
Female Subjectivity: A Re-reading of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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ABSTRACT: *Polygamy in Africa has being in existence before the advent of religion, western education and colonization. Once upon a time, polygamy had numerous advantages, so much so that the benefits superseded the disadvantages. But this is not the case today. Over the years, scholars from different fields of knowledge have contributed to the discourse of polygamy, while trying to investigate its necessity in the lives of the each individual in the family. While most were against it, few were in support of it. Bâ explores the problems of polygamy, patriarchy and female oppression in the context of African and Western cultures. She critiques polygamy by exploring its cons in the lives of women. This essay looks at the contribution imaginative literature has to offer to this discourse. Hence, this essay examines the portrayal of polygamy as it relates to female subjectivity in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*; especially how religion and society contributes to the oppression of women and children in a polygamous relationship.*

KEY WORDS: polygamy, society, culture, religion, family.

INTRODUCTION

Those women who struggle without giving up hope herald the impending change...change in attitude for both men and women as they evaluate and re-evaluate their social roles... Rosemary Moyana. One way or the other, socio-political, socio-economic and cultural reasons have been used to back up the idea of polygamy. According to James Fanske, reasons such as war and economic improvement have been used to support polygamy in time past. In her book, *Polygamy: past and Present*, she gives an example of a research she conducted in Paraguay, in which : the war killed most of the male population”(15). As a result, a situation was created in which two or three women had to be married to a single man. She also illustrated her stand with the situation in Iraq where “polygamy has become a coping strategy for war widows” (15). One of the advantages of polygamy in the past is the fact that it helps to balance the population of communities due to the large number of the women when compared to that of men. In order words, due to situations like war which cost the lives of the men, polygamy was reasonable as it will reduced the number of unmarried women. In addition, since one of the major thriving occupations in the past was farming, polygamy was deemed necessary because it guarantees more farm hands, and more farm hand guarantees more farm produce, while more farm produce would result in more wealth both for the family and the community. But this is not the case today. Only few youth desire to continue in the old occupation of their parents because they are now more urban inclined. Hence, it is quite surprising that polygamy is still greatly practiced despite the growth of urbanization.

Worse of all, the rules guiding polygamy is not respected. Anote Ajeluorou states that “ there are codes attached to it polygamy is African... In those days, there were ethics, dignity, code of conduct to control polygamy, which, when violated, attracted sanctions (5). Unfortunately, many today do not follow the rules guiding polygamy, hence, thrusting the home into a state of pandemonium. Hence, it is on this background that this essay investigates female subjectivity in Africa using Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* as a case study.

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The act of taking multiple wives does not appear to be the root cause of the problem in a polygamous household. Instead, the problem with polygamy is that it is used as an excuse and a principle for discrimination against women. Early and forced marriage is frequently mentioned in reports from polygamous societies, where the institution serves as both a protective layer for and a weapon of misogynistic behaviour and attitude. Polygamy itself is not what hurts women, but the chauvinistic society that damages any hope of women achieving their dreams- such as keeping them from having jobs, education, or accomplishing their goals. Using culture or religion as a defense, many men choose to marry more wives and at the same time prohibiting the current wife from objecting to her husband's marriage to a new woman. This practice views females as second-class family members and as inferior citizens in comparison to men. Polygamy is also harmful to children because a man who has more than one wife often has a large number of children in a short time period. Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* shows the socio-psychological trauma of polygamy in the lives of its characters. It is fair to say that the main reason why the text is against the institution of polygamy is because in many societies and cultures, polygamy has helped in the oppression and suppression of women and children. Her aim is to show that certain African traditions have some harmful effect in the lives of women. By using several female characters, Ba ascertains that it is possible for women to break free from oppression and achieve liberation.

The epistolary describes the ordeals of the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, in a culture that undermines any hope of female voice. Modou Fall, Ramatoulaye’s husband goes ahead to take a second wife simply because his religion permits him. In as much as the religion, Islam permits a man to have more than one wife, it also demands that the man treats and love his wives equally (Abu and Philip 3). Unfortunately, many only obey the first part (marry more than one wife) and forget the second part (treat them equally) which in many cases lead to disaster. The moment Modou Fall takes a second wife, he forgets his role as the protector of the family. Ramatoulaye had to provide for her children-who were twelve in total- without the help of her husband. Her husband, who had been instructed both by law and religion to take care of his children and love his wives equally, chose to favour and provide only for the younger wife at the expense of his children. His younger wife served as a tool to recapture his youth, hence, he went to parties, dyed his hair and travelled around the world with her, while Ramatoulaye was left alone. At his death, Ramatoulaye is forced to give up her possession, while her husband’s family disregards the fact that she needed it to take care of her children. Florence Stratton posits that “Ba deals with issues pertaining to women’s oppression many of which emanate from traditional norms and customs, such as polygamy and its effects on women “ (138)

Almost every female character in the epistolary suffered because of polygamy. Starting with Ramatoulaye the protagonist of the epistolary, she was left alone to take care of twelve children. Even when her husband was still alive, she had to play the role of the father and the mother which is quite difficult. Despite the humiliation, she stays in the marriage and even encourages her children not to hate their father for his betrayal. Even after Modou Fall's death, Ramatoulaye is still not free for at least four more months. The "*process of burial is one dreaded by every Senegalese woman*" (110). She willingly gives up her properties and most especially her personality to her in-laws. "*Her dignity, becoming a thing a thing in service of the male who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunty, cousins and his friend*"(4). She gives up her dignity and personality because she wants to fulfill her duties as a faithful and obedient wife and as a good Muslim. She says, "*I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion...I expect not to fail...May their evocation not soil the state of purity in which I must live...*" (8). Hence, we ask the question, of whose benefit is polygamy? The society encourages the men to become polygamous on one hand, and the women to be submissive on the other. The woman is not allowed to voice her opinion. Any thought of speaking out will result in resistance and criticism- the same faced by Assiatou.

Even though Binetou is the second wife, she also had to suffer and start her life again at the age of nineteen with three children. She loses her source of security and shelter. Her story is even more pathetic than other characters because other women married for love and they got to live their lives in peace for a number of years with their husbands before they were disappointed and rejected. Although they were disappointed by their husbands, they found hope and encouragement from their children who were old enough to support their mothers. Binetou on the other hand was pressured by her mother to marry Modou Flall. Her mother used every tactics possible to pressure her daughter into marrying Modou Fall. She did not have the chance to live her life and enjoy her youth. This act destroyed Binetou's life before she could begin to live it. At the young age of adventure, youth and freedom from care, she is burdened with sorrow with three infants and no source of income or security. It is therefore not a wonder that she is referred to as a "*silent, haggard child*" (7). Hence, she has been denied of the chance to cultivate a sense of individuality and independence. If she had not been pressured by her mother and had been allowed to complete her education, she might have "*developed a more critical questioning mind and perhaps acquired the ability to speak for herself. Binetou's fate exemplifies how the girl child is disadvantaged because she is raised to be see marriage as the ultimate goal, making it difficult for her to pursue any other desire outside of marriage or develop her own capacity for independent self-expression.*" (Mazvita 39).

Another character than suffered because of the institution of polygamy is Jacqueline. Unlike other men who try to hide their escapades, Jacqueline's husband, Samba Diack does not care about hiding his escapades, honouring neither his wife nor children. Hence, while "*Jacqueline cried, Samba Diack lived it up, Jacqueline lost weight: Samba Diack was still living fast...She complained of a distributing lump in her chest...a sharp point cutting through her flesh to her very bones...*"(42). After consulting several doctors, she was told nothing was wrong with her. Her health continued to deteriorate, she began to think of death. Her saving grace came when the doctor told

her that she was not suffering from anything physical but mental. According to the doctor, her depression is caused by “*vexations, moral torture and constant frustration*” (43). She was told to “*react, go out, give yourself a reason for living, take courage slowly you will overcome*” (45). She decided to follow the doctor’s advice and she survived. If not for prompt advice, she might have lost her life out of depression.

Among all the female characters, Assiatou was the most fortunate. She was brave enough to leave the marriage disregarding what the society and her religion says about the woman’s place in a polygamous marriage. Her husband hides under the umbrella of obedience by telling her that he could not go against his mother’s wishes hence he had to take a second wife. Assiatou knowing fully well that her husband could always say no to the wishes of his mother, after all, he had done it before by marrying her, instead he chooses to marry a younger woman because of her youth, body and beauty, disregarding the promises he made to Assiatou while using his obedience to his mother as an excuse. She chooses to leave the polygamous home. After all, how could she sacrifice her happiness and fulfillment for a man who clearly has no respect for her. The reason why most of these women feel betrayed and abandoned is because they willingly gave their soul, body and heart to their husbands. They chose to love them hoping for a good future with them, yet their hopes were dashed by the men.

According to Ajayi Omofolabi in her book *Negritude, Feminism and a Quest for Identity*, it is almost like the “institution of polygamy is totally incompatible with any hope of female happiness or self-expression” (44). Ramatoulaye concedes that Islam permits a husband to have multiple wives. With a smile on her face, she accepts Modou's marriage and keeps silent in honour of her religion and her husband. She maintains a dignified exterior despite the fact that she is angry inside. In the end, Modou dismisses Ramtoulaye and their children to establish a separate household with his new bride, clearly violating the Islamic injunction that all wives be treated equally and fairly. Without prior notice, Mawdo, Tamsir as well as The Imam come to her home informing her of her husband marriage to a new wife. Despite the fact that these men are influential, they show no remorse or thoughtfulness in their report. They simply tell her that Modou has also gotten a new wife in accordance with religion and tradition and she is not supposed to question his decision instead she is to accept it has not only God’s will but God’s instructions.

Ramtoulaye concedes to observe the ceremonies and rituals for a man who has treated her harshly and disrespected everything they shared, despite the fact that the period of mourning is feared by every Senegalese woman. Ramatoulaye aspires to be the ideal Muslim wife and obediently accepts the religion's version of patriarchal system. Yet, in her prime, this same woman couldn't wait to get “out of the bog tradition, superstition, and custom” (15). She matures into an adult life of compromise. She learns to choose from what is expected of her in the very traditions she sets out as a teenager to challenge. Gradually she sacrifices her own interest to fulfill the aspirations of Modou, her husband, and continues to do so even after the death as she carries out faithfully the required rituals. In many African cultures, women are seen as inferior in status in comparison to their male counterparts. Not only is she deprived of own property, but she is deprived of self-worth, as she is required to submit in totality to her husband and his relative.

It is even more saddening when we consider the fact that in many African cultures that oppress women, women are the ones who fully support these rules. In many occasion, man are not involved directly in the day-to-day process of the patriarch and the subjugation of women. Women play a major role in the subjugation of other women. Due to internalized misogyny, they do everything to appease to the male gaze while oppressing their fellow women. For example, Aunt Nabou treats Assiatou, her daughter in-law, scornfully and consequently put an end to Assiatou's marriage because she is poor and not an elite. She aims at maintaining the purity of elite even if it means destroying the happiness of another woman. She feels powerless and disgraced when her son chooses his wife from a lower class. Aunt Nabou's shame is not because the man in her class will think less of her, but because other women will in stand judgment against her. If polygamy was not permitted in the society, Aunt Nabou would have accepted Assiatou whether she liked it or not, because there would have been no other alternative. Instead, she made it her point of duty to destroy the marriage of her son without considering the hurt both Assiatou and her husband will be going through.

The concept of female oppression by women can be seen in the character of Lady-mother-in-law, Binetou's mother. She encourages her daughter, Binetou to disregard her schooling in order for her (lady-mother-in-law) to attain a higher social and economic status through her daughters marriage to Modou Fall. In the process, she destroys another woman's (Ramatoulye) home and happiness. She also jeopardizes her daughter's chance of becoming economically liberated in her own right and "deprives her of the ability to combine forces with her generation in the struggle for women's right and autonomy in the future" (Omofolabi 44). Eventually, these women constantly undermine themselves in order to attain the smallest amount of influence.

According to Uzo Esonwanne, "the problem is not polygamy but a specific failure in the part of the male characters to sustain commitment. (44). In other words, the men find it impossible to stay committed to their wives. The moment they get bored they look for another subject of interest, and forget about the existence of the other. After thirty years of marriage, Moudo marries another wife despite several promises he made to her in his youth that he will not allow dogmatic African traditions control his choice and challenge his unending love to her. It is therefore not a wonder that Ramatoulaye says "*Modou Fall new happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us, he forgot about us*" (45). The question then is, if it is impossible to love and take care of these women equally, why subject them into suffering and pain. Hence, in anger, Ramatoulaye response;

You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me. It is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you." (58)

If each man can treat his wives equally, and make adequate provision for the women and children, the institution of polygamy might not be questioned. As a matter of fact, it might even be encouraged. Unfortunately, the rules guiding polygamy in the African culture and in the religion is not followed. It is fair to say that Ba is advocating the fact that it is impossible to find happiness

in polygamy. This is why not one person finds happiness or fulfillment in any of the polygamous marriages in the novel. In Ramatoulayes words,

I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings. To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other! If each could only melt into the other! If each would only accept the other's success and failures...the success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instrument creates a pleasant symphony... the success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family. (88-99).

The female characters represent women trying to make sense of who they are and what they which to be. Aissatou regards polygamy as an injustice and discrimination. She chooses to fight for her happiness and that of her children. Ramatoulaye on the other hand sees it as a burden that society imposes on her with which she has to cope by staying in the marriage. What is dangerous is the inability to separate African culture from systems that oppress the freedoms of African women. The more Africans have a culture that is tinged with patriarchal undertones many women will continue to suffer and remain crippled with the inability of self-fulfillment and actualization. Not just them, but their children who are the leaders of tomorrow.

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