

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN LANGUAGE,  
MARRIAGE, RELIGION AND CULTURAL  
EMPATHY: THE AGONY OF THE PROTAGONIST IN  
*SO LONG A LETTER***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the conflicting interests of actors in Mariama Ba's 1981 Senegalese epistolary novel: *So long a letter*, as it affects the interest of the protagonist within the conceptual discourse on language, culture, religious hegemony and marital vow. The paper explores the literary use of language (*French Language*) in presenting issues such as cultural problem and conflict of interest with emphasis on the African patriarchy system which applauds masculine domination of the female gender in marital relationship, and the attendant threat to the feminine interest. In this article, the focus is on the African culture, religious sentiment in which women find themselves entangled, while men are set loose or free by the same religion with reference to the cultural practice or traditions of the Senegalese community.

**Keyword:** Conflict, Religion, Marriage, Culture, African, Patriarchy

**Introduction**

The word conflict has been defined by different scholars as it relates to their professions, persons experiences and contexts. It can be defined as the confrontation between individuals or groups as a result

of opposing or incompatible interests, ends or means. Unlike what operates in the literary world, the word conflict originally had a physical rather than a moral connotation. It refers to incompatibility of behaviour between parties whose interests are or appear to be incompatible or clashing (Hoivik and Meijer, 1994). Conflict is implicated in any situation where two or more principles, perceptions and beliefs are antagonistic or irreconcilable in nature, or causes disquiet from fear, uncertainties or from want of accomplishment (Omoluabi, 2001). It is a state of opposing values, where the achievement of one value can be realized only at the expense of some other values (Holsti, 1983:350). Conflict may even arise within an individual pursuing multiple goals, as well as between people of opposing goals (Maoz, 1982:12). It may be a particular relationship between states or rival factions within a state, which implies subjective hostilities or tensions manifested in subjective economic or military hostilities. Conflict is a situation of competition in which the parties are aware of rivalry for a potential future position, which each party wishes to occupy. It means a breakdown in agreement, characterized by opposition, which could often lead to verbal abuse and incriminating statement against the person in dispute.

Conflict is practically unavoidable and often engenders beneficial outcomes, depending on how each case is managed (Lederach, 1997; Omoluabi, 2001; Behre, 2012). The likely areas of conflict however, are vast but pertinent to every relational affair. This is because people of essentially different cultural beliefs are bound to interact by law of nature. Thus, when people of different cultural beliefs, values, mores, or religions come together, conflict is inevitable. In such a situation, people of different cultural beliefs will usually come into relationships or union with the expectation of continued experience of their primary belief or custom. Their beliefs and expectations can often be likened to the characteristics of couples. Each

of them often expects the other to share of his/her interest, or conform to his/her belief or behaviour and when the expectation is not met, conflict is often the result. This is the reason why Pruitt and Rubin, (1958) defined conflict as a perceived divergence of interests or a belief where parties current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.

Culture, being the sum total of a person's beliefs, mores, traditions and religious practice is often reflected in an individual's way of life. It defines a group and its members. The culture of a group guides their daily practices and their existence. Conflict shock occurs when people's expectations of a certain behaviour coming from their cultural backgrounds are not met as others have different cultural backgrounds and different expectations (Grewé, 2005). When such different cultural practices clash, it is often difficult to resolve as the different groups are often totally grounded in their ways of life and may not yield to change. In such a situation, the stronger group will often want to impose its belief on the minority/weak group. This type of scenario is most often the case in African marriages as experienced and narrated by the actors in the *So Long a Letter*.

Marriage is a legally recognized union between two people in which they have rights and duties towards each other, their biological children and possibly their extended families. According to the Western culture, marriage is the union between a man and a woman who both agree to come together as man and wife. This means that they have both agreed to have everything in common as one entity and any attempt to engage in any other marriage outside the union is considered a criminal act punishable under the law. Another marriage type is polygyny, which is culturally relative in the African setting. It is a marriage which involves a man and two or more women (Zeitzen, 2008). In such a union, the man is married to two or more women at a time. The women are considered as mates or equals and are thus referred to as co-wives, unless if the man by preference makes one,

usually the senior, the official wife. The marriage in question is between the man and each woman in the union.

An educated African woman, who has imbibed the western cultural practice will naturally expect her marriage to be a monogamous one in which her husband is married to her alone. African men most often fall in line with the western cultural standard, based on their education and love for their spouse. But the traditional African practice encourages them to practice polygamy, because it is accepted that it is possible for a man to love more than one woman at a time. This line of belief is also prescribed in the Islamic religion where men are encouraged to marry up to four wives. The fusion of Islam and African custom forms the bases of the African male's need to identify with his culture, despite his high level of education. This is the scenario that plays itself out in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* as related in the fiction by the protagonist, Ramatoulaye. The two men, Mawdo Ba and Modou Fall both find themselves falling back in line with their societal cultural belief which conflict with the marital vows of chastity they had with their different spouses. Can it be said that the African man cannot totally disengage from his ancestral cultural belief or is it just a matter of their selfish interests? The marital situation in the novella as projected in the Senegalese Islamic culture is most often a peculiarity of the African cultural practise.

The injustice often meted on the womenfolk and the psychological trauma on the female gender in the African culture form the plot of *So Long a Letter*. The novella is intended as a loud cry against a practice abhorred by women all over the world, regardless of their skin colours, religious sects, and tribal or ethnic extractions as illustrated by an adage of the Yoruba that the loud prayer or supplication by women about being partners in a matrimonial home is not sincere (Akano, 2014). The situation is further aggravated by the fact that often the womenfolk do not feel free to express their rejection of the rivalry

because the society tends to tag such a women with a lot of unprintable names, since rivalry in matrimony is seen as a normal way of life in a polygamous African home.

The novel is a canonical kind that gives an expose of the cultural factors affecting women, mainly marital, political representation and the low encouragement of the girl-child education within the African milieu. The writer, Ramatoulaye, sentiments, ideas, critical outburst and stance on polygamy presents the position of Mariama Ba on the subject. She and her friend, Aissatou, are part of the few educated women who enjoy the accolade and the position which their enlightenment affords them within the society. But Aissatou and Ramatoulaye's elevated positions are shattered by the unpleasant marital experiences they have which in turn subject them to patriarchal domination, religious empathy and total cultural shock. They both have their interests and expectations of life shattered, their trust betrayed by their spouses as they struggle to make ends meet while also maintaining marital chastity.

The effect of patriarchal cultural practices on women's psychological makeup as well as their disenchantment with the long rope the African cultural practices afford the male gender is the focus of the novella. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou view the male's sense of entitlement to bed sharing with other woman, a major conflicting issue with the practice of monogamy. It is affirmed that polygamy as a cultural practice remains a major cause of conflict in the African society, especially among the educated elites who often find it difficult to dissociate themselves from the expectation of the African cultural values and the Islamic religious dictates which both negate the western cultural practice.

This article, within the concept of conflict analysis emphasises the tale of cultural and religious inadequacies which place a burden on an individual as she struggles to find her interest projected, and

protected in the hazy situation of co-existence especially within the marital agreement. The experience from this novel reveals that African women face the cultural challenges of patriarchal institutions which subjugate their interests as a result of polygamous practice. The religious constraints of tradition, class prejudices, domination and patriarchal subjugation are some of the factors that make marital life intolerable for the female gender. Mariama Ba's experience is a clear cut case of polygamy which amounts to a betrayal of trust by her husband and the patriarchal domination in their relationship which give her husband unrestrained access to their common purse for his own personal gratification.

Another notable case against the male gender in a monogamous marriage is the issue of infidelity as the author projects it through the character of Dr. Samba Diack, a Muslim who becomes so brazen about it that the culture shock renders his protestant wife, Jacquelyn, a psychological wreck. The plight of women owing to betrayal and oppressions in marriages is graphically projected in *So Long a Letter*. There is a clash of interest, which results into conflict between Ramatoulaye and her rival on one hand, as well as the man, and the two women he needs to contend with, conflict, being the clash of incompatible interest between two or more parties (Albert, 2001). Ramatoulaye goes through several cultural traumas, and suffers oppressive patriarchal domination from her husband, Modou Fall, in order to abide by the cultural values of her tradition. The incompatible interest is the desire for another woman by her husband and her own desire to have the man to herself alone. The two opposing positions portray a clash of interest as she continues to struggle with the conflict, in order to survive her predicament.

The protagonist in *So Long a Letter* presents Africa's notoriety for ill treatment of the female gender based on the patriarchal cultural belief of the male folk that a woman is meant to be possessed by her

spouse and so is subject to the control of the man, his extended family and the society at large. This is because, Africans believe that the primary purpose of a woman is procreation and not public utterance of expression of her right to be heard. Ramatoulaye's twelve biological children from her marriage give credence to the African female subjective nature.

In the conversational chronicle, Mariama Ba brings to the fore a number of conflicting issues that educated African women have to deal with in their bid to carve a niche for themselves in the African cultural setting. Her feminism is projected through her protest against polygamy. Her education conflicts greatly with her traditional Islamic culture that totally favours polygamy and the poor treatment of women. Her efforts at addressing women's unsavoury conditions are referred to as feminism.

Feminism has always been considered both as a theory and a movement designed or embarked upon to whip up global support for women and the condemnation or sentiment against injustice, unfair treatment and persecution of the womenfolk. In several works of art, feminism or issues relating to women's condition have been taken up from the perspective of the personal account given by women themselves as a direct or first-hand narrative. Both male and female writers of African descent have at one time or another written about the suffering of the womenfolk in the African setting. For example, the protagonist in *So Long a Letter* gives a personal narrative in the form of a diary that shows practical incidents of women abuse, excessive male domination or chauvinism, sexual pride, religious practices which subjugate women, culture shock, societal prejudice and women inferiority notion. Also presented in the creative works are cases of women supporting women, women in conflict with women or men for or against women.

In a similar vein, feminism is a belief that is being championed by the womenfolk, mostly to create and build up support for women emancipation. It advocates equal right for women. This theoretical approach to feminist movement is all-encompassing, more general in outlook and reference and collaborative. *So Long a Letter* exemplifies an outburst and a campaign by a woman (Ramatoulaye), as representative of the oppressed women under a polygamous set-up. Mariama Ba used her novella to expose the down side of the African culture towards women. The protagonist says that they were helped to become whom they were through the unconditional love of their headmistress and not the society and she sees her education as a form of liberation from the old ways of doing things:

...We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations... (p16).

Here, the author uses allusion to show the different ways women fight for survival in an environment of cultural conflict. It is a cry of anguish that women daily make and it echoes their need to be heard and to be treated as normal human beings that deserve to be respected by their husbands, in-laws and the larger society.

The conflict is deeply rooted in the role that the Islamic religion and the Senegalese culture have subjugated women to. In Mariama Ba, we see a conflict between three major factors: the education conferred on her through the French language, culture, and her Islamic religious practice. Ramatoulaye rejects polygamy, yet her faith would not allow her to openly react or say so. Therefore, she presents an outward façade of indifference. She believes that there is no life outside marriage, and chooses to remain in a marriage that is technically dead, after her husband Modou Fall has openly rejected her by marrying Binetou, her daughter's friend. Despite the fact that she does not agree with the

tenets of Islam with regards to polygamy, she is still ready to 'share' because she cannot think of a life outside marriage. However, she displays a strength of character in her rejection of the old ways, in not visiting 'marabouts' (seers). Ramatoulaye's feminism prefers to operate within the confines of Islam. She carries out all the funeral rites as dictated by Islam, starting with her prayer for the dead Modou: '...I hold tightly on to my prayer beads. I tell the beads ardently...' (p2).

After the burial, there follows on the third day of the burial with '...the comings and goings of friends, relatives, the poor, the unknown'. 'The forty days mourning when all the relatives of the dead remained under a roof, receiving visitors.' Although, Ramatoulaye is greatly displeased with the concept of staying under a roof with her co-wife, she expertly gives an outward sign of acceptance. The unending entertainment is equally not pleasing to her. She says the people "stripped her bare"( 2009: 10-16) of her resources with their comings. But as a staunch Muslim woman, she bears it all without any complain. Aissatou, her friend, however cannot reconcile herself to the fact that a man would claim to love her and still bear children by another woman. She leaves Mawdo Ba because of his polygamous practice of bed sharing with Nabou, his cousin under the pretext of duty. Aissatou's position is also echoed by Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter who strongly believes that marriage is a contractual agreement which can be terminated when either or both parties involved are tired of the union. Ramatoulaye admires her daughter's and Aissatou's position and constantly berates Mawdo for falling for his mother's manipulation through his marriage to Nabou. But she cannot bear to leave the convenience of marital life for that of a divorcee.

Marriage in an African setting is also a factor that puts women at a position of disadvantage. It is a patriarchal culture that forces women to sacrifice their personalities in marriage and they are also forced to sacrifice their possessions too. Modou uses his headship

position to exploit Ramatoulaye's financial independence. Her social disadvantage has to do with her gender and her position as mother and wife. Ramatoulaye complains of her mother in law's constant visits with different friends at each of her visits to show off her power and her need to constantly give her parting gifts on each of her constant visits.

His mother would stop by again and again while on her outings, always flanked by different friends, just to show off her son's social success but particularly so they might see, at close quarters, her supremacy in this beautiful house in which she did not live. I would receive her with all the respect due to a queen, and she would leave satisfied, especially if her hand closed over the banknote....  
(Ramatoulaye, 20)

Her sisters in law also stay on visits with their children passing envious comments on her perceived opulence: her engagement of two house helps is seen as enjoyment. She cannot make them see the need for it. She feels that her hosting of the unreal is unjustified because the man abandons her and strips her of their joint properties and income in his last years on earth. Her being made to share the money gifts with the co wife does not also go down well with her as she, alone is stripped bare of her hard earned money in entertaining guests during the funeral.

The elaborate Islamic burial ritual is also a factor that Ramatoulaye is not comfortable with, but she complies with it since she knows not how to reject it. It starts with three days mourning at the end of which a lot of people are fed in a grand ceremony. Then all the relatives have to stay under a roof to be cared for, for forty days in mourning the dead together. They disperse and the widow starts another round of mourning for four months and ten days in seclusion. All these bring the absurdity of France's political assimilation to the fore because the people still practice their culture fully.

Mawdo is also an individual, who is embroiled in the conflict of self and duty. He loves Aissatou, but his sense of duty to his mother makes him fall from the pedestal of love of Aissatou. He allows polygamy through his mother to make him fall into the traps of tradition. Also, Education and culture are always at conflict in the story. The assimilationist rule of the French colonial government fails to make the people accept the western religion. They hold onto their Islamic culture of polygamy with tenacity. All the men in the novel see polygamy as a way of life. Modou Fall marries Binetou, Mawdo Ba marries Nabou as his second wife Daouda Dieng, a doctor and an MP proposes to Ramatoulaye to become his second wife. Tamsir wants Ramatoulaye as his fourth wife, while Samba Diack is not averse to multiple female partners. Despite their education, they see women as possessions to be acquired. Mawdo tries to explain his duplicity away on the pretext that he turned to Nabou, whom he metaphorically referred to as '...a plate of food' because Aissatou was not there.

Some women in Senegal saw the ills of polygamy and fought against it, because despite the fact that the religion preaches equal treatment of the wives, it is a difficult thing to do. Modou Fall abandons Ramatoulaye completely till he dies. Aissatou leaves Mawdo Ba and chooses to remain single after it. Ramatoulaye through her pains is able to see what polygamy does and thus rejects Daouda Dieng. She says:

... Esteem is not for marriage, whose snare I know from experience. And then, the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation. Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family. You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their conscience in ephemeral joys of change....  
(Ramatoulaye, 72)

The marriage of Mawdo Ba and Aissatou is a clear case of triumph of love, disrupted by conflict between class and culture because Mawdo's mother who is a princess of a remote province feels that it is not right for her son to stoop so low. Senegalese cultural setting sets much on social class within the society. The society frowns at the marriage regarding it as 'controversial' and that the union will not be prosperous. 'What, a Toucouleur marrying a goldsmith's daughter? He will never make money' (p17).

Aunty Nadia, is a traditional African woman that is totally rigid in her cultural beliefs and practices. She so much believes in social stratification and is very proud of her heritage. Thus, she finds it inconceivable that her son married Aissatou. Mawdo's mother sees his marriage to Aissatou, a goldsmith's daughter as a slap in her face and she goes all out to undermine Aissatou throughout her marriage and ultimately breaks up her marriage to Mawdo Ba.

'...If you procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable...I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. Goodbye, (Aissatou, 32-33)

Both Aissatou and Ramatoulaye have experienced the sharing of their respective husbands with other women, although their individual reactions to such experiences were different, yet they still fall within the clash of interest between the characters as they both find themselves entangled by their religion and cultural values. Aissatou however, divorces Mawdo after he succumbs to his mother's pressure by taking his cousin Nabou as a second wife after twenty-five years of marriage, while Ramatoulaye chooses to stay married when her husband, Modou, marries Binetou, a much younger woman who was their daughter's friend. The action of the two men in the novel demonstrates social injustice on the two female characters and it also

reflect how the women face various marital and cultural prejudice in their lives. African culture gives oppressive value in favour of men against women as they futilely struggle to follow their heart's desires in a society fraught with suspicion and male dogmatic self-desire to achieve their interest at the expense of their spouse's happiness.

The author of *So Long a Letter* figuratively used language to bring out the germane issues in the novel. She used metaphor to pass her message of the hypocrisy in the assimilationist culture with regards to religion and fidelity, because the African man will always find one reason or the other to still give credence to his culture. For example, Mawdo metaphorically refers to his conjugal relation with Nabou as 'a food' that was placed before an hungry man who would naturally grab whatever food to satisfy his 'hunger'. Meaning that his sexual urge can be satisfied just as a hunger pang that has no bearing to his love or emotion. Thus, undermining the concept of conjugal issues in marital affairs. Also, at the onset of Ramatoulaye's reminiscence, she metaphorically refers to Aissatou's heartbreak as 'a wound', which indeed it is. The death of Modou is given an animate personality as 'fate' which 'grabs...' Synecdoche was employed by the author to somehow reduce the grimness of Modou's death. For example, 'His hairy chest, at rest forever' is used to represent the stillness of Modou in death. The '...hands...' of Mawdo were also used to represent the whole of his medical practice of saving lives. The figures of speech and the author's expressive way of reminiscence in *So Long a Letter* contributes in no small measure to the canonical issues of contention in the novel.

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