

Polygamy in *So Long a Letter*: A Misunderstood Concept?

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Abstract: This paper examines the issue of polygamy as expressed in *So Long A Letter* by Mariama Ba. This is because the way so many researchers perceive the concept of polygamy, as expressed in *So Long A Letter*, is quite debatable and even controversial. What is problematic is not that many critics, whom I have read on *So Long A Letter*, have negative opinions on the issue of polygamy, as it is their right to challenge the issue from a given angle, but that these critics do not even bother to distinguish between the tenets of polygamy as a prescribed God's Law and its abuse by some men before attacking it. Then, an examination of the issue, in the novella, would seem to indicate that the marginalization of Muslim women within polygamy is not the outcome of polygamy as a prescribed God's law but the ignorance of its practice. That is certainly why, Ba proposes education to investigate the difference between Islamic principles and cultural practices. In other words, Ba has made clearer in the novella that the greatest enemy for women is not polygamy but ignorance. As a result, to free women in a society with history of abuse of religious prescriptions passes through providing a sound education for both men and women. Finally, since every research is a result of discussions, in examining polygamy in *So Long A Letter* as a misunderstood concept, the researcher, tentatively, applies the theory of Reader Response Criticism.

Keywords: *So Long A Letter*, Polygamy, feminist Aesthetics

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Introduction

The advent of female literature promises woman's view of life or woman's experience. Learning on scholars such as Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, and Vladimir Propp, Darah (2008: xvii) foregrounds his presentation with the affirmation that "the literature of every community reflects in its totality the values and counter-values that characterize that community in a given period." Since any given writer is a product of his or her milieu and culture, it follows that the developments that take place within a society constitute the raw materials for the writer's works. This relationship between text and context, certainly, pervades Africa and its literature at the turn of the twentieth century. These changes in the rethinking and rewriting of the general societal problems are, according to Nwapa, "affecting both men and women in many ways and creative writers are responding" (Tejumola and Ato, 2007:529).

As every research is the result of discussions; within the discussions, many researchers are tempted to think that Mariama Ba has taken polygamy to the trial bench, or else, that her novella *So Long A Letter* is nothing more than a criticism of Polygamy. What is more, as said

earlier, most of those researchers do not even bother to distinguish between the tenets of polygamy as a prescribed God's Law and its abuse or misinterpretation by men to satisfy their selfish desires. Yet, in *So Long A Letter*, the abuse or misinterpretation of religious recommendations by developing hypocritical strategies to attain men's selfish desires and to justify their biased actions is what Mariama Ba is denouncing on the pages of her novel in an Islam dominated Senegal.

Instead, this paper aims to reflect that Mariama Ba is not against Polygamy as it is practiced within the Islam dominated Senegal; rather, what she portrays, in *So Long A Letter*, is the misunderstanding or abuse of the precepts of polygamy, by the patriarchal society of Senegal, which victimize women. What is quite unquestionable is that as women write in a largely patriarchal environment where the woman is not positively recognized, the African women writers have a number of perspectives to consider in the course of creating a literature that pays attention to the socio-cultural position of women.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to find out how other researchers view polygamy as expressed in *So Long A Letter*, what are the limitations of those perceptions and, finally, bring out the contribution of this paper to knowledge as Wangusa (2007:82) points it out either, "to create some new synthesis out of already existing information, or to throw new light on previous findings, or to take one step further a matter that has already been observed and studied but which leaves room for improvement, or even 'filling in the gaps.'"

An overview of Reader Response Criticism

Reader Response Criticism gained prominence in the late 1960s, particularly, in the US and Germany with scholars such as Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, Roland Barthes... In opposition to the theories of formalism and New Criticism, in which the reader's role in re-creating literary works is ignored, Reader-response criticism is a school of literary theory that focuses on the reader. For reader response criticism adheres to the principle that everyday readers can produce right interpretations. The Theory believes that a written text is an event that only occurs within the reader. Accordingly, Tyson (2006:170) writes: "Reader-response theorists share two beliefs: (1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature."

Also, though there are many approaches within the theoretical branch of reader-response criticism, they are all unified in their belief that the meaning of a text is derived from the reader through the reading process. That is, since all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation of literary work is therefore subjective and unique.

Contrary to popular belief, reader-response criticism is not an anything goes theory; instead it is a theory that uses specific tools that help us analyze our response and the response of others. That is since learning or reading is a constructive and dynamic process, most importantly, reader response encourages readers to be aware of what they bring to texts as readers. In other words, it helps them to recognize the specificity of their own cultural backgrounds and to work to understand the cultural background of others. In sum, the diverse responses of individual readers are key to discovering, in this paper, the variety of possible meanings that the concept of polygamy, in *So Long A Letter*, can provide.

An Overview on Polygamy

One of the major thematic foci of Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* is polygamy. Polygamy, according to the *Online Oxford Dictionary*, is "The practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time." The *online Dictionary.com* has made the definition of polygamy even more specific and close to Islamic principles when it defines it as "the practice or condition of having more than one spouse, *especially wife*, at one time" (italics mine). In Islam, the Holy Qur'an allows any Muslim, under certain conditions, to marry up to four wives if he wishes: "Many women of your choice, two, three or four but if ye fear that one shall not be able to deal justly(with them) then only one (Ali, 1983:100)." But, the quotation clearly implies that a husband must give his wives equal consideration in the house (at least materially).

It is pertinent to point out that polygamy is not basically an African thing as it cuts across all continents and it is not exclusively associated with Islam as it cuts across most cultures. But, unlike other cultures, Islam gives it more prominence and allows it limited room to flourish and with predefined conditions. The point is that it is the misunderstanding of Islam not Islam, itself, that plays a great part in the saddening of polygamy in *So Long A Letter*.

For instance, Nnolim's (2009:223) depiction or justification of polygamy as "native to Africa as foofoo and couscous" mimics the all too familiar excuse given by Mawdo Fall, in *So Long A Letter*, to justify his marriage with Binetou. That is, in *So Long A Letter*, the marriage between Modou Fall and Binetou is interpreted by many people as predestined by Allah. The Imam, introducing Modou's wedding to Ramatoulaye, begins as such: "There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side... Modou Fall...is to marry a second wife today" (Ba, 1989:36-37). In this sort of situation neither the man's lustfulness nor the new wife's greed is blamed, but fate.

It is then clear, from the above, that in the society of Mariama Ba, women are not given due consideration either due to ignorance or abuse of the principles. To speak in such a term to Ramatoulaye who has been married to Modou for twenty five years and blessed with twelve maternities is quite hypocritical and it is an attempt to force Ramatoulaye to accept Modou's action as a normal procedure. Tamsir even reinforces by reporting what Modou has said: "it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it" (Ba, 1989:37). Ayayi (2005:261) notes that what Mariama Ba seems to highlight, through *So Long A Letter*, is that institutions like family and religion "have the potential of being used as a powerful instrument of prejudice, suppression, discrimination and, hence, division and instability."

As for Masri (1996:101), polygamy "should not be for the mere satisfaction of passion, it should serve a real purpose in the life and meet a justifiable need of the individual or society, such as the case of compassion towards widows and orphans." In *So Long A Letter*, after the death of Modou, when Tamsir announces his intention to marry Ramatoulaye, the latter responds to him: "What of your wives, Tamsir? Your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children. To help you out with your financial obligations, one of your wives dyes, another sells fruits, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine" (Ba, 1989:58).

In fact, in such a foregoing condition, marrying one more wife is to debase women. That is why, in *So Long A Letter*, Mariama Ba bestows Ramatoulaye with discernment to be able to distinguish between good and bad. Even in the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, the immediate

occasion for the promulgation of the verses on polygamy was in the aftermath of the Battle of Uhud, in the early seventh century, when the Medina Muslim community was left with many orphans, widows, and a number of captives of war. Even in such a condition, before engaging into polygamous marriages, one should be able to feed, to house, to provide clothes for the family and mainly to have fairness in his character to deal justly with his women. Habib (2005:1) has even made it clearer that no one can be free and enjoy complete freedom by “succumbing to the endless forces operating worldwide that encourage us to remain ignorant...” That is, as men keep to the role of women within marriages, they should also look at the corresponding duty of husband. This is what complementarity requires and what the whole struggle of Mariama Ba is about in *So Long A Letter*.

The above analysis proves that the Senegalese society is not only patriarchal but also materialistic and that people are often hypocritical in their actions and reactions. Ayayi (2005:272) has made it clearer that even “The mourners [during Modou’s funeral] are more concerned with the material benefits to be derived from such an occasion than in the welfare of the bereaved family.” It is a society where culture and religion are used as a camouflage of the reality.

As a result, Mariama Ba takes time to explore the circumstances, the pressures and the deprivations that their characters suffer in order to soften the societal conscience so that the societal scales of justice could shift toward the correct balance. In other words, Ba seeks to restore women’s dignity in polygamous marriages. For instance, Ramatoulaye, in *So Long A Letter*, stays with her husband Modou despite that the latter has taken a new wife; despite the pressure of her own daughter who asks her to break after his marriage with Binetou: “Break with him, mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Auntie Aissatou did; break with him” (Ba, 1989:39); despite the prediction of Farmata, the cowries’ woman, to leave her husband so that she would get a better man. This is because Ramatoulaye knows that: “...marriage is never smooth. It reflects differences in character and capacity for feeling” (Ba, 1989:55).

The above assertion is enough to be an indication that Mariama Ba, the writer, is not against polygamy, as many researchers tend to prove, but, as said earlier, against what turns women in polygamous household to be “decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises” (Ba, 1989:61). Rather, after twenty five years of marriage, Ramatoulaye decides to stay with Modou when he marries Binetou, a much younger girl who was her daughter’s friend. When Modou abandons her for Binetou, Ramatoulaye assumes the upbringing of their twelve children but stays legally married to him until his death, the landmark event after which she writes the letter. Otherwise, she would have made her protagonist, Ramatoulaye, leave her husband, Modou, or claim for divorce, after the latter has taken a second wife.

Selected Review On Polygamy In *So Long A Letter*

As said earlier, in this paper, every research is a result of discussions. Thus, within the discussions of *So Long A Letter*, many researchers are tempted to think not only that Mariama Ba is a radical Feminist, but also and mainly that, in *So Long A Letter*, she radically stands against polygamy, which is an institution deeply rooted in Africa and recommended by Islam, one of the greatest religion in the world and much dominant in West Africa.

More specifically, since the publication of *So Long A Letter*, Mariama Ba’s prime literary masterpiece, many scholars, both men and women, have made criticisms of her work at

different levels, at different times and with different approaches. But, to keep this paper within reasonable limits, we only refer to few scholars.

To begin with, Davies (1986:273) in the article “Marriage, Tradition and Woman’s Pursuit of Happiness in The Novels of Mariama Bâ” supports that Mariama Ba “was convinced that happiness and not just women’s happiness, but men’s as well, a whole happiness- must be based on a monogamous marriage.” However, our reading of Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter*, proves that, according to Mariama Ba, unhappiness in Muslim polygamous family is due to the ignorance of the basic tenets of Islam and, as a result, she suggests education as a means by which to clear the minds of both men and women from distortion.

Also, according to Champagne (1996:26) who, in the U.S, examines the struggles of the female students in a classroom, there is a connection between Radical feminism and Ramatoulaye’s struggle to free herself from the yoke. Champagne remarks: “As properly trained Western feminists, students saw their role as one of championing Ramatoulaye’s attempts to free herself from both her backward and oppressive culture and the confines of Islam.” For Champagne, Mariama Ba, through her representation of Islam and polygamy, has made it possible for Ramatoulaye to take both Islam and polygamy to the trial bench as so many researchers on *So Long A Letter* tend to prove.

On the contrary, our reading of *So Long A Letter* offers a counter argumentation. That is, Mariama Ba is not anti-Islam and that what she exposes in *So Long A Letter* is women being victims of traditions and wrong interpretations of Islam rather than the limitations of the prescribed God’s Law. In other words, Ba’s main preoccupation in *So Long A Letter* is more of the pursuit of happiness, when certain conditions are fulfilled, than an outright attack on polygamy.

The paper by Reuben (2014), entitled “*So Long A Letter*: Understanding the missionary Narrative of a Polygamous Victim” presents polygamy as a great societal challenge to the African women. In the article, it is presented as an evil. Reuben concludes his article as “another effort at educating and soliciting the collaboration of the global community in the fight against polygamy” (Reuben, 2014:27). However, our reading of *So Long A Letter* does not enable us to see polygamy as evil as Reuben does, but reveals the contrast between the teachings of the Qur’an and the application of its principles which portrays the gross distortion of the teachings of Islam on polygamy.

Panirao (2014:174), in a paper which deals with the analysis of some famous African women writers among whom Mariama Ba, and in the quest to find out elements which have lessened the position of African women towards self-fulfillment, supports that:

...even though the women in Mariama Ba’s story were Muslims they were all against polygamy. Regarding Ramatoulaye, one finds it difficult if it was the second marriage that made her bitter or her husband’s treatment. In all three scenarios of polygamy (Ramatoulaye and Modou; Aissatou and Mawdo; and Jacqueline and Samba Diack) the husband’s treatment of the first wives, after taking on another wife, was appalling resulting in emotional distress, divorce and nervous breakdown and subsequent death, respectively, for all the women involved.

However our reading of *So Long A Letter* reveals that Ba is not critical of polygamy if its rules and regulations are respected. As a result, what she denounces is male’s behaviour

based on sexual instincts. In the novel, Ramatoulaye supports that “It is through his self-control, his ability to reason, to choose, his power to attachment, that the individual distinguishes himself from the animal”(Ba,1989: 87). The foregoing quotation better calls for discernment in whatever action one undertakes (including polygamy), rather than total rejection.

Similarly, Aswani (2015), in a paper entitled: “Religion, Tradition and Woman: Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter*”, points out that religion and tradition have created a favorable condition for men to subjugate women, both in the societies and in the literatures. As a result, she proposes her reading of *So Long A Letter* with special reference to religion (Islam), tradition and customs as reasons for inequity between men and women, mainly through polygamy. However, our reading of *So Long A Letter*, supports the view that even in Islam, polygamy is based on certain rules and regulations that if they are known and applied conveniently, they favor pacific coexistence and mutual understanding. That is certainly why, in *So Long A Letter*, Mariama Ba proposes education as a solution to free women from the yoke. In short, Critics have extensively discussed the issue of polygamy in *So Long A Letter* and have quite mentioned it among the most fundamental elements that are considered to marginalize women. That is certainly why it is worth taking a look at the issue of polygamy, in *So Long A Letter*, and have a rethink.

Conclusion

Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter* is most often used as a basis for highlighting the negative effects of polygamy on women in Africa in general and in the Muslim context of Senegal in particular. But, our examination of the issue, in the novella, indicates that the marginalization of polygamous Muslim women, in *So Long A Letter*, is an outcome of ignorance. The latter could be alleviated by advocating a sound education, for both men and women, to investigate the difference between Islamic principles and cultural practices. In other words, it is clear to Mariama Ba that the greatest enemy for women is neither the male nor the institution of polygamy but ignorance.

In sum, the main issue, in *So Long A Letter*, is not about the criticism of polygamy as a prescribed God’s law, but men’s polygamous instincts that result in the abuse of Islam, betrayal, infidelity, lack of trust and abandonment which disgrace women. Ba’s aesthetic strategy, in *So Long A Letter*, seems to say that there is, certainly, a need for change within the community. Women are human beings who should not be abused within polygamous family, but should be admired for their dignity. She intimates that though polygamy is sacred to culture, tradition and religion, fairness should predominate in a polygamous relationship.

Finally, Ba’s didacticism is that in order to achieve a meaningful purpose in life, every woman and indeed every man in the world must be educated. Equal treatment of persons in equal situations will contribute greatly to the eradication of injustice. What is more, equality is the cornerstone of every democratic society which aspires to have social justice. The foregoing message is certainly what Mariama Ba reverberates on the pages of her novel, *So Long A Letter*, rather than an outright attack on polygamy.

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