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## “EDUCATION: A TOOL TO REPEL POLYGAMY” A READING OF *SO LONG A LETTER* BY MARIAMA BA

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### ABSTRACT

Mariama Ba was a Senegalese author and feminist born in Dakar, Senegal and was raised a Muslim by her maternal grandparents. Being raised by her traditional grandparents, she had to struggle to gain an education because; they did not believe that girls should be taught. But against her grandparents' wishes, she graduated from the Teacher's College in 1947 and taught for 12 years. Ba later married a Senegalese member of Parliament, Obèye Diop, but divorced him and was left to care for their nine children. Her frustration with the fate of African women; as well as her ultimate acceptance of it is expressed in her first novel, *So Long a Letter*. Ba's source of determination and commitment to the feminist cause stemmed from her background, her parents' life and her schooling. Indeed, her contribution is of absolute importance in modern African studies. She was a pioneer to illustrate the disadvantaged position of women in African society. As a divorcee and "a modern Muslim woman" as she characterized herself, Ba was active in women's associations. She also ardently promoted education. She defended women's rights, delivered speeches, and wrote articles in local newspapers. Her contribution is prominent and compelling because she explained and described the disadvantaged position of women in general and especially with married women. Ba's first novel, *So Long a Letter* unraveled the complex lives of African women. She addresses about the multiple women's issues. The story centers on two educated women who had happy, loving marriages until their husbands took second wives. This study however focuses on the benefits of education to women and how they act as a weapon fighting against polygamy.

**Key words:** Education, identity, self realization, polygamy

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### INTRODUCTION

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is considered to be a widely read novel because of its cluster of themes and universal truths which are packed together in the form of a novella. It has gained a worldwide recognition because it focuses on the plight of women. Ba talks about the various forms of oppression that women go through in order to

survive their predicament. The issue of women's oppression and empowerment has been one major theme in African literature in the last few decades. Women suffer in this way as a result of various factors, some of which may be related to traditional beliefs and practices in their societies. This is often interconnected with forms of race, caste and economic oppression. *So Long a Letter* exemplifies an

outburst of the oppressed women under a polygamous set-up. The author condemns polygamy by highlighting and exposing the many ugly sides of the practice. One of the evils of polygamy is the physical separation and the emotional agony the female spouses are usually subjected to throughout their life.

Published in 1980, *So Long a Letter* recounts the stories of two lifelong friends and their husbands, living in Senegal. The novella is written in the form of a lengthy epistle from Ramatoulaye, to her beloved friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye, the speaker, has just experienced the death of her husband, Modou, and as a devout Muslim woman, she is expected to perform the ceremonies for her dead husband. This study compares and contrasts the women characters in the novel and brings to the fore how education has helped them open doors of opportunities to fight back and attain self-realization when they are deserted by their loved ones.

Ramatoulaye writes of her emotional struggle to regain her life after her husband's decision to take a second wife. Although the law of Islam accepts that a man can have up to four wives, Modou's action is looked as treason and as an abrupt elimination of the life they have lived together for about thirty years. After thirty years of marriage and twelve children he wants somebody new and younger, a classmate and a friend of his oldest daughter Daba in other words, somebody of her daughter's age. He decides to take a new wife without her knowledge. She cannot reason out as to why her husband should engage in such an act of betrayal and this thought tortured her all over.

Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou? *SLL:12*

All of a sudden she is deserted by her husband and she is unable to think outside of him. To her the whole world was revolving besides her home and office. And to be left alone with twelve kids to take care and to provide for was unimaginable for her. She tries to divert her mind from thinking about her disappointments by focusing on other forms of grief that other people face. But her thoughts about the betrayal haunt her very soon.

My efforts cannot for long take my mind off my disappointment. I think of the suckling baby, no sooner born than orphaned. I think of the blind man who will never see his child's smile. I think of the cross the one-armed man has to bear. I think... But my despair persists, but my rancour remains, but the waves of an immense sadness break in me!

And to think that I loved this man passionately, 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. *SLL: 12*

It would have been different for Ramatoulaye if she had not loved him. Her generation was the first that could fight against their parents and marry for love. They were also the first to see that love and polygamy cannot abide together. It would have been completely different if Ramatoulaye was only educated in the old traditions, and had never known of love, and was in a set up of a forced marriage from the get go where polygamy was customary. Ramatoulaye and Modou married for love and she was so hurt because Modou essentially gave up their thirty years of marriage, his good relationships and respect of his children.

But finally Ramatoulaye accepts the fact that Modou has taken a second wife and that she is ready to accompany her co-wife but Modou doesn't give her the opportunity to face the situation. He simply dumps his first wife thereby rejecting to obey the Islamic rule. He never bothered to come back and explain his decision. This is when Ramatoulaye feels bad and is unable to take a decision. She says:

Leave? Start again at zero, after living twenty-five years with one man, after having borne twelve children? Did I have enough energy to bear alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both mortal and material? *SLL: 39 & 40*

Though she decides to endure polygamy according to the precepts of Islam, she grieves to discover that Modou has not even given her a choice.

From then on my life changed. I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life. I was left with empty hands.

... I lived in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends and family to bring him back to the fold proved futile... He never came back again; his new found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us. *SLL: 46*

She started to face life with a strong face. It was only because she was educated and financially secure. Throughout her suffering, she survived. She took up all her household duties like buying food stuffs, paying electricity and water bills, replacing locks and latches of broken doors as well as looking for a plumber to check the blocked sink all by herself. She overcame her shyness by going alone to cinemas. She refreshes herself by watching movies packed with messages, sentiments, comedies and thrillers. Moreover she even feels grateful to Modou for having cut off all the contact without disturbing her by wallowing in indecision. She says:

I survived. The more I thought about it, the more grateful I became to Modou for having cut off all contact. I had the solution my children wanted – the break without having taken the initiative.

... What do other husbands do? They wallow in indecision; they force themselves to be present where neither their feelings nor their interests continue to reside. *SLL: 52*

She kept herself occupied and faced the situation bravely. She waited for the correct decision to be taken and to go ahead with her life. Soon after her husband's death, Tamsir – her husband's elder brother who had several wives and children came to claim her hand in addition according to their tradition. But she faced the situation very daringly and fires back at him for treating her as a commodity.

You forgot that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and one has chosen you.'

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 fruit, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine. You, the revered lord, you take it easy, obeyed at the crook of a finger. I shall never be the one to complete your collection. *SLL: 58*

Next comes Daouda Dieng, who has loved her from her youth. Daouda is a rich man, a politician and a Doctor who has established himself very well. He also claimed her hand in marriage after Tamsir. Since she knew the heartbreaking pain of being in a polygamous marriage; thinking about the wife and children of Daouda, she writes in her letter to Daouda:

My conscience is not accommodating enough to enable me to marry you, when only esteem, justified by your many qualities, pulls me towards you. I can offer you nothing else, even though you deserve everything. Esteem is not enough for marriage, whose snares I know from experience. And then the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation. Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family.

You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constrains, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change. *SLL: 68*

Though she needs external support physically and financially to look after her family she refuses to accept polygamy. Her refusal to marry Tamsir and Daouda and all the other suitors points out her strength of reasoning and thought that education has given her. Her education has given her another identity as a teacher and she feels financially secured. Since she is financially secured; she is able to provide for her whole family without expecting help from external sources. Because she is able to nourish her children and look after their needs she out-rightly

repels to accept polygamy. Her love for her profession is seen in this.

How we loved this priesthood, humble teachers in humble local schools. How faithfully we served our profession, and how we spent ourselves in order to do it honour.

*SLL: 23*

Thus only because of her education and career as a working woman is she able to uplift herself and support and feed her family without any other dependencies. She strives to grow in her life saying:

... I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything – disappointments and humiliations – hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plants sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me. *SLL: 89*

Ramatoulaye's best friend Aissatou also relates herself with what her friend has gone through because she also had to endure the same torment when her husband decided to take a second wife. But Aissatou unlike Ramatoulaye moves out immediately and leaves her problems behind her. She refuses to accept the lame excuses that Mawdo gives for taking Young Nabou as his second wife. She considers it as a betrayal of trust and love that she had from her youth. He blames his mother saying:

'My mother is old. The knocks and disappointments of life have weakened her heart. If I spurn this child, she will die. This is the doctor speaking and not the son. Think of it, her brother's daughter, brought up by her, rejected by her son. What shame before society!' *SLL: 30*

Though he wanted to play it safe by blaming his mother as the cause for his second marriage; she at full throttle left him back and looked forward on her life. He assumed that Aissatou would simply stay and accept her co-wife. But she stood by a decision which was uncommon in that polygamous society. Though she was advised to compromise and threatened of the unknown future she took notice of none. She just left him there with only a letter.

Princess master their feelings to fulfil their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and in

silence, accept a destiny that opposes them. *SLL: 31.*

... I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. *SLL: 32*

With this above letter she was determined to go ahead with her life all alone. She courageously took her life in her hands gained control and accomplished her self-esteem with the help of education. Books became her only refuge. She got equipped for her survival through books.

The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence...books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted: examinations sat and passed took you also to France. The school of Interpreters, from which you graduated, led to your appointment in the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. You make a very good living. You are developing in peace as your letters tell me, your back resolutely turned on those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationships. *SLL: 32 & 33*

She fought against all odds to reach a stable financial situation that allowed her to provide for herself and her children without the support of others. Being an educated woman, she set an example for the upcoming generations where women can be both providers to the family and mothers. Because of the gain of education and the willpower to reject polygamy Aissatou has accomplished her identity for her life. Ramatoulaye quotes:

How I envied your calmness during your last visit! There you were rid of the mask of suffering. Your sons were growing up well, contrary to all predictions. You did not care about Mawdo. Yes, indeed, there you were, the past crushed beneath your heel. There you were, an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life. *SLL: 34*

Thus the two friends Ramatoulaye and Aissatou stood their stand in resisting polygamy and overcame their crisis with the help of education.

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