

Impact Factor: 6.017

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

Vol.15, Issue- 1 January 2026

15 Years of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.galaxyimrj.com



Exploring Widowhood Practices and Their Impact on Women: A Critical Analysis of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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Abstract:

Widowhood is a reality for as long as people are born and people die. Widows are found in every community but in Africa, the experience of the widow is such that women dread to be widows. In Africa, widows go through a lot of hardship that stems from the society, the husband's family and from tradition. This paper tries to look at the nature of the woman, see how this subscribes to the treatment she receives in society especially in her time of grief and loss. This paper will focus on the plight of widows in some communities in Africa and how gender and its attendant problems impede on the women's social standing and general development in society. In looking at the issue of widowhood in Africa, the reference point will be Mariama Ba's novel, *So Long a Letter* where the paper will be addressing how the African woman handles widowhood and how the African society looks at the widows. From study, it is observed that the term "Widowhood" has not really attracted much criticism in African Literature. In this sense, this paper will be examining some feminist theories in an attempt to adequately appraise this situation.

Keywords: widowhood, society, tradition, problems, feminist theories.

Gender as a recognized phenomenon today makes it almost impossible for one to address any issue whether in politics, economy, philosophy, literature, name it, without a specific reference to gender. Showalter (1989:1) quoting Ruthven considers gender a "crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse" One is

therefore tempted to apply the principles in the analysis of widowhood. In applying these principles, one must first and foremost look at the place of widows in society.

This article discusses the plight and suffering of widows in terms of their social, economic, and psychological and human rights violations in Africa. The article describes the situation of the widows as silent victims who suffer cruel and dehumanizing cultural and ritual practices as a mourning process for their dead spouses. The article also examines the gender inequalities suffered by the widows and makes some recommendations as to how these practices could be minimized or eliminated from society

Widows make up to about half of the adult female population in many African societies as Potash (1986: 1) reveals but very little is said about them and their situation or plight in any discourse. Most of the materials gathered on widowhood practices in African societies can be said to be “raw” and “unprocessed”. The absence of a diachronic research on the issue of widowhood makes the practice very difficult to assess. This is to say that literature available on widowhood practices particularly in Africa is very little. The dearth of African literary genres that would have interrogated the plight of widows show evidence of her “silencing and invisibility” and this may be responsible for the very little materials available today on widowhood.

Given this situation, African literary criticism will have to explore this rather “dry” area of African experience because it is essential. Critical appraisal is necessary and pertinent in that, African perspective more than anyone else’s can appropriately and adequately explain, describe and interrogate this aspect of life and it is through continuous examination and portrayal of African realities that the world will get to see where the problem lies and adjustments made. It is in this light that this paper tries to cut into the plight and suffering of widows in their social, economic and psychological state using Ramatuolaye’s experience in Ba’s *So Long A Letter* to break into the position of women in



general and that of widows in particular. The paper looks at the situation of widows as silent victims, it also examines gender inequalities suffered by widows and makes some recommendation as to how widowhood practices can be minimized, given a human face or totally eliminated in African societies. As an important treatise on the heart-rending plight of widows in African societies, this paper delineates the oppressive structures that give rise to oppressive traditions and so the paper will examine what is actually responsible for these traditional practices.

“Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow” Ba (1980:1)

Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter* presents Ramatoulaye’s unhappiness as a product of victimization by the male social order. As it was in medieval Africa where the woman was given no position at all, the woman is still seen as an object even today whose main duty it is to bring forth children, nurse them and look after the home. She is not entitled to the same right as her men folks; she is disqualified when it comes to inheritance. The woman is not supposed to rule but her male children can and the woman is not expected to contest this as she is asked to accept her situation without complain.

To explore the female condition, Ba finds a perfect place in the religion of her people, Islam. Using the Islamic traditional way of mourning in confinement, Ba brings to fore her heroine’s psychological state because it is while in confinement that Ramatoulaye finds her voice and through her narrative one is exposed to the genesis of her present predicament which as revealed was not the product of Modou’s death but dates back to five years before his death. In confinement, Ramatoulaye ruminates over events that have come to structure her entire life and that of her family. She tries to come to terms with choices before her after her husband of about twenty-five years announced the entrance of Binetou, “Break with him” her daughter told her but Ramatoulaye chose to be a complete womanist in her approach to challenges before her for she believes that she can only “realize herself fully and

bloom only when she form a part of a couple”. Even then, she “respects the choice of liberated women” (p: 55) as one sees in her admiration for her friend Aissatou thereby combining communalism and feminism and Ramatoulaye clings to the love of her youth and clings to the youthful fantasy of living-ever-after with Modou when the cloud clears off. Ramatoulaye refuses to spurn patriarchy in all its guises hoping that things will get better one day for her.

Using Ramatuolaye’s long lamentation and meditation in mourning, Ba is able to explore the pain, anger and despair brought by death to a family and the agony of widows in Africa. Ba also presents a perspective portrait of a Muslim woman who must accept whatever comes her way without questioning. A Muslim woman must adhere to the tenets of Islam concerning polygamy and mourning of a loved one.

Using the Islamic precept which calls for disclosure of all possession of the dead, Ramatoulaye stripes Modou of all his secrets. The “Mirasse” according to her is commanded by the Koran and it” Requires that the dead person be stripped of his most intimate secret, thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed”.

This act is encouraged in Islam, to either praise or as Ramatoulaye does, expose Modou’s financial and emotional treachery. The unveiling through “Mirasse” helps her in her journey towards lucidity because, in doing this, Ramatoulaye allows readers to seek evidence of a healing process so as to see for themselves what actually transpired. Mirasse defines and stipulates the nature of inheritance in Islam whether the family is polygamous or not hence Daba and her husband are able to take over the SCCAP Villa after the payment of the debt owed and with Mirasse, Ramatuolaye’s revelation of Modou’s atrocities is justified, but one must point out that the Islamic way of inheritance is rather fair to the woman in that it allows for equity which is not evidenced in the traditional method of sharing in the cause of the



man's death. This in most cases encourages the stripping bare of the woman even where the woman has children to care for.

In confinement, Ramatoulaye recalls her early years with Modou, how beautiful their union was. In recalling, she turns to nature for inspiration, using it to symbolize the purity of their relationship which was then full of boundless dreams and hope but hers is a case of "dream deferred", "dream aborted".

Using the device of psychological double which to Stratton (1988:163) is common to women, one sees the dramatization of the psychic split of the individual and one is also tempted to see Ramatoulaye as a victim in that her marriage which earlier on promised blissful future turns out to be a disaster for it renders her "dead inside". Ramatoulaye as one can say is faced with two "evils", her allegiance to polygamy because Islam sanctions it and that to her overbearing mother, she chooses both evils and comes out a loser, no happiness in marriage, no wealth and her youth is already violated. She can therefore be said to be a victim of tradition which she constantly adheres to. Broken by polygamy, she rejects Tamsir, Modou's brother's offer of marriage after Modou's death even though Islam permits it because her conscience does not allow her to break another woman's home and for the same reason, she refuses to marry Daouda Dieng, her former suitor who remains committed to his love for her "My conscience is not accommodating enough to enable me to marry you". This again differentiates Ramatoulaye from other widows in Africa because she is allowed by her religion to choose whether or not to remarry, this is one luxury most widows do not have access to.

Unlike most widows in African societies who have been blinded by tradition and customs, wasted and disabled by fate, Ramatoulaye finds her voice at the end of the day by emerging out of the shadows and then seeking the true meaning of happiness which confinement did not offer. She unlike most widows in African societies is able with her

outburst on remarriage, remove the “mask of the passive and acquiescent woman and so finds the words to affirm her identity (Mortimer, 1990:144) and with her letter of refusal to Dieng, she finally heralds in her total rejection of polygamy and breaks away from the conventional widowhood practices known to Africa.

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