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## **Polygamy is an Affront to Romantic Relationship: A Critical Analysis in Mariama Ba'S *So Long a Letter* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*.**

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### **Abstract**

Studies show that majority of African men engage in polygamous marriages, where the men marry more than one wife. Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* are two texts that portray polygamy as an affront to romantic love. The present study seeks to highlight the various constructions of polygamy in the texts and to showcase how polygamy deprives women of romantic love and critique its effects on the lives of characters in the texts. This study, therefore, is worth examining to shed a light of the social ills of polygamy in the society today. The study is a qualitative one, it employs textual and critical analysis to analyse the texts. The analysis indicates that polygamous marriages do not guarantee healthy relationship between spouses, men use polygamy to subject women to inferior positions, women in polygamous marriages are depressed, lonely and are also deprived of joy and love and there is also disintegration between the children in polygamous homes. The study adopts polygamy as the main theoretical framework in theorizing the work. Findings of the study have implications for scholars and society to reorient their minds about polygamous marriages.

**Keyword:** *Polygamy, Romantic love, Relationship, Marriage*

### **Introduction**

Polygamy is an ancient practiced that is widely rooted in African. Tracing the meaning of polygamy, Mabaso, Malope & Simbayi (2018) assert that polygamy is a Greek word that refers to multiple marriage union for one person, a man having more than one wife is polygyny and a woman married to multiple husbands is polyandry. Polyandry as a marriage form is alien to African

culture, since Africa culture is deep-rooted in patriarchal ideologies which ascribe headship to men, therefore, polygyny is what is embraced in most African societies. This study will prefer to use polygamy to refer to men marrying more than one in this paper. Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba are two female writers who have use their art to fight for the emancipation of women rights and to advocate for a society for women where women will be free from male oppression and male-domination. Aidoo and Ba texts portray polygamy as a tool that men use to oppress women and subject them to depression. Therefore, this paper see the need for society to criticize those practices that militate` against the fundamental rights of women. This paper seeks to advance arguments of the various constructions of polygamy in both Ba's and Aidoo's novels and critique its negative effects on romantic relationships in these texts.

Critical reception of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is mostly on feminist, gender and cultural issues. The novel was widely acclaimed shortly after its publication, the novel is considered as one that seeks the emancipation of women. According to Abdoulaye (2016), Ba's *So Long a Letter* deals with issues of gender and culture in general, it captures how modern societies prefer Western culture to their traditional cultures which has resulted in the marginalization of women. Latha (2002) and King (2002) both affirm the injustice against women.

Latha (2002), for example asserts that Ramatoulaye's awareness of the injustices meted to her intensify her cultural ambivalences. Which shows a compelling account of an African Muslim woman's emotional journey. Ramatoulaye's journey represents a significant attempt to portray the personal and cultural conflict of women in African societies. King (1994) on the other hand, opinions that, the novel is a campaign for morality based on respect for women by others and also women to encourage women to fully discard those traditions that inhibit their self-respect. But Shirin (2009) differs from the other scholars when she argues that, some key Islamic concepts described in Ba's novels, such as the mirath, polygamy, prayer, and sunna, as strategic for self-positioning as defined by Islamic feminist Mirian Cooker, who sees Ramatoulaye succeed in enacting Islamic feminism in her spiritual persistence for street adherence to the Qu'ran and in her resistance to the temptation to expand the Islamic percepts by her faith.

Aidoo's *Changes* (1991) has received massive scholarly attention as a novel design to transform women as the title depict. Ekpong (2011) argues that the psychological disposition of characters in Aidoo's *Changes* reveals the mentality of urban dwellers, showcasing some Western culture contact and conflict with traditional African cultural values. According to Rathinabai (2018), Aidoo's artistically exploit the disintegration emotion of traditional values in post-colonial African extrapolating from for the amelioration of women's condition, Esi and Opokuya are two middle class modern educated African women, who are compared and contrasted in Aidoo's *Changes*. Aidoo's characters employ different forms of mobility in their process of self-flashing as Toivanen(2017) opinions that modern African subjects draw attention to the anxiety that informs

processes of self-fashioning among urban African elites, who are caught between the tension of tradition and modern. Labo Bouche (2013) on the other hand views Aidoo's *Changes* as a novel that depicts the impact of patriarchy in traditional Africans through both male and females, where Aidoo insists that women should be respected in African traditional societies.

In this paper, I argue that polygamy denies women the romantic love they need in their marriages. Langeslag & Van Strien (2016) argue that romantic love is a kind of emotion that strikes everyone at least once in their lifetime. Romantic love brings positive effects on individuals and society; it is also associated with emotions such as euphoria and romantic relationship between two people. Therefore, I argue that romantic love cannot be shared; this makes its principles disagree with polygamy. I also demonstrate that polygamy disintegrates families and is a major cause of divorce in African society today.

Research on polygamy in Ghana has received massive scholarly attention. Polygamy according to (Baloyi, 2011) is a phenomenon often associated with African people. Polygamy is accepted and practiced in almost every society in Africa as a form of marriage. He further advanced reasons for the practiced of polygamy in African to be a remedy for infertility, menopause, pregnancy, and nursing, social exclusion, a source of labour, fulfilment of a male heir, a wife ill health, a way of taking care of widows, fear of being a social outcast and economic consideration among many others (Baloyi, 2011). However, Thobejane & Flora (2014) condemn polygamy because it is considered as a criminal offence in countries like United Kingdom (UK), in some part of the United State of America (USA) and many other countries in the world, but its practice continues to widen as it has three billion people around the world who still practice polygamy. Polygamy has its advantages and disadvantages

Scholars have advanced criticism against polygamy. Polygamy according to (Thobejane & Flora, 2014) remains a cultural practice in a patriarchal society, which allow men to marry as many as they can. This notion is similar to what (Mwambene, 2017, p.2) posits that 'Polygamy has been perceived as an affront to women rights in the society'. Therefore, recent laws in the African continent continues to advocate for the promotion and protection of women rights as are defined in the international women law and also respecting the practice of polygamy. 'This practise has long been perceived to conflict with ideals of gender equality. Thobejane & Flora (2014, p.15) argue that 'during the colonial period, when Christianity prevailed, polygyny was one of the reasons why customary marriage was not legally recognized. It was viewed as a form of slavery that had to be abolished'. Polygyny in urban African areas according to (Clignet, & Sween, 1981, p.8) 'appears to take on different forms, such as informal marriages or second or third marriages without the knowledge of the first wife'. Therefore, from these entire scholars, one can conclude that polygamous marriages subject women to oppression.

### **Methodology and Justification for the choice of Novelists.**

The study primarily employs the qualitative approach in exploring how polygamy subject women to oppression and deny them happiness in their marital homes. The approach is used to examine two novels which reflect polygamy as a tool of destruction to romantic relationships from Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*(1981) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*(1991). These texts are purposely selected as they appear to have adequate representations of writings that showcase polygamy as a tool of marginalizing women. These texts are analyzed through the content-based approach. The paper is motivated by the fact that polygamy has disintegrated many families and also has led many children to be wayward in society today.

### **Textual Analysis and Discussions.**

I use character and the process of characterization to reflect on how polygamy oppresses women in the texts. Holman and Harmon (1986) suggest that a character is made up of the moral constitution of human personality. A character is thus a person, an animal or an imaginary creature that takes part in a work of fiction.

My arguments in this paper are to showcase how the practice of polygamy does not embrace romantic love. Ba and Aidoo's texts are set in Senegal and Ghana respectively. Senegal as a Muslim predominated country accepts polygamy as a form of marriage where under Islamic practices men are allowed to marry up to four provided the first wife agrees. Polygamy is also accepted and practised in Ghana due to the existence of multi-religious practices, where except for the Christian religion, the other religious groups accept polygamy as a form of marriage. Therefore, polygamy is widely practised and accepted in Senegal and Ghana. But the aim of this paper is not to condemn polygamy but to advance arguments from Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Aidoo's *Changes* (1990) that polygamy cannot guarantee romantic love.

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* tells the story of two successfully marriages initially founded on love, Ramatoulaye and Modou , Aissatou and Mawdo become disintegrated as a result of polygamy. In commenting on the novel Mutunda (2007, p.1395) states that 'These are all the old Ramatoulaye. For at the crucial moment, she decides to remain in Dakar and accept her new situation, and to 'prepare myself for equal sharing according to the perceptions of Islam concerning polygamy life'. It is rather her husband who violates the law of Islam, failing to give her equal time with the new wife'. Thus Ramatoulaye is abandoned with her children, she is left on her own to take care of twelve children without the support of her husband. Aissatou the radical type rather succumbs to divorce than share her husband Mawdo with a younger woman, she believes the must be a distinction between true love and physical love.

Despite Ramatoulaye and Aissatou commitment and loyalty to their families, their husbands betray their love by taking younger wives. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as western-educated women, who were privilege to be the pioneers from benefitting from a western education contributed to the upkeep of their families as women of the working class, they supported their husbands with their resources to build a happy home. Ramatoulaye, for instance, extends her commitment and loyalty to her in-laws who troops in and out of her house to be pampered. However, their husbands betray their trust by taking younger second wives. Ramatoulaye bemoans the injustice of polygamy, where twenty-five years of marriage is accorded the same respect with five years of marriage. The delusion of a fail marriage is what Ramatoulaye refer to as, '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? (15). Polygamy rob Ramatoulaye and Aissatou happiness and love they once dreamed of. Their commitment and loyalty could not stop their husbands from polygamy.

Ramatoulaye plays the role of both father and mother to her children. Modou marriage to young Binnetou leads to the abandonment of Ramatoulaye and her twelve children. Ba uses Modou to condemn the hardship polygamy puts women and children in. Ramatoulaye is left with twelve children without any support from relatives, as a devout woman she accepts what the society pushes on her. She resists her daughters Daba advise to divorce her husband, she embraces her new fate to live without a husband but she later on encounter problem in raising her children alone in a modern society. 'The other night I surprised the trio (as they are popularly known).Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba, smoking in their bedroom. Everything about their manner showed that they were used to it: their way of holding the cigarette between their fingers or raising it gracefully to their lips, of inhaling like connoisseur (76). Ramatoulaye is confronted with the difficulties of raising twelve children alone, the pain of the children seeing their mother suffering to raise them while the father enjoys with a younger woman could be the source of their misbehaviour. The trio is caught smoking and Aissatou becomes pregnant out of wedlock reveals a home that discipline is lacking, the presence of a father at home guarantees discipline among children. According to Pervez & Batool (2016), a polygamous household was underline with negative experiences such as the disintegration of the family unit, a sense of deprivation and social, economic, and education constraints. Ba disintegrates Ramatoulaye's family and causes some of her children to indulge in social vices to depict the consequences of men abandoning their family to be with another wife.

Aissatou chooses a divorce rather than allowing her true love for her husband to be exploited in polygamy. Aissatou and Mawdo marriage was founded on true love that resisted the opposition of Mawdo's mother, however, Mawdo acceptance of young Nabou ended his romantic relationship and kept Aissatou on a new path, 'I am stripping myself of your love, your name. clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way' (32). Aissatous believes if love can be shared then it is not true love, she therefore finds it difficult to understand Mawdo's betrayal of accepting her

mother's choice of a younger woman to be his wife. Mutunda(2007, 95) states that, 'Aissatou is clear-sighted, unsentimental, and courageously bold. She breaks archaic customs that thrives on women's subjugation and oppression and chooses to get out of her marriage and the society which legitimizes infidelity and polygamy. Aissatou is the opposite of Ramatoulaye, she cannot cope with a society that does not respect women, she rejects what society gives her and leave with her children. She creates her path and walks in it with her head lifted to show that women have the power to resist every oppression in society.

Aidoo's *Changes* (1991) is a reflection of various manifestations of African feminism. The three women Esi, Opokuya, and Fusena represent three strands of feminism in African society. Esi, the career-oriented type represents Omolara Ogundipe Leslie Stiwanism. Here Leslie reflects on structures in African society that oppress women and how the women react to such established patriarchal norms. Esi refuses to subject herself to the desires of her husband, she believes she has equal rights in a marriage just like her husband, she, therefore, decided to pave her freedom through a divorce and refuses to bow to structures that continue to depress her. However, her second marriage with Ali is characterized by loneliness and regrets as she realises in polygamy the husband's love must be shared. Opokuya a nurse and married woman with five children represents Obioma Nnaemeka Nego-feminism, which name suggests no ego, where Opokuya employs negotiation, cooperation, and compromise to win and gain freedom in a patriarchal structure. And Fusena represents Mary E. Modupe Kolawole African womanism, where she reflects respect for her family unity and motherhood. Fusena sacrifices her career for the sake of her family. However, Fesena becomes sad when her husband takes another wife who is more educated than her.

Fusena successful marriage turns to unhappiness when Ali decides to take a second wife. Fuesna is a devoted African woman who places the needs of her family above her desires and ambition. Ali is the opposite of his wife, he uses his good looks and money to attract women. He enjoys having pleasure with other women apart from his wife. His decision to take a second wife saddens Fusena's heart. 'Ali had not known it then, and was never to know, that it was to these same elders that Fusena had gone to complain and to weep, the morning she drove furiously from the house and later from the kiosk.... She really could not believe that the beautiful journey that had begun on the teacher training College campus was ending where it was threatening to' (121). Fusena unhappiness comes from the fact that she imagined a romantic relationship between her and Ali without the interference of another woman who will compete with her for her husband's love. Therefore, the thought of Ali's taking another wife shatters her dreams of a happy home.

Esi grandmother sees no difference in leaving your husband and becoming a second wife to another woman's husband. Esi's grandmother Naana a woman of wisdom in the novel believes in a woman having her husband. Naana's ideas of monogamous marriages being the best may have originated from recent studies that have characterised polygamous marriages with massive abusive of woman,

division amongst children, hatred and unhealthy competition in polygamous homes. The Christian religion in avoidance of these negative trends of polygamy preaches against polygamy, which tends to disintegrate families. Therefore, Esi desire to become a second wife baffles her grandmother and mother.

In polygamous marriages there exist love sharing but romantic love cannot be shared in marriages. Esi, who initially believes monogamy is so stifling and decided to share in the love of another woman's husband, she realises her delusions only after she has entangled herself with Ali as his second wife. Esi has all the freedom in her second marriage but she is not happy. She has to teach herself not to wonder where he was when he was not with her. But that has been the hardest of the lessons to learn. for her. Accra is a big city and Esi couldn't help hearing about these womanizing activities of Ali.

'She knew it was true: that he loved her in his fashion. What she became certain of was that his fashion of loving had proved quite inadequate for her. So what fashion of loving was she ever going to consider adequate? She comforted herself that maybe her bone-blood flesh self, not her unseen soul, would get answers to some of the big questions she was asking of life. Yes, maybe, 'one day, one day, as the Highlife singer had sung on an unusually warty and not-so-dark night...' (185).

Ali, couldn't give Esi the adequate love she needed because Ali has to share his love between Fusena his first wife and Esi. This then supports Opokuya's reflection of a polygamous marriage, 'In a polygamous situation, or rather in the traditional environment in which polygamous marriages flourished, happiness, like most good things of life, was not a two-person enterprise. It was the business of all the parties concerned. And in this case, it should have included the first wife of Ali whom Esi had not even met' (108). This, therefore, shows that in Polygamous home if love and happiness will exist all parties must be involved. But in the case of Esi and Fusena who never met, it was therefore difficult for them to enjoy the love that each wife desire. Ali has to share his love between the two and mostly not in a way that the other co-wife accepted. According to Karandashev (2015) assertion of romantic love, he suggests that it is an emotional feeling binding two people together. Therefore, romantic love cannot be shared or divided. Ali, therefore, employs the 'hide and seek' to be with one woman at a time, which makes it impossible for genuine love to thrive between him and his wives. This romantic love in marriages is characterized by a strong emotional passion between husband and wife and it is normally unlikely to be shared.

Esi and Ali's marriage place Esi's daughter and Fusena's children in a devastating circumstance. Esi's second marriage with Ali affects her daughter. In every society, the mother has to raise the children up but in the case of Ogyaanowa, she detests staying with her mother Esi, which



proves Esi's inability to take care of her daughter, this could be as a result of Esi's psychological problems in her second marriage, therefore affecting her ability to nurture her daughter. Fusena's children have their share of loneliness, the children have to learn to eat their evening meals without their father. They have to learn this incoherent due to their father's second wife. Their mother Fusena has to embrace this new order sadly for the sake of love for her husband and children. According to Keefe (2016, p.111) 'today women prefer divorce to polygyny and imagine an independent wife, in which they can provide for themselves and their children. The effect of women's informal entrepreneurial activities has transformed women's options, within aid out of marriage. This explains why Aissatou opted for a divorce to take care of her children independently through hard work than to succumb to a polygamous marriage which can affect the up bring of her children. Therefore according to Pervez & Batool (2016), a polygamous household was underline with unpleasant circumstances, a sense of deprivation and social, economic, and education constraints.

Romantic love turns sour in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Aidoo's *Changes* (1991) due to polygamy. Both novels present unhappiness in marriages, rejection, divorce and loneliness when the men in these texts opted for second wives. Both novels raise questions about how men use polygamy to intimidate and depress women. All women were considered faithful to their partners despite the oppression they received from their husbands. Therefore, African women continue to be the ones at the disadvantage side when a relationship turns sour.

## Conclusions

Ba and Aidoo have demonstrated from their novels that men do not adhere to polygamy rules. In Islam where the practiced is allowed, there are existing rules and beliefs it must adhere to. The men in both novels floated these rules. According to(Clignet et al., 1981) the consent of the first wife must be sought before the man can embark on taking a second or third wife. But the argument here is, most women in African traditional home do not have a say in their homes. The women are perceived as subordinates who must always take orders. The man as a family head makes all the decisions, this could account why the men could even float religious rules regarding polygamy because as a family head of the home, the head is not supposed to be subjected or questioned about his decision, this patriarchal ideology continues to bring inequality between men and women. Also, in polygamy, another rule is that the man should demonstrate equal love to all women. But from our definition of romantic love, it binds a pair, an attraction that exists between two people, therefore monogamy marriages are normally the ideal form of marriage where romantic love can grow from its definition. Ba and Aidoo novels according to scholars are emancipatory novels for all women. The two novels explored the construction of polygamous marriages as a negative influence on the romantic relationship. From Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Aidoo's *Changes*, all

women in these texts initially enjoyed a romantic relationship which only turns sour after their husbands took second wives.

I have shown in this article that polygamy denies women, romantic love, women in polygamous marriages are marginalized, subordinated, oppressed, and stereotyped variously in the texts. These resulted in loneliness, rejection, and depression among the women in the texts. From the texts, polygamy is an enemy to romantic love, both texts depicted that polygamy and romantic love cannot exist together. From Ba' *So Long a Letter* and Aidoo's *Changes* polygamy disintegrated families, brought division and it was also used as a tool to manipulate and subject women to oppression. Therefore, my arguments are that polygamy is an insult to romantic love in Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Aidoo's *Changes*.

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