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## Narrativization – A Weapon For Assertion Of Women’s Identity In Senegal (Mariama Bâ’s *So Long A Letter*)

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### Abstract

Mariama Bâ, one of the prolific women novelists of the African Literature, emerges as a harbinger and torchbearer for women’s identity by fighting against social injustices, particularly those faced by women in the predominantly Muslim and male-dominated society of Senegal. Focused on female emancipation, Bâ challenges entrenched patriarchal values and urges women to seize control of their destinies. In Mariama Bâ’s two novels, *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. Bâ’s focus on the ills of polygamy is analysed. Her novels highlight the progression of the African educated women. *So Long a Letter* attempts to examine how an educated, middle-aged and abandoned wife achieves self-realisation and emerges as a confident woman fully in control of herself. It also shows how women are able to accept life on their own terms and live independent lives. This paper explores Mariama Bâ’s mission to use narrativization as a weapon for gender empowerment, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges faced by women in post-independence Senegal and emphasizing the transformative journey towards gender equality.

**Index Terms:** Narrativization, female emancipation, patriarchal challenges, societal values, gender dynamics, transformative journey.

**Introduction:**

In the contemporary African literary horizon, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head from South Africa, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Adaora Lily Ulasi from Nigeria, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau from Kenya, Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, Mariama Bâ and Amanata Sow Fall from Senegal are the most famous women writers. They focus on issues such as marriage, child-bearing, motherhood, polygamy, abandonment, divorce, power struggle, identity, empowerment and so on. One of the key themes in their writings is the opposing pull of tradition and liberation. Woman's experience, unlike that of a traditional woman, does not revolve around man's needs. She is able to prove her self-perception in complex and intense terms. In general, the female writers dedicate their writing in representing the role of the African woman from abundance to self-assertive and independent.

Mariama Bâ, a pioneer Senegalese woman writer focuses against social injustices and a natural revolutionary in her writings. She emerges as a trailblazer in championing female emancipation. Originating from Senegal, this novelist directs her efforts towards combating the injustices inflicted upon women, extending her social vision beyond their immediate challenges. Bâ emphasizes the critical need for female self-awareness and calls for a reevaluation of prevailing values ingrained in the patriarchal fabric. In Senegal's predominantly Muslim, male-oriented society, she passionately works to uplift women's status, urging them to seize control of their destinies and challenge entrenched hierarchies. Bâ sees narrativization as a tool for liberating colonized Africans, asserting the African writer's role in fostering a free democratic society, awakening consciousness, and denouncing societal ills through the portrayal of women protagonists.

Mariama Bâ's crusade for female empowerment encompasses not only a challenge to the injustices faced by women but also a broader call for a paradigm shift in societal values. Through her writings, she calls on women to assume agency in their lives and resist the oppressive norms that have constrained them for far too long. In Senegal and beyond, Mariama Bâ emerges as a voice of change, inspiring women to rise above societal constraints and assert their rightful place in a world that demands their active participation and leadership. She says,

... the duty of African women is not just to write but to use writing as an arm (weapon) to destroy the age-old oppression of women. (Mariama Bâ, "La fonction Politique", 7)

She is the first Senegalese woman writer to see literature as a weapon for gender empowerment. While demonstrating the challenges of gender ideology in an African society, still sustained by traditional mores, she sees that each of her women emerges stronger and better placed to understand, cope with, analyse and articulate the problems, challenges and aspirations of both women and society.

Mariama Bâ, the recipient of the internationally acclaimed Noma Award for her first novel, **So Long a Letter**, is regarded as the first female African writer to offer "... a testimony of the female condition in Africa, while giving the testimony a true imaginative depth." (Irele, 108) On the occasion of receiving this award, Mariama Bâ articulates that:

... there is a cry everywhere in the world; a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry may be different, but there is still a certain unity. (Barbara Herrel, interview with Mariama Bâ)

Discussing the nature of this cry and its implications, Cham says thus:

In detailing the nature and implications of this universal feminine cry on the African soil, both novels reveal at the same time a dominant problematic ... For want of a more comprehensive and better-sounding label, we shall refer to this problematic as one of abandonment with all that it entails on the personal, social, psychological, cultural, political and economic levels. (Cham, 30)

For Mariama Bâ, writing is a vehicle for liberating colonised Africans, and the African writer is free to perpetuate the African worldview. For her, the African writer should play a vital role in helping to build a free democratic society. In "So Long a Letter" and "Scarlet Song," Bâ's experiences provided her works with one of her central concerns - the institution of polygamy, which often left married women with few legal rights. Well ahead of other feminist activists, she also took on the issue of female genital mutilation, a subject that gained in prominence only towards the end of the twentieth century.

Mariama Bâ felt that women are pitched both psychologically and financially in a sensual indulgence and complete lack of regard for the consequences of men's actions on families. They are completely blind. Bâ's portrayal challenges stereotypes of submissive African women, presenting characters as resilient, strengthened by experience and with a profound understanding of their challenges. In contrast to conventional narratives, these women actively resist passivity, engaging in understanding and articulating their struggles. Bâ's literary perspective amplifies women's voices, urging a reevaluation of societal norms and empowering women amidst evolving gender dynamics in post-independence Senegal.

### **Socio-political context**

Mariama Bâ's "So Long a Letter" is set in Dakar, Senegal's capital, approximately two decades after the nation gained independence from France in 1960. Her second novel, "Scarlet Song," unfolds in both Dakar and Paris, intricately weaving in the political tumult of May 1968. Bâ, however, narrate the contemporary women, shaped by the nationalist and feminist movement in her first novel, **So Long a Letter** written in French (1979). This novel has received much acclaim from African and French

critics and fetches her the inaugural Noma Award for publishing in Africa. Abiola Irele a critic, called it "... the most deeply felt presentation of the female condition in African fiction." (Irele, 108). This book is translated into English, Dutch, German, Japanese, Russian and Swedish immediately after received the award.

As the title indicates, the book **So Long a Letter** is written in the form of a long letter-- a medium that allows Bâ to bridge the gap between African forms of spoken storytelling and the traditional structure of a novel. This novel projects the scurrilous shells of introvertness to challenge the status quo through a rational thinker Ramatoulaye and her friend Radical thinker Aissatou, the two major characters both victims of polygamy living against a background of a tacit, yet stringent Muslim culture by choosing two extremes.

### **Mariama Bâ - A Representative of African Woman's Emancipation:**

As a novelist, Mariama Bâ was active from 1979 to 1981 and her two novels were seen as representative of the growing social consciousness of African women and Bâ became the focus of numerous critical studies in American and European journals. Even in the Academic circles, by late 1990s, **So Long a Letter** was included in college and university curricula all over the world.

Senegal, a former French colony, predominantly comprises Islamic inhabitants. The Wolof people, geographically situated in the S n gambia region along the Atlantic coast of Africa, have a rich history of sustained interactions with foreign cultures, particularly in urban areas. These influences have significantly impacted Wolof lives, fostering a sense of adaptability and openness to change in the face of foreign cultures. Notably, Islam, itself a foreign cultural element, has emerged as a potent force within Wolof society.

Bâ draws upon the Wolof worldview in her works, delving into perspectives on issues such as caste, friendship, fate, and women's relations. The Wolof people's ability to navigate and embrace diverse cultures becomes a central theme, reflecting their adaptability in the face of historical encounters. Islam's pervasive influence in Wolof society is explored, highlighting its transformation into a significant societal force.

Through her novels, Mariama Bâ offers a nuanced portrayal of Senegal's post-independence landscape, intertwining historical context with contemporary insights. By incorporating the rich Wolof cultural tapestry, she provides readers with a window into the complexities of caste dynamics, the intricacies of relationships, and the evolving role of women within the broader socio-political context.

This perhaps prompts Siga Fatima Jagne to comment that

Without her particularly being situated in an Islamic Wolof society and having an Islamic/Wolof world view, she could not have written these specific texts of hers in the context that she does. (Jagne, 4)

## So Long A Letter

Bâ's first novel, **So Long a Letter**, marks a unique female portraiture against the male-authored Senegalese literature. She has taken a long-awaited departure from the stereotypical female portraiture in the male-authored Senegalese literature and has pinned the women with courage and self-assertive. Bâ's world is primarily women's world, giving only peripheral treatment to the affairs of men. Her women are highly self-assertive and highly individual in the post-independence Senegal. Focusing on the themes-- abandonment, polygamy, mothering, nation-building and the empowerment of women-- Bâ dedicates **So Long a Letter** to "... all women and to men of good will." This shows that, she may embrace all women cross-culturally, but she wants solidarity only with men who will respect the equality and empowerment of women's lives.

**So Long a Letter**, epistolary in form, is about an abandoned wife, the physical and psychological impact of abandonment and the strength, resolve and resilience of the wife in coping with the devastating condition. Ann Mc Elaney-Johnson has given a review on this novel as

... an individual's search for self-understanding and as a woman's written communication with a carefully selected confidant. (Johnson, 111)

Ramatoulaye Fall (hereafter referred to as Rama), the protagonist, conforms to both the literary and social definitions of her gender. By contrast Aissatou Bâ, her friend, refuses to submit to traditional methods. Though Mariama Bâ allows Rama, her conservative heroine, to tell her own story, indirectly, she quite explicitly identifies herself with her other heroine, the radical Aissatou. Like the novelist herself, Aissatou is a divorced woman and shares Mariama Bâ's last name as well. Commenting on the narration of the novelist, Florence Stratton aptly remarks that, "Working within the genre of pseudo-autobiography, Bâ has her heroine tell her story, not directly, but with subconscious evasion and revelation." (Stratton, 159) The autobiographical voice in the letter means coming out of muteness and articulating the fear and the hope, the weakness and the strength, the resolve and the resilience and, more than all these, the sense of mission of the African woman.

In Ramatoulaye's life, a three-phase development can be seen. In the first, Rama, the victim of polygamy, uses the period of mourning for her husband's death to reflect on the circumstances of her life. The second phase is a kind of turning-point for Rama which may be called a period of self-realisation. She refuses to marry any man with whom she is not romantically in love. In the third phase of her life, she redefines her status of a free woman and a single mother so as to be able to begin a new chapter of her life, and emerges as an independent woman.

The narration begins with Rama's composition of a letter to her lifelong friend, Aissatou, mirrors the opposite to her ideology after Rama's recent widowhood. As she recounts her husband's passing, Rama reflects on the pivotal events shaping both their lives. Central to their shared history is the rare opportunity for education they seized in a time when it was uncommon for African women, particularly beyond the privileged elite. Despite defying parental expectations by marrying for love and establishing happy, productive marriages, a common challenge arises as both husbands opt for polygamy. The friends' differing responses to this practice become a crucial point in their lives, exploring the complexities of marriage, societal expectations, and personal choices in a changing society.

Rama examines herself-- about her victimisation by the male social order and how carefully and skilfully she escapes from it; about her suffering from family crises and how with the help of her friend she comes out of the traditional definitions of the family. In the conclusion to her letter Rama reflects upon "... the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world", (88) a "commotion" in which Rama feels herself to be a person who endeavours the intellectual horizons by widening her thinking. She realises that in the final tally, a woman cannot depend on anybody but herself, or at the most on the other women. Women's assertion and fulfillment is identified near the end of the long letter, "My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows." (88) So Rama's heart can rejoice each time a woman realises self-fulfilment only because she herself has achieved that point. Reacting to Rama's statement, Sharn Irlam says that

... it will be a time of double rejoicing: for the return of her friend and for her own "return" from the shadows: from her confinement, her silence, her widow's weeds. (Irlam, 86)

Rama, who accepts her position as a co-wife, later discovers that Modou abandons her in his vanity and weakness. Now critical of the polygamous structure which suppresses the personality of women, she explains the ways by which she perceives truth:

My reflections determine my attitude to the problems of life. I analyse the decisions that decide our future. I widen my scope by taking an interest in current world affairs. (Ba, So Long A Letter, 88)

### **Narrative Expression**

Ramatoule, in her own way, attempts to end the oppression, powerlessness and patriarchal exploitation and seeks to identify, define and adopt strategies of resistance within her cultural confines. Her statement becomes a metaphor for the creative process itself. She never loses hope. Hope keeps her emotionally together and knowledge is freedom to her. Her final words are "The word 'happiness' does indeed have

meaning, doesn't it? ... Too bad for me if once again I have to write you So Long a Letter ..." (89) Interestingly, there is no closure to the novel. The final statement brings the reader back to the beginning. For Rama, the act of writing has been the means of finding her own place. About her signature at the end of the letter, Katherine Frank rightly says:

The name represents the attainment at long last of Ramatoulaye's hard-earned struggle for an independent identity. Her signature is her assertion of selfhood.  
(Frank, 20)

Rama's journey leads to lucidity. Rama progresses from a victim unable to reject polygamy in her marriage with Modou to a woman capable of refusing two proposals and learning to believe in herself and recovers her earlier vitality and optimism.

It is rather difficult to agree with Alphy J. Palakkootam who says that, "Mariama Bâ's novel leaves behind no hope and no sense of optimism." (Palakkootam, 89) A sense of optimism has been explicitly found in Rama's final words. Florence Stratton does not have any hesitation in acknowledging this optimism when she comments, "Rama's final diary entry is filled with optimism." (Stratton, 165) M.Cham, a well-known critic, endorses Stratton's view when he says that "**So Long a Letter** opens with a funeral (death) and closes with an affirmation of life (regeneration/rebirth) ..." (Cham, 37)

Rama and Aissatou want the society to change because everyone has something at stake. They have faith in themselves. Because of stifling traditions, these women struggle with the challenges and making choices overrule ancient modalities. They confront against the women's role in the patriarchal society through her narrativization. This perhaps prompts Cham to remark that "Bâ's ... heroines are champions of change and justice and they inspire other women and people to live and carry on." (Cham, 50)

### **Conclusion:**

Mariama Bâ, the pioneering Senegalese novelist, stands as a potent advocate for female emancipation in the predominantly Muslim society of Senegal. Focusing on the struggles of women, she challenges entrenched patriarchal values, urging them to seize control of their destinies. Through works like "So Long a Letter" and "Scarlet Song," Bâ defies stereotypes, presenting resilient female figures actively engaging with and articulating their challenges. Her mission to wield writing as a weapon for gender empowerment, emphasizing the transformative journey towards gender equality in post-independence Senegal is clearly visualized through her writings.

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