts the intersection of gender trauma with cultural and religious dimensions. Ramatoulaye's experience as an educated, middle-class Muslim woman provides a nuanced perspective on the pervasive nature of patriarchy. The narrative also illustrates how individual narratives of gender trauma can become a driving force for collective empowerment. Ramatoulaye's decision to share her experiences with her friend Aissatou through her letters represents a politically charged act. Her personal story resonates with other women with whom she develops solidarity and encourages the recognition of shared adversities. The novel suggests incorporation of personal stories as a method to challenge oppressive norms. Ramatoulaye's act of documenting her experiences becomes a form of political resistance and a means to exteriorize her inner life and mitigate gender trauma within her society.

Furthermore, the narrative highlights the dissonance between public facades and private truths. In a society that expects women to maintain an outward appearance of contentment despite enduring such suffering, the letters become a sanctuary where Ramatoulaye can candidly articulate her genuine sentiments without the fear of societal judgment. This sharp dichotomy accentuates the incongruity between societal expectations and Ramatoulaye's internal turmoil, amplifying the impact of the gender trauma on women's lives. In addition to this, Ramatoulaye's act of writing letter and consequently mitigating her trauma signifies the importance of self-expression and especially scriptotherapy.

Additionally, by altering the autobiographical details, Ba provides more relatable perspective on the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. Ba

recognizes the therapeutic advantage of epistolary genre. Ba acknowledges the therapeutic advantages of epistolary style and incorporates it in the novel. The epistolary narrative elevates the novel's emotional depth presenting the intimate world of the protagonist. The relationship between Ramatoulaye and her confidant Aissatou plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative.

In essence, *So Long a Letter* presents a distinctive combination of gender-based trauma, epistolary writing, and scriptotherapy to illuminate the plight of women within a patriarchal society while highlighting the significance of scriptotherapy as a means to exteriorize, validate and mitigate the anguish borne of gender trauma. The novel's choice of the epistolary format, notably employing Ramatoulaye's closest friend as her confidant, serves as a particularly essential means for the poignant portrayal of gender trauma in the context of the Senegalese Islamic society. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Ba artfully blends factual accounts with fictional elements; the dichotomy between fact and fiction does not prevail in the novel. This creative synthesis is not only aimed at maintaining authenticity but also crafting a more compelling and resonant narrative, thereby advancing an anti-patriarchal discourse. Through the eloquent voice of the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, Ba extends an earnest appeal to women, encouraging them to counteract the dominion of patriarchal norms with a steadfast commitment to female solidarity, self-expression and resilience. As a trauma narrative, with a poignant portrayal of gender trauma within the context of specific patriarchal Islamic culture, *So Long a Letter* provokes empathetic emotional response and prompt critical reflections on the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society.



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