

The Effects of The Western Traditions On Muslims' Wives As Portrayed In Mariama Ba's Novel "So Long A Letter".

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ABSTRACT:

The paper intends to cover the changes that occur due to the effects of the western civilization on the African traditions. It focuses on the subordination based on gender, class, race, language and culture, as they become unsolvable problems of the world. The paper moreover works over Mariama Ba's novel "So Long a Letter" within a context of a feminist approach in Islam. It concentrates on the terms polygamy and patriarchy that mainly leads to disintegration of family life. Mariama examines her themes into the counteractions of the two women form their husbands' mistreatments. The paper however resolves the results that happen due to the humor and exonerate their base desires under the guise of a matchless authorization.

Keywords: feminism in Islam, polygamy, monogamy, genders, Senegalese culture, patriarchy.

المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة للوقوف على الآثار التي تحدث للموروثات المجتمعية الإفريقية بسبب الحضارات الغربية. هذا العمل تطرق إلي أهم تلك العناصر المتمثلة في: الجنس، الطبقات الاجتماعية، العنصرية، اللغة والثقافة صارت من المشكلات التي يتعذر حلها في العالم. كما أيضاً وقفت الورقة على تحليل العمل الأدبي "أطول رسالة" للكاتبة مرياما با بمنظور اسلامي وكزةً على مصطلح تعدد الزوجات والهيمنة الذكورية الذان يؤديان إلي التفكك الأسري. تدور أحداث هذا العمل على أن الكاتبة مرياما با صورت جل تلك المشكلات من خلال شخصية إمرأتان عانتا من إساءة زوجيهما. لذلك فقد خلصت الدراسة إلي النتائج التي تحدثت بسبب محاولة كل طرف هلى تحقيق رغباته دون مراعاة للطرف الأخر.

INTRODUCTION

In Africa, women predominately suffer from the continuation of the cultural practices that chiefly insult and affect their normal lives. They still experience their lack of planning their own life styles, enjoying their normal lives' stages or having their legal rights. Moreover, hence the African men mostly were, and are the only decision makers of their paths, the African women sustain and still suffering in many different areas. This patriarchal society represents the nucleus of their endless suffering.

Cultural practices continue to overwhelm nearly every aspect of

female lives; beginning from the discriminatory of sharing food, education hence "For African women, however, until now, education was considered an unnecessary burden." (Kamara, 2001:217) besides health care, and passing through the traditions of marrying young girls to much older men for illogical circumstances (Uche, 2009:1). This unjust marriage, which is still practiced in many cultures, results to a serious social issue in which the family is the backbone that helps in building a healthy society.

The statement of the problem:

The inherited oppressiveness of marriage and the inequality of the two sexes that were found in many parts in Africa, represent the heart of the different societies' feminist matters that made out of the inheritance traditions and played a big role in destroying many families. However, this paper seeks to find out the issues that play roles in destroying families through Mariama Ba's novel '*So Long a Letter*'.

Research questions:

1. To what extent are the African women affected by the western civilization?
2. What is the view of the educated Muslim women towards the idea of polygamy?
3. What is the core of the conflicts between Muslim husbands and wives?

Significance of the research:

This paper concentrates on the analysis of Mariama Ba's novel "*So Long a Letter*" descriptively to stand on the term feminism in Islam and its effects as a new phenomenon in the era of the author.

Objectives of the study:

This paper is aimed to intensify the issues that lead to the changes of the African women due to the western teachings. Moreover, the role of women in the new phenomenon "feminism".

Methodology:

The researcher has analyzed Ba's work "*So Long a Letter*" descriptively to touch the changes that happen due to the effects' of the mixture of the Afro-western cultures.

Literature Review:

In this paper, the researcher has based on Ba's novel: *So Long a Letter* taking advantages of its themes and characterizations. Moreover, the researcher has also taken advantages of any materials that have a link or may serve in building up the thesis. Therefore, many studies, papers and researches done about Mariama and her works that available on the internet have mainly used.

The literary work of Mariama Ba becomes a field of studies as the work sheds the light on the utmost conflicts in the African communities portraying that throughout her characters. For that, Ramatoulaye is Ba's protagonist who through she sets her first novel "*So Long a Letter*" to express the Senegalese women's culture throughout her own life-series. In this literary work, Ramatoulaye is the author of the **so long letter** that had sent to her long-lasting friend Aissatou. However, her life passes through three main stages: a successful adult; a wise married woman, and a non-traditional widow. Furthermore, her life thrives as a prosperous teacher, loyal wife, and a mother of twelve children.

As a young adult, she is unlike many girls. She desires to widen her knowledge as well her life visions. Consequently, due to her educational desires, she becomes a well educated and a profitable teacher.

Regrettably, Ramatoulaye's marriage life fills with miseries. The main reason behind her gloom is that after thirty years of marriage (So long. 13), Ramatoulaye had abandoned by her youth-love husband Modou Ba who takes a second wife (So Long. 59).

Yet she feels betrayal due to Modou's deeds, she does not divorce herself as her close friend Aissatou. She admits her desire in being wife because of her belief in marriage. Letter 17 includes her disagreement opinion with Aissatou:

"Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage." (So Long. 57)

On that account, the twelve children's mother further decides to distance herself from her man physically not psychologically. Therefore, Ramatoulaye keeps her youth promises of love and makes up her own mind to be still Modou's wife. She admits that via her confession to Aissatou,

"The truth is that, despite everything, I remain faithful to the love of my youth." (So Long 59).

Ramatoulaye's life with her twelve children perhaps represents Mariama's own life. Akinola and Olatipe point that, *"So Long a Letter* has been lexically and semantically presented, to reflect or imitate the realities of life." (2016). Professor Derayah Derakhshesh declares that as follow:

"Mariama Bâ's novel So Long a Letter not only depicts a female figure who confronts the persistent presence of culture represented by patriarchal institution, it explores rather a spiritual journey in which the protagonist recognizes the need to rewrite her own story and takes a process of affirmation to proclaim that selfhood, her very own which has been "othered" for so long. She

liberates herself because she becomes the teller of her own tale. (Derakhshesh: 2007)

Moreover, Ramatoulaye throughout her so long letter not only represents her own predicaments, yet the entire African women, particularly who face the same issues. The letter however affords a space in which she tells about her own actions.

Undoubted, mostly African women sustain from men's domination that come into view within some deeds like polygamy, patriarchy and female subjectivity (Derakhshesh: 2007). She therefore expresses her experiences and choices that Ba structures to symbolize males verses females' conflicts particularly in African community.

On that account, Ba pens the only two choices in which women can follow in such cases when a man gets a second wife. Thus, she articulates the **YES/NO** verdicts through her characters Ramatoulaye and her lifelong friend Aissatou who both respectively and divergently make their own paths.

The **YES** decision is made by Ramatoulaye when decides to stay married to her beloved husband, though he has his best daughter's friend Binetou the teenager as a second wife. Her strength of mind was due to her understanding of the importance of marriage and family that build a healthy society. By that acceptance, Mariama the author shows the importance of society in the African culture for the same situation of other women that have lived the same circumstances. Derayah says,

“Her accepting her situation serves to help stabilize the community just as the other women have willingly and conscientiously sacrificed their individualism for the sake of collective harmony.” (Derakhshesh: 2007).

Therefore, Ramatoulaye sells her own legal comforts just because of her awareness towards the importance of her own small community (her family). She realizes that a family is a core of society. Edson states that;

Mariama Ba's central character affirms that "The success of a nation . . . depends inevitably on the family". (Edson, 1993: p89)

Consequently, by means of this decision, the author persuades us to comprehend the prominence of families that result a concrete and healthy community in turns.

Nevertheless, could life be simple and easy to be tamed by a lonely woman versus a dozen children? Could she raise her innocent fellows away from the negative effects of modernism?

“As her gradual passage from wife to widow yields to the pressures of single motherhoods, she comes to confront the dangers of modernism to which her children are exposed.” (Kenneth, 2008)

Unfortunately, soon enough things get worse and answers began to come to light. Kenneth W. Harrow into the bargain touches upon the situations that may answer the previous questions;

“She (Ramatoulaye) catches three of her daughters smoking, she has to deal with her son recklessly playing in the street, and finally, most

movingly, must handle the delicate situation posed by her daughter Aissatou's pregnancy.” (Kenneth, 2008)

Doubtless, life would not be easy for individuals, thus humans always gather in groups to survive.

On the other hand, Aissatou represents the women that do not accept having co-wives. As a result, due to the concepts of polygamy, she has come up against her husband's act; she left him, her country, and the traditions in which she lives.

“Aissatou rejects this notion and chooses her own life without being denied a life of her own by her husband Mawdo. This strong exploration of feminism is perhaps what makes the novel a strong voice for the oppressed women in Africa.” (African Novel: 2014:128)

Accordingly, Aissatou says **NO** and embracing a new culture (the Western culture). Her acceptance refusal appears in letter (12),

“I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only garment, I go away.” (So Long 33).

Aissatou does not suffer when she makes the decision to take her children to the United States. Her verdict shows the group of women who hangs on their strength without fear. Saying **NO**, not accepting the legal and religious as well the traditional men's actions proves that although women make different choices regarding similar circumstances, they may become strong, continue their paths, and begin new lives. Obioma remarks that,

“By walking out on her husband, Mawdo, Aissatou demonstrates that the initiation of divorce can also be the woman's prerogative. With her head held high.”(Nnaemeka: 1990:19)

Even though Ramatoulaye chooses to stay in her country, accepting the fate of sharing her husband with another woman, yet she physically refuses to stay with him. Her non-traditional thoughts let her not to obey the limitless oppresses that fills her life and result her suffering due to the unacceptable habits of traditions as polygamy, betrayals and sacrificing true feelings. Nnaemeka further claims that;

“Her verdict is done due to the scarcity of her courage. Unfortunately, instead of being a divorcee, she stays to share her husband with her daughter's adolescent friend, Binetou.” (1990, p18)

Thus, the pathetic experiences that Ramatoulaye had had along her life's series force her to give up her desires and to shut off the doors of her needs as a woman after her disappoint due to the inequality that practiced by Moudo, though of the Islam's teachings of providing equality between wives,

“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.”(So Long 48)

The above quotation shows how men fail to equalize. However, religion being one of the factors that has sealed the fate of women draws attention to the reality of unfair religious practices and their negative impact on women. (Latha: p72).

However, a sudden change of fate comes out announcing Ramatoulaye a widow. That fate helps her to free herself from pain and injustice that she suffers. Therefore, she renews her vows not to hand a man herself again though of her needs. Her refusal is a result of the sufferings that she had faced through her journey-life. The case of refusing the proposal of her admire brother-in-law Tamsir is a clear sign of the feminist thought that Ba sends through her character Ramatoulaye. (Derakhshesh: 2007)

Furthermore, loyalty of her true youth love and her believe in love marriage, let her not to accept to build a new life that seems not a heart to heart life.

“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 who has chosen you.” (So Long. 60)

However, it seems clear that despite the traditional denial of not accepting marrying a brother-in-law to a dead brother's widow, yet Ramatoulaye insists to challenge. Her powerful replying to Tamsir in letter (18) are evidently showed her new visions towards traditional marriages,

“You forgot that I have a heart, a mind; that I am not an object... You don't know what marriage means”. (So Long 60)

Undeniably, these parts of her replying picture her inside visions towards traditions that appear as signs of her feminism dilemmas towards the African society.

“Because, being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were very few of us. Men would call us scatter-brained. Others labelled us devils. But many wanted to possess us. How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed? (So Long.15-16)

Therefore, Mariama Ba reintroduces the pictures of the Senegalese in particular as well the whole African in the 1960s, concentrating on the great historical, political and ideological changes that occurred, and brought new notions to conflict with the oldest. Obioma Nnaemeka sheds the light on that point,

“Historically, politically, and ideologically, Une si longue lettre is situated at a point of convergence, a point of ambivalence where old and new ideas, old and new values collide. Mariama Ba resurrects images of the political and ideological turmoils of the 1960s in Africa in general, and in Senegal in particular.” (Nnaemeka: 1990:16)

The two friends (Ramatoulaye and Aissatou) draw the attention of their community towards the new changes that exist due to the Western effects. Both were affected by the outside ideas that delivered to them by the effort of their white teacher who teaches them about the *Western Civilization*. Letter 7 displays that affection;

“Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny. ... To lift us

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

For those unacceptable changes, the two friends had faced great oppositions. The promotion that they had let some men to look at them as devils that must be controlled.

“Because, being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women ... Men would call us scatter-brained. Others labelled us devils.(So Long. 16)

Moreover, rejecting traditions or even bringing devilish ideas would not be easily accepted at all in an African society. This rejection appears in letter (8) when schools have been accused of playing a great role in changing communities thus in turn destroying it.

“School turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path.” (So Long. 18)

Dr. J. S. Cherekar further sums up the change that has come out according to education, which gives women strength to subjugate the inherited social traits;

“It is education that provides women an opportunity to overcome the impositions laid down by the patriarchal society. The women who have received an access to education have played an active role in the social processes rather than being the passive recipients of change. This new attitude focuses on the way in which

women have been active in attempting to establish their authority and independence.”

Hence, education was the responsibility of the western rulers; new anti-African social attitudes have stepped over. Thus, gender conflict since then has been noticed leaving society looking for an answer of how can people live peacefully in balancing between traditional and modernism?!

Conclusion

I believe that literature is a record of human experience, which will help the readers to strengthen their understanding of the genre of reality. Mariama Ba however was a great feminist writer of her age and she was the pioneer of women's new life in Africa particularly her homeland Senegal. She witnessed the discriminations of gender conflict continue in her age in her own homeland for which she dedicated her life. She therefore tries her best to better her community by noting the problems as well giving solutions to them through her characters that represent reality. The idea of polygamy is a worldwide field of study that should be focused on as the modern world is trying to incorporate, understand, integrate and accommodate all the people of the universe through different ways of studying literatures.

Suggestions

Literature plays greater role in transferring the hidden feelings of human. Thus, people may find their right path through the moral lessons which get through the literary written text, especially the social objects and

the problems which people suffer from in their lives. Therefore, writings about the main problems that generally affect our society particularly are suggesting. Moreover, nearly, most of the social problems' that people usually come up about exist everywhere. For instance, marriage issues, men domination or the unbounded conflicts between the two sexes are global issues that people suffer from all over world. Consequently, comparing some local literary works with others from overseas may deepen the way of understanding more about the foreign customs in spite of the different races, beliefs and cultures.

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