

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

**Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal**



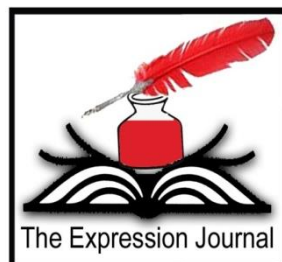
Impact Factor 3.9

**Vol. 5 Issue 4 August 2019**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)



**EVILS OF POLYGAMY AND OPPRESSION IN  
MARIAMA BÂ'S *UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE (SO LONG A LETTER)***

**G. Vidya**

**Assistant Professor of French**

**School of English and Foreign Languages**

**The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University)**

**Gandhigram – 624 303, Dindigul Dt., Tamil Nadu**

.....

**Abstract**

Mariama Bâ was one of the first women to notice and write about women inequality, oppression, their legal rights, the institution of polygamy and the importance of women's education well ahead of other feminist activists. She also took on the issue of female genital mutilation, a subject which gained prominence only towards the end of the twentieth century. Bâ's frustration with the fate of African women, as well as their helpless acceptance of it, inspired her to write her first novel *Une Si Longue Lettre (So long a letter)*. She has vehemently argued both in her fiction and non-fiction writings that change in the perspective and consciousness of the victimized women can change the injustice of legal rights in married women in a polygamous society. Mariama Bâ, being widowed and left to look after her nine children on her own, was driven to create the character Ramatoulaye, who is a recently widowed woman, and is forced to mourn her husband's death along with his much younger second wife. The author chose the form of an epic letter written by Ramatoulaye to her childhood friend Aissatou, to lament her sufferings and share her grief. This letter form gives the author a convenient method to replace the African oral traditional form of storytelling, as fit for the publication of a novel. This also serves as the author's unique way, of expressing her grief over the plight of the divorced or widowed women of her community who have very few legal or moral rights. This paper is an attempt to shed light on the plight of African women in an unfair and polygamous society, through the autobiographical fiction, *Une Si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter)*.

**Keywords**

Mariama Bâ, Women Inequality, Oppression, Polygamy, Gender Discourse, Feminism.

.....



**EVILS OF POLYGAMY AND OPPRESSION IN  
MARIAMA BÂ'S *UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE (SO LONG A LETTER)***

**G. Vidya**

**Assistant Professor of French  
School of English and Foreign Languages  
The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University)  
Gandhigram – 624 303, Dindigul Dt., Tamil Nadu**

.....

Born in Senegal and raised as a Muslim, Bâ (1929-1981) was a writer and a “womanist”, who wrote in French. Due to her mother’s early death, she was raised by her very traditional maternal grandparents. They strongly believed that women should not be educated beyond elementary school. As a result, at such an early age Bâ realized the inequalities between sexes and the oppression of women existing in her community in the name of religion and tradition. If not for her father who insisted on her further education, Bâ would have never been known to the world. She became a teacher and later an Education Supervisor. Bâ eventually married a politician and a Member of Parliament, Obèye Diop, but later divorced and had to look after their nine children on her own.

Bâ’s life as a divorcee with a large family to raise alone, coupled with her health problems, provided her the raw material for the two novels she wrote at the very end of her life. Her first novel *Une Si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter)*, written in 1980, received the prestigious Noma award and made Bâ world famous. Bâ died a year after the publication of this novel due to her protracted illness and her second novel *Un chant éclarate (Scarlet Song)* was published posthumously.

The word oppression signifies vastly different meanings and triggers unique perceptions based on the experiences and understanding of people. While it may cause a deluging cascade of emotions in someone who has actually experienced the trauma of it, it may not prove to be more than a quaint concept in a population experiencing relative stability in their society for a couple of centuries. However, in Islamic African societies, women experience oppression in the name of polygamy, female genital mutilation, and inadequate education. Inevitably, where people live and what people experience mark their perceptions for the rest of their lives, for better or for worse.

According to Marilyn Frye,

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable but are systematically related to each other in such a way to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: All avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped. (12)

The novel *Une Si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter)* portrays the disadvantageous position of women in general and especially married women of her community and the evil effects of polygamy. As a consequence, married women lose significant legal rights. Through this novel Bâ strongly urged dynamic changes in the consciousness of these women that would finally result from the political changes and thereby bring about a paradigm change in the status of women. This novel is in the form of an epic letter written by a recently widowed Senegalese woman named Ramatoulaye to her childhood friend Aissatou, a divorced woman working at the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. The letter form of the novel chosen by Bâ has become a convenient medium as this allowed her to bridge the gap between African oral traditions of story-telling and the traditional European structure of a novel. There are autobiographical notes in many parts of the novel, which make this novel an autobiographical fiction. The protagonist Rama is the mother of 12 children and like Bâ herself, lives a traditional life despite her European style schooling. The long letter recounts the circumstances in which her husband, Moudou Fall, abandons her for a second wife, a 17 year old girl named Binetou, who is a friend of his daughter.

Ramatouloulaye writes of how Modou had completely forgotten the twenty five years of their married life, spending all his time with Binetou and she laments:

And to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think that twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal. (12)

She writes of her even worse struggle of encouraging her children to continue to respect her father regardless of the circumstances. This proves to be harder for Rama as the older children find it very odd that their father had married Binetou who is of their age and who had grown up with them.

Although Modou and Binetou had no regard for her feelings when they decide to venture into cohabitation, Ramatoulaye forgets all her problems for a moment and thinks about Binetou when she receives the death message of Modou. Her heart goes out to Binetou who is trapped into a marriage to a man twice her age, is now a widow and thus losing her security blanket at an early age. Rama observes that "Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (39). Ramatoulaye's friend, unlike her, chooses the difficult path of divorce when she encounters the same situation of second marriage of her husband. At the time of the death of Moudou, Aissatou has already been living successfully for five years of her divorced life despite the taboos of Islamic Senegalese society. But Rama resolves to develop an independent existence. And when her husband's brother Tamsir, according to tradition, offers to make Ramatoulaye one of his many wives, she refuses his proposal as she knows his actual motivation of gaining control over the modest amount of money and property Rama has acquired. Rama's act of refusal and the decision to stay single is the starting point of the liberation and the sign of the change in the woman who is in the

threshold of a changing new era. *Une Si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter)* provides us with various examples of the ways in which its central protagonists are able to achieve liberation of this kind, since Rama proves to be a woman who breaks free from patriarchal oppression. Similarly, Aissatou is able to make ends meet along with children without the help of a man.

Being doubly oppressed herself by the traditions as an African women and as a Muslim, Bâ's contribution through this novel is significant as it underlines the need for a radical change in the status of these women in the society which could only be achieved by creation of self-awareness and empowerment through education. The novel ends when Rama's unmarried daughter returns home pregnant which is a major mark of shame in her traditional belief system. But instead of getting angry, Rama decides to support her daughter. Thus Ramatoulaye enters into the next stage in the development of African Islamic women's consciousness.

*Une Si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter)* is not only a brave attempt of Bâ in portraying the evils of polygamy but also subtly highlighting the importance of women's self-awareness and self-reliance. Rama empowers herself through her relationships with other people, especially through her letter to Aissatou, friends and family, and she draws strength from custom and tradition. Aissatou succeeds in becoming self-reliant, as a diplomat. This is not only an individual's achievement, but also a significant example of women's capacity for empowerment.

Finally Bâ, through her characters Rama and Aissatou, encourages the African Islamic women to realize their real potential. In the words of Rama, Bâ emphasizes education as a very important tool for empowerment:

To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress (15-16).

Bâ also suggests that all women have important stories to tell and they should express themselves. She states in an interview in 1980: "There is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry may be different but there is still a certain unity" (cited in Chain, 89). And through this novel she brings home the point that this cry will be heard only through self-reliance and self-expression and which will in turn pave way for other women in their struggle for liberation from various forms of oppression.

## Works Cited

- Bâ, Mariama. *Une si longue lettre*. Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1987.
- . *So Long a Letter*. Translated by Modupé Bodé-Thomas. Heinemann, 1981.
- Chain, Mybe B. "Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Miriama Ba," in Eldred Durosimi Jones, et al., (Eds.) *Women in African Literature Today*. Africa World Press, 1987.
- Frye, Marilyn. "Oppression" in Anne Minas (Ed.) *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men* Wadsworth, 2000.