

Contrasting Women in Patriarchal Tradition: Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, and *Scarlet Song*

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I. Introduction

The aesthetics of women writers of color is matched by the complexity and ambivalence with which they treat women in their fictions on multiple levels. This can be explored in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *Scarlet Song* (1981) through examining the relationship between victims and victimizers. Both writers share the common ground in that they illuminate not only one group of women trying to do their duty as women in patriarchal tradition but also another group independently shaping their own life outside the tradition. Although the latter are placed in more flexible, aggressive position, my argument is that central female characters can be revealed as

virtually all victims of patriarchal tradition which has forced women to bear passive victimization. This essay does not mean to include other aspect of victimization caused by internal factors, such as man like Nnaife can be a victim or woman as her own enemy in *Scarlet Song*. In structuring this writing, the central focus is to examine the ways in which the female characters' passive mode of being and their ways of thinking are illustrated in three novels. I will demonstrate how female characters are victimized by social convention as an external factor, thus approaching the universal message of the two writers.

II. Within Tradition

The Joys of Motherhood is the story of Nnu Ego, the daughter of Chief Nwokocha Agbadi and his concubine Ona. With a certain freedom, independence and assertiveness, Nnu Ego sought to live her life only by embracing motherhood and enduring many unjust social conventions against women. Eustace Palmer, in this sense, extolls the novel as the first in African literature to present the female point of view in registering its disgust at male chauvinism and patriarchy's unfair and oppressive system towards mothers (39). The barrenness of women signals a kind of curse in the Nigerian society in which Nnu Ego lived. This novel maintains the Igbo social mores of the importance of children to a successful marriage. Nnu Ego made an attempt to define her identity as a means of procreation. However, her motherhood valorizing on her dreams and hopes becomes, in effect, the subtle imposition of shackle: "Her love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery" (*JM* 186). She must remain to fulfill her role as mother and wife, rather than divert from the subjugation of woman in Nigerian society. Despite her strenuous efforts toward the attainment,

her efforts evaporate like a mirage in the end. Nnu Ego cried bitterly from her heart by saying, “[s]ometimes, seeing my colleagues, I wish I didn’t have so many children. Now I doubt if it has all been worth it” (*JM* 202). The novel insists Nnu Ego’s identity cannot be circumscribed without children, because her existence without them remains like an empty shell or shadow.

Nurturing children does not bring her personal fulfillment in the sense that “Nnu Ego’s unbending faith in the traditions of her culture, particularly as they relate to marriage and motherhood, is shown to be an alienating desire” (Ogunyemi 99). Consequently, Nnu Ego suffers an ignoble death at the age of forty–five, all alone, abandoned by her sons who went abroad to further their education.

However, what actually broke her was, month after month, expecting to hear from her son in America, and from Adim too who later went to Canada, and failing to do so. It was from rumours that she heard Oshia had married and that his bride was a white woman. ... After such wandering on one night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother. (*JM* 224)

This tragedy again shows “a textual critique of the romanticization of motherhood” (Ogunyemi 99). It also requires us to see that “she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife” (*JM* 137). Finally, she was never fulfilled ‘as a full human being’. She was hampered by the heavy burden of tradition and social custom in that period which has exploited women’s status. As Marie Umeh

contends, “*Joys*, as a result, is laced with cultural codes and feminist messages protesting the culture’s outer oppression of women which results in their inner repressions and denial of female sexual desire, passion, and fulfillment” (190).

Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (*Une si Longue Lettre*), translated from French into English, “is a pioneer work in being one of the first novels by a Senegalese writer to give a close portrait of a woman in an Islamic African context” (Ogunyemi 178). Muslim convention is designed to keep Ramatoulaye within the confines of women’s role. She must to tolerate the custom of a co-wife, as “[p]olygamy, of course, is the most glaringly inequitable and sexist feature of traditional African society” (Frank 18). During thirty years of marriage and twelve children, Ramatoulaye, an intellectual Senegalese school teacher has faithfully performed her duty as a wife. She is devastated when her husband, Modou Fall takes a young second wife, the schoolmate of one of their daughters. His dagger of betrayal planted in her heart, as she laments:

But my despair persists, but my rancour remains, but the waves of an immense sadness break in me!

Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love?
What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?

And to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think that twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal.

And yet, what didn't he do to make me his wife! (*SLL* 12)

So Long a Letter is indeed a long letter written by Ramatoulaye to her childhood friend Aissatou, as it consists of a long lament on the pain and anger Ramatoulaye suffers.

Ramatoulaye did choose to remain because of this decision, her “new choice of life” (*SLL* 45) similar to that of Nnu Ego. Ramatoulaye assumes the posture of the traditional, obedient wife and submits to her husband's second marriage. Facing up to the situation bravely, she was committed to the recuperation of couplehood, and painfully survived with solitude and reclusion. Ramatoulaye cannot imagine herself outside the structure of her society. This leads to the fundamental inequality between man and woman sanctioned by traditional values and social norms. Tradition as the victimizer justifies the men's betrayal while insisting that the women remain docile and tolerant. In this sense, *So Long a Letter* maintains “a sustained critique of an entrenched patriarchal culture and the traditions that keep women subjugated” (Ogunyemi 178). Sustaining a terrible trauma, Ramatoulaye has struggled all her life with her own belief.

My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous. ... You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I'm 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. (*SLL* 57–58)

Although in the end her self–portrait is depicted positive and happy like a rather artificial ending, her own life seems to be ladden with tragedy due to gigantic pressures from social custom and constraints. In this aspect, the lives of Nnu Ego and Ramatoulaye as individual human beings acquaint us that “[i]nstruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised,

often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed” (*SLL* 88).

III. Against Tradition

Both writers are concerned with the active and energetic women showing different responses to the same situation. It is significant with specific regard to the other group who is not like passive as Nnu Ego and Ramatoulaye. Adaku, Nnaife’s other wife, in *The Joys of Motherhood* is presented as more or less an independent, liberal, flexible woman. In saving herself from madness and premature death, Adaku is determined to leave Nnaife and her loveless marriage. She achieved economic independence by her trade and educated her two daughters to take their own places in this world. As Eustace Palmer aptly states, Adaku is the “forerunner of women’s liberation in African literature” (49). While “Nnu Ego accepted her lot” (*JM* 161) and stood firm in the tradition, Adaku appears in the novel as a sort of rebel.

Adaku resists to her present condition: “[y]et the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have set my own” (*JM* 169). Having resisted her tradition by declaring “Damn My *Chi!*” (*JM* 168), she herself makes her true decision: “I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters” (*JM* 170). In the progression from Nnu Ego who maintains her life within traditional boundaries, to Adaku who steps out of tradition, we find our own clue that traditional values are disrupting among the younger generation.

Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* creates a kind of structural parallel to Adaku. She does not dominate the story, but appears “an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life” (*SLL* 34). Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are treated in the novel as victims of polygamy. However, their responses are quite contrasted. Aissatou in full possession of her independence takes control of her own life. As if Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood* prepares her future, Aissatou takes the same road, as Ramtoulaye writes: “And you left. You had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands. You rented a house and set up home there. And instead of looking backwards, you looked resolutely to the future” (*SLL* 32).

Aissatou is less traditional woman who is willing to divorce her husband when he takes a second wife. When Aissatou’s husband Mowdo took a co-wife, the situation was so unacceptable that she goes her own way with her children by deserting him. To some extent, “Aissatou embodies the self that Ramatoulaye is struggling to become” (Frank 180) in their very different reactions to their husbands taking second wives. And in so doing, she exercised her right as a liberated woman outside of the marriage. Adaku and Aissatou are identical in the context that their search for new life requires liberation from destructive and hampering paternal forces. They show western orientation toward individualism and self-fulfillment.

Aissatou presents to her friend the Fiat 125 as a symbolic reference to independence, mobility, and freedom. We are able to be masters of our own lives, free, independent in our driver’s seat. It seems to me that Aissatou’s independence has a certain limitation because Aissatou “is the high bourgeois woman who escapes from her natal culture to work as an interpreter in the U. S. because of her class outlook and her location” (Champagne 30). Derailing from tradition can not simply equate with no

pain or suffering. Although they achieve some freedom by breaking free of the influence of tradition, on a deeper meaning, Aissatou and Adaku also remind us of potential victims entrapped in social constraints. They could have written 'so long a letter' containing their own frustrations.

IV. Silence and Madness

Bâ's *Scarlet Song (Un Chant Ecarlate)* is a much darker, more pessimistic novel than *So Long a Letter*. It goes to more complicated depths to pick one's way through racial problems. Through the white French heroine, Mireille de la Vallée, we are bound to view this novel as reversion to, or variations of the themes of *So Long a Letter* when it comes to the associations of the female protagonist's situations. Ousmane's betrayal led to the ruin of their love and marriage which started with youthful optimism. Ousmane didn't lose his identity and personality at all in marriage because he "wasn't letting himself be dictated to or assimilated" (SS 86). He insisted Mireille fit herself into his African society through tolerance and submission. Furthermore, Yaye Khady, Ousmane's mother, "would have liked to turn Mireille into her slave" (SS 152). Mireille, who left her own country for her love, resisted to African way: "She felt as though they wanted to bury her alive and resurrect her as another woman who would have nothing in common with her except her physical appearance. But she resisted" (SS 99).

Moreover, Ousmane, who made an excuse for physical pleasure through Islam cultural justification, built a double life with second wife, Ouleymatou. As Ramatoulaye decided to keep her marriage, being humiliated, "[p]athetically, Mireille chose to stay. She attributed no greatness to her attitude. Her choice was not an evasion nor cowardice,

but the only possible choice for a woman in love" (SS 162). The novel's tentative engagement with the issue of race is used by displacing the female character as white. Therefore, introducing a nexus of universality in which women's fate and experience are common regardless of whether they are black or white. In this way, Bâ's novels appeals to universalism and global feminism. They concern the universal conditions of women in Africa, or women in general all over the world. According to Glenn W. Fetzer, "of Third world literary figures whose appeal transcends the parochial, the late Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ speaks with exceptional clarity and universality" (31).

What I want to emphasize is the female's 'madness' that reflects repressed desire, anxiety and anger. Clearly the function of Chapter 11 in *Scarlet Song* is to radically rearrange the premises of the text on different levels. The author made a deconstructive gesture by intentionally exposing disturbing, repulsive and subversive acts. At the end of *Scarlet Song*, Bâ returns to that need, so evident in Mireille's madness, to expose all women's critical condition as well as their rebellion being expressed as an act of defiance. The outlook that "Mireille stood naked in front of her mirror, searching for physical imperfections that could put off Ousmane. She saw a stranger reflected there" (SS 163) explicitly reflects that Mireille's identity degraded into a state of nothingness. It is Mireille's madness that leads Ousmane to realize his unfaithful act to her as this passage represents:

She was trembling. She hiccupped. Fear triggered off a belated surge of reason in Ousmane's mind. A light of humanity finally pierced the thick darkness. A feeling of nausea and self-disgust flooded over him. It was he who had been mad and had contaminated Mireille. Only madness could explain his blindness and his actions. If carried to extremes, so that it

tramples pity and compassion underfoot, then commitment goes beyond the bounds of reason. (SS 165)

My contention is that women's madness may be read as just such a strategy of resistance that women have as an essentially negative freedom to escape. So, in another sense, madness refers to an exit of women's aggressive expression of repressive femininity because of having no other alternative. In the face of madness, Mireille seized the knife and stabbed at Ousmane again and again.

Mireille had already attacked him. He was handicapped by two deep wounds in his shoulder and right arm, as he struggled desperately to disarm his wife. There seemed no escape. She stabbed and stabbed again. Madness lent her strength to wield the knife. ...

Mireille wandered to and fro on the landing, wild-eyed, the carving-knife still in her hand. Ousmane Gueye lay on the floor. Mireille did not seem to see him as she continued walking aimlessly to and fro. A scarlet song welled up from Ousmane's wounds, the scarlet song of lost hopes. (SS 166)

This kind of madness is, to a certain extent, establishing a particular link with Nnu Ego's silence as it appears in the final sentence of *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego's complete silence can be understood as a kind of resistance to motherhood. Women wants to become mothers, praying their life to be as productive and fertile as Nnu Ego's. Nnu Ego, in a rage, rejects other women's desperate pleas to have many children.

Stories afterwards, however, said that Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people

appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did. Poor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace! Still, many agreed that she had given all to her children. The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children, they said.

And her reward? Did she not have the greatest funeral Ibuza had ever seen? ...

Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children. (*JM* 224)

The silence of refusing to answer culminates so cruelly the self-revealing of Nnu Ego's inner psychology, the reader comes to expect some sign that she bitterly regrets her life. Through her protagonist Nnu Ego, "Emecheta is most invested in critiquing women who passively accept oppressive institutional structures under the guise of adherence to 'tradition'" (Andrade 270). Emecheta describes the victimization of mothers by unjust 'tradition' which is Igbo society's standards for women and primacy of sons.

V. Conclusion

As the discussion of *The Joys of Motherhood*, *So Long a Letter*, and *Scarlet Song* demonstrates, I observed the similarities and differences of the woman character's mode of being in the two African women novelists. All three novels with feminist elements depict realistic conditions of women's lives and struggles, as "Mariama Bâ and Buch Emecheta elucidate woman-centered themes such as the problems encountered with polygamy, motherhood and marriage conventions" (Kemp 12). The purpose of this essay is to understand the complexity of women's lives in social contexts.

Emecheta and Bâ's textual parallels are signalled through echoed forms. First, both writers commonly investigate women's two ways of living by showing not only one choice to stand within the social boundaries but also the other choice of breaking with convention. The female character's pervasive ontological passivity suggests they are all victims imprisoned in social convention which denies the women's equal place. Secondly, a closer look reveals that they significantly exhale female character's repressed anger as a means of madness and silence, thus they seem to criticize tradition as system of oppression.

Finally, it is important to note that both writers are deliberately engaged in envisioning a radical change, challenging us to replace old and bad virtues. The forces of change are supported by many evidences. Adaku like younger generation is willing to live her life independently. Also, Nnu Ego's first son, Oshia doesn't want to support his family as social norms require. And Kehinde, Nnu Ego's daughter chose her spouse herself, defying her father's intention. Soukeyna, Yaye Khady's daughter dared to confront her mother's selfishness for Mireille's sake, as her friend and sister. Furthermore, Dada, the daughter of Ramatoulaye insists her concept of an ideal marriage, claiming that "[m]arriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life's programme. ... Why not? The wife can take the initiative to make the break" (*SLL* 74).

The mental anguish of African women by the inequity of patriarchal traditions constitutes a part of themes in the writing of Buch Emecheta and Mariama Bâ. Consequently, intertwined with their portrayals of tragic or triumphant women in a delicate balance, both writers offer a variety of choices, leaving the judgement to the reader. The result is a fascinating tissue of complexity and ambivalence within their novels. This sense of balance represents the novelists' abilities to penetrate beneath the surface reality of women and society to present the issue in all its complexity.

Through contrast of mother and daughter generation, Emecheta and Bâ give an insight into some of the changes in world which modern society wrought. They go back to the same strategies to assert that the self-contradictive tradition functioned as an exploiter of women is already submerged in the second generation.

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Abstract

**Contrasting Women in Patriarchal Tradition:
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So Long a Letter, and *Scarlet Song***

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This article aims to demonstrate Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, through examining the relationship between victims and victimizers. One common thread binding Emecheta and Bâ is that they illuminate not only one group of women trying to do their duty as women in a patriarchal tradition but also another group independently shaping their own life outside the tradition. In this sense, the main purpose of this essay is to understand the complexity of women's lives in social contexts. Emecheta and Bâ's textual parallels are signalled through echoed forms. First, both writers commonly investigate women's two ways of living by showing not only one choice to stand within the social boundaries but also the other choice of breaking with convention. Secondly, they significantly exhale the female character's repressed anger as a means of madness and silence, and they seem to criticize tradition as system of oppression. Finally, both writers are deliberately engaged in envisioning a radical change through younger generation. The mental anguish of African women by the inequity of patriarchal traditions constitutes a part of themes in the writing of Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ. Consequently, intertwined with their portrayals of tragic or triumphant women in a delicate balance, both writers offer a variety of choices.

Key words: Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, tradition, patriarchy, marriage, polygamy

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