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## *A Postcolonial Analysis of Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter*

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers a postcolonial reading of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, situating the novel within the broader landscape of modern African literature and postcolonial critique. Rather than providing a thematic inventory, the study examines how the narrative articulates an African-centered worldview through the interrelated issues of polygamy, religion, and female friendship. These themes are approached as social structures and discursive sites through which gendered power relations, cultural continuity, and postcolonial transformation are negotiated in Senegalese society. Focusing primarily on the epistolary voice of Ramatoulaye and her dialogic relationship with Aissatou, the analysis explores how personal correspondence becomes a narrative strategy for political reflection, ethical questioning, and female self-representation. Polygamy is examined not merely as a cultural practice but as a contested institution shaped by colonial legacies, patriarchal authority, and individual agency. Religion, particularly Islam, is analyzed in its dual function as both a source of moral grounding and a framework susceptible to patriarchal reinterpretation. Female friendship emerges as a counter-discourse that enables solidarity, resistance, and alternative forms of social belonging beyond marital and familial constraints. Methodologically, the article employs close textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory and African feminist criticism to demonstrate Mariama Bâ's critical engagement with practices often treated as cultural taboos. The novel's character network—including figures such as Modou Fall, Mawdo Bâ, Aunt Nabou, and Binetou—is read as a narrative constellation through which competing visions of tradition, modernity, and gender roles are articulated. The study argues that *So Long a Letter* functions as a reflective space in which postcolonial subjectivity, female agency, and ethical modernity are negotiated. By foregrounding women's voices and relational bonds, Mariama Bâ contributes a nuanced critique of postcolonial African society that remains central to contemporary debates on gender, culture, and social change.

**Keywords:** Friendship, Mariama Bâ, Postcolonial feminism, Polygamy, African literature

## **Mariama Bâ'nın Uzun Bir Mektup Romanına Postkolonyal Bir Bakış**

### ÖZET

Bu makale, Mariama Bâ'nın *Uzun Bir Mektup* (*So Long a Letter*) adlı eserini postkolonyal feminist bir bakış açısıyla ele almakta ve romanı modern Afrika edebiyatı ile postkolonyal eleştiri bağlamı içinde konumlandırmaktadır. Tematik bir listeleme sunmak yerine çalışma, anlatının çekeşlilik, din ve kadın dostluğu gibi birbiriyle ilişkili olgular aracılığıyla Afrika merkezli bir dünya görüşünü nasıl kurduğunu incelemektedir. Bu temalar, Senegal toplumunda toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı iktidar ilişkilerinin, kültürel sürekliliğin ve postkolonyal dönüşümün müzakere edildiği toplumsal yapılar ve söylemsel alanlar olarak ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, öncelikle Ramatoulaye'nin mektup anlatıcısı olarak sesi ile Aissatou ile kurduğu diyalojik ilişkiye odaklanmakta; kişisel yazışmanın siyasal düşünüm, etik sorgulama ve kadın öz-temsili için bir anlatı

stratejisine nasıl dönüştüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Çokeşlilik, yalnızca kültürel bir pratik olarak değil, sömürgecilik mirası, ataerkil otorite ve bireysel özneleşme süreçleri tarafından şekillenen tartışmalı bir kurum olarak incelenmektedir. Din, özellikle İslam, bir yandan ahlaki bir referans çerçevesi sunarken, diğer yandan ataerkil yorumlara açık bir yapı olarak çift yönlü işleviyle ele alınmaktadır. Kadın dostluğu ise evlilik ve aile bağlarının ötesinde dayanışma, direniş ve alternatif toplumsal aidiyet biçimlerini mümkün kılan bir karşı-söylem olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Yöntemsel olarak makale, postkolonyal kuram ve Afrika feminist eleştirisinden beslenen yakın metin çözümlemesi kullanarak Mariama Bâ'nın sıklıkla kültürel tabu olarak görülen pratiklere yönelik eleştirel tutumunu görünür kılmaktadır. Modou Fall, Mawdo Bâ, Hala Nabou ve Binetou gibi karakterleri içeren anlatı ağı, gelenek, modernlik ve toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri arasındaki rekabet hâlindeki tahayyüllerin ifade edildiği bir anlatı kurgusu olarak okunmaktadır. Çalışma, *Uzun Bir Mektup*'un postkolonyal öznellik, kadın failliği ve etik modernliğin müzakere edildiği düşünsel bir alan işlevi gördüğünü savunmaktadır. Kadın seslerini ve ilişkisel bağları merkeze alan Mariama Bâ, postkolonyal Afrika toplumuna yönelik güncelliğini koruyan, çok katmanlı ve eleştirel bir perspektif sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arkadaşlık, Mariama Bâ, Postkolonyal feminizm, Çokeşlilik, Afrika edebiyatı.

## INTRODUCTION

Mariama Bâ (1929–1981) stands as a foundational figure in modern African literature and postcolonial feminist thought, particularly within the Francophone West African context. Her literary work emerges at the intersection of colonial legacies, Islamic tradition, and gendered social transformation in Senegal. Born in Dakar into a Muslim elite family, Bâ was shaped by a dual intellectual formation that combined Qur'anic instruction with French colonial education. This hybrid background profoundly influenced her critical engagement with tradition, modernity, and women lived experiences in postcolonial society. Alongside her career as an educator and civil servant, Bâ was actively involved in women's organizations advocating for social justice and gender equality commitments that are deeply reflected in her writing (Bâ, 1979).

Published in 1979, *So Long a Letter* (*Une si longue lettre*) occupies a central place in African postcolonial literature and remains one of the most widely studied African novels. Written in epistolary form, the novel unfolds as a letter from Ramatoulaye to her lifelong friend Aissatou in the aftermath of her husband's death. Through this intimate narrative structure, Mariama Bâ transforms personal correspondence into a space for ethical reflection, political critique, and female self-articulation. The novel does not merely recount individual suffering but interrogates the social institutions and cultural norms that shape women's lives in postcolonial Senegal.

This article adopts a postcolonial approach to examine how *So Long a Letter* articulates an African-centered worldview through the interconnected themes of polygamy, religion, and female friendship. Rather than treating these themes as isolated motifs, the study analyzes them as social structures and discursive sites through which gendered power relations, cultural continuity, and postcolonial transformation are negotiated. Polygamy is examined as a contested institution shaped by patriarchal authority and colonial legacies, particularly through the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Religion specifically Islam is approached in its ambivalent role as both a source of moral grounding and a framework vulnerable to patriarchal reinterpretation. Female friendship, embodied in the enduring bond between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, emerges as a counter-discourse that enables solidarity, resistance, and alternative forms of social belonging beyond marriage and kinship.

Methodologically, the study relies on close textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory and African feminist criticism, reading the novel's character network—including figures such as Modou Fall, Mawdo Bâ, Aunt Nabou, and Binetou—as a narrative constellation through which competing visions of tradition, modernity, and gender roles are articulated. By foregrounding women's voices and relational bonds, *So Long a Letter* functions as a reflective space in which postcolonial subjectivity, female agency, and ethical modernity are negotiated. In doing so, Mariama Bâ offers a nuanced and

enduring critique of postcolonial African society that remains central to contemporary debates on gender, culture, and social change.

### ***Polygamy in "So Long a Letter"***

In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ articulates a critical perspective on polygamy by narrating women's experiences through the voices of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou (Bâ, 1979). Rather than addressing polygamy as a neutral cultural practice, the novel presents it as a form of betrayal that disrupts emotional bonds, family stability, and women's dignity. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, polygamy emerges as a gendered institution sustained not only by male authority but also by familial and social pressures that reinforce patriarchal norms (Stratton, 1994).

Through the character of Aissatou, Bâ illustrates how polygamy is imposed through traditional expectations rather than personal choice. Aissatou's husband, Mawdo Bâ, accepts a second marriage orchestrated by his mother, Aunt Nabou, who rejects Aissatou and insists that her son marry within the family lineage. The selection of "Little Nabou," his cousin, as a second wife underscores the tension between individual agency and inherited tradition, revealing how women's lives are negotiated within rigid social structures (Bâ, 1979; Nnaemeka, 1997).

Unable to accept what she perceives as a profound betrayal, Aissatou chooses divorce and leaves with her four children to rebuild her life independently. Her response contrasts sharply with that of Ramatoulaye, whose experience highlights another dimension of polygamy's impact. After twenty-five years of marriage marked by affection, mutual support, and shared responsibilities, Ramatoulaye is confronted with Modou Fall's decision to take a second wife, Binetou, a young woman of the same generation as their daughter Daba and one of her close friends. This act destabilizes the moral foundations of marriage and intensifies the sense of injustice experienced by the first wife (Sarr, 2019).

Ramatoulaye's reflections reveal the emotional and psychological consequences of polygamy, including sadness, humiliation, and a loss of self-worth. She describes Modou's decision as an abandonment not only of her but also of their children, stating: "With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family ... was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account" (Bâ, 1979). Polygamy thus emerges as a system that privileges male desire and authority while marginalizing women's emotional needs and social recognition, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations within marriage (Sarr, 2019; Stratton, 1994).

The contrast between Binetou's privileged position and Ramatoulaye's increasing isolation further exposes the inequality embedded in this marital arrangement. While Binetou enjoys material comfort and social attention, Ramatoulaye and her children experience neglect, even after Modou's death. Despite this marginalization, Ramatoulaye remains faithful to her moral principles, a stance that Mariama Bâ implicitly presents as a form of ethical resistance and female resilience (Nnaemeka, 1997).

Through the parallel experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, the novel insists on betrayal as a central consequence of polygamy in postcolonial African society. While Aissatou responds by rejecting the institution altogether through divorce, Ramatoulaye endures its effects while critically reflecting on its injustice. The epistolary exchange between the two women transforms private suffering into a shared discursive space, reinforcing the novel's postcolonial feminist critique of polygamy as a mechanism of control rather than a harmonious social arrangement (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

### ***Caste and Social Stratification in "So Long a Letter"***

The question of caste is sharply articulated in *So Long a Letter* as a reflection of Senegalese social organization and its enduring cultural hierarchies. Mariama Bâ exposes how caste operates as a mechanism of exclusion, particularly in marital arrangements, through the character of Aunt Nabou.

Deeply attached to traditional values, Aunt Nabou vehemently condemns the marriage between her son, Mawdo Bâ who belongs to a noble Fulani family and Aissatou, whose background as a jeweler places her outside the accepted social hierarchy. From Aunt Nabou's perspective, this union represents a violation of lineage purity and a stain on the family's social image.

As noted by Aissatou Sarr (2019), such marriages are often perceived as threatening not only individual honor but also the symbolic capital of an entire family or ethnic group. Aunt Nabou's insistence that her son marry within the family reflects a broader belief system in which social worth is inherited rather than earned. Mariama Bâ critically interrogates this position by highlighting its discriminatory foundations and its consequences for women, who are frequently reduced to carriers of social status rather than autonomous individuals.

Through the character of Aissatou, the novel challenges caste-based prejudice and sociocultural stereotypes. Despite being marginalized because of her origin, Aissatou achieves professional and personal success, thereby undermining the assumptions associated with her caste. Her financial independence and generosity symbolized by her ability to support Ramatoulaye function as narrative strategies through which Mariama Bâ affirms the equal dignity of individuals and rejects inherited hierarchies that restrict women's agency. In this way, the novel situates caste as a postcolonial social constraint that must be critically reassessed considering ethical modernity and gender justice.

### ***Religion and Patriarchal Interpretation in "So Long a Letter"***

Religion occupies a central yet ambivalent position in *So Long a Letter*, shaping both social norms and individual behavior in postcolonial Senegalese society (Bâ, 1979). From the opening pages, Mariama Bâ emphasizes the pervasive influence of religious tradition—particularly Islam—on everyday life. Ramatoulaye's experience of widowhood illustrates how religious prescriptions regulate women's conduct, defining appropriate modes of mourning, restraint, and submission. These practices reveal the moral authority of religion while simultaneously exposing the gendered expectations imposed on women within patriarchal social structures (Mbiti, 1969).

Religion also plays a significant role in legitimizing polygamy. Ramatoulaye initially accepts her husband's decision to take a second wife on religious grounds, as Islamic law permits men to marry up to four wives. However, Mariama Bâ draws a clear distinction between religious doctrine and its patriarchal application. Modou Fall's polygamous marriage—contracted after twenty-five years of shared life and emotional commitment—is portrayed not as a moral obligation but as an act of betrayal. The instrumental use of religion to justify such actions exposes how faith can be selectively interpreted to reinforce male dominance and silence women's emotional suffering (Sarr, 2019; Stratton, 1994).

This tension is further illustrated through the intervention of the imam, who urges Ramatoulaye to accept her situation as divine will, asserting that human beings must submit to God's decisions. While this counsel reflects a conventional religious response rooted in submission and patience, the narrative invites readers to question its ethical implications particularly when such discourse discourages women's autonomy and delegitimizes their pain. In this respect, Mariama Bâ does not reject religion itself but critiques its patriarchal mediation and its use as a mechanism of social control (Bâ, 1979; Nnaemeka, 1997).

By weaving religious themes throughout the narrative, the novel foregrounds the complex interplay between faith, tradition, and gendered power. Ramatoulaye's reflections reveal an ongoing negotiation between belief and personal dignity, suggesting the necessity of interpretative frameworks that acknowledge women's moral agency and lived realities. Religion thus emerges as a contested discursive space in which postcolonial identity, ethical responsibility, and female subjectivity are continuously renegotiated (Bhabha, 1994).

### ***The Impact of Religious Diversity***

Through the character of Jacqueline, an Ivorian Catholic woman, *So Long a Letter* addresses the tensions and vulnerabilities generated by religious diversity within marriage (Bâ, 1979). Jacqueline's union with Samba Diack, a Muslim Senegalese man, illustrates how interreligious marriages are frequently shaped by social pressure, cultural hierarchy, and gendered power relations. Despite her parents' warnings regarding the fragility of such a union, Jacqueline chooses to marry Samba Diack. Her decision, however, leads to progressive marginalization after the couple relocates to Senegal, where Samba Diack distances himself from her and forms relationships with Muslim women.

Jacqueline's experience reveals how religious difference intersects with patriarchy to the detriment of women. Her Catholic identity becomes a marker of exclusion within both her marriage and her in-laws' family, who never fully accept her. Rather than fostering dialogue or coexistence, religious diversity—when embedded in asymmetrical power relations—intensifies female vulnerability and emotional displacement. This representation resonates with broader postcolonial literary depictions of interfaith relationships, in which women disproportionately bear the social and affective costs of cultural negotiation (Aboulela, 2006; Stratton, 1994).

### ***The First African Religious Belief***

Beyond Islam and Christianity, Mariama Bâ evokes indigenous African belief systems through the character of Farmata, Ramatoulaye's neighbor. Farmata embodies animism, presented as one of the earliest religious frameworks in African societies prior to the arrival of imported religions. Her spiritual insights and prophetic interventions articulate a worldview grounded in communal ethics, ancestral knowledge, and moral reciprocity. Several events in Ramatoulaye's life appear to confirm Farmata's predictions, reinforcing the narrative legitimacy of indigenous spirituality (Bâ, 1979).

Through this character, the novel recalls a precolonial cultural order structured around collectivism and social cohesion. This vision aligns with African philosophical perspectives articulated by Mbiti (1969), who emphasizes the primacy of the community over the individual in African religious thought. By integrating animism into the narrative, Mariama Bâ challenges assumptions that spiritual legitimacy derives solely from external religions and affirms the historical depth and coherence of African belief systems.

### ***Some Figures of Speech Developed by Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter****

Mariama Bâ employs a wide range of rhetorical devices to intensify the emotional and thematic resonance of the novel. Anaphora is notably used to convey intimacy and emotional urgency, as seen in the repetition of "my friend, my friend, my friend," which underscores the depth of the bond between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou (Bâ, 1979). Hyperbole serves to externalize psychological distress, particularly in expressions such as "there is a rigid lump in my chest," dramatizing grief and anxiety.

Metaphor and comparison further enrich the narrative, especially in representations of Modou Fall as "lion-hearted" or in the contrast between male and female mourning practices. Irony, particularly in the depiction of women's behavior during funerals, exposes the tension between social performance and genuine emotion. Collectively, these stylistic devices function not as ornamentation but as critical tools that reveal gender norms, emotional hierarchies, and social expectations.

### ***Mariama Bâ's Postcolonial Thoughts in *So Long a Letter****

Mariama Bâ's postcolonial vision in *So Long a Letter* is articulated through interconnected themes such as marriage, polygamy, betrayal, religion, education, and female solidarity. Marriage is portrayed not as a stable institution but as a site of power negotiation and gender inequality. Polygamy, though culturally

sanctioned, is represented as a mechanism of domination that produces emotional suffering and social fragmentation (Sarr, 2019).

Religion, while offering moral structure, is shown to reinforce male authority when interpreted through patriarchal lenses. In contrast, education and female friendship emerge as strategies of resistance and empowerment. By centering women's voices and experiences, Mariama Bâ advances a postcolonial feminist critique that challenges inherited traditions while remaining attentive to cultural specificity (Nnaemeka, 1997).

### ***Female Friendship in So Long a Letter***

Female friendship constitutes a foundational pillar of *So Long a Letter*. The enduring bond between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou provides emotional refuge, ethical reflection, and resilience in the face of betrayal and injustice. Through their correspondence, personal suffering is transformed into collective reflection and mutual support. Acts of solidarity such as Aissatou's material assistance to Ramatoulaye or Ramatoulaye's unwavering support for her daughters demonstrate the practical significance of female alliances.

Mariama Bâ presents women's solidarity as a counter-discourse to patriarchal domination, illustrating how collective support enables women to reclaim agency and dignity. Female friendship thus functions not merely as a personal relationship but as a social and political resource, reinforcing the novel's broader postcolonial feminist critique and its call for gender equity (Stratton, 1994).

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, *So Long a Letter* offers a profound reflection on the intersections of personal relationships and social structures within postcolonial Senegalese society. Through the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Mariama Bâ foregrounds betrayal as a recurring condition in women's lives, one that is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and institutionalized practices such as polygamy. These personal narratives reveal how private suffering is inseparable from broader social and ideological frameworks.

By adopting the epistolary form, Mariama Bâ transforms individual testimony into a collective feminist discourse. The novel articulates a critical response to traditions that marginalize women, exposing the ways in which male dominance is sustained through social customs, religious interpretations, and legal inequalities. Polygamy and forced marriage emerge not merely as cultural practices but as mechanisms that reinforce gendered power relations and limit women's autonomy.

As a feminist text written from within African society, *So Long a Letter* challenges reductive portrayals of African women by emphasizing their agency, moral reflection, and capacity for resistance. Through female solidarity, education, and ethical self-awareness, the novel proposes alternative modes of belonging and empowerment. Mariama Bâ's work thus stands as a significant contribution to postcolonial feminist literature, offering a nuanced critique of social injustice while affirming the enduring relevance of women's voices in debates on gender, culture, and social transformation.

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