

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

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This study analyzes female friendship in *So Long a Letter* written by black diasporic woman writer and examines the impact of race, class and gender on women's relationships. The novel emphasizes how women face the challenges of patriarchal institutions to subjugate them through polygamy, neo-colonialism, and constraints of tradition, caste prejudices, political instability and the patriarchal subjugation. This paper uses characterization and plot analysis to explore the message the novel reveals. As findings this study foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding, which allows women to overcome prejudice and survive, to enjoy female empowerment, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that participates in nation building. However, another conclusion focuses on the power of patriarchy which constitutes a threat to female bonding and usually causes women's estrangement.

The present research papers intends to reveal the impact of female solidarity on Mariama Ba's novel *So Long a Letter*. Mariama Bâ presents patriarchal institution in her novels as a potential threat to women's relationship with men. Her novel *So Long a Letter* describes the plight of women owing to different forms of oppressions. It demonstrates how women characters struggle throughout their lives in order to survive their predicament. However, their struggle against the patriarchal subjugation the protagonists in *So Long a Letter* make a stronger plea to average women to develop female bonding and financial independence to liberate themselves from the burden of oppression. The novel also highlights how the mutual female bonding is ultimately converted into female solidarity, and in effect, involves more women in the struggle against patriarchal subjugation. This female bonding demands the active participation of all women, along with men, in the national building. Moreover, the post-colonial context of *So Long a Letter* demonstrates the importance of nation building as a primary concern for both men and women. In the newly independent African countries, the struggle for development requires the synchronized efforts of both men and women.

Bâ's novel foregrounds the healing powers of female friendship that soothes pain and facilitates women with enough vigor to survive the male prejudices. Although other African novelists depict class to be an obstacle to women's relationship, Bâ has a different impression on the issue. Bâ portrays class as caste prejudice that does not take into consideration the economic status of people but rather focuses on their family background. This ranking causes problems to the lower castes who suffer a social discrimination from the nobles. Conversely, *So Long a Letter* regards female friendship as a solution because it integrates the lower castes and allows them to form bonds with the nobles. Aïssatou in *So Long a Letter* suffers even though she is from the same ethnic group since both the wife and husband are Moslems. Aïssatou's situation is further compounded by the strict caste divisions that show loyalty to class and ethnic affiliation before marital bliss.

However, in Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, a tegg and a guer (a) [castes in Africa] come together in friendship based on equality and mutual respect. Evidently, these two women transcend the boundaries of caste. In spite of the caste difference, Ramatoulaye continues to have vigorous friendship in the form of a long letter to Aissatou. This mutual emotional tie with Aissatou helps her survive the oppression which in effect urges women of the world to form mutual emotional ties in order to fight back. The novel undeniably makes clear that the female friendship allows women to face adversity and challenge the masculine attempts to subjugate them. The success of Bâ's novels demonstrates the strength of female friendship that aims to liberate women from the burden of oppression and gives them a chance to empower each other. This triumph over patriarchy is, indeed, vital and highlights the nurturing and caring qualities of female bonding that makes this liberation possible. Despite the different cultural and social realities that Bâ's women characters witness, they acknowledge and strongly assert the potentiality of female friendship. This commonness in women's experiences of oppression reveals the universality of female subjugation. It reveals the universal truth that women have to fight for their fundamental human rights.

As Ramatoulaye helps Aissatou surmount her painful experience, Aissatou also shows a tremendous support to her friend throughout her ordeal even though they have different answers to the question of polygamy. Because she understands her friend's predicament, Aissatou completely empathizes with her situation, thereby helping her overcome this challenge. When Modou leaves Ramatoulaye after twenty-five years of marriage with twelve children, the failure of love is not only real, but also dramatic; however, Aissatou will always be there for her. Aissatou's care for her friend and generosity urge her to travel all across the Atlantic in order to present her condolences and provide her support. Ramatoulaye reflects on her friend's coming back and their friendship in general:

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

The two friends have suffered deception and betrayal from husbands to whom they were married for a long time. However, they adopt different attitudes toward their misfortunes. While Aissatou moves forward and starts a new life as a single mother, Ramatoulaye prepares herself to accept polygamy. Coulis observes:

Aissatou has known the same betrayal as her friend. And yet, she, unlike Ramatoulaye who chose to stay and remain a co-wife, refuses to accept the situation and leaves. She will not accept the othering by her husband, or his attempt at colonizing her and their children (31).

Aissatou takes Mawdo's betrayal seriously and refuses to forgive or forget; she prefers divorce and takes full responsibility of herself and her children. This decision is very courageous and actually rare in a society where polygamy constitutes the rule and not the exception. Ramatoulaye's decision to stay as Modou's wife comes from her beliefs in the sanctity of the institution of marriage. She firmly believes that a woman needs a man in order to maintain balance in the society, she reflects:

I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage (*So Long* 56).

Ramatoulaye insists on the complementary bonding between men and women. Her ideals about marriage have been shattered by her husband's decision to leave her, but she is quite reluctant to take the first step, despite her children's wishes. Furthermore, even though Ramatoulaye accepts a co-wife, she refuses to become a second wife to Daouda Dieng, a former suitor who renews his marriage proposal to her after the death of her husband, partly because she does not want to harm his wife. She reflects: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family (*So Long* 68)". She refuses because she understands the pain and sufferings associated with polygamy and does not wish to impose such a plight on anybody. Though the different approaches that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have toward polygamy, Bâ demonstrates that women's differences should not be an obstacle to female friendship. She invites women to consider their differences as positive elements that call more for unity than division. The close friendship of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye allows them to tolerate differences. These differences have never endangered their relationship because what unites them is stronger than those clashes of opinion. The mutual respect they have for one another and their open mindedness allow them to support each other, in whatever the circumstances. Coulis argues:

Even though Ramatoulaye and Aissatou choose different responses to the attempt to subjugate them, they retain a friendship and respect that endures. Their bond transcends distance and all differences and is the core of the narrative. Being unclassified or unclassifiable by genre, *So Long a Letter* seems a metaphor for the sisterhood Ramatoulaye and Aissatou forged in childhood, modified throughout many years together and apart, and continues to offer sustenance and support to them both. (32)

Their different answers to polygamy only reflect their different stands on women's issues; while Aissatou regards polygamy as an injustice to fight, Ramatoulaye sees it as a burden that society imposes on her with which she has to cope. However, their ability to handle this divergence of opinion demonstrates the strength of their friendship. This situation shows that differences do not always destroy female bonding; they can be cleared, and sometimes they are

not even an issue. Ramatoulaye reflects: “Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love (*So Long* 54).”

Ramatoulaye sums up her sisterly concern in these terms: “My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present and male egoism resists (*So Long* 88).” She also shows a lot of concern about her friend Jacqueline, who becomes sick because she feels alien. From Ivory Coast, Jacqueline has trouble adapting to the Senegalese culture. Ramatoulaye comforts and cares for this friend who needs all the help she can get in order to overcome this difficult challenge, thereby accomplishing another form of female solidarity. Bâ’s novel invites women to follow these examples in order to cultivate the challenging path of sisterhood. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye’s relationship represents a good example of female solidarity. The moral support they offer each other is complemented by material assistance, as the car Aissatou buys for her friend restores her dignity and offers her new possibilities to express herself. The novel shows that friends need to share joys and sorrows but also abundance and deprivation. Aissatou’s generosity in buying her friend a car saves Ramatoulaye the humiliation of having to take public transportation while her co-wife drives her own car. This act gives Ramatoulaye her confidence back as she learns to drive. This gesture not only provides her with a means of transportation, it also heals her pain and restores her pride and dignity.

So Long a Letter, thus, presents a strong form of female friendship that ultimately extends to female solidarity as Aissatou and Ramatoulaye not only empower each other but also participate in nation building. The sisterhood they build and maintain secures their survival against the constraints of patriarchy, tradition, polygamy, colonialism and any form of prejudice.

INDEX WORDS: Women’s relationships, Female friendship, Female bonding, Sisterhood, Female solidarity, Female Empowerment

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