

A Comparative Study in the Epistolary Novels the Color Purple and So Long A Letter

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Abstract

The epistolary mode in fiction has been associated with the expression of trauma experienced by women in a private, domestic and interior space. The present study analyses how Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) appropriated the epistolary mode to reveal the multiple forms of suppressing marginalization of women in public sector. Although the narrative voices of the two novels differ, where both narrators use their own letters to work through their experiences of trauma and ultimately they are healed through the process of sharing their recollections with another. Throughout the novel, the writers reveal their vision that African women should not be oppressed or suppressed on any ground. They must be given equal status and rights to maintain peace and harmony. As women they should tackle their jeopardy wisely with their creativity and ability to establish their rightful place in the social hierarchy.

KEYWORDS: Epistolary mode, trauma, marginalization, recollection, peace and harmony.

The present study stylistically and thematically analyzes Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. To facilitate the condition of women, the researcher has tried to trace the background of the societies, in which the books are based. *The Color Purple* is a product of Christian culture, and *So Long a Letter* is that of Islam. In traditional Africa, women were considered as an object of constant scorn, degradation and physical torture. They did not exist as individuals with their personalities but rather existed as meredocile, exotic accompaniments to men. Throughout their life, they lacked voices to articulate their dilemma and views. African women are subdued by the suppressors and their capabilities and self worth are underestimated. Accordingly they, as the women of colour accepted their fate without any resistance. So in order to rejuvenate the wounded dignity of African womanhood, each women writer has a special task to exhibit the patriarchal condition of coloured women. Like male writers female writers should know, how to use literature as an effective but a nonviolent weapon. It is the duty of every depressed and exploited woman to select education as their strong weapon to stand against the oppressors and to find their own hidden creative strength to retain their existence as human beings.

Alice Malsenior Walker and Mariama Ba play the role of a good mother to mould the characters of their daughters through their powerful and expressive fiction to struggle against racial inequality and injustice inflicted on women by the patriarchal society. Their writings explore multidimensional kinships among women and embrace the redemptive power of social and political revolution. Altogether they both bring their women as socially, politically and internally self dependent.

The *Color Purple* and *So Long a Letter* are presented in the epistolary form which allows the writers total freedom of speech, style, and expression. Writings of these writers capture their exalt experiences and let out the inner heart burning issues to penetrate the readers mind so movingly.

Mariama Ba and Alice Walker, both being activists and fiction writers have gained wide critical acclaim, where Ba is considered as a pioneer of African feminism and Walker an American feminist who introduced the notion of womanism to the feminist movement, stating that womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender. The chief aim of the present paper exhibits the trauma faced by women in different culture. Ba's expressions and structures do not change in the transition from speech to writing, as she gets Ramatoulaye to write herself not only in to existence, but in to a growth of self-consciousness. This is identical to what Alice Walker does to Celie in *The Color Purple*. The autobiographical voice in the missive means coming out of muteness and speaking. It is important for an African woman to speak for all her life. Ramatoulaye, a character in the Ba's novel is a more mature and an articulate speaker than Celie, as she addresses herself to her best childhood friend Aissatou, where Celie of being the victim of her destiny, and of having no access to any kind of power within her environment addresses her pathetic and sorrowful state to God through letters. In which Celie realizes that the possession of a female body makes her most vulnerable as though she is created by God to surrender herself for satisfying male needs. Celie's position in the novel is about the black women's position in general. Ranveer points that, "Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black women" (17).

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* portrays Ramatoulaye, herself as a byproduct of the French education system, confronted by the heavily patriarchal Senegalese society and the institution of polygamy. *The Color Purple* dramatizes the turmoil of Celie, an African American girl still processing the stigmas of slavery. Each main character in the novel suffers from traumatic ordeals and that triggers the needs of writing letter as an excretory experience.

The epistlers of the two novels, Ramatoulaye and Celie write letters to their dearest female friends. Through the epistles the author brings the trustworthy relational bond between the narrators and the implied narrate. The narrator also points the long-standing friendship between sisterhoods and justifies why they lean on them in these moments of torment. According to Coulibaly, "the reader or audience plays an important role in the process of victims trauma healing" (112).

As the growing victims of injustice, spoilt and ugly, Ramatoulaye and Celie suffer from the chocked emotions of an outcast. They often experience inner suffering by their

aloofness which is so tough and their spirit is so suppressed to see the world's beauty. Their life is engulfed in disappointment, despair and depression. At this point they start to write their dreadful plight in the form of letters to get consolation in their heart.

Ramatoulaye is abandoned by her husband. He leaves her to suffer with the burden of twelve children, while he chases a young woman, who is the classmate of his own daughter. She undergoes more internal conflicts than the external one, between her rebelling self that yearns for emotional freedom and her polished self whom she knows must cope with the established norms of muslim culture. "My heart concerns with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood in their strict precepts. I expect not to fail" (8). Such submission is inculcated by her parents, religion and society. The thought of her education along with the concept of religion made her to play the role of a submission woman.

Ramatoulaye describes herself as a torn individual aspiring for evolution, but she is ready to break the traditional norms. So, she desires to give good response to act according to the mores of society and religion. Ramatoulaye sacrifices her dignity and personality. She welcomes Binetou, her daughters' classmate as co-wife in to her house with open arms. The Secrecy of Modou's late marriage has been revealed by Imam, in which throughout the novel Modou remains oscillated. So, Imam takes the opportunity to pull down his tension: "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" (37). The patriarchal society is not ready to consider woman's opinion against polygamy. Ramatoulaye uses dark humour to relate her distressed situation, "I forced myself to check my inner agitation. Above all, I must not give my visitors the pleasure of relating my distress. Smile, take the matter lightly, just as they announced it" (38).

Tradition compels Ramatoulaye to cope with happiness and joy in such bleak situation. She clearly identifies her oppressors, but doesn't resist their wills. She doesn't even want them to know she is unhappy with the ways she is treated. So, she bitterly plays the tragic role of self- destruction, as she admits: "I acquiesced under the drops of poison that were burning me" (37). She shares her tortured and criticized self to her friend Aissatou who got immigrated to United States after divorcing from her husband, when he takes a second wife.

This acceptance of her weakness and inability to cope with modernity provide disparaging self- portraiture to Celie. Ramatoulaye is praised for being docile. At the same time a chauvinistic character like Harpo in *The Color Purple* seeks his wife Sofia to be submissive and docile as Celie.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, who makes her pregnant twice and drives the resultant children to eradicate the proof of his incest. At the very outset, her sensibilities begin to work on various internal and external factors that fix her in a framework. She realizes that the possession of a female body makes her most vulnerable as though she is created by God to surrender herself for satisfying male needs. Her experience as a daughter proves an unhappy and disastrous moment. Celie experiences pain as she gets molested by her father. She is raped and beaten daily. His answer to her cries and prayer is "Shut up and git used to it" (1). She does not react in

return, rather she accepts the tragic situation she lives in. Worthington observes that, “Celie is a reminder to him of his sexual abuse. To get rid of her and his guilt, he marries Celie to Mr. _____” (49).

Celie lacks power and will to resist the brutality imposed on her. All she can do is to survive and preserve. Life of Celie is more of a passive object than a subject, since she is absolutely dependent on two men, her violent father and her husband Mr. Albert. These two men make decisions for her, whereas Celie herself serves as a sponge which has to collect all their emotions and cannot even express her feeling or have an opinion. There is also an emotional threat involved in the prohibition as the opening sentence of the novel announces, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mummy” (3). Nobody asks what she wants and nobody inquires about her feelings, dreams or wishes. She was unable to open herself to her ailing mother or to her younger sister.

Celie is in a position of complete powerlessness. The only person she can talk to is God and she is forced to write letters to Him rather than praying. The first letter of Celie shows a fragile and lost teenager, “Dear God. I am 14 yrs old”(1). She writes letters to God to facilitate communication between a mute victim and an omniscient authority of justice. It not only provides an emotional outlet to Celie, but a glimpse of the internal upheavals of an oppressed human soul who seeks liberation. She continues to share her feelings and thoughts with the only available passive listener “Dear God”. Celie’s letters to God serve as a cry for help and comfort not only for her, but for all the coloured women. God is her only source of consolation, hope, inspiration, friend, guide, inspirer and confident. Hence in her letters to God, Celie pours forth her agonized soul, seeking his guidance and urges Him to dispel her ignorance.

The exposition of Celie’s thoughts and feelings through her letters to God and her sister Nettie is a tactic used by Walker to establish Celie’s innate independence and creative streak. Such communication of one’s thought is essential for a woman who has been so trampled in life, who later emerges as a fighter and discovers of her freedom within herself. The device of letter writing addressed to God reveals the trueself of Celie. Celie in her victimized state says, “I am pore, I am black. I may be ugly and can’t cook... But I’m here” (3).

Walker delineates Celie’s journey from abusive father to arrogant husband, from pain and distress to disgust and despair. Celie’s suffering in the patriarchal society continues unabated even after her marriage with a man called Albert. She is overworked in her husband’s house taking care of her husband’s children. Her work is not acknowledged and she is often subjected to sexual oppression. “He never ask me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bondaged” (117).

Celie accepts this new bondage of her marriage too without external opposition, consequently she was caught to fulfill the stereotypical role of a wife and mother. Celie passively accepts her externally defined image and fulfills all the demands made on her. Celie’s life moves uneventfully when he come across Shug, who shakes Celie out of her nightmare and begins the process of her spiritual awakening. Through her love for Shug and love making with her, Celie discovers herself. She encourages Celie to explore her own body. Shug tells Celie that, “She is still a virgin and needs to know about it” (189).

Gaikwad comments, "Celie is a virgin in spite of the fact that she was forced to have sexual relations with man" (70). She stops being afraid and ashamed of sex and indulges in her passion for Shug and discovers her homosexual side. Looking at her image, she thinks that she is prettier rather than ugly. At this point, Celie has reorganized her entire life by achieving economic liberty and gathering the knowledge of meaningful things.

Nettie writes letters to Celie regularly, and in return Celie is perpetually waiting for them. But the letter never reaches her, as her husband intercepts them. This way of meaningful communication represents the emotional and intellectual confinement of black women. When Celie comes to know that Mr. Albert has been hiding Nettie's letter from her, she grows furious and for the first time she retaliates, curses him and leaves him with Shug. The moment rejuvenates and revitalizes her to be an empowered woman. Berlant states, "Sexual awakening not only transforms her relation to her body and to pleasure in general, but also leads to a major shift in her understanding and mastery of power in the world." (851)

Both Ramatoulaye and Celie consider men as strange beings. Raped by her stepfather, Celie is scared of men, and she indiscriminately avoids them: "Most times mens look pretty much a like to me" (15), "Men look like frogs" (254), and Ramatoulaye reinforces: "... Mawdo and through him all men, remained an enigma to me" (33), because she was betrayed by her husband in whom she placed an unwavering trust. Paraphrasing McDowell, one can say that Walker, Ba reveal their heroines completely from the inside. Everything which filters in their consciousness, renders in their own voice. Through their letters, the mental and psychological evolution of these characters alters from detestation to distinction. Through the progression, the characters reveals their development of habits by breaking secular taboos found within marriage, religion, and social values. Ironically Ba presents the character of Modou, a false man who try so desperately and absurdly to look young. "Modou would dye his hair every month. His waistline painfully restrained by old fashioned trousers, Binetou would never miss a chance of laughing wickedly at him. Modou would leave himself winded trying to imprison youth in its decline, which abandoned him on all sides" (48). He is fully aware of Binetou's interest in the relationship and he conquers her heart through ostentatious presents. For instance, he "offes her a villa, mecca for her parents, a car, a monthly allowance, jewels" (35). At the same time he makes his first family to starve. He pleases his second-in-laws by debts. His crippled desire made Ramatoulaye to think of being betrayed.

In *So Long a Letter*, Tamsir's declaration of love to Ramatoulaye after becoming the widow, insists his arrogance for taking women as granted by thinking they don't have any choice, "You are my good luck. I shall marry you" (57), same happened in *The Color Purple*, when Albert marries Celie. She is not left for her choice. Towards the end of the novels, Ramatoulaye and Celie assert their self by redefining themselves as independent women. As Ngom utters, "remember their fragmented selves with I narration". The woman in the world should attain wholeness through self dignity and self identity.

Ramatoulaye and Celie acquire a kind of maturity through difficult circumstances. These women's emergence and brave fight against the jeopardy encourages all women in the world to fight courageously against all perils which stifle the growth towards their selfhood and self identity. The study encourages every woman to recognize her own

potential and bravely challenge the atrocities perpetrated women in general. Both Ramatoulaye and Celie accept their newly won independence and they no longer defines themselves under male tutelage, neither the father's nor the husband's. Ramatoulaye is now ready to face the chauvinistic society unaccompanied by anyone, while before she couldn't picture her life without the protective shadow of a loving man. She's now ready to face the lashes of her life alone and she chooses to cope with her new role as a single parent of twelve children rather than to remarry. Similarly, Celie's life pinpoints the various factors that change her from a sexual product to a whole, self, confident woman with identity. Celie gathers courage in the company of Shug who is instrumental in accessing Celie's knowledge. She starts to admire herself in spite of her ugliness. She grows psychologically independent under Shug's persuasion and receives a boost in the process of her emotional and intellectual growth. With Shug's assistance, Celie starts the business of stitching trousers which makes her to stand independently. She becomes financially, physically and mentally strong. She admits "I am so happy, I got love. I got work. I got money, friends and time" (194). Shug successfully guides Celie and brings her as an autonomous individual to discover her own self, by giving her the ability to love and see the creation in herself.

The study foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome their prejudice in order to survive, to enjoy female empowerment, and to extend female friendship. Every woman should have proper education to awaken their self and in turn automatically it gets inculcated in their hidden potentials and strength.

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