

## **Between Two Choices: A Re-reading of Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre***

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### **Abstract**

*There is no hullabaloo about the dynamism of every culture. However, people, all over the world, cannot be absolutely separated from their history and culture. In all artistic creations, context of situation, which dwells much on cultural and/or environmental elements, plays a key role since there is a serious link between art and the society which produces it. This paper examines gender issue, which has become a contemporary world affair. As its purpose, the paper seeks gender equality and preaches for unconditional fair treatment for women. Using Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* as a yardstick, the paper explains the relationship between feminism and womanism with a view to articulate the need for such movements as well as to validate the necessity for mutual understanding between men and women in the sincere call for nation building and human development. Feminist criticism is the theoretical framework which provides roots for our discussion. The study concludes that women in the whole wide world have suffered almost similar fate, always oppressed, used and dumped and painfully too, they are hooked by legislations, cultural and religious practices. Hence, there is the need for a redress.*

**Keywords:** culture, history, love, marriage, liberation

### **I. Introduction**

The three major genres of literature namely: drama, poetry and prose have potential ingredients which make them functional platforms to showcase Africa's beliefs, feelings, norms, values and aspirations which can translate into desired societal development. Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It is equally, at the same time too, a means of expressing ideas, views, opinions, experiences, feelings, body of knowledge, cultural values as well as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be "a medium of appending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development", (Ogundokun, 2013, p. 34-39).

From east to west and north to south, people agitate for a fair treatment for womenfolk to create a leveled playing ground for both male and female so as to redress the old order of male chauvinism, which has reduced women to mere decorative things to be seen and not to be heard. Womanism goes a step further in the operations of the Feminist movement. While feminism is militant, forceful and radical in nature, womanism is calm, mild and more reasonable in its approach.

The womanists believe that women can still keep their husbands, manage their homes and nurture their love all at the same time as they demand for their rights in a male dominated society. Striking the balance of equality between the two existing genders (male and female) is the bone of contention for both the feminists and the womanists.

In other words, rejecting socio-cultural, religious, political and economic bondage, which restrict women's rights and give men unparalleled advantages over women in human societies is the focus of both Feminism and Womanism. However, they adopt different strategies to achieving their aims based on the context of situation and, or environment (society) where they found themselves and operate.

Feminism gives birth to Womanism. The latter is the Africanization of the former. Because of the various contending factors in African context, the more conscious committed writers have chosen to domesticate the feminist ideology, which gives birth to the baby, "*Womanism*".

Womanism as a movement, celebrates woman strength as a pillar, the strength that brings black-men to recognize and compromise for harmonious co-existence of both sexes. Womanism is a peculiar culture which reminds men, with outstanding indices that without women's full engagement and involvement in the system; politically, socially, economically, culturally and religiously, man is incomplete in action as well as in achievement and this is the central message of most practitioners in majority of their artistic creations. Davies and Graves (1986) observe thus: "A genuine African feminism should recognize a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign denomination and European/American exploitation". This is not confrontational to African men; rather it paves the way for them to be aware of various salient facets of women's subjugation which are not the same as the popular oppression of all African peoples. "Stiwa", Social Transformation including women of Africa is what we want in Africa. It is not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest (Ogundipe, 1994).

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

Feminist criticism is one of the popular types of sociological criticism. It holds that literature and other forms of creative arts should be examined in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received. This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society. To understand a writer's literary work(s), one may need to probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be "the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature" because it (the approach) takes into consideration "everything within our society which has informed the work", Irele (1971, p. 9-24).

The word feminism is derived from the Latin word "femina", which implies "pertaining to women", "a synthesis of women's experiences", that is an amalgamation or fusion of women's experiences (Adebayo, 2010, p. 18). The movement wears a militant face and its root is in the West. Feminism has been established as a belief in the right of women to have political, social and economic equality with men. The concept involves various movements, theories and philosophies that are concerned with the issue of gender difference. It advocates equality for women and campaign for women's rights and interests.

Through protest writing, committed African creative writers condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material development in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence. Feminism has turned out to be a veritable critical theory, which provides a safe landing ground for writers and theorists who have chosen to protest against women oppression, marginalization and/or any form of maltreatment against womenfolk for socio-cultural, political and economic reasons.

### III. Discussion

In what appears to be an autobiographical account of reminiscences, accentuated with the I-narrative technique, Mariama Bâ, through her major character, Ramatoulaye is able to unmask her emotional struggle for survival upon the demise of Modou, her husband whose abrupt decision to take a second wife has murdered the peaceful co-existence which they both built, nurtured and enjoyed for twenty five years. Seeking the fundamental human rights of women, which will allow them to take their proper place in the schemes of things; deconstruct a major Islamic injunction that demands a total submission of a woman to her husband in all ramifications. Ramatoulaye strategically rejects male chauvinism and its consequential effects on womenfolk by writing a letter to an old friend, Aissatou, who is also suffering the same fate as hers.

Knowledge is the cornerstone of any creative or artistic invention. It is a topmost, transcendental gift from God, our creator. Newmann (1960, p. 13) comments thus: "When I speak of knowledge, I mean something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses, something which takes a view of things, which sees more than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees, which invests it with an idea."

Mariama Bâ, a school teacher and educational inspector, uses the knowledge she has acquired to fight inequalities between men and women in Africa. She lashes out at the cruel restrictions against womenfolk; socio-culturally, religiously, politically and economically. The womanist holds that man and woman have supportive/complementary roles and that neither of them can survive alone. Bâ, a Senegalese female writer believes there could not be any self-fulfillment outside the "couple" situation. A womanist goes beyond the husband and wife matter. Bâ kicks against the abandonment of children. She wants children to be trained and educated. However, the most important meeting point between feminism and womanism is in the area of political marginalization with respect to women. Politics is strongly interwoven with religion, traditional laws and culture, this is evidently defined by popular religious as demonstrated in the Holy Bible and the Glorious Qu'ran and our traditional religion. Political issues are also connected with society and economic matters. In 2010, Balogun affirms that: "African literature explores the realities of human condition in Africa in totality and it speculates what is and what is not to be. In so doing, the minds of the people are sharpened and sensitized towards qualitative change."

Ramatoulaye leverages on the demise of Modou, her husband to express her bitterness against a killing tradition. It is the death of Modou that has actually caused Ramatoulaye to write her childhood friend, Aissatou in an attempt to recount the dreaded experience she suffers.

Bestman (2003, p. 109-123) attests thus: "Ramatoulaye is heart-broken. Her world falls apart as her husband treacherously exposes her contempt and frivolously destroys all that they had trilled together to build over the years." The narrator says: "In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal." (p. 12).

There are instances where Ramatoulaye demonstrates brutal rejection of male chauvinism while at other times, she displays mild reactions to some male-female issues. A feminist like Aissatou, for example chooses to make a break from her marriage. In other words, she adopts a divorce to revolt against an archaic practice, which permits her husband to take a second wife. However, as a womanist, Ramatoulaye thinks divorce is not the right answer since it does not produce the desired result.

The feminists are interested in changing the old and barbaric social order and injecting fresh and friendly one. They want to end the era which portrays women as ornaments; decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, mere companions to be flattered, brainwashed or blindfolded and crowned up with empty promises. On page 61, when discussing with Daouda Dieng, a politician and member of the National Assembly, Ramatoulaye itemizes some of the demands of the feminist movement thus: "We have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to have and pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities. The right to vote is an important weapon..."

Both feminism and womanism kick against the deplorable social structures in the society. This is simply described as poverty. Both material and moral poverty are discussed in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*. Material poverty can be measured in the lack of basic structural amenities, which hinders development and reduces the standard of living. On the other hand, lack of will, interest, purpose or attitudinal disposition, which can bring development, is translated to mean moral poverty.

Better living condition means good roads, decent houses, and potable water as well as functional hospitals, adequate food supply, security of lives and property, good schools and employment opportunities for all among other things.

Commenting on social services in African states, Mariama Bâ (1979) observes: “Even though the primary schools are rapidly increasing, access to them has not become any easier. They leave out in the streets an impressive number of children because of the lack of places...Apprenticeship to traditional crafts seems degrading to whoever has the slightest book learning. The dream is to become a clerk. The trowel is spurned. The horde of the jobless swells the flood of delinquency.” The condition of the clinic where the young Nabou works in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* is a reflection of poverty in the black continent. Let us take a look at young Nabou: “She would come back from work railing at the lack of beds led to the discharge, too early in her opinion, of the mothers; worried about the lack of staff, inadequate instruments, medicines. She would say, with deep concern, fragile baby is let loose too quickly into a hygienically unsound social environment. She thought of the great rate of infant mortality, which of course any devotion cannot decrease...” (p. 47).

Validating all that we have seen or heard about the sordid human conditions in African states; Fafowora (2001, p. 248) remarks: “But without controlling its birth rate, Africa will be facing a decade in which social services and public utilities will decline.

Already under SAP, Structural Adjustment Programme, the gains of the 70s in health, education, and other public utilities, have been badly eroded. In the case of Nigeria, per capita income has dropped from US\$800 in the 1970s to less than US\$300 in the 1980s.” The situation is even more serious now; with the issue of insecurity in the land.

One of the major achievements of Feminism cum Womanism Movement is the passing of the Family Code in Senegal, which restores the dignity of women that has often been trampled or infringed upon. In Nigeria, there was the creation of the Ministry of women affairs at the state and federal levels in 1975. Also, since the time of Military President Ibrahim Babangida, we have witnessed the establishment of the office of the First lady.

Another point of confluence between feminism and womanism is in the area of women empowerment. It is believed that women emancipation is an incomplete dose without an empowerment mechanism. The economic empowerment for example will make women comfortable; free from unlimited over reliance on men for all their daily needs and this purchasing power will make women more relevant at the home front and the society at large. Ramatoulaye confirms thus: “...They would go into raptures over the many gadgets in my house: gas cooker, vegetable grater, sugar ....” (p. 20).

Because Ramatoulaye is educated and economically empowered, she is able to move on with her life when Modou abandoned her and her twelve children. On page 51, she proudly points out: “I was surviving. In addition to my former duties, I took over Modou’s as well. The purchase of basic foodstuffs kept me occupied at the end of every month; I made sure that I was never short of tomatoes or of oil, potatoes or onions during those periods when they became rare in the markets; I stored bags of Slam rice, much loved by the Senegalese.

My brain was taxed by new financial gymnastics. The last date for payment of electricity bills and of water rates demanded my attention. I was often the only woman in the queue.”

In Africa, polygamy, a tradition which permits a man to have more than one wife, is an old custom. Of course, it is as old as the history of the black people. But, this old practice has been perceived to be bondage on women for their social well-being. Therefore, gender movements especially feminism and womanism see polygamy as a serious social problem. It causes unhealthy separation among families. It discourages practical love, which is required for mutual co-operation and understanding between the two sexes; male and female. Truly, polygamy more often than not tears apart family ties. The pain a woman suffers as a result of polygamy can be felt in the reaction of Aissatou when her husband, Mawdo picks the young Nabou as his second wife. She says: “Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. Others bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart’s acceptance...I find you despicable. At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have always placed you...” (p. 32). Polygamy is a social, cultural and religious problem especially in African societies. The issue of polygamy features prominently in most African literary works. Typical examples are novels and films of Sembène Ousmane and this literary work under review, Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*.

This culture which allows a man to have many wives is therefore needs to be taken as a serious matter. Culture is the sum of all kinds of acquired mannerism and behavior in one's society from cradle to death.

Although it must be noted; at the same time too that any cultural change should be a gradual/slow process because it is a sensitive issue. It requires a high level of understanding, re-orientation and co-operation. Validating this fact, Okeh (2003, 1-43) asserts thus: "Culture is the dearest possession of any human group and any human being...Problems rooted on culture therefore take time to eradicate because customs and traditions cannot be done away with overnight."

It is indeed sadden that polygamy collapses the family, which is the nucleus of every human society. In expressing the distress caused by polygamy in her life, Ramatoulaye laments through these rhetorical questions: "Did Modou appreciate, in its full measure, the void created by his absence in this house? Did Modou attribute to me more energy than I had to shoulder the responsibility of my children?"(p. 53). The revolt against marrying Tamsir explains the feminism in Ramatoulaye and by extension, Mariama Bâ, the novelist; while her refusal to quit her marriage when Modou, her husband picks a second wife demonstrates her womanist posture.

Ramatoulaye knows that Tamsir attempt to acquire her as it were could not be interpreted as a declaration of a sincere love but a practical show of male oppression over an innocent woman, who is perceived to be a weaker vessel.

When women are empowered socially, politically and economically, there will be peace at home which will translate to societal development and transformation, which will pave the way for better human living conditions. Akingbe et al (2011, p. 301-309) affirm: "There can be no doubt that the relationship between literature and society is as close as to be virtually symbiotic." What we see in this novel represents African social realities.

By and large, it can be deduced that the Europeans and the Americans can settle with the feminist ideologies while it will be more constructive for Africans to adopt womanism taking into account historical and cultural factors, which validate that people cannot be absolutely divorced from their societal virtues; norms and values within a short time. The writer acknowledges the social problems which women are facing in a male dominated society; she identifies with the women and makes a case for them with the aim of solving their plights not only because she is involved but also because she wants a change so that human societies can move forward. Mariama Bâ's advice for both the male and female genders is that each partner should move sincerely towards the other; accept the others' successes and weaknesses; appreciate each other's qualities, abilities among other things. On page 89, she writes: "The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony...The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family."

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Many critics have talked about women's emancipation. But, women's emancipation without empowerment is as good as nothing. In this paper, we have identified material and moral poverty as well as women's empowerment as issues which need serious attention. We have also; concisely justified that Feminism and Womanism are gender movements by identifying the correlation between them. As x-rayed in her first novel, *Une si longue lettre*, Mariama Bâ recounts the psychological struggle she went through when her husband married a second wife. With a lot of flashbacks, the reminiscences are presented in form of a letter to an old friend by an I-narrator to accentuate the emotional appeal of the story. It can be deduced that these movements are "necessary evils" to establish equality between men and women in an attempt to water down the effects of male chauvinism in human societies of the world. Whether a writer adopts a feminist posture or a womanist tactics, the most important thing is achieving the desired aims and objectives of his/her calling. To be productive as an African social realist is however, noble and more rewarding than crossing one's arms and hiding behind foreign ideas and practices. We would like to submit that gender equality is desirable for sustainable development in every human society.

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