

Rewriting Womanhood: African women's Empowerment in Mariama Ba's *So Log a Letter* and Buchi Emecheta's *the Joys of Motherhood*

Dr Jayat S Cherekar

Shri Madhukarrao Bapurao Patil Khatgaonkar College Shankarnagar

Abstract—This comparative study of two novels authored by distinguished African women writers reveals the mechanisms of women's oppression under traditional and cultural frameworks across different African nations. Both primary texts also delve into how colonialism, economic challenges, polygamy, and patriarchy influence the lives of African women. An examination of these works indicates that racial, class, and gender disparities exacerbate the subjugation faced by numerous African women, diminishing their chances for self-recognition. This research paper further aims to assess potential avenues for women's empowerment within these narratives. It highlights that while many women confront similar forms of oppression, they respond in varied ways. The authors convey the importance of female solidarity as a means for achieving empowerment.

Index Terms—colonialism, polygamy, racial issues, class issues, self-recognition

The post-colonial women writers such as Emecheta and Bâ have opened up creative space for women to counterbalance and correct stereotyped female images in African literature. These women writers have presented a realistic picture of African women that is sharply in contrast with the idealized presentations of motherhood by certain male writers on the African continent such as Leopold Senghor. For instance, a novel such as Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* seeks to present a picture of motherhood in Africa that differs markedly from the poetry of Senghor, which depicts women's figure as mother in Africa. He equates women with earth Africa, which perpetuates and reaffirms the subordinate roles of women. Ngugi WaThiong o's novels also bound up women's roles as wives and mothers. On the other hand, writers such as Bâ and Emecheta depict the position of women in Africa as they battle with or

succumb to the various forms of traditional oppression that hinder them from attaining personal empowerment. Whereas, many well-known male African writers like Ngugi and Senghor, do not explore these damaging aspects of tradition.

In contrast to the idealized presentation, these three women writers explore women's attempts to achieve self-actualization in the changing societies they inhabit. Ketu H. Katrak states that these women writers play a significant role in women's literature, by exploring new possibilities for women and women's writing. (2006: 240). These women writers make effective use of oral traditions and make adjustments to the Western literary forms that relate integrally and dialectically to the types of content and the themes they use in their writings. Women writers' stances, particularly concerning glorifying denigrating traditions, vary as dictated by their class backgrounds, levels of education, political awareness and commitment, and their search for alternatives to existing levels of subjugation often decorated within the most esteemed traditions. Their writings reflect and also challenge the duality of patriarchal oppression that continues even in post-colonial Africa. These oppressive forms include concepts of womanhood, motherhood, traditions such as dowry, bride-price, polygamy and a worsened predicament within a capitalist economic system introduced by the colonizers. In the midst of all these women writers, portray the burdens of female roles in urban environments that result in the rise of prostitution in cities and women's marginalization in political participation.

Thus, the two women writers depict various forms of oppression in their writings. Moreover, she mentions women's quests for self-actualization. Conversely, regardless of combined efforts to empower women

mainly in post-colonial societies and states, many women have not been emancipated from various forms of psychological, emotional, and physical oppression and sex-role stereotyping. The novels by these women writers reveal all these forms of oppression the protagonists suffer from. For example, Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* endures polygamy, a common practice that results in hardships for women, sometimes representing a potential obstacle in women's path to empowerment. But Ramatoulaye manages to attain self-actualization by employing female solidarity. Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who is denigrated by her husband's polygamy, is unable to transcend that which confines her. Nnu Ego also suffers later when Oshia, her son refuses to fetch water for his stepmother, emphasizing that he is a boy: "why should I help in cooking? That is a woman's job". (154). Thus, in these novels, tradition is one key factor that inhibits some women's potential for empowerment, although, on the other hand, it also contributes to their growth in self-actualization. However, although the tradition is one significant form of oppression, there is a range of others, such as the extent to which gender oppression is intensified by racial and economic oppression.

In *So Long a Letter*, polygamy and various cultural practices result in the sufferings of the protagonists. The traditional norms allow men to take the second wife without consulting their wife. Polygamy is regarded as a "manly" characteristic in various other African societies, including their own. For instance, Modou and Mawdo's behaviour indicates this, as is Nnaife's behaviour in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Both Bâ and Emecheta's novels highlight the fact that the practice of polygamy enables men to oppress beautiful young girls who cannot make decisions on their own. These men take them as additional wives, thereby robbing them of the possibility of a bright future. For example, in *So Long a Letter* when Modou marries the youthful, attractive Binetou and Mawdo weds young Nabou whom he cannot resist because of her physical appearance. Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood* also marries a lovely young woman, Okpo.

Like Binetou and young Nabou, the patriarchal society decides Okpo's future by marrying her to Nnaif. Not only polygamy but patriarchal domination manifests itself in several other cultural and

traditional issues. Moreover, men can also develop an inflated sense of their importance. For instance, Nnaife treats Nnu Ego in a selfish, callous way for these reasons, feeling that this is acceptable masculine behaviour. Furthermore, Rama is informed of her husband's decision to take another wife in an insensitive, offhand way, since men in her society believe that it is not necessary to take women's feelings into account. In all these instances, men behave as per their selfish opinions and desires whilst women experience various forms of psychological suffering. It is quite obvious in Ramatoulaye's case, as she fails to understand what laid Modou to abandon her in the way in which he did. Her thinking over it leads her to blame her own physical appearance. She is heartbroken the moment she comes to know Modou's betrayal. Rama always thought that her relationship was based on a strong foundation. Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* feels distressed and humiliated the moment Nnaife takes another wife, though he hardly fulfilled the economic needs of his family.

The novels also reveal how some women also experience forms of male violence and abuse varying according to their situations. For instance, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* suffers verbal and psychological abuse from her first husband, Amatowu. Nnu Ego's life with her second husband is not markedly different, as Nnaife also inflicts pain and suffering upon her through verbal and psychological abuse. Besides, Nnu Ego also experiences physical abuse when Nnaif tries to beat her, and the only alternative she follows is running away from the situation. Aissatou and Rama experience psychological abuse as a result of the way they are treated by the men that they love; and Nnu Ego experience this too as her husband treats her in a selfish, and insensitive way. These kinds of abuse stem from how women are denigrated, devalued and deprived of opportunities in life. This is particularly evident in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which the sole purpose of a girl's life is to make life better for the male child or her husband and family. The society expects that the girl child should give up her and work to raise funds which will benefit the male child in times of economic hardships. For instance, Nnu Ego's daughters have to start selling firewood so that her two sons can continue with their education.

Further to this, the men in society not only deprive young women of education for economic reasons but also because they expect them to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers. In various respects, this is evident in these primary texts. For example, in *So Long a Letter*, Binetou and young Nabou are deprived of education to fulfil their roles as wives; while in *The Joys of Motherhood* Kehinde and Taiwo are told not to worry about education because they will soon be wives and mothers. This is indicative of the extent to which society views young women in the primary texts as destined for marriage. This indicates that society gives very little importance to women's right to independent selfhood. It never allows them any space to express their needs and desires. Their total existence is as per the whims and fancy of men, as is evident in the way Nnu Ego worries about what people will think of her if she is not a "good" wife and mother. This sort of devaluation of girls is visible in Nnu Ego's insatiable desire to give birth to sons. Their relegation to inferior positions, undermined and worn down, enable these women unthinkingly perpetuate the very forms of oppression that have been imposed on them. Their subjugation as inferiors enables them to internalise their oppression and believe they must impose these oppressive norms and practices on younger women. This is indicative of the extent to which the patriarchal society conditions women into submissiveness. For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, some women perpetuate the oppression of women, such as Aunt Nabou, who deprives Nabou of formal education and trains her to be a submissive wife, whilst her mother's greed pushes her daughter Binetou into early marriage. Farmata also encourages Rama to be a submissive woman, although the behaviour of this kind would not be in her interest. This is also the message Nnu Ego passes on to her daughters in *The Joys of Motherhood* because she is defeated and only makes her daughters aware of the downtrodden, disempowered female conduct. Thus, she is not an effective role model.

Another form of oppression that the women in the primary texts experience is the way the men in society view them as possessions with no feelings or desires of their own. These women are incapable of deciding on their own, and their main role is primarily to serve the men in their lives and the needs of their families. But despite their hard work, the men in society always undermine the women, and they

barely recognize their hard work. Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* takes over the responsibility as a breadwinner and entails a great physical and economic hardship, whereas Nnaif abandons his role as a responsible breadwinner. However, the society pays little attention to the women's labours and the total credit is given to men only. For example, Rama works hard, contributing significantly to her family's financial and material needs, but comes across neglect and humiliation in the end when her husband discards her, by marrying a younger beautiful wife. On the other hand, Nnu Ego's hard labours remain unacknowledged and she reaches death without peace. As a result of attitudes of this kind, some women become viewed as commodities, existing to further the interests of others. This is particularly evident in *So Long a Letter*, in which young girls are used to enriching their parents' position, as is apparent in both Young Nabou and Binetou's cases.

The impact of tradition on the society results in silencing women in various respects and this ultimately diminishes their sense of selfhood. This exacerbates the extent to which women are viewed as potentially income-generating assets, as is evident in Binetou and Young Nabou's situations. Thus, the society enables these women to feel as if they are devoid of independent selfhood, existing primarily in relation to the men around them, as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. The fact that many women are silenced is also indicative of the way women have repressed themselves by suppressing their own feelings and desires. However, Ramatoulaye draws attention to the fact as to how she manages to find her own voice after thirty years. On the other hand, Nnu Ego silences herself due to her incapability of self-expression. She feels, as a woman, she does not have the right to express her own needs and desires. Aissatou expresses herself violently in her letter to Mawdo and decides to live an independent life.

One notably important aspect of oppression associated with the previously mentioned examples of subjugation is how women experience varying levels of interconnected race, class, and gender oppression. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, it becomes clear that economic hardship—partly linked to class—and racial oppression rooted in colonialism exacerbate the suffering of women, intensifying the gender-based challenges they face. Additionally, both

texts indicate that men are also impacted by these dynamics. Although *So Long a Letter* does not showcase specific forms of colonial oppression, it illustrates intertwined instances of gender and class oppression, particularly through Binetou's situation where she is forced into marriage with a wealthy man. Similarly, Aissatou's mother-in-law seeks a new wife for her son from a higher social class due to these influences.

Farmata's claim that women resemble a ball underscore how various female characters across the three primary texts are marginalized and disempowered. She argues that a woman is akin to a ball, lacking control over who kicks it or the trajectory it takes. The potential for empowerment within the two main texts will now be analyzed through comparison and contrast; they generate and perpetuate multiple related forms of oppression as discussed earlier. However, Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* manages to withstand and rise above her humiliation when her husband secretly marries another woman. Despite her initial shock, she preserves her dignity and triumphs over her challenges. Drawing strength from her cultural background enables her to cultivate an independent identity while continuing her marriage.

Culture and tradition significantly influence women's lives; although they can hinder progress by fostering various forms of patriarchal oppression, they also contribute to women's sense of belonging to their families, communities, and land—a connection relevant to Rama's character. Conversely, *The Joys of Motherhood* highlights the detrimental impact of tradition on individuals like Nnu Ego. Her perspective and lifestyle are heavily influenced by traditional norms yet fail to lead her toward personal fulfillment because she clings too tightly to these customs. Even as she adheres to societal expectations as a “good” African woman—bearing many children including valued sons—she ultimately struggles to live life fully due to the constraints imposed by her gender.

Another important factor is worth considering here. Rama's friendship with Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* provides her with support in difficult times and strengthens her, as she finds a voice of her own and acquires a sense of independent selfhood. It is noteworthy to note that these and other forms of

empowerment are connected to the way women draw strength from one another sustaining each other in difficult times. For instance, Rama draws strength from Aissatou. On the other hand, women's inability to attain empowerment can be related, to a certain extent, to the lack of such bonds. For instance, Nnu Ego invests so much in motherhood such that she forgets to build a social life of her own which ultimately results in her lonely sad death. Whereas, women like young Nabou and Binetou in *So Long a Letter* cannot attain empowerment because they lack positive bonds with other women.

There are other factors that can significantly affect women's capacities to develop a sense of independent selfhood such as education, which can play an ambiguous role. Education helps some women to attain self-expression and it makes the succinctly heard by the society around them. On the other hand, Emecheta demonstrates that even education cannot change the selfishness in some men though education is a tool meant to enlighten and change the perceptions of people. For example, Oshia, Nnu Ego's first son whom she toils so much to educate, never turns back to pull out his family of poverty but goes on to enrich himself only.

However, in light of issues such as these, both writers present the possibilities of women's empowerment. *So Long a Letter*, is a text that projects a grand vision of hope, as Rama successfully embarks on her journey towards individual fulfillment. Aissatou also manages to triumph over her circumstances by choosing to leave a polygamous marriage and start a life of her own. Then, in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu makes the other women aware that one has to be careful not to compromise one's sense of identity, and not choose security over self. Moreover, she demonstrates the way in which deriving support from those around may help in creating a stable foundation for one's personal development, however, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, which contains the bleakest vision of women's possibilities for empowerment, one can notice that Nnu Ego does not attain self-actualization because of the societal and patriarchal pressures around her, exacerbated by economic and political factors.

The issues discussed in this research paper highlight the fact that African women are “crying” in various ways from different places. Sometimes women are able to speak out effectively, “crying” out in a self-

aware and powerful way. On other occasions, they utter a “cry” of pain, as evident in Nnu Ego’s words: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” (209). Thus, both writers illustrate; that there is a need for alternate remedies for some problematic features of traditional cultures and other damaging factors at work in societies. As African women, it is evident that these women must be pregnant with ideas and plans that can contribute to their own personal empowerment and to the development of societies around them. The women characters in these novels also make it clear that in some societies the conditions do not permit them to give birth to the female child. Moreover, these women may also be held back by aspects of their own natures. Therefore, these women continue to be deprived of opportunities for empowerment. However, they also need to come together and address these issues so that these women can move on with their lives without fear of “entrapment.”

In order for women to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment, a society characterized by balance, understanding, and harmony is essential, as reflected in the womanist perspective presented in *So Long a Letter*. In this narrative, Rama progresses with her life, and her journey towards personal empowerment serves as an inspiration, instilling hope in female readers who may find themselves in similar circumstances. This suggests that both her future and those of other women facing comparable challenges can improve. Womanism embodies visionary traits by fostering a sense of hope and highlighting women's potential for empowerment while also emphasizing the possibilities for connection, wholeness, and healing at individual, familial, and societal levels.

In contrast, Buchi Emecheta's feminist themes emerge prominently through her portrayal of male characters in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where opportunities for harmony between genders are limited. The principal female characters struggle to achieve substantial empowerment, leading to a depiction of restrictive feminist viewpoints that culminates in a disheartening outlook with no clear path forward for its female protagonists.

Overall, both works under examination provide valuable insights into the experiences of African

women, addressing the forms of oppression they encounter as well as their avenues for empowerment. Both Emecheta and Mariama Bâ have significantly contributed to the empowerment discourse among African women by raising awareness about various oppressive forces they face and motivating them to pursue their own empowerment. Through their narratives, they inspire women to “[take] up the drum and [beat] along,” echoing the sentiments of early pioneers in African women's literature.

The war for women’s empowerment is still far from over, as the paper presents the fact that many women in various parts of Africa have been and continue to be oppressed. Therefore, they still need to be made aware of the forms of oppression which may be set for them, both overt and subtle. Bâ and Emecheta have played valuable roles as leading African women writers as they challenge gender stereotypes previously prevalent in African literature. They also offer insights into various African women’s lives and inspire women, showing them ways forward, while warning them to guard against that which may entrap them.

Primary Texts

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