Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Widowhood and Single Motherhood In Mariama Bâ's *So Long A Letter*

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Abstract
An epistolary novel, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* recounts the story of a thirty year old marital union that ends in divorce and widowhood. It is a critical appraisal of polygamy, patriarchal control and changing cultural standards in post-colonial Senegalese society presented by two women, Ramatoulaye Fall and her friend Aissatou. This paper investigates the captivating nightmares of widowhood and single motherhood. It exposes the psychological and economic hardships, primarily the oppressive customary rituals (mirasse) and the helplessness of a woman place in inheritance. Anchored on Postcolonial feminist theory juxtaposed with African feminism (Womanism), the paper considers the double yoke of single motherhood, as Ramatoulaye strives to raise twelve children alone in a shifting world while defying societal demands to enter into a levirate marriage. Notwithstanding her nightmares, the study opines that Ramatoulaye remains brave with tough spirit of resistance. She transforms the role of the modern African woman from being a victim of customary cultural docile expectations to an energetic agent of her own destiny by means of education, inner force and recollection. It concludes that *So Long a Letter* provides a narrative that commemorates feminine fortitude in addition to denouncing patriarchal codes in its entirety. It shows women are able to surmount patriarchal systemic torments of motherhood, babyhood and widowhood through toughness and comradeship.
Keywords: Polygamy, Widowhood, Single motherhood, Resilience, Patriarchy

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
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Introduction

Mariama Bâ's epistolary novel, *So Long a Letter* (1981), is equally a forceful auto-biography that depicts the resilience of two Senegalese female friends, Ramatoulaye Fall and Aissatou, who lived in a shifting and modernising nevertheless intensely patriarchal world. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist of the narrative, exposes the miserable realities of Senegalese traditional setting with its extreme anti-women customs. The "mirasse", a traditional, invasive funeral rites and polygamy aided the fashionable desertion of women by their husbands, apart from a man's untimely death. Thus, the narrative is a depiction of the scourge of sexual denial, betrayal, loneliness and several other forms of gender-related discrimination experienced by African women in the face of the archaic patriarchal social norms. The protagonist laments Modou's betrayal, the burdens of single motherhood and widowhood in various segments of the narrative. Through their failed marital experiences, both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou underscore the woman's ordeal where her home becomes a location of quarrel and her life becomes a struggle for self-respect. The author's portrayal of the two characters shows how each of them handles the numerous feminist issues facing her matrimonial home. For instance, the narrative presents polygamy as one of the culture-based structures created to defend men's infidelity. In other words, these ordeals emanate from various inflexible patriarchal customs, disloyalty through polygamy, as well as the weighty burdens of post-colonial Senegalese society. The anguish of polygamy and husband's abandonment is seen in the husband's sudden marriage to a second wife or wives, after deserting his first wife and children, leaving them psychologically redundant and in economic helplessness. This is equally demonstrated by societal complicity where **r**eligious and community leaders regularise the heartless and selfishness acts of males, leaving women to accept and internalise their misery amid bearing the burdens of broken family structures

Thus the paper will focus on the intricate ordeals of widowhood and single motherhood in *So Long a Letter*. The premise is that Bâ underscores these ordeals as systemic apparatus of oppression, instead of mere personal tragedies. Consequently, the study assesses Ramatoulaye's passage from passive victimhood to lively resistance, showing her redefinition of her motherhood and widowhood to accomplish self-respect and independence in a hostile patriarchal society. The **s**pecific objectives of this study are to: i) examine the mental and economic nightmares of single motherhood caused by the abandonment and death of Ramatoulaye's husband; ii) scrutinise the socio-cultural and religious constraints imposed on widows in the novel; iii) evaluate the impact of traditional norms on the autonomy and dignity of the widow in the novel; and iv) explore how the epistolary form aids resistance and self-assertion against patriarchal marginalisation of widows and abandoned wives.

Review of Relevant Literature

Mariama Bâ's epistolary narrative centres on issues of collective and patriarchal-related constraints facing women. It is a typical novel marked by the resilience of its protagonist, Ramatoulaye. Critically acclaimed as an African feminist literary work, *So Long a Letter* is a distinguished work as it examines repressive traditional structures, patriarchy and Islamic practices in postcolonial Senegal society. Several scholars dwell on the questions of unbearable agony, isolation, material deprivation and other related themes in *So Long a Letter* and other African novels. Apart from condemning the society-imposed quandary of single parenting, scholars like Ojo-Ade (1982, pp. 71-87)

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

unambiguously parodied cultural impositions in addition to the countless stigmas suffered by widows. The narrative itself shows how Ramatoulaye, and by extension symbolising the African woman, recounts how she suffered intolerable agony, isolation, material deprivation, which was socio-culturally intensified by the community's anticipation that they remain docile to their in-laws even as they experience harsh psychological betrayal and pain.

Among scholars and critics who have worked on African feminist literary tradition and particularly Bâ's contribution, is Asika (2012). He examines Bâ's *So Long a Letter* from an inter-textual outlook, paying attention to its matrimonial disparities, gender dynamics, in addition to the traditional repression of feminine autonomy. Specifically, Asika (240–252) investigates the disconnection of women from their own households as a result abrupt marital desertion and cultural anticipations. In this exploration of the "wounded" psyche in Bâ's novel, he looks at the weighty emotional pain and mental anguish experienced by Ramatoulaye, the protagonist. Although the analysis underlines Bâ's commendation of female determination against age-long patriarchal formations, one of its shortfalls lies in its oversimplification of male counter-texts. Again its reliance on an inflexible binary of gendered opposition is apparent. This paper opines that limitations in Asika's (2012) appraisal of Bâ's novel could be addressed by applying an interface of class scrutiny along with distinguishing apparent shades of agency apart from victimhood. It stresses the context of the fortitude of characters as the bargaining strategy within definite traditional and postcolonial structures.

Another scholar of African feminist literary tradition who examined Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is Abdulkadir (2021). He makes an express critique of Asika (2012) analysis of the novel, presenting an examination of the novel from the perspective of Marxist-feminist criticism. His exploration of the socio-economic and materialistic helplessness of women underscores how Bâ's presents and lampoons a systemic commodification of women. Thus, the treatise of Abdulkadir (155–163) remains an exposition of material dispossession and exploitation, financial nightmares, with related physical ordeals and mental agony induced by patriarchy on women. However, it exposes how the women reject patriarchal structures and edge towards their liberation through self-empowerment and solidarity. Nonetheless, this paper disagrees with the view that women in *So Long a Letter* perpetuate their own oppression through internal rivalry, docility and the surrender of agency. It is helpful to note that through an interface of postcolonial feminism and cultural analysis, scholars are able to assess several related spiritual, emotional and patriarchal issues associated with women's response to their oppression.

Concurring with many other scholars, another eminent scholar of feminist scholarship Nnaemeka (2004, pp. 357–385) underscores the double yoke placed on women, who must tolerate psychological loneliness as well as pass the brutal realities of economic hardship and societal demands subsequent to the destruction of their marital unions. Thus, with her broad-based discourse on African women's literary out-puts, exposes the questions of women's abandonment, the emotional distress of such circumstances and related issue. Through the emphasis on "nego-feminism", a feminist model that relies on compromise, negotiation and equilibrium, she illustrates the survival and resilience of female characters in *So Long a Letter*. Another prominent African

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

feminist scholar, Acholonu (1997, pp. 112–128) employs the African 'Womanism' concept in exploring African literature. Looking at the issue of failed marital union, she analyses the misery of the first wife. Not only is she blamed for this marital breakdown, she is abruptly discarded, forsaken and divested of her socio-economic and cultural position. According to Acholonu, who has written copiously on the predicaments of African women struggling within the *impasse* of tradition versus modernity, the African women's doggedness and resilience are commendable as such qualities are responsible for their survival amid inherent isolation and discrimination from patriarchy. Accordingly, most critics confirm that Ramatoulaye's depiction in the novel is that of a victim of destructive cultural codes that ensures that the widow is socially isolated and stigmatised especially in her mourning period. This is the clear principle of the cultural code of *Mirasse* or mourning rites, where the widow is made to scrupulously account for the deceased's debts and property (Nnaemeka, 2004, pp. 357–385). Hence, the *Mirasse* code is a means of patriarchal control over widows, ensuring a widow's financial deprivation, as the younger co-wife's family or in-laws grab the household assets, leaving the rightful wife of the diseased with little to no inheritance. Through this exploitation of the concept of "nego-feminism" or feminism by negotiation, Nnaemeka and her allied critics show how Ramatoulaye finds the way amid shared patriarchal control and limitations using silent, relational resistance instead of open revolt.

Furthermore, existing literature validates that Bâ's narrative, *So Long a Letter*, is a compelling denunciation of patriarchal customary structures of polygamy that enforce women's dehumanisation in Senegalese society (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Thus, single motherhood agony, as shown in the novel, cannot be said to be a mere consequence of a husband's death; it is also promoted by beliefs in polygamy which frequently lead to abandonment, and in case of the man's death, to varied nightmarish conditions for the woman. It is agreeable that numerous ordeals single motherhood, and of course widowhood in the novel, are inextricably blamed on polygamous betrayals and related societal anticipations. Recall that Nnaemeka's (2004, pp. 357–385) critique on Bâ's narrative, *So Long a Letter*, reveals that Ramatoulaye had to sustain her dignity, while quietly confronting enormous demands to maintain traditional standards of motherhood in addition to managing the ordeal of desertion and financial laxity of her dead husband. She is not seen as an inactive casualty of the numerous oppressive cultural codes. Instead, her experiences dovetail into a transformative voyage on the way to self-discovery as she epitomises the fictionalised agency for the modern African woman.

Most literary studies like Irele (1994, pp. 87–99) use Ramatoulaye's epistolary evidence as a definitive expression for the modern African woman's binary connect, in which she is wedged between ancestral collective obligations and the excruciating certainty of male unfaithfulness. This also agrees with the notion of most literary and postcolonial feminist critics that Bâ's protagonist is not only inhibited by society's long-established patriarchal beliefs, but is imbued with the potency of bargaining her autonomy by means of silent resilience. This aligns with Ogunyemi's (1996, pp. 114) view of Ramatoulaye as an expression of "African womanism" that sets an equilibrium between her intellectual independence and the overwhelming cultural and religious stipulations of Senegalese widowhood and polygamy, stressing Ramatoulaye's resistance as a positive sign of African

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
feminism. She refuses to be taken over or inherited by Tamsir, her brother-in-law, and in so doing, shatters the traditional cycle of *leiratic* marital union. In the face of immense and deadly tribulations, these critics (like Ogunyemi, 1996) have shown that Bâ makes her the influential protagonist instead of debasing her due to her suffering. In the long run, the epistolary form becomes a "vehicle of communication, as strengthening the bond of friendship and a means of realising the letter writer's inner strength", signifying that the protagonist's writing is a form of resilience against the entire oppressive cultural codes of patriarchy.

Generally, the pitfalls of literary and postcolonial feminist critics in the study of Bâ's narrative, *So Long a Letter*, lie mostly in their elitist view of the protagonist. She is seen a passive fellow who is assimilated into the negating traditions and structures of her community, stressing her urban-educational status and her Francophone Muslim woman qualities as characterising the essence of "African womanhood". Most of the critics also demonstrate a tendency towards a limited view of working-class, unique religious orientation and other veracities facing the characters, especially the protagonist, in the within the same geographical space. There is also the imposition of ideas about modernity and improvement in Western codes of interpretation, oversimplification that negate shared, community-based bargain and technique of survival in traditional institutions like polygamy which by western codes are considered absolutely as homogeneously oppressive, thereby negating the intricate, relational choices and indigenous spaces of dignity inherent in alternative African structures. Thus, among other things, the purpose of this paper to explore how the epistolary format aids Ramatoulaye's passage from passive victimhood to lively resistance, showing her redefinition of her motherhood and widowhood to accomplish self-respect and independence in a hostile, marginalising patriarchal society.

Theoretical Foundation

To investigate the nightmares facing widowhood and single motherhood in Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) requires a multifaceted procedure. This study is anchored on Postcolonial feminist theory juxtaposed with African feminism (Womanism). Pioneered by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 1984 essay *"Under Western Eyes"*, the theory arose as a condemnation of Western stereotypical Eurocentric scholarship. Credit for the emergence of Postcolonial feminist theory cannot be given to a single scholar. It was developed by a collaboration of scholars prominent among them are thinkers like Mohanty, (1984, 333–358) and Spivak (1988, pp. 271–313). These scholars are remembered as first proponents of Postcolonial Feminist Theory, owing to their passionate focus on evaluating Western supremacy, probing into the intersection of silences, and introducing a re-conceptualisation of structural divergence. Thus, it began as a critical reaction to conservative Western feminist conception, relying deeply on postcolonial scholarship, especially the works of scholars of colour from the Global South.

In her work, Mohanty (pp. 333-58), captures and critiques the classic Western feminist scholarship for inventing and spreading a monolithic, ethnocentric, representation of the "Third World Woman" which portrays her as a homogeneously uneducated, subjugated and victimised. Her work insists on contextualizing race, class, and geopolitics. Spivak (pp. 271–313) examines how the oppressed,

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
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marginalised (‘subaltern’) women endure a binary hushing spree under imperialist administration as well as native patriarchal systems, questioning the logic or morals behind the Western intellectual pretence at representing the imperial subject. These scholars stress, among other things, the vital intersections of race, age, class, gender, identity, thereby, confronting typical white feminists to notice how their uncheck concessions reproduces structures of supremacy. The core concepts of Postcolonial Feminist Theory include double colonisation**,** critique of Western feminism and intersectionality. Following thematic pre-occupations, women suffer from simultaneously the traumas of imperialist subjugation and those ensuing from native patriarchal supremacy by men. This is what most scholars treat as double yoke of colonialism. Other themes revolves around the appraisal and critique of Eurocentric or Western feminism, underlining the condemnation of such Western feminist idea that sees the experiences of Western women as the universal codes without regard the unique historical and cultural experiences and struggles of women in non-White spheres. Postcolonial Feminist Theory also deploys its argues regarding the effects of native patriarchy, stressing how nationalist or decolonial movements frequently promise freedom for the whole country but still leave women in subsidiary, tradition-based gender roles imposed by local beliefs. The theorists also accentuate the interface of race, nationality, gender, social class, and religion, presuming that genuine freedom demands a consideration of how these diverse systems of power correlate.

Vital and relevant Postcolonial feminist tenets most applicable to analysing widowhood and single motherhood in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* include the critique of patriarchal traditions juxtaposed with spiritual codes, the interface of gender with Postcolonial national identity, as well as feminine harmony as a form of resistance. Another tenet applicable in this study is the gender with power and cultural variants. The study would analyse marriage as a machinery of gender dominance and emotional degradation, underscoring an affront to polygamy; it will examine female character witnessing the dualistic torments of patriarchy and those posed by post-independence communal anticipations. In addition, the study will show how traditional spiritual laws like *mirath* (inheritance) and marriage structures favoured males as against females. The mixture of religion, tradition and patriarchy is another important tenet to feature in this study. The mental and bodily confinement of widows during compulsory funeral rites amounts to women’s cultural helplessness; while polygamy uses traditional codes of disinheritance to manipulate and magnalise women socially and financially in event of the man’s death in a patriarchal system. The daily veracities of widow and single mothers constitute another tenet to be explored. This will verify systemic helplessness, economic deprivation, emotional torture and segregation against widows as enshrined in traditional mores; while the female friendships as necessary substitute arrangement of political and emotional resistance, underscoring agency, negotiation, fortitude, and resilience among educated, urban mothers handle economic burdens, confront marital betrayal and weighty emotions and parenthood in the absence of husbands. Sisterhood and epistolary form of resistance against patriarchal and colonial systemic torments; as communication and as collective survival approach. The tenet of the duality of modernism and traditionalism will show women bodies and household duties as tangled space for social change and cultural progress; the metamorphosis of marriage into single motherhood and consequence feminist

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

autonomy, underscoring the systemic degradation of Post-independence state and decay of contemporary family structures.

Using Postcolonial feminist theory to analyse this novel distances the study from conventional emphasis placed squarely on overlapping pressures of native patriarchy, Islamic traditions and the legacy of colonial modernity that determine women's personal life and survival. Projected by Mohanty (pp. 333-58), Postcolonial Feminist theory stipulates that women's predicaments must be clarified from domestic, socio-cultural standpoint. This procedure ensures that the examination of Bâ's *So Long a Letter* does not depend entirely on generalised, Western feminist principles. The implications for this study is the representation of double deprivation and trauma, so as to turn widowhood and single motherhood into political visions and operations that battle the apprehension native tradition and westernised agency. Another connotation demands a re-reading of the protagonist's conformity with or subversion of traditional mourning rites as a calculated concession of social space and identity rather than an inactive endurance. Among several other implications, is the opportunity created for lonely raising of children outside male support, hence, as an economic and psychological battleground where women reconstruct family authority outside of patriarchal validation

The Postcolonial feminist theory used for this study is juxtaposed with African feminism (Womanism). Womanism was initially propagated by the African American activist and writer Alice Walker in 1983. She created the concept to cover the unique experiences, resoluteness and survival of Black women. However, African-specific frameworks like Africana Womanism were later developed by Hudson-Weems (2004), while different African feminisms were projected by thinkers across the continent to deal with the constraints found in Western feminism. Hudson-Weems crafted an Afrocentric philosophy designated for women of African descent, prioritising race, family and cooperation with African men while advocating against seeing men as enemies or rivals. There is also an aspect of Womanism termed the Black Womanist Theology, blending Black liberation theology with Christian morals along with the daily experiences of Black women. This was pioneered by the theorist Cannon (1995). It condemns white feminist theology as well as traditional Black liberation theology for overlooking the open, exploitation history and moral agency of Black women. Among other things, its tenets are working for good and survival of the whole community (men, women and children); seeing daily cultural practices, folklore and religious life as tolerable and vital structures for creating awareness and actualising freedom; countering the use of gender, race and class to compound the daily struggles of Black women. Hence, it probes historical repression within both religious institutions and ordinary freedom movements, redefining spiritual agency and ethical power for women of colour.

Another African feminist strand, STIWANISM, was coined by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) to stand for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. Much of its development has been aided by the writings and activities of numerous **A**frican thinkers and writers who desired the establishment, on the African continental arena, of the socio-cultural, political and Postcolonial society based on gender equality. The major emphasis of this African feminist theory is the unity of family and

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
community, underscoring the rejection of Eurocentric perspectives on feminism. Much attention is drawn to male-female collaboration, shared communal experiences for community survival, family integrity with respect and gender parity instead of a total division from the male-folk. A variant of African feminist scholarship, "Snail-sense feminism" is a solo theoretical construct propounded by the Nigerian author and scholar Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012). An indigenous Afro-centric feminist theory rooted in Nigerian cultural wisdom, it specifically draws from an Igbo proverb about how a snail safely finds its way through the rough terrain. The Igbo proverb, "*Ire oge ka ejula ji aga n'ogwu"* (meaning "the snail crawls over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue" gives it the necessary footing. The analogy is that the snail's ability to smoothly crawl over sharp thorns, rough surfaces and dangerous rocks, using a well-lubricated tongue without getting hurt, women can also follow such pattern, employing diplomacy, discretion and intelligence to bypass harsh patriarchal hindrances "Snail-sense feminism" is a theoretical concept whose basic tenets include strategic patience and discretion, encouraging women to apply diplomacy, dialogue, compromise, forbearance and non-confrontational negotiation instead of hostility when dealing with patriarchal problems. Another doctrine is self-preservation, showing the snail's method of self-protection by retreating into its shell when its senses danger, encouraging women to apply a gradual, calculated, persistent approach to achieving gender equality and justice, using endurance in bypassing opposition devoid of self-destruction. The shell represents its enormous multi-tasking resilience and fortitude, signifying African women's efforts at handling family crisis and communal pressures. Lastly, the tenet of resilience and progress advocates for stable progress by means of education, in addition to personal empowerment to attain equilibrium and parity in relations and society

There are other African feminist concepts and Womanist frameworks developed by different contemporary theorists. Among these frameworks are Motherism propounded by Acholonu (1995) which focuses on motherhood, nature and mothering as an empowering force. Womanism which is projected in the Nigerian setting by Ogunyemi (1985, pp. 63–80) insists on a notion of working with African men instead of being separated from them. There is also the African feminism of negotiation, give-and-take and patriarchal steering, termed Nego-feminism by its proponent, Nnaemeka (2004). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) coined and propounded the Stiwanism standing for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. Among other things, this study will apply Womanism, especially Walker's notions of love for one's culture and personal completeness and identity, in addition to the interface of battle against disparity based on gender, class and race. These are also related to Hudson's preference for family-based ideas of one's race-first dynamics along with the integration and harmony with Black men. The study involves qualitative narratives that illustrate the genuine voices of Black women like Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter*, instead of using external and universalised structures. Thus, the "Snail-sense feminism" is significant in this analysis the tenets of strategic patience and discretion, highlighting women's need for diplomacy, dialogue, compromise, forbearance and non-confrontational negotiation strategies in dealing with men problems. Self-preservation and resilience are also called for. On the whole, the study looks at the total lived experiences of African women, prioritising healing, safety, strength and continuity of the whole community, both men and women. On the contrary, the inquiry takes adequate cognisance of post-independence African experiences that manifest women's double yoke through its patriarchal

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
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norms aided by both colonial heritage and religious creeds. The womanist approach explores the female characters' experiences and their effort to modernise in the face of these inequalities. It helps in identifying and analysing samples of the predicaments facing female characters in *So Long a Letter*, especially as suffered by Ramatoulaye Fall, consequent on her husband Modou's desertion and subsequent death, hence, allowing for a scrutiny that underscores both the specific cultural context of Senegal (tradition and Islam) and the gendered repression suffered by Ramatoulaye and her friend, Aissatou.

Distinct from Western feminism, the Afro-centric feminist code relies on a two-fold struggle against patriarchal domination and colonial/post-colonial heritage. It underscores the value of family, community, along with the definite role of the African woman both as a dynamic member of the society and as a mother, without essentially or completely rebuffing men. It aids in re-evaluating traditional norms and practices such as the *farba* or in-laws and their interference or the *mirasse* or the inventory of property, to expose how these norms become oppressive tools against the widow instead being supportive to her. The African feminism approach also underscores the single motherhood, recognising the woman's courage, flexibility and freedom in raising children after the man's desertion or death. This study also recognises the significance of Postcolonial feminist theory in investigating the nightmares facing widowhood and single motherhood in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. As part of the combined theoretical front, Postcolonial feminist theory scrutinises how colonial legacies, joined with native patriarchal norms, generate exclusive blockages for feminine prospects in an average post-colonial African state. For instance, polygamy is a patriarchal structure maintained by religious and customary explanations that abuse women's physical and emotional health. This theory also throws more light on the struggle between western education that empowers Ramatoulaye and Aissatou (modernity) and traditional anticipations of docility.

Ordeals of Widowhood and Single Motherhood in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

The issue of societal inflicted women's dilemma in the text would be discussed under two sub-headings, namely the nightmares of Widowhood and the ordeals of single motherhood.

The Nightmares of Widowhood

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye Fall the protagonist exposes the wretched realities of Senegalese traditional setting with its excessive anti-women customs. One of such realities is the cultural ordinance of "*mirasse*", the traditional funeral rites (pp. 9, 14) that she describes as a highly invasive norm. It includes a 40-day mourning period termed 'widowhood seclusion' which amounts to a physical and symbolic prison. Obviously, Ramatoulaye is confined to her home and is subjected to intense scrutiny by the community. She notes that this is the moment when the widow must "give up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man". Thus, she explains how the demise of Modou, her husband, launches her life into unexpected and unbearable loneliness, material denial and an instantaneous insecure financial circumstance. She laments about her new role as a single mother to twelve children. Her anxieties increased as she had to manage the emotional blows of her husband's previous unfaithfulness. But, the demise of this same unfaithful husband opens her to sudden subjection to austere communal demands that heightens her multiple nightmares as single

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
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mother and widow (pp. 50-90). She becomes a woman whose ordeal underscores her home becomes a location of quarrels and her life a struggle for self-respect.

The narrative, thus, exposes the systemic helplessness of women in society applying the prototype of the post-colonial Senegal, where religious norms, legal and cultural standards frequently aid in denying women their individuality and humanity and merely turn them into "things in the service of the man", even while he is dead. She reflects on her horrible yet unfair confinement, asserting that she is "stripped of her status as a wife". She believes that women are required to live under an archaic system that "exalts the position of the dead man", that permits a fake mourning instead of genuine grief (pp. 30-31). The story of her ordeals and struggles in the midst of different socio-economic and cultural challenges posed by age-long traditions becomes the epistle that focuses not only on her failed marriage, but also on different taboos set aside for only females, and that lead to different forms of female agency's stigmatisation. Consequently, the narrative exposes her growth from absolute submissiveness of a woman to her husband, her passage from a passive victimhood to a lively resistance, showing her redefinition of her motherhood and widowhood to accomplish self-respect and independence in a hostile patriarchal society.

Among other things, the narrative is littered with a catalogue of nightmarish experiences. These include the nightmares of abandonment, polygamy and death. The narrative explores the widow's nightmares through marital betrayal in form of polygamy and its consequent abandonment. The 30-year marital union ends with the desertion of her husband, and Ramatoulaye returns to a single woman status (pp. 11-26). This means that she loses her social position and security covered formerly by the husband through their marriage. It also means loss of public identity, autonomy, dignity and self-respect. She becomes vulnerable at the behest of the society. She is deeply touched as she writes: "From the surprised looks, I gauged the slender liberty granted to women" (p. 51). She also hints at the scrutiny she faces when she, for instance, as a symbolic attempt to regain autonomy and identity, she chooses to go to the cinema alone. But, the union now ends as a double tragedy since she mourns not only for the death of Modou, the husband, but also the symbolic 'death' of the union. Consequently, she passes through a deep "emotional and psychic hemorrhage" since it is the same man who abandoned her and married her daughter's friend, Binetou, that she must now mourn in public as a devoted wife (pp. 5-6). This is a total humiliation ordained by the obsolete cultural principles.

Another tough widowhood experience is the 'co-wife' nightmares and internal crisis. Ramatoulaye also recounts how she is compelled to accept a humiliating relationship with her "co-wife", Binetou, who is young enough to be her child (p. 40). For her, the "co-wife" predicament is an unbearable experience of her life. The disgrace of being substituted by her own daughter's classmate remains a deep-rooted source of heartbreaking torment. She reflects on the "inner torment" that led to her husband's "betrayal", stressing how the society pushes men to be polygamous while women are required to be docile. She sees this experience as the most critical nightmare facing all "devoted Muslim" women. She respects her culture and yet that same culture becomes the very source of her subjugation. Ironically, the same culture is simply behind the "psychic hemorrhage" she

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
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experienced. Despite her internal predicaments, she tries to define herself amid this inner struggle involving traditions and modernity, and finally, states: "I will remain with the traditions" (p. 60). This she resolves but at the same time appraising "the traditions" through her letter to Aissatou, aspiring for a "modern" future for her daughters.

Next is the nightmare of inheritable commodity, sorrow sacrifice and outlandish surveillance. Another nightmarish incidence during her husband's funeral occurs as a form of 'sorrow sacrifice' (p. 21). The widow is now required to sponsor her husband's funeral and give out gifts to the family-in-law, even where they were careless in his life. In fact, Ramatoulaye sees this as the most critical moment "dreaded by every Senegalese woman". The widow must sacrifice her possessions (p. 14), cultural norm which the narrator terms "the sack of her house" (p. 21). Equally, she notes with sadness that the money/wealth and gifts from guests are manipulated to favor the second wife by her sisters-in-law and the "Lady Mother-in-law", Binetou's mother. (pp. 4-5). In other words, her letter exposes the exploitative socio-cultural demands of the patriarchal society. With the 40-day mourning period over, Ramatoulaye is considered as an object to be inherited by the community norms (p. 19). She is not seen as a mourning individual. The community demands that she remarries. People did not see anything unusual about the pressures from Tamsir (her brother-in-law) and Daouda Dieng (an old suitor) to remarry her at all costs. These suitors operating like "a greedy pack of hounds" lined past her (p. 60). She discerned the suitors' lack of esteem for her agency as they merely treat her as a property to be "taken" rather than a personality to be valued (pp. 59-61).

The widow also suffers the outlandish terror of the meticulous surveillance and social policing by in-laws who implemented heinous demands of the turbulent patriarchal social system. She hints at her in-laws, particularly Modou's sister, acting as enforcers of customary norms. They scrutinised her movements and made sure she acts according to cultural expectations. Thus, she observes and explains the "chorus of praises" from sisters-in-law who judge her based on her "patience" or docility in addition to her capacity to bring and shower gifts (p. 20). Thus, her identity solely rested on the context of her compliance to the demands of the deceased's family. In the long run, the untold nightmares of widowhood remain unimaginable for Ramatoulaye, who eventually discovers that Modou, her husband of 30 years, has died leaving behind no assets. He simply left huge debts, having transmitted his wealth to his young second wife, Binetou (p. 52). She is starkly confronted with the 'sorrows' of motherhood which are but the nightmares of widowhood. She laments that she is left with "twelve children" and no financial support (p. 51). In the long run, she resolves to be brave enough to assume the responsibility of a sole provider, underscoring the financial deprivation inherent in the hostile patriarchal system (p. 58). It is necessary to analyse her societal inflicted dilemma in the text, as the ordeals of a single mother.

The Ordeals of Single Motherhood

Among other things, Ramatoulaye Fall the protagonist of *So Long a Letter* exposes the wretched realities of Senegalese traditional setting with its extreme anti-women mores. This examination focuses on the ordeals of single motherhood as experienced by the protagonist. Structured as a long letter to her friend Aissatou, the narrative chronicles the emotional, psychological, financial and

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E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
other socio-cultural tribulations of a woman left to raise twelve children alone after her husband, Modou, abandons her for a younger woman, Bentou, and finally dies.

One of the ordeals of single motherhood is the trauma of silently adhering to traditional patriarchal rites and norms. Ramatoulaye suffers from the trauma of silently adhering to traditional patriarchal norms. As a single mother in a traditional Senegalese-Muslim community, she faces enormous pressure to take her misfortune silently. Silently, she bears the "burden that society imposes" on her, that demands she must tolerate polygamy (pp. 20-21, 57). Moreover, she suffers the undue violation of traditional rites during widowhood period. After Modou's demise, she is subjected to the *mirasse*, the stringent, often manipulative, traditional rites of mourning (pp. 6-9). She illustrates the irony of being forced to perform the role of the "bereaved wife" for a man who had previously deserted her. Moreover, she continued opening her home to, and nourishing mourners who frequently come purely out of curiosity, requiring her energy during her heightened period of sorrow. Also, she is exposed to the hazards of forced solitude and single parenting. It is clear that she experiences unbearable mental pain when Modou, her husband of 25 years, abandons his original family, after secretly marrying her daughter's friend. She laments how she is left with "empty hands" and describes this period of unimaginable loneliness, saying "I lived in a vacuum" (p. 46). This unexpected, secret nature of her husband's unfaithfulness intensifies her loneliness, leaving her to manage her emotional desolation by herself. In her role as a single mother,

Ramatoulaye explains how she struggles to control and discipline her twelve children (66). This is more difficult during their adolescent years, when she faces the modern challenges of her children engaging in truancy and related behaviours like partying and smoking. She calls these attitudes a "wider array of temptations" (p. 87). Hence, she deeply feels the absence of a father figure to help enforce control and obedience. As a result, she states this led her to use a "laissez-faire" technique that causes her anxiety. Hence, she faces the miserable incident of adolescent pregnancy, a shame brought to her household by her daughter. A traumatised single mother, she has endure the situation where her daughter, Aissatou (Daba's namesake), becomes pregnant outside of marriage (p. 87). As a single mother trying to follow traditional morality as she confronts modern realities, Ramatoulaye's reaction is intricate. At last, she offers "boundless love" instead of denunciation. This is a tough decision that defies conventional standards and causes her inner turmoil. However, it finally underlines her role as a fostering, progressive being.

She has to also pass through the ordeals of legal intimidation and carrying huge financial burdens.
The death of her husband exposes Ramatoulaye to undue financial burdens. She inherits all of Modou's financial responsibilities. The irony is that this includes debt incurred to fund his new life with Binetou, her co-wife. In her letters, she hints that she struggles with the "purchase of foodstuffs", underscoring her sole-breadwinner role (p. 48). Moreover,she suffers the diverse legal and financial intimidation from in-laws, particularly Modou's sister. They try to maneuver and intimidate her for inheritance, challenging her in order to control her home. She has to fight to maintain control over her home as well as the "rightful inheritance" of her children (p. 62). She

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

squally deals with the "greedy mother" of her co-wife who was behind the, financial ruin of her matrimony (p. 39).

Conclusion

This study has, among other things, analysed the myriad of the untold nightmares of widowhood and dreadful ordeals of single motherhood in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981). The novel serves as an intense indictment of both the customary and neo-colonial patriarchal systems that shrink Senegalese women to subsidiary life, particularly through the ordeals of widowhood and single motherhood. The narrative reveals that the untold nightmares of widowhood are as humiliating, and torturing as the unimaginable single motherhood ordeals. Trapped by traditional anticipations of devotion to a dead/absent husband, Ramatoulaye the protagonist struggles with all sorts of ordeals, saying: "I am, for all of these, a heart that has been flayed". Her visits to friends and family mark out with awkwardness, as she is no more seen as a "complete" woman, but as a mere "widow" or a lost and "abandoned wife", with no acceptable socio-cultural reputation. With "twelve children" in her hands, with no financial support, no partner to provide emotional backing, amid the crushing socio-economic deprivations inherent in the hostile patriarchal system, Ramatoulaye trudges on to carve out an identity, self-esteem, and autonomy for herself. This is the nitty-gritty of the message of the author and the essence of African feminism. Traditional norms and rites like the *mirasse* represent the means of stripping the widow of her identity and autonomy (p. 32); yet, they are ironically behind female self-discovery and agency. The women are able to transit from victimisation to empowerment. Ramatoulaye hence transforms her pain into authority by recovering her domestic freedom, taking full charge of her children's futures and unleashing her voice by the act of writing.

Having systematically examined the mental and economic nightmares of single mothers and widows caused by their husbands' abandonment, polygamy or death, and heightened by socio-cultural and religious constraints of traditional patriarchal practices, this study concludes that traditional norms and postcolonial legacies are at the roots of societal marginalisation of widows and single mothers. The investigation demonstrates that women's fight against social injustice is aimed at gaining female autonomy and dignity. It is equally logical to apply the findings to state the epistolary format of this novel has aided female resistance and self-assertion against patriarchal marginalisation. However, the study notes that Bâ's mission is not an outright abrogation of tradition, but an insistence on a crucial reformation of society which accommodates the place of women as personalities and not as items to be acquired, inherited or discarded. The lasting alliance between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou becomes the model for female solidarity, corroborating the fact that the solution to patriarchal domination lies in education, financial independence and female's shared support and action. Obviously, the resilience of both friends has helped them to rework their life stories. It has equally proven that widowhood or single motherhood is not conviction but a test for renaissance.

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

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