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Accepting or Opposing The Status Quo: A Look at The Women Characters in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003)

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

Omolola Idowu Giwa

May 2022

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Dr. Martha Michieka, Chair

Dr. Phyllis Thompson

Dr. Michael Cody

Keywords: status quo, patriarchy, gender, misguided religion, colonialism, feminism, trauma

## ABSTRACT

Accepting or Opposing The Status Quo: A Look at The Women Characters in Mariama Bâ's *So*

*Long a Letter* (1981) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003)

by

Omolola Idowu Giwa

What exactly is the status quo of women in Africa? Women's selfhood has been systematically subordinated or outright denied by law, customary practices, and cultural stereotypes. Scholars like Judith Bennet suggest that religious practices and colonial rule subjugate African women. Patriarchal ideologies guide the society's discrimination against women and this has influenced the status of women, especially married women and the way they respond in times of affliction.

Authors like Chimamanda Adichie and Mariama Ba in their fictional novels *The Purple Hibiscus* and *So Long a Letter* focus on capturing the struggles and conditions of women in the Western African society. Through their protagonists, they explore various issues such as patriarchy and the influence of religion on the lives African women. This thesis aims to examine the notion of a single story and how and why African women accept or oppose the patriarchal status quo.

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## DEDICATION

To all the African women struggling to find their voices and those that have found their voices.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for providing excellent feedback and working with me through this process. I especially thank my thesis chair, Dr. Martha Michieka for picking me up and stepping up to work with me on this project. The constant feedback and patience have been appreciated. I would also like to thank my family and friends for building up my confidence in this topic when I felt my research was not quality work.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### *My Personal Experience*

My personal experience with patriarchy in Africa has inspired my interest in the study of how African women oppose and/or accept the status quo of patriarchy. I come from a long line of strong African men and women who are opinionated, and I have seen most of their decisions be determined by their gender and patriarchy. My maternal grandmother gave birth to four children with my grandfather, but after her third child, my grandfather had an affair with another woman, and the two had a child through that relationship. My grandmother was very upset and wanted to end the marriage, but she was told by family and friends to stay with him regardless of his actions because women are not allowed to leave their families or husbands. “What would society say?” was the question she kept getting from family members. They told her that men were all naturally polygamous and that she just had to accept him. She stayed and had her fourth and last child with him. He, on the other hand, proceeded to have two more children outside of their marriage. Out of his seven children, three were from extramarital affairs. After he had his seventh child, my grandmother could not take it anymore and wanted to leave again, but her family told her to just “manage” the situation, that it was not all that serious. She worried about what could happen to her children if she left, as she was not financially capable of taking care of them without my grandfather’s support. Her life was restricted to having children with him while he could have extramarital affairs because men are allowed to do that since they are “polygamous by nature.” While she resisted the status quo, she did not have a way out because of her economic and even social situation. So, to an outsider, it might appear that she accepted the status quo because the society has been infected by colonial socio-religious norms .

My maternal grandmother, on the other hand, had a sister who refused to accept the societal dictates. As of the year 1989, that grandmother whom we call Big Mummy in my culture, was a divorcee and a single mother, a concept that was not common in Nigeria at that time. Her husband had cheated on her with his secretary, and soon after she found out, she left the marriage and started a new life with her two children, hence opposing the status quo that African women have to stay in such situations. She was shamed by society and other members of the family for her decision, but she stood her ground and made the decision for herself and by herself. Unlike my maternal grandmother, Big Mummy had some economic independence and could make a decision to leave her marriage.

These stories of my grandmother and my Big Mummy are similar, yet different in a way. While both women suffered under patriarchy in a similar manner, Big Mummy was able to make a decision that was best for her and her children without worrying about society because she had some financial freedom. My grandmother, on the other hand, did not have a choice, especially because of her economic situation.

I have also seen my mother make big family decisions based on the patriarchal society that we live in. In 2002, my mum had the opportunity to travel to England to further her education, but this opportunity meant she had to leave us, my father and my siblings, behind. My mother was open to the idea of leaving her young children behind, but my father was totally against it because he felt families should stick together and that a mother should not leave her children. My mother listened to my father and gave up her opportunity to further her education. She later informed me when I became an adult that the reason she did not leave was that the society did not condone leaving her children behind; a man was not considered capable of taking care of children all by himself.

Five years later, my father got a similar opportunity to leave the country, and without thinking twice, he accepted the offer and left us. Unlike my mother, he did not have any pressures from society. He did not have to worry about what the society thought because he did not think it was his responsibility to raise children; that role is assigned to women. In that culture, it is normal for fathers to leave their families for work while most women stay home and take care of the children. In his context, therefore, he did not think he was putting his career above his family, but rather doing what was very normal and acceptable in society.

My mother's sister went through a similar encounter in 2010. She had just had her first child, when an opportunity came for her to go to the UK for further studies. She was hesitant about leaving her baby, not because she worried too much about what society would say, but because she was still breastfeeding and was scared to leave her baby behind. She was also afraid of missing out on most of his first activities. Unlike my father who was against my mother's leaving, my aunt's husband supported her and encouraged her to do something for herself. He understood that it was important for a woman who had just had a baby to do something for herself in order to avoid postpartum depression. He was willing to stay behind to help raise his child which is not common in that part of Africa, and he did not feel threatened by society or by the success which could result from my aunt getting a higher education. All these women in my family have different experiences and stories. They have all encountered the patriarchal status quo, but each has handled it in her own unique way.

Nigerian patriarchal society, like Catherine Oluyemo observes, means that men have all the financial capabilities and women depend on the men for financial assistance, but an argument like Oluyemo's leaves a gap that is caused by such a singular approach. Most Nigerian men tend to not want their wives to be more successful than they are because they are afraid the women

might learn to claim their rights. They fear that their wives or partners might start making more money and therefore not need them for financial support, which in turn could make these women bold enough to talk back at them. These men are threatened by this financial freedom because it means they could not be in control of both their wives and children. This, however, is not every Nigerian man's story, so it could be wrong to have this story define every Nigerian man. My uncle, for instance, wanted that financial freedom for my aunt, so she could have something of her own that made her happy. In the end, my aunt did not go to the UK because she did not want to leave her baby behind, not, like my mother, because of her husband or the society's expectation of her. My aunt had the freedom to choose for herself and she could own her decisions.

About six months later, after deciding to stay behind with her family, her husband got a similar opportunity to leave Nigeria, but this time around it was to leave to the U.S. My uncle decided he was going to make the same sacrifice his wife had made for the family, and he refused to take the offer. My aunt tried to convince him, but he too said that he was too scared of missing out on their child's life. He told the company that he would only accept the offer if his wife and child were given an opportunity to accompany him. He was not willing to leave them behind. The company accepted his request, and the family all made the move together. My aunt's marriage showed that not all Nigerian men are selfish and controlling. Not all Nigerian men want to fit into the patriarchal stereotype and culture, hence the importance of multiple stories, because a single story can lead to a misunderstanding that all Nigerian men are patriarchs and unsupportive.

Growing up in my Nigerian family and listening to these different stories and experiences, I have realized that my family is made up of both people that are forced to accept

the status quo or have resigned to the status quo and those that oppose the status quo. I did not know these stories until I was about fifteen years, and from around that time, I knew which side I wanted to be on. I wanted to be a strong, independent woman who did not need a controlling or selfish man for a life partner. From this age, I became aware of men and how some of them spoke about women. I listened for red flags related to patriarchy and for men that made a statement like, “Oh, you’re a feminist.” My first relationship happened when I was eighteen years, and typically we discussed both our long-term and short-term goals. This first relationship ended after we discussed our long-term goals because this man I was in a relationship with did not appreciate a woman who wanted more than a bachelor’s degree. He was a man who wanted a partner he could control.

After I graduated with my bachelor’s degree, my parents and I discussed my next steps in education. We agreed that I should continue with my education and get my master’s degree. My father advised me not to get married yet because “most men wouldn’t want to be with an ambitious woman,” and it would be better if I did not have a husband that would limit my dreams. He advised that I should get my dreams working before I got married, but my mother kept on saying, “You can always find a man that loves you and your dreams.” I think my mother had come to understand that not all men are the same and that there are several that support their wives and help them achieve their dreams. I was surprised that marriage was coming up as a topic with my parents because I already warned them not to put such pressures on me. In a typical Nigerian society, once a woman earns her bachelor’s degree, she is expected to get married soon after. As soon as I graduated, everyone kept saying, “the next thing is to get married” and “may God provide a good husband.” Not one person mentioned getting a job or doing something other than getting married.

That conversation with my parents made me realize that most people are deep into one form of patriarchy or another. Both of my parents felt that I needed a man to be complete. My dad wanted me to have a man, but he also wanted me to pursue my dreams first because of fear that I would not find a man that would support me while in the process of getting an education. My mother, on the other hand, wanted me to have a man that would support me in the process. She didn't want someone like my dad that didn't support her in the process of getting hers. I told both of my parents there and then that I was going to get my master's degree with or without a man. A partner is meant to compliment and not complete one. When I told my father that, he remarked, "She is sounding like a feminist," and I replied, "What is wrong with being a feminist?" I told them that the story of the women in our family is the reason I am the way I am, and I didn't want to end up like some of them.

These conversations and experiences inspired my decision to research how and why some women oppose while others accept the status quo. Also, I realized that for the longest time as a child, I only heard one side of all these stories and this helped perpetuate the stereotypes. It is important to hear both sides of the story; for example, I only heard my father's reason for leaving his family for years and never heard my mother's side. My father's story made me believe it was important for a father to go find a job outside the home while the mother took care of the children, but listening to my mother's side of the story showed that she was forced to accept the status quo. This also inspired me to check the importance of different perspectives as discussed in Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story." What really happens when we continue to hear just one side of the story? The danger is visible even in literature. For instance, Catherine Oluoyemo's argument mentioned earlier in this chapter—that the Nigerian patriarchal society means men are providers and women are dependents—is faulty and one-sided. Yes, there are men that think this

way and there are women that are entirely dependent on their husband, but that is not the full story. Based even on my aunt's experience or that of my big mummy, I know that this argument is faulty. These two women in my family do not fit in that kind of story. Patriarchy is more complicated, and as Adichie warns, there is a danger in a single story. The varying approach to patriarchy by my family shows that there is no single way to look at African women and their struggles, and this leads me to questions like these: What is the value of multiple stories? Who can speak? Who has been telling the stories of African women? Is it possible for a culture to recover from the continued telling of a story from one perspective?

### *Goal of the Study*

In this study, I explore how and why African women accept and/or oppose the patriarchal status quo through the female characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. I also examine how having multiple stories can help create a better understanding of African women and their struggles. Sylvia Tamale in her essay, "Taking the Beast by Its Horns: Formal Resistance to Women's Oppression in Africa," says that it is only recently, around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the struggles and voices of African women have been recorded in scholarly texts and literature (1). It is true that for many years literature has not captured the voices of African women and their struggles probably because in real life the voices of many African women have been silenced and their experiences have not been shared. It is important, however, to note that while this may not be the case for the most part, authors like Chimamanda Adichie and Mariama Bâ in their novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *So Long a Letter* respectively focus on capturing the struggles and conditions of women in the West African society.

Through their protagonists, these two authors capture the voices and struggles of West African women. For example, Adichie uses Kambili to deliver her story in first-person narration and this allows her to have a voice in the midst of the silence, while Mariama Bâ in her epistolary form of writing uses her main character Ramatoulaye to narrate the experiences of women in Senegal. These novels provide different types of African women with different stories. They show the importance of having different perspectives, just like Adichie discusses in her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” where she tells the “story of how she found her authentic cultural voice and warns that if we hear only a single side of a story about another person, country, or culture, we risk a critical misunderstanding.” These novels provide distinct stories about African women and how they deal with afflictions and patriarchy. In Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, for instance, Ramatoulaye and Binetou approach patriarchy in various ways. After a while Ramatoulaye begins to fight patriarchy while still living in it by educating others; Binetou resigns to the status quo. Characters like Aissatou and Daba oppose patriarchy outrightly, and neither of these women is wrong in her approach.

In Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, Mama seems to have accepted or become resigned to the status quo of her society and religion while Auntie Ifeoma opposes it. As readers we see how both women’s actions impact their daughters. Kambili becomes just like her mother, quiet and obedient, pushed around by family and society, while her cousin Amaka is just as opinionated and independent as her mother, Auntie Ifeoma. We could misunderstand these women if we used one gauge to measure them. Each one has her story, and each one tries to fight the oppression in the way she knows how.

Adichie’s warning of risking a critical misunderstanding in “The Danger of a Single Story” is important in this research work because it helps provide multiple approaches to viewing

African women and their decisions to support and/or oppose patriarchy because a singular approach of African women and their decisions causes a critical misunderstanding in how African women are viewed and understood.

The goal of this study is to understand how and why women oppose and/or accept the status quo of patriarchy in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. This thesis also examines the importance of multiple stories as described by Adichie.

### *The Notion of a Single Story*

Everyone at some point in their life has been confronted with a single story, either because of where a person comes from, their race, ethnicity, gender, class, or age. Author Chimamanda Adichie uses the phrase “single stories” in her 2009 TED talk titled, “The Danger of a Single Story,” to describe false stereotypes people form about a person, a group of people, or a place. In the twenty-minute video, Adichie describes the powerful impression the numerous British stories made on her as a young girl growing up in Nigeria. She argues that a danger is rooted in the power of single stories. There is a danger of only knowing one story or one side of the story about a group of people or a given culture. She claims that our lives and our cultures, are composed of many intersecting stories. In her TED talk, she tells the story of how she found her original cultural voice and warns that if we hear only a single side of a story about another person, country, or culture, we risk a critical misunderstanding. She says that single stories can have meaningful negative effects; i.e., they can help emphasize differences rather than similarities. Adichie further argues that “[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” The single stories may have some truth, but the problem is that what is

not included in that story may be key or significant in understanding a group of people or a given culture. Jayvaughn Seymour-Greene in “The Truth Behind Single Stories,” similarly observes that the concept of single stories can be either positive or negative, but it is up to society to find the balance between the multiple stories in order to make a meaningful understanding of the full story. The only way we can find this balance is to listen objectively to all sides of the story and not rely on just one story.

In order to get the right and meaningful story, it is important to listen to all sides and perspectives of the story so as not to create stereotypes. Most of the stereotypes created about African women, for instance, are caused by a single story. Catherine Oluyemo and Tolulope Ola in “The Rights of Nigerian Women in a Patriarchal Society” assert that married women in Africa seem more respected than unmarried single or divorced women. This suggests that African women are expected to be married and that their value is tied to their association with men. Many believe that most African women accept the status quo of patriarchy without any form of opposition, and this belief stems from the stereotypes that have been perpetuated that African women must be submissive.

This thesis will analyze the importance of multiple perspectives in order to show that stereotypes are incomplete stories, as described by Adichie, and that those incomplete stories create a gap in our understanding of people and the real complicated lives they live. The thesis will also examine how Bâ and Adichie provide different perspectives to the story of African women. There is the African woman who appears to accept what society expects of her; there is another who out rightly opposes it; and then there are several who are in between, neither fully resigning to the status quo nor completely rejecting it. These two authors provide different characters that go through similar experiences but with different outcomes, which leads to

multiple stories. These multiple stories, along with my personal story and those of my family, will help to debunk that stereotype that all African women have the same story.

### *What is Patriarchy?*

Before going further into my discussion of patriarchy in West African culture, it is important to define it. What is patriarchy? Mary Becker in “Patriarchy and Inequality: Towards a Substantive Feminism” argues that social structures and the people within them replicate the imbalances related to sex, race, class, religion, and ethnicity (23). Different cultures have different attitudes towards patriarchy and most patriarchal societies prefer male “control and domination” (24). According to Allan Johnson in his book *The Gender Knot: Unravelling our Patriarchal Legacy*, “A culture is patriarchal to the level that it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered” (5). This author observes that women have had to deal with gender-based stereotypes because most societies are gender-biased. Most societies encourage male privilege, hence, making those societies patriarchal and male centered (Johnson 5-6). However, Becker contends that this concept of male domination is not the main essence of patriarchy. According to Becker, the main essence of patriarchy is not about women but fear of other men and male distrust amongst men (Becker 24). Catherine Oluyemo and Tolulope Ola suggest that patriarchy creates a form of subjugation that affects the rights of these women. They claim that most women in African societies are under some form of patriarchal subjugation.

Simone de Beauvoir commenting on patriarchy states that the man “[i]s the subject, he is the absolute—she is the other. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality—that of the self and the other” (26). It is interesting that in this argument Beauvoir sees that women are defined in relation to men while men are defined in relation to themselves. Women are the other; this secondary status lies at the heart of women’s

subjugation. According to Beauvoir women are generally classified as the other and the weaker sex, while men are the absolute and the stronger sex.

Beauvoir also argues that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283). While sex is biological, gender is socially constructed. Sex refers to the characteristics assigned by biology at birth while gender is based on a set of societal expectations. A child is socialized to be feminine or masculine, and as Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet in *Language and Gender* argue, humans are not born with a gender. Gender is performed and done. Society determines what is ultimately male or female (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 3). The society decides for instance that women should wear pink while men wear blue, that women should be nurses and men engineers, that little girls play with dolls while boys play with cars. There is nothing biological in that. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* claims that gender consists of the identity it is alleged to be (25). This refers to gender as a doing by a subject; that is, gender is performed. Butler also claims that gender is performative and explains that an act can only be performative if it produces effects. What this means is that gender can only be said to be performative when there is gender identity before the gendered acts, because these acts constitute identity. She claims that there cannot be a gender before doing gendered acts because the gendered acts determine the gender. Ultimately, Butler is arguing that it is our performance of these gendered acts that determines our gender and not the society. Gender identity is a process and a journey, and we embrace this journey by our actions. Because of the performance of gender, the society determines what is male and female, hence, the society determines social expectations and gender roles and so the society determines patriarchy.

Most communities that practice patriarchy also practice sexism and it functions to maintain patriarchy. Like patriarchy, sexism also duplicates the imbalances related to sex.

Chimamanda Adiche writes in “Dear Ijeawele or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions” that she is angrier about sexism than she is about racism:

I don't think sexism is worse than racism, it's impossible even to compare, it's that I feel lonely in my fight against sexism, in a way that I don't feel in my fight against racism. My friends, my family, they get racism, they get it. But I find that with sexism you are constantly having to explain, justify, convince, while never having the same expectation for racism. (12-13)

Women all over the world have had to deal with sexism and patriarchy and have felt alone in their fight against it, while most understand the concept of racism, most don't grasp the concept of sexism and the fact that women are subjugated and oppressed by patriarchy that exists in most societies just like racism exists in most societies. So many women have had to justify and explain that sexism exists and that it oppresses women. According to Adeyinka Aderinto, women all over the world encounter one form of subjugation or the other, but it is worse for women in developing countries like Asia or Africa (1).

Judith Bennet in *Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* observes that African women have faced a lot of repeated gender injustices over the years, and this is due to the patriarchy and sexism that exists in most African societies. Butler claims that this patriarchy affects the role that women play both inside the home and outside. Some scholars like Pamela Scully in “Feminist Theory, African Gender History and Transitional Justice” claim that African women began to face oppression during colonial rule. She introduces the notion that colonialism may have had a role to play in the subjugation of women. She also suggests that religious practices, especially those that were introduced by the colonist promote women's suppression. Catherine Olutoyin, in “Patriarchy and the Representation of Women in Africa and Asia,” says that women's inferiority

stems from the patriarchal society and culture that tends to look down upon women and the various activities they perform in society, pushing them to a lower and unequal position in relation to men in society. African women have been limited by society, and this subjugation has affected their decision-making and their rights.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

A theoretical framework helps structure, provides a rationale, and guides the research process. It supplies background information that supports and structures the research and provides proof for the study and research problems. Cynthia Grant and Azadeh Osanloo state in their essay “Understanding, Selecting, and Integrating a Theoretical Framework in Dissertation Research” that the theoretical framework of a research project is the premise from which all knowledge is established and it provides the foundation for analysis. To analyze how and why the characters in Bâ and Adichie’s novels accept or oppose the status quo, feminist and trauma theory would be essential to this research.

### *Feminist Theory*

According to Lois Tyson, Feminist Theory is concerned with the way in which literature strengthens or reduces the economic, political, social, and psychological oppressions of women (83). This means that Feminist criticism focuses on the way literature and other cultural productions promote the oppression of women. It also looks at how literature diminishes the effects of the oppression of women in various aspects of life, such as the economic, political, social, and psychological. This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal and aims to expose misogyny in writing and other forms of literature about women.

The Feminist Theory as a school of critical theory has become one of the rapidly growing approaches to text and literature. This theory includes other intersections such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. On a general note, the feminist approach to a piece of literature inquire about patriarchy, women, and how women are portrayed in the text. The feminist critic points out gender imbalances identified in the characters' attitudes or overall plot of the story; s/he also studies how authors reject notions of inequality in their stories. Feminist authors like Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill write about intersectional feminism which deals with how racism, classism, and sexism intersect. These authors argue that not just gender imbalances need to be pointed out, but that inequality will look different as we cross intersections of experience for those in marginalized groups. Kimberle Crenshaw mentions in her "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" that because of the intersectional identity of both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (1244). This implies that women of color not only have to fight against sexism but against racism as well, and these two discourses are made to oppress and marginalize them. Patricia Hill in her book "Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice focuses on how black women face social injustices both within the black communities and the society at large. She also states the importance of acknowledging social theories of oppressed groups because they provide different experiences and ways of looking at human injustices.

Karen Offen in "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach" says that the feminist theory began in the 1970s, but feminism effectively began in 1848 with the first Seneca Falls Convention and the Sojourner Truth who is a black woman who spoke at the 1851 convention and in that same year published *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, which includes her

proto-intersectionality concerns of millennialism, abolition, and women's rights. This gave rise to an intersectional feminism, in which the focus was on votes for women, and it birthed what is now called the first-wave of feminism. Since then Black feminist thought developed and Alice Walker coined the term *womanism*, in 1979 to describe the experiences of black women. The Combahee River Collective (a group of black feminist lesbians who felt that their needs as black women and as lesbians were not being met by white feminists and the civil rights movement) was formed in 1977 and had their manifesto written. Other feminist writers include Audre Lorde who published *Sister Outsider* and Alice Walker.

Jennifer Carlson and Raka Ray in "Feminist Theory" explains that the theory analyzes gender inequality and the constitution of gender. They claim that this theory helps explain how gendered assumptions are utilized to reward or punish gendered practices yet there is a danger in a single story, and this applies to theoretical lenses as well.

Bâ and Adichie both uses the feminist approach to highlight the religious, political, social, and economical subjugation and oppression of women in their texts respectively. They also highlight the oppression of women in a patriarchal society and family where all the power is given to the men.

Using Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story and the importance of multiple and complete stories as a framework will help me better understand feminist theories and their relevance to my current work.

### *Trauma Theory*

According to Jennifer Venderheyden in "The Resilience of Women in the Face of Trauma," trauma studies began in the 1860s when some doctors observed how patients of

accidents reacted beyond the physical injuries and pain. Trauma theory began in the 1990s when critics studied the cultural effects of trauma. Trauma theory is the theoretical framework of the studies in Trauma. Dominick LaCapra defines trauma as a “[d]isruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates a hole in existence” (698). According to “The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder,” trauma is “an event that involves a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone” (271). This shows that trauma is an event or experience that causes stress and confusion in people. Generally, trauma is an emotional response to past experiences or events. Van der. Kolk in *Body Keeps the Score* claims that trauma leaves marks on our minds and emotions, our biology and immune systems, and it affects not only the direct victims but also those around them. What makes trauma unbearable and intolerable is that it is an event of the past that keeps recurring. What separates trauma from a bad experience is the reoccurrence. According to Ruth Ley, in relation to trauma theory, trauma refers not so much to the traumatic event, but to the traumatic aftermath such as dreams, narration, or various symptoms known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (248). PTSD can be triggered after experiencing or witnessing it; symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety.

Nasurallah Mambrol asserts that trauma studies analyze the effects of trauma in literature and society by exploring its psychological and cultural importance. She also says that the concept of trauma first relied on Freudian theory to develop a model for trauma. Trauma scholars began to emerge: Cathy Caruth, Brooks Bouson, Suzette Henke, and Deborah Horvitz. Trauma keeps recurring; it keeps happening in the present and can be triggered unexpectedly by a smell, a song, a word, an image or a touch.

According to Tobi Oloyede in “The Resilience of Female Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Southwest Nigeria: An Interdisciplinary Analysis,” the patriarchal culture of the Nigerian society causes gender trauma, and this is reinforced by cultural ideology and social norms (27). She argues that gendered trauma arises from patriarchal societies that devalue and oppress women and their rights. She posits different ways to understand trauma as a theoretical framework: understanding what makes the experience traumatic, the effects of these experiences, the persisting symptoms, and the responses (27). Oloyede identifies three types of trauma: “Family trauma,” which comes from members of an individual’s family; “Community Trauma,” which comes from members of the community to which the individual belongs; and “Intimate Partner Violence,” which involves violence from one’s partner or spouse (28).

Trauma theory allows writers to think differently through the relationship between trauma and fiction. To understand the effects of the decision of female characters to oppose or accept the status quo, trauma theory will be used to analyze the aftermath of their decisions and the effects of a patriarchal society on women’s mental health.

Bâ and Adichie both highlight the trauma that each women face due to the oppression from the patriarchal society. They highlights the different effects of patriarchy and the importance of mental health. They both highlight family trauma that can be caused by a spouse and sometimes a parent, the impact of that trauma and the permanent impacts of such trauma in the lives of their characters.

## CHAPTER 2. ANALYSIS

### *Introduction*

This chapter focuses on the role of colonialism and religion on the lives of West African women. Research has been done on colonialism and the topic is not new. Many scholars from Africa and other parts of the world like Zilter and Kirsten have explored the impacts of colonialism on the colonized. These scholars mainly focus on the political, social, and economic impacts of colonialism, but they do not make any mention of the colonial impact on women. This chapter aims to fill this gap in the scholarship by paying attention to the impact of colonialism on West African women.

### *Colonialism and Religion*

Erin Blakemore in “What is Colonialism?” defines colonialism as the control of an area, people or group by a powerful one (1). The concept of colonialism is similar to imperialism. David Lake in “International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences” defines “Imperialism as a position in which one political community rules and controls another political community” (4). Colonialism happens when one powerful country or nation conquers another country or a lesser one, by forcing its language, culture, or by taking a country’s land, and resources. Blakemore asserts that as of 1914, a vast population of the world’s nations had already been colonized by European nations. The main essence of colonialism is domination, i.e., a situation where one country/nation dominates and subjugates another.

Blakemore writes that, traditionally, colonialism was a practice among certain empires like Greece, Rome, and Egypt. They subjugated and conquered people in order to gain more power. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Portugal conquered a town in North Africa, called Ceuta, and this can be viewed as marking the beginning of colonization in Africa. Spain and Portugal were in

competition for colonies and began to subjugate indigenous lands in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. However, England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany also joined the business of colonization by fighting Spain and Portugal for the lands that they had already colonized. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some countries began to gain independence from colonial powers (Blakemore 5). By the 1880s, European nations started colonizing African lands and their natural resources, enforcing their Western cultures and practices like religion, economics, and education. Blakemore argues that the European colonizers were particularly interested in the natural resources, like crude oil, cocoa, cotton and gold in African countries. However, in order to establish control in these countries, they had to provide the people with some sort of reward, which, in turn, had to also help the colonizers establish control. Religion and western education helped the colonizers be in charge of what Africans learned and to control their thought process.

Ahmed Faosiy defines religion as a set of belief systems that is related to spirituality and moral values (Faosiy 51). There is no doubt that Africans had their own religious practices and beliefs before the introduction of colonization. While Faosiy argues that all religions have shared characteristics like belief in God or deity, a doctrine, a code of conduct or ethics, the use of sacred stories, and rituals or religious acts and ceremonies (5), there are still some differences in what each religion emphasizes and how those differences impact the various religions in unique ways. European countries colonized some parts of Africa and introduced Christianity. To these colonizing European nations, Christianity signified civilization, and they used it as a disguise for colonization.

Faosiy identifies four major reasons for the emergence of colonialism in Africa:

1. Abolition of the slave trade
2. Industrial revolution

3. Finding markets for the European countries
4. Urbanization. (Faosiy 51).

This scholar argues that the advent of colonialism and the arrival of Western religious practices brought Western education into Africa which is considered the beginning of civilization. Teefah in “Religion, Women and Gender-based Violence in Nigeria” claims that Nigeria today is a highly religious country, and there are three major religious groups: Christianity, African Traditional religion, and Islam. Religion plays a role in shaping beliefs and perceptions in the country and most of Africa.

### *The Role of Women in Precolonial Africa*

Before the arrival of colonialism and Western religion in Africa, there was an Africa that had and made its own traditions, laws, and practices. Foasiy argues that the history of pre-colonial Africa is very complex due to the contradictory narrations offered by different scholars. Scholars like Kiwanuka in “African Precolonial History: A Challenge to the Historian’s Craft” argue that during the pre-colonial rule, African had its own education which was transmitted in form of the oral tradition of folklore. The continent also had a strong political system involving kings and armies, and there existed agriculture and trade, and a diversity of cultures, norms, and taboos.

According to Toyin Falola, the role of women in Nigeria has evolved, from the pre-colonial times to the colonial and postcolonial periods. She asserts that “Women had a significant role in the political and socio-economic activities. Division of labor existed amongst the groups and women were mostly in charge of activities such as food processing, cooking, mat weaving, and pottery making” (1). Women were also involved in trade and politics. For instance, in the Yoruba culture, the women leader of the trade association was *Iyalode* or *Iyaloja* which

was a powerful position because all the other women involved in one form of trade or another reported to her. Women were also involved in basic politics such as the politics of the home. They could influence the men and control the children. Outside the home, women assumed certain political positions and had power to some degree. In the Yoruba and the Edo culture, for instance, the Queen mother was given power over some decisions and meetings. In some parts of the Hausa and Yoruba culture, women were actually the kings such as the legendary Moremi of Ile-Ife and Amina of Zaria who were rulers. Even though men had more power in the society, the presence of female leaders such as the Queen mother shows that women had power and some level of control and were acknowledged in their societies during the precolonial period.

It was during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the advent of colonialism, that the gender dynamics changed significantly in Nigeria. This began the development of patriarchy and took patriarchy to the next level because as the colonial masters consulted with the chiefs, the role of women in politics began to decline. Falola argues that while the production of Nigeria's agricultural substance shifted to cash crops, the women were pushed towards subsistence farming. The nature of farming that the women did then, although it produced food for the family, did not earn an income. Men on the other hand worked in the cash crop sector and their labor was paid by cash. Also, the educational system brought by the colonizers favored boys over girls, and this excluded girls from certain occupations and certain . Girls and women ended up in careers that did not require much education. The postcolonial period has seen some rise in women's empowerment but to the level of precolonial times. Education has begun to favor women and this has led to the emergence of women in different occupations and political roles. Scholars like Fredoline Anunobi in "Women and Development in Africa: From Marginalization to Gender Inequality" argue that patriarchy began or worsened with the arrival of European rule

in Africa, which favored men politically, economically, and educationally because men were seen as the forerunners of the societies by the Europeans. The Europeans consulted and gave all the power to the men without considering the women. Although one cannot deny that patriarchy already existed in Africa during the precolonial period, the coming of colonization made it worse and expanded it.

Religion is an intricate part of colonialism, and the two are mostly interwoven. Apart from the Europeans, other colonizers also invaded Africa like the Arabs. According to J.O. Hunwick in “The Influence of Arabic in West Africa: A Preliminary Historical Survey,” the Arabs invaded parts of Africa with their Arabic language and beliefs. They brought with them their Islamic religion and the earliest spread of Islam was in Western Sudan in the latter half of the eleventh century. Pamela Scully claims that other religious belief systems such as Islam practiced in the northern parts of Nigeria and other Islamic countries also subjugated the rights of women and this allowed an advanced form of patriarchy into the lives of African women. This affirms that various religions and not just Christianity, affect the lives of some African women.

#### *Effects of Religion on African Women*

Pamela Scully argues that European leaders restructured the roles of women while Falola agrees that the subjugation of African women can be linked back to the establishment of colonization. With the arrival of colonialism in Africa came Western religion. Before colonization, many Africans practiced an African religion that mainly focused on ancestral worship. New religious practices like Islam and Christianity, however, were introduced and then imposed by the colonial masters. This introduction of Western religions brought about changes in the roles that African women played in society because religion and some of its practices were used as tools to inflict oppressive practices on the colonized including the subjugation of women.

Teefah, in her essay “Religion, women, and gender-based violence in Nigeria,” claims that religious practices were responsible for encouraging social organizations and institutions such as patriarchy in Africa. Certain colonial religions brought into Africa preach that women are inferior to men and that women should be submissive to their husbands as seen in one text in the Bible that has been grossly misinterpreted. In the book of Ephesians, according to the New International Version (NIV), Paul writes, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5: 21-23). Other versions express this idea differently. The New American Bible, for instance, reads, “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21), While the New Jerusalem Bible translated the same verse this way: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). In later verses, both versions also talk about husbands and wives in relation to Christ and the church, but both later conclude in love and respect for one another.

While the focus of these verses in the book of Ephesians is on the relationship between Christ and the church, patriarchal societies like those of Nigeria interpret this passage differently. Most interpret this passage as the Bible imploring Christian women to submit themselves to their husbands because the husband is the head of the home. Referring to the husband as the “head” suggests to them that he is the leader while the woman is the body that receives instruction from her husband.

There is a proverb in parts of Nigeria that says, “the husband is the head of the home while the woman is the neck that supports.” This statement suggests that the society at large sees women as subordinates and that the Bible helps reinforce this by telling them to submit to their

husbands. Some African preachers and pastors also advise and encourage women to do what is being asked of them by the Bible and some preachers even embellish the contents of the Bible. As an example, an Instagram post by @instablog9ja went viral on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, in which a Nigerian pastor named Patience Obi referenced women supporting men and advised women to submit everything they owned to their husbands including their money because their husbands had authority over everything they owned. Despite the economic hardship faced by women in Nigeria such as limited job opportunities and education, they are still expected to give the little money they earn to their husbands because the husbands are “heads of the homes.”

Many Africans also identify the woman of Proverbs 31 as the model of a virtuous and perfect woman. Proverbs 31 is a Bible chapter of the Old Testament and verse 1 to 9 represent some advice King Lemuel’s mother gave to him about how a just king rules and the latter part of the chapter focuses on the attributes King Lemuel had to look for in a wife. Some Christians today practice some of these rules that were meant for a king. Just like the passage in Ephesians, these lines are read and interpreted differently by different audiences. The African patriarchal society interprets this section of the Bible as describing the wife of a noble character who takes care of her family and children and who also works by being a trader of fabrics. She is not expected to be idle when not taking care of the home and her husband:

**10** A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

**11** Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.

**12** She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

**13** She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.

**14** She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.

**15** She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants.

**16** She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

**17** She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

**18** She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

**19** In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

**20** She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

**21** When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

**22** She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

**23** Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

**24** She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.

**25** She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

**26** She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

**27** She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

**28** Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:

**29** “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.”

**30** Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

**31** Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate. (NIV).

This Proverbs 31 woman is expected to reflect all of the above descriptions, and these can put some pressure on women to be everything the Bible wants them to be. The virtuous woman must be submissive. For example, verse 15 says she provides food for her family; this shows that one of a woman’s major tasks in the home is the provision of food, and therefore a “good” Christian woman in an African Christian home is expected to be all that the Proverbs chapter describes, especially being present to prepare meals for her family. The husband goes to work and expects his wife to have made some food for him upon his return home. Verse 27 also suggests that she is in charge of the home and thus is always busy. Interpreted to fit the status quo, this verse, too, suggests that women are meant to stay busy serving at home. That could be fine if the roles the women play at home were valued. Some women are put in this subordinate position because their religion encourages them to perform domestic duties that are not rewarded financially while the men perform duties that are rewarded financially. This subordination of women is supported even by some religious leaders. Teefah affirms that religious leaders are also feared because, while they are seen as role models, these religious leaders encourage the religious practices of submissiveness. Teefah also argues that this submissiveness promotes gender-based violence because when women are considered as not submissive enough, the men become abusive towards them, either physically or emotionally, in hopes that the abuse would make them more

submissive in order to fit the status quo. This misguided interpretation of scriptures that leads to the suppression of women is not restricted to Christianity and the Bible.

The Islamic religion puts pressure on women just like Christianity does. The Quran, verse 3 of Suratul Nisai says, “And if you fear that you will not be just towards orphan girls, marry the women whom you like—two at a time, or three, or four; then if you fear that you cannot keep two women equally then marry only one or the bondwomen you won; this is closer to your not doing injustice.” This is basically telling men to marry more than one wife if they have the capacity to treat them all right. If they have the power to treat them all equally, they can marry up to four wives at the same time. But what is equal treatment in a marriage? Most Muslim women are not given the option of leaving the marriage if they do not want their husbands to marry another wife, hence most are forced to accept the status quo given to them by their religion.

Some Africans take these misguided religious practices seriously and adhere to the beliefs even more than Western countries because they have been brainwashed by the colonizers to always trust their religion.

### *The Status Quo of Women in Africa*

Like Falola and Anunobi have stated above, women in Nigeria and Africa have been subjected to the system of patriarchy for a long time. Anunobi argues that the common denominator between all African women is their subordinate position. She also argues that women’s oppression in Africa worsened due to the colonialism that took place which led to economic dependency. This economic dependency led to the oppression, inequality, and lack of opportunities for both African men and women, however, women suffer more and have limited

access to resources like jobs and education. This scholar also points out that although some girls are born into prestigious and elite families, and thus have access to good education and jobs, they still have limited access to economic and political positions. It is therefore not just a question of limited resources in families but sometimes a deliberate denial of access to resources and services. Anunobi argues that although African women play important roles in the development of their nations, those roles are often unacknowledged. This study further asserts that some African traditions and practices have been interpreted in ways that favor men's control. She further asserts that this failure to acknowledge women's role in the society worsened with the arrival of colonialism.

Not only are women's roles undervalued and unacknowledged, but women suffer from other forms of oppression as well. Teefah argues, in her essay "Religion, Women, and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria," that the patriarchal system in Africa imposes some sort of violence either physical, emotional, or mental against women as a means of correcting behavior and showing male dominance. Male dominance and female abuse are common in Africa as in many other parts of the world. Teefah also maintains that young African girls go through sexual violence, especially in cultures that promote child marriages.

Maria Rojas observes that the African society consider the women's role as subordinate to that of the men. They are built and expected to be complementing and assisting their partners instead of having an equal role. Rojas suggests that many African societies always try to control the lives of women and promote domesticity amongst women.

Endalcachew Bayeh claims that gender inequality happens all over the world in various cultures, but it is more common in underdeveloped continents like Africa and Asia. This may be because of how poverty and violence interact. A poor woman has no economic resources to

defend herself. Like my grandmother who was forced to stay in a marriage because of her financial situation, many women are forced to stay in uncomfortable relationships and situations because they cannot afford to leave.

Women's subjugation in Africa goes as far as control over their sexuality and fertility. African women are subject to physical violence. A study carried out by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) shows that an average African woman who lives on the continent of Africa has experienced some form of physical violence since age fifteen.

Alyssa Qualls in "Women in Nigeria Today" claims that the life of an average Nigerian woman is different from that of a Western woman. She argues that their men take them for granted and don't value any form of contribution from them. She also asserts that while it is allowed for men in different cultures and religions to marry multiple wives in certain parts of Africa, it is frowned upon for women to do the same, hence, creating a double standard. For instance, Qualls observes that women in Africa are responsible for childbearing, and if there's any form of delay in this process or signs of barrenness, the women are blamed without there being any form of pressure on the men. Obviously, it takes both a husband and wife to achieve conception, but rarely does the society consider the possibility of the man being the reason for the delay in conception and having children.

Qualls also looks at another form of injustice toward and suppression of women: the inheritance system. She argues that in Nigeria, inheritance, which is the process or mechanism by which family heritage and endowment are passed down from one generation to another, favors men over women. When a husband dies, his wife receives nothing, and the treatment is usually worse for women who do not have children because they are seen as failures. In a sense a

woman's success in the family is determined by the number of children she bears. The same measure is not used for men.

Oloyede affirms that the social construction of gender roles for women and the patriarchal system in Africa controls the way society views women, and this perception has had an effect on women and how they viewed themselves in society. This perception has allowed them to see themselves as the "other" that is subordinate rather than complements. Women in Africa have been subjected to patriarchy either through religion or colonialism. African women are expected to be submissive to their husbands. Patriarchy is a major influence on a status quo in Africa that has led women to be viewed as "the other."

#### *Trauma in African Women*

As discussed in the previous chapter, trauma is a past event that causes reoccurring stress in people. It is an emotional response to past experiences and events. The patriarchal structure of Africa can cause trauma. The way African women are subjugated under patriarchy and the pressures placed on them due to the religious practices can breed some trauma in these women. Oloyede claims that African women go through physical and emotional abuse from their spouses, and this can lead to the toxic effects of trauma having impact on women's lives, either mentally or physically. Any form of abuse, whether physical, verbal or mental can lead to trauma in anyone, and it can be worse when this abuse comes from a spouse because of the trust and intimacy that has been lost.

Stephanie Covington, in "Women and Addiction: A Trauma-Informed Approach," asserts that trauma can affect women's relationships and their psychological growth as well. When a woman goes through abuse, this can affect the way she views situations and others because of

the trauma from that abuse. This can also affect her psychological growth. Solomon Ademiluka, in “Patriarchy in Abuse: Perspectives from Ancient Israel and Africa,” affirms that women’s abuse stems from patriarchy. This maybe because of how men are placed in a higher position than women, and this can make a man believe he is in a position to punish the woman by abusing her. Sylvia Tamale in “Gender Trauma in Africa: Enhancing Women’s Links to Resources” claims that the domesticity of women, which is due to patriarchy, can lead to gendered trauma. Women are underpaid in their domestic labor because their work is viewed as less important. Their work is often unacknowledged, undervalued, and unappreciated. There are several ways to devalue and dehumanize people, such as failing to recognize their labor, and doing so can cause a level of toxicity that has traumatic effects. Tamale claims that in Africa, womanhood is associated with domesticities like cleaning, childbearing and farming. To perform such duties without any form of recognition can have traumatic effects in the lives of these women. She claims that “African women engage in the drudgery of domestic work for an average of 17 hours a day” (53), and this unrecognized labor can lead to the women feeling undervalued which causes traumatic effects.

Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet in “Language and Gender” argue that men’s activities and occupations involve greater societal power than that available to females. Women are restricted because of other activities that they must perform such as childbearing. Apart from women’s reproductive ability, women are kept out of certain jobs like engineering because they are deemed too weak to perform them. In the past, they have been offered positions that involve nurturing other people. Women have commonly held jobs such as nursing, teaching, and being secretaries. Most women have not been allowed to engage their potential, and that can cause toxicity that leads to traumatic events. Working so hard for so long can lead to stress and

confusion, and the way women respond to this stress and confusion can be different depending on each woman; for instance, the trauma could manifest in one woman as the feeling of inadequacy or incompetence and in another woman as dependence on one's partner despite all the unrecognized hard work.

Psychologist Valeria Rein, in her 2019 book titled, *Patriarchy Stress Disorder: The Invisible Inner Barrier to Women's Happiness and Fulfillment*, proposes a type of trauma in women called Patriarchy Stress Disorder (PSD), which is the “emotional, mental, and physical impact of gender inequality, and those who suffer from it find it difficult to express themselves” (6). Rein argues that PSD could be passed down from generation to generation just as genes are passed down from generation to generation. The neuroscience related to this type of trauma is called epigenetics, and it shows that trauma changes the brain and has intergenerational effects at the DNA level. This means that generations of African women pass PSD unto their daughters without realizing it. According to Rein this has an intergenerational effect, and many women cope with it using counterproductive methods. Some women resort to addictive behaviors such as turning to alcohol or shopping all the time. PSD can be passed down to generations because daughters mostly learn from their mothers, and if all they learned from their mother is how to accept and cope with patriarchy and not how to break free from it, then they will continue in the same. According to Ruth Adimula and Ignatius Ijere, in “Psycho-Social Traumatic Events among Women in Nigeria,” women that live in a patriarchal society like Nigeria go through gender bias which subjects them to trauma.

David Oluwole, in his research titled “Patterns of Stress, Support and Mental Health among Nigeria Women,” finds that Nigerian women rarely have balanced mental health because of the stress from their trauma and changes of life events. He also argues that women's feeling

like they are a form of property to their husbands and fathers can lead to a decline in their self-esteem. The concept of polygamy, infertility (when a woman cannot bear a child, all the blame is placed on her), and widowhood (women are not treated well after the demise of husbands) in Africa can lead to a decline in their mental health and engender some form of trauma.

Despite the various views scholars hold on the status quo of women in Africa, history maintains that women are given the subordinate position and are expected to be submissive to their partners.

## CHAPTER 3. MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER* (1981)

### *Introduction*

This chapter focuses on how the female characters in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* oppose and/or accept the status quo of patriarchy that the West African society places on them. It examines how the female characters in the novel despite the restrictions imposed on them by the patriarchal system navigate their way in their country, Senegal, a Muslim country. Furthermore, the chapter provides multiple perspectives on how different female characters in Bâ's novel respond to patriarchy and religion.

### *Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter (1981)*

This 1981 epistolary novel centers on the life of Ramatoulaye, the protagonist and narrator of the novel who writes to her best friend, Aissatou who lives in America. The main essence and drama of the letters is the betrayal of Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou. He is described as a good husband who is charming, handsome, and smart. Despite him being described as a good husband, he takes on a second wife, a young lady named Binetou who is also the close friend of Daba, Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter. Modou abandons Ramatoulaye and her children when he takes on his second wife.

The novel is in the form of a letter Ramatoulaye writes to her best friend because of the sudden death of Modou. She sends Aissatou a copy of her journal which consists of everything she has gone through at the hands of Modou and his family before and after his death. In addition to marrying Binetou, he also used the house he and Ramatoulaye worked hard to build as collateral for the new house he built for Binetou. After his death, she must go through the Muslim rites of forty-day isolation and mourning period. Although Modou abandoned her and

did not want to have anything to do with her, she is still required to serve well-wishers and give him the expected honor during a mourning party.

While she is still mourning her late husband, his elder brother, Tamsir, proposes to marry her because he is entitled to get married to her as the older brother of the deceased. She reflects to Aissatou how she got married to Modou despite her education and the disapproval of her family who thought he was not good enough for her. She chose him over a more sensible, and financially stable man named, Daouda. Although Modou betrayed her by marrying her daughter's friend, she endures her marital misfortune and remains married and loyal to him. Even when her children protest this and question her staying in such a marriage, she stubbornly holds on and refuses to divorce him.

Ramatoulaye's children have embraced modernity more than she has, although that does not mean that their lives are easier or better. Modernity brings both advantages and disadvantages. Her daughter Daba, for instance, marries a young man, Abdou, who respects and treats her as his equal, but her other daughters are engaged in destructive practices that are viewed as a form of modernization. At one time Ramatoulaye catches three of her daughters smoking and is mortified by that because girls are not supposed to smoke in their community. Her second oldest daughter, Aissatou, gets pregnant out of wedlock, but her university boyfriend is responsible enough to marry her once he is out of school. Her pregnancy out of wedlock goes against their religious beliefs, but Ramatoulaye provides support and stands behind her.

Ramatoulaye writes to Aissatou as a friend but also as one who had undergone a similar experience with Mawdo, an affluent medical doctor. While Mawdo is from an affluent family, Aissatou was the daughter of a goldsmith, and this caused his mother to object to their marriage. Years after they are married, Mawdo's mother convinced one of her brothers to give his daughter

to Mawdo in marriage. She then convinced Mawdo to take the young girl as a second wife, which he did because he did not want to cause any kind of stress or illness to his old mother. Despite assuring Aissatou that he did not love the girl, he had children with her. Aissatou could not accept this behavior, so she divorced him. She focused on herself, received a degree in diplomacy, and moved to America to work in the Senegalese embassy.

This novel digs deep into the harsh realities of the Senegalese Muslim society, a society that calls for the submissiveness of women to their husbands. It is an account of the trials that are particular to Senegalese Muslim women. Meanwhile, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent mature, troubled women, who provide models and stand for women supporting one another in West Africa, Senegal to be precise (*So Long a Letter* i).

#### *The Influence of Religion in So Long a Letter*

Religion plays a major role in the decisions that both men and women make in this novel; it also determines their views and how they react to situations. Ramatoulaye's religion, Islam, permits polygamy—i.e., a man taking more than one wife—and dictates that the woman remains with her husband even after he marries another woman. Ramatoulaye is shocked by her husband's new desire for Binetou, their daughter's friend. She has been married for 25 years and they have twelve children. Her husband, Modou Fall, cannot claim that he is looking for children. Bâ attacks the idea of polygyny, which she considers a humiliation for women. None of her major characters accepts it. Where it appears some of them do, it is because they have no choice, within the confines of marriage or limited opportunities, should they walk out. Ramatoulaye, for example, is held back from possible action by her children. She thinks she is too old to start over again (39, 41, 52). Aissatou, on the other hand, wants all or none as she says in her letter to Mawdo (31).

Religion influences the lives of most of these women. Despite their knowledge and western education, they are still subjected to certain Islamic norms such as the rights of their husbands to marry more than one wife and the exhausting tradition of practicing a series of mourning rights. All the family of the deceased are required to stay under one roof for the funeral, and this forces Ramatoulaye to remain in the presence of her in-laws and the young woman who took her husband from her. There is a three-day mourning period, and the full mourning period for the wives is forty days. Ramatoulaye has to go through several mourning rites. This period is a difficult time in the lives of every Senegalese widow, but Ramatoulaye is aware of the expectations and is determined to do her best: “My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail” (*So Long a Letter* 8). This statement uttered by Ramatoulaye shows the demand and pressure that Muslim women face from their religion right from childhood. They are expected to act a certain way, be treated a certain way, and are expected to accept what their religion gives to them. Despite the harsh treatment by Modou when he abandons her, stops visiting the children or paying the bills, leaves her with his responsibilities, she remains faithful and loyal to him because that is what a good Muslim wife does. She does not divorce him or move on from him due to his absence mainly because of the strict rules of their religion which permit him to have multiple wives at a time, but do not look favorably on divorce, especially one initiated by a woman.

Like many religions, Islam favors men and grants them greater power and authority, just like Pamela Scully affirms in “Feminist Theory, African Gender History and Transitional Justice,” that many Islamic countries subjugate the rights of women. Marriage is considered a woman’s greatest achievement, which is why right after Modou dies, men found it necessary to approach Ramatoulaye for her hand in marriage without even giving her time to get over her late

husband's death. Women are treated as commodities that can be passed down from one man to another.

In the novel, the Islamic culture of the Senegalese people permits the younger brother or his friend to inherit the widow of his late brother/friend but in Ramatoulaye's case, the older brother wants to inherit her once she comes out of mourning. Tamsir says,

‘When you have “come out” (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife, and further, you will continue to live here, just as if Modou were not dead.

Usually it is the younger brother who inherits his elder brother's wife. In this case, it is the opposite. You are my good luck. I shall marry you.’ (*So Long a Letter* 59-60)

In this interaction which took place in front of Mawdo and an Imam in a house that is still in mourning, Tamsir made his proclamation to Ramatoulaye. He expressed his desires without giving her the chance to agree or disagree, declaring his intentions to her in that way showed that he thought she was obligated to marry him because of their religion. This proclamation angered Ramatoulaye, and for the first time, she broke her silence on the way she has been treated by Modou and his family. Ramatoulaye writes, “My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment” (*So Long a Letter* 60). For the first time, Ramatoulaye stands up for herself after feeling and being treated like an object both by Modou and his family. As we see from Ramatoulaye's experience, women in Senegal have been silenced by both patriarchy and religion; they have lost their voice due to their subordinate positions. Women like Ramatoulaye have been subjected to silence because their silence is linked with their submissiveness and this silence allows the men to establish control over them.

Audre Lorde, in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” speaks on her silence and how her silence never protected her and how silence wouldn’t protect any woman (40). Ramatoulaye’s silence to Modou and his family never protected her; instead it allowed her to be treated worse because they knew she did not have a voice for herself, and for the first time she voiced her opinion on what she believed in despite her religion. She replied Tamsir saying, ““You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand” (So Long a Letter 60). This reply suggests that Ramatoulaye is tired of being an object in the eyes of men. We know that Ramatoulaye does not accept the status quo and that she has simply tolerated it all along. In addition to her response to him, she reveals that he is financially unstable; his income can’t support his three wives and children, so his wives have to support him financially by working menial jobs even though their religion requires him to take care of them. Despite his financial status, he still feels the need to take on a fourth wife because his religion permits him to do so; yet even if his religion requires him to take care of them, he ignores that part of the religion and keeps getting married to women that he can’t take care of. His wives have to bear the burden of taking care of him and their children. Tamsir can marry as many as three wives simply because his religion and culture permit him to do so. When Modou marries Binetou, Tamsir tells Ramatoulaye that “God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it” (So Long a Letter 38). Sadly, it is believed by them that it is God’s will for a man to marry multiple wives, and this has forced the women to accept polygamy as part of their culture and tradition.

As seen in Bâ’s novel, polygamy seems to be an intricate part of the Islamic religion which is why most of the wives are afraid to voice their feelings and opinions when their husbands take on other wives. Sometimes the women themselves are forced into being second or

third wives because of difficult financial situations. Binetou's family goes through some financial hardships and in turn, she is forced to have a "sugar daddy." Binetou is forced to accept Modou's advances because of her financial situation. She does so at the urgings of her mother, who is after Modou's money. Binetou, the poor young woman, does not accept polygamy out of choice. She had little option but to marry this potbellied sugar daddy (39). There is every reason to suspect that she was pressured to accept this man that she described in such derogative terms. She had even confided in Daba that she didn't think this could be her reality (39). Ramatoulaye seems to understand Binetou's struggles: "but what can a child do faced with a furious mother?" (39). Her mother pushes her because she knows Modou could provide her family with some financial security and comfort. Modou could even afford to take them to Mecca on a religious pilgrimage, which most Muslims partake in, and he eventually sponsored their trip there. Modou also fails to honor the Quran's second condition of treating the wives equally as he abandons Ramatoulaye completely by focusing entirely on Binetou. He leaves her to take care of herself and their children.

Ramatoulaye is open to the liberation for women from certain religious practices, she allows her daughters to wear trousers, which she used to frown upon, because she believed that trousers accentuated the figure of a woman. Ramatoulaye knows that women in Senegal were meant to keep their bodies and figures hidden because their religious practices did not promote women showing off body parts. The Islamic religion expects women to dress a certain way, hence, denying the women control even of their fashion or bodies.

Lucy Creevey's "The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal" posits that Islam plays a major role in the education of women in Senegal. In Senegal, religion determines the kind of job or education a woman does and receives, it is required that most Muslim women select feminine

jobs. In the novel, Aissatou's mother-in-law who forced her son to marry his cousin trained the young wife through school. She advised the girl to go to a school of Midwifery:

'This school is good. You receive an education there. No garlands for heads. Young, sober girls without earrings, dressed in white, which is the color of purity. The profession you will learn there is a beautiful one; you will earn your living and you will acquire grace for your entry into paradise by helping at the birth of new followers of Mohammed, the Prophet. To tell the truth, a woman does not need too much education. In fact, I wonder how a woman can earn her living by talking from morning to night.' (*So Long a Letter* 30)

What Aunty Nabou is suggesting is that the profession a woman chooses determines her destiny and whether she gets to heaven or not. It is unfortunate that Aunty Nabou has resigned to the status quo and in fact gets to enforce it on other women. She has been brainwashed to believe that women who do jobs other than nurturing are not fulfilled. In her view a woman does not require too much education because she is dependent on her husband. Unfortunately, that is what oppression does to people. The oppressed get used to that status quo and may even oppress those below them for they do not know any better.

The religion in Senegal allows women to be treated differently than men; they are held to different standards than men. Creevey affirms this by saying that "Islam has reinforced the second-class position of women" (362). While Modou takes on a second wife in his free will, Mawdo is convinced by his mother to take on a second wife; meanwhile the women were not allowed to have multiple partners at a time. Creevey further mentions that under no

circumstances can a woman marry more than one at a time, although she is allowed divorce on the ground that her husband did not meet an obligation.

While Ramatoulaye is forced to accept her fate, her friend, Aissatou rejects polygamy not minding the consequences. When her husband marries a second wife, he persuades Aissatou that he does not love the young wife and is only marrying her to gratify his old mother's wishes. Given that tradition and the Islamic beliefs permit the marriage, Aissatou believes him. Despite fixing his new wife in a different house away from Aissatou, he goes ahead to impregnate the young Nabou, and at this point Aissatou decides to leave the marriage, thereby breaking the ancient habits of Islamic subjugation. She decides to stand up for herself in defiance of a religion that thrives on the subordination of women and their marital rights. She will not bend her head in silence and accept a destiny that oppresses her. She does not allow Mawdo and his family to disrespect her and minimize her to nothing, which is why she left with her dignity, even though he never abandoned her and always did his duties. Mawdo claims not to have taken a second wife out of his selfish desires but because it was the will of his mother. Aissatou leaves with her four sons and takes to her studies training as an interpreter and eventually goes to America. Aissatou blames her mother-in-law for tempting Mawdo with Nabou and claims, and rightfully so, that her mother in-law played a major role in the sad misfortune of her marriage because her mother-in-law could not live with the fact that her son was married to someone from a poor background. She grooms young Nabou to be an obedient young wife in the strictest precepts of Islam and trains her in the domestic arts. She uses polygyny to exert her revenge on Aissatou.

By leaving her marriage, Aissatou does not denounce her religious practices; she still goes on to be a practicing Muslim, because she does not believe that it is the religion that caused her husband to marry another wife but the misinterpretation of the religion. She, however,

denounces the society that allows the misinterpretation of these religious practices and beliefs to favor men over women by moving to a different country where she can be independent and respected. The religion has woven polygamy so deep into the society that it has been forced on young girls like Binetou to accept it even though they are not happy. Aissatou was advised by other women to compromise and not leave her husband because most women have learnt to unwillingly accept polygamy while others have been forced to accept it.

Despite their western education and social class, these women still deal with the religious subjugation of women in their country; however, they make different decisions on the acceptance or refusal of polygamy and subordination. Aissatou does not support polygamy and she tells Ramatoulaye how she felt about Mawdo impregnating Nabou:

He was asking me to understand. But to understand what? The supremacy of instinct? The right to betray? The justification of the desire for variety? I could not be an ally to polygamic instincts. What, then, was I to understand? (35)

Despite not being an ally to polygamy, Ramatoulaye tolerates it because she doesn't have a choice and is forced to accept it because she still stayed in her marriage with Modou when he practiced polygamy and even abandoned her. Bâ uses the different stories of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's experiences with polygamy and religion to describe the different ways polygamy and religion can affect one's life and marriage. She also captures the different responses women have towards religious and traditional practices like polygamy; while some might be forced to accept the status quo like Ramatoulaye, others oppose it and leave the marriage like Aissatou. The novel focuses on the negative effects of polygamy on the lives of women.

*Patriarchy in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter*

Just like religion, patriarchy is also woven deep into the Senegalese culture. Men are respected and placed over women. Women are expected to be obedient to their husbands, take care of the household and children while the husband is the main provider of the family. Ramatoulaye is an example of a stereotypical Senegalese Muslim wife; although she is progressive in the sense that she has an education and a job, she is the sole nurturer of the house and children. She is still oppressed, silenced, and has been forced to tolerate and accept the societal norms of her community. The first time she uses her voice and expresses her thoughts on how she is being treated is when Tamsir disrespects her by declaring his intentions to inherit her as his wife. Despite Modou not being with her before his death, Ramatoulaye still performs the funeral rites like shaving her head without objection even though she describes it as

. . . the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behavior is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable. (*So Long a Letter* 4)

Even after the death of the husband, the Senegalese society still expects a woman to sacrifice her dignity and personality to the family of her husband. Her behavior while she was married would be judged during the funeral process; if she had ever been unfaithful, she would face the repercussions for that. Meanwhile, her husband is permitted to take on multiple wives at a time without any repercussions. In addition to her taking care of the home and children, she is

expected to be hospitable towards his friends and family as well, else she would face the repercussions during the funeral process. Her entire life, then is lived with this funeral day in mind.

The expectations placed on Senegalese women exceed the expectations placed on men. Women are expected to be hospitable, loyal, submissive like Ramatoulaye while domination of women by men is common. A woman is expected to have a husband to lead her, which is why multiple men came up to Ramatoulaye to propose marriage to her right after her husband's death. It is not just Tamsir, Modou's brother, who seeks her hand in marriage. One of the other men that proposes marriage to her was her first and ex-boyfriend, Daouda Dieng, a deputy at the National Assembly, who already has a wife but is willing to make Ramatoulaye his second wife. Ramatoulaye declines his request because she is beginning to believe in the independence and liberation of women, like her friend Aissatou does. Daouda Dieng is referred to as a "feminist" by society because he believes and expresses his views that women should no longer be seen as accessories to their husbands or objects to be passed down from man to man, and he supports women's interests and participation in politics. He married his wife out of his duty as a citizen and not out of love. Despite his belief in women's politics, he has not been able to make much change in Senegalese politics, as only four women have political seats in the country and there are no female ministers yet. Bâ shows how the politics in Senegal is dominated by men through the conversation between Ramatoulaye and Daouda.

The politics in Senegal is dominated and controlled by men while women play little or no role because of their subordinate position and the belief that they are meant for more domestic roles. Ramatoulaye and Daouda believe in the participation of women in politics and equality in education. They both question when their country will base education on talent and not sex

because girls are geared towards certain fields like teaching and nursing because it is believed that those are nurturing roles and women are born nurturers while men are geared towards fields like businesses because it is believed that men are more assertive. Women like Ramatoulaye acknowledge that there is a problem with the patriarchal system in their country, but they are not willing to leave a marriage or the country because of that. Ramatoulaye does not want to bear the responsibility of her twelve children alone, which she eventually does when her husband abandons her. She believes in the happiness that comes with being married, which is one of the reasons she stays married to Modou despite his abandoning her. In her letter, she tells Aissatou,

I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated woman, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage. (*So Long a Letter* 58)

By using the phrase “liberated woman” Ramatoulaye confirms that while some women have liberated themselves from the shackles of patriarchy, most women in the country are still oppressed by patriarchy. Her refusal of both Tamsir and Daouda gives her the nickname “lioness” or “mad woman” (73); either she must be a very strong woman to refuse those men or she must be mad to think she can survive without a man. After a while Ramatoulaye begins to be grateful to Modou for abandoning her and their children because of the new sense of independence she experiences. She is able to take on new responsibilities and roles that were once Modou’s. This gives her a new form of power she did not have when her marriage was intact.

On the other hand, women like Aissatou outrightly oppose patriarchy by leaving a marriage that is not serving the purpose it is supposed to serve, which is sharing love. After her

husband Mawdo chooses to follow what society believes, she decides to take her life into her hands by moving to another country and pursuing another degree that makes her life better. She decides to honor herself by leaving the marriage and taking her children along. She was advised that she could not raise her four boys because only a man knows how to raise boys: ““Boys cannot succeed without their father”” (32). This belief that only men can raise boys is one of the effects of patriarchy in the Senegalese culture. Women are deemed unfit to raise a boy because they believe that women do not have the power to tell a man what to do and not do; only a man has such powers.

The story of Senegalese men and women is not singular though. In contrast to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou is Daba, Ramatoulaye’s first daughter, who is logical and levelheaded when it comes to religion and patriarchy. Daba’s character and relationship with Abdou shows that Senegalese Muslim women and men do not have a single story, and some are opposed to the idea of patriarchy and polygamy. Her husband, Abdou treats her like his equal, unlike other Muslim men in Senegal who assume the role of unquestionable heads of the house. He treats and sees her as his wife and not his slave as other Senegalese Muslim men do. When Ramatoulaye suggests that Abdou is spoiling Daba because they both take care of the household, he responds by saying, ““Daba is my wife. She is not my slave, nor my servant”” (77). The Senegalese culture is infused with patriarchy to the point that it is frowned upon when a man does house chores and is seen as spoiling his wife. Abdou does the same amount of chores as Daba without hesitation or acting like he is doing her a favor. Daba also advises her mother to leave her father when he marries her friend Binetou. Daba’s beliefs in patriarchy and female independence are synonymous with those of Aissatou. The younger generation of Senegalese men and women like

Daba, Abdou, young Aissatou, and Ibrahima Sall is logical in how it handles the patriarchal society.

Ibrahima Sall is responsible enough to have an extensive plan on what to do and how to take care of Aissatou during her pregnancy. Despite still being a student, he does not abandon her like most men could. He helps her with her schoolwork and sees the need to build a relationship with his future mother-in-law. Despite not being married, he takes responsibility for his actions, unlike the other men like Modou who abandons his wife for another woman and Tamsir who takes on too many women he cannot take care of. Young Aissatou's getting pregnant makes Ramatoulaye realize the importance of making the girlchild aware of the value of her body and sexual powers, a conversation that was always avoided in the community. Ramatoulaye understands the necessary education every girlchild must receive in order to fight for herself.

Modou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye caused some self-doubt in her; she did not believe any man would find her attractive. This abandonment caused a form of trauma for Ramatoulaye, due to which she sees herself as not good or attractive enough for any man. She compares her mental stress to that of her acquaintance, Jacqueline, an Ivorian Protestant who marries Samba Diack, a friend of Mawdo. Jacqueline is shocked by the Senegalese culture which allows the men to have multiple partners. When Samba Diack begins to pursue other women, Jacqueline, finds it strange and this causes her a lot of physical distress. She begins to experience different types of physical pain that the doctors cannot diagnose despite several medical tests and X-rays. Her condition remains a mystery till a doctor diagnoses her with depression. The diagnosis helps her overcome everything as she turns her energy towards herself and feeling better mentally. Polygamy and patriarchy can cause trauma and depression in women, and they

can manifest in various forms like inferiority complex as in the case of Ramatoulaye and physical sicknesses as in that of Jacqueline.

### *Conclusion*

Patriarchy and polygamy are the souls of Bâ's novella, and it is an effort to reconstruct the status of women in Senegal, particularly Muslim women—how they are viewed and how they view themselves. Bâ provides a balanced description of various Senegalese women and how they deal with their oppressive society. Through her characters, Bâ captures the intricate lives of Senegalese women, their fears and their struggle to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy. Bâ depicts the position of women in African society and how different women respond to both patriarchy and religion; some are forced to accept the status quo while others outrightly reject it. Others like Jacqueline and Binetou are completely traumatized by the situation, but there are those like young Daba who show signs of a possible way out and a new mind set.

According to AnnaLouise Keating in "Teaching Transformation Transcultural Classroom Dialogues," status quo stories make the mind believe that the way things are is the normal way since inception and must be left that way (22). By providing varying perspectives, Bâ is able to clear some misconceptions that Senegalese/African women all behave and react towards patriarchy and religion in the same way. By clearing these misunderstandings, Bâ creates a clearer picture of the variety of women and disrupts the dominant thinking of the women available in her country and creates awareness of the types of women in her country and that not all women are submissive and have accepted that status quo. She shows through her characters that it is possible to write new stories about the status quo of women in Africa; it is not a single story. Each woman has her own story; some women oppose the standards and stand up for what they believe in like Aissatou, while others like Ramatoulaye tolerate the situation

and work towards making it better for younger generations. Her characters show that there is no normal or single way to be an African woman, and there is a change taking place in the way some women think today.

By debunking the stories on the status quo of women in Senegal, Bâ has helped show that there is more than one story and one way that African women accept or oppose patriarchy. The status quo does not have to be left in the dominant thinking of others. Bâ uses the epistolary form of writing to narrate Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's experiences. The letter can be viewed symbolically as representing the letters of the law regarding women in Senegal, and by using this method Bâ may be disrupting the dominant thinking about the status quo of women in Senegal. Besse Van Der Kolk's, in "The Body Keeps the Score," establishes that the difficulty in recovering from trauma is to retake ownership of self, i.e., the mind and body and one good way to do so is by revisiting the trauma (240). Ramatoulaye heals from the trauma of her silence and the patriarchal society that she accepts by revisiting her problems through the letters she writes to Aissatou. By writing these letters, she is able to relive and remember these experiences, which is a form of self-expression and reflection, and this can help with the healing of her pain and trauma. The act of letter writing can help the writer find meaning and patterns in the jumble of events that compose a life. Sending letters to Aissatou can help Ramatoulaye find some comfort to her pain; she pours her pain in writing and uses her voice, forgetting her silence and suffering for a while.

Bâ attacks the idea of polygyny in her novella, and none of her major characters accept it. Where it appears some of them do, it is because they have been forced to accept; they have limited opportunities and no choice. Each character has different reasons for their decisions on polygyny; Ramatoulaye's position should not be conceived as an act of submission or acceptance

of this humiliating condition. She respects marriage and has never conceived of happiness outside marriage. Binetou does not accept polygamy out of choice but resigns to it because of her financial situation.

## CHAPTER 4. CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

### *Introduction*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* provides a vivid description of the different ways Nigerian female characters like Mama, Aunt Ifeoma, Amaka, and Kambili respond to trauma, patriarchy, and religion. The novel focuses on how various women react to being controlled by patriarchy and religion. Adichie provides the effects of male dominance and challenges the dominant thinking about Nigerian women and their response to patriarchy.

### *Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2003)*

*Purple Hibiscus* is a 2003 postcolonial novel that focuses on the lives of the Achike family (both nuclear and extended). Through the narration of the main character, Kambili, Adichie provides a vivid description of the struggles of the women in the family in the hands of Papa, who is a wealthy man but also a strict authoritarian and religious fanatic. Papa has very strict rules and standards for his wife and children (Kambili and Jaja) on how to run the home and attend school and church. He even tries to extend these rules to his only sister, Ifeoma. He inflicts physical pain on his children whenever they do something he deems wrong or sinful, like taking the second position in the examinations or refusing to take the holy communion at church. His wife, who is referred to as Mama does not have any say in how he treats the children or in making any big decisions at home. She allows him to take control and bully both her and the children. He never shows any form of affection towards her and the children, and Mama never complains because she is forced to accept Papa's rules and control because she is afraid and helpless.

Papa also takes his misguided Catholicism very seriously: it guides his way of life and how he views other people. He cuts ties with his father, Papa-Nnukwu because his father holds on to his traditional gods. He does not want his children and wife to be corrupted by Papa-Nnukwu's "paganism" and thus keeps them away from him. Papa was raised by the British colonial masters who brought religion into Nigeria and has believed in the Western culture and way of life. He has adopted the Western ways and does not want to have anything to do with his Igbo traditions. He avoids speaking Igbo and makes sure his children do not speak Igbo either; he tries hard to speak in a British accent. Kambili says, "Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict" (46). Despite Papa's supposed strong belief in God, he does not have a forgiving spirit; he has refused to forgive his father for not adopting the new religion and for being stuck in the old ways and traditions. He also does not have a close relationship with his only sibling, Ifeoma, because she is not a Catholic fanatic like he is and because she has a close relationship with their father.

Despite, being a widow with three children, Ifeoma does not allow herself to be controlled by her brother and his wealth. She stands up for what she believes in. She believes in her father and is not afraid to show him affection and support his religion. She also confidently embraces modernization. She takes on the sole responsibility of taking care of her three children without help from anyone. She is a hard worker, a professor at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Unlike Papa who is a Catholic and a Western fanatic, Aunty Ifeoma is more liberal with her Catholicism. She welcomes both the new and old ways and ideas in the religion and does not mind including Igbo songs in her worship. She and her children explore other religious practices, unlike Papa, who says that such a practice is heathenism.

Aunty Ifeoma's daughter Amaka turns out to be a strong, opinionated fifteen-year-old who has a vast knowledge of her femininity, politics, and the economy because her mother raised her to be involved and knowledgeable about things going on in the government and in the world. Meanwhile, Kambili who is also the same age as Amaka, is timid, shy, and dull. Although Kambili is intelligent, her father's intimidation has pushed her into a shell from which she rarely emerges. Her father shelters both her and her brother, Jaja, from the world in the hope of making them innocent and making them fear him and the gospel. The lives of the Achike women, though, are connected and interwoven but still very different. Adichie, through the characters of these women, captures the different stories and ways to oppose and/or accept patriarchy. While Mama is obedient and dependent on her husband, Aunty Ifeoma is strong, independent, and rises above whatever life throws at her. When the Nigerian government, economy, and the educational system fails, Aunty Ifeoma can stand up for herself and her family by looking for ways to leave the country despite her financial challenges, while Mama is unable to leave her controlling and authoritarian husband because of fear of what the society would think. She is also afraid of what life could turn out like without the financial security Papa provides.

### *Religion in Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie provides varying descriptions of different religions practiced by different characters and how their religions affect their lives and relationships with others. There is Papa-Nnukwu, a traditionalist who attends traditional festivals and rituals; he does not believe in the God brought by the Western colonizers. Despite both his children's conversion to Roman Catholicism, Papa-Nnukwu does not change his beliefs. His beliefs and refusal to believe in Christianity causes a strain between him and his son. This in turn affects his relationship with his son's children, Jaja and Kambili. When Kambili gets the chance to spend quality time with Papa-

Nnukwu, she realizes how similar both religions are; she realizes that religion is not as important as faith, which is what all religions have.

Papa-Nnukwu's faith in his gods and devotion is similar to that which Papa has in his Roman Catholic faith. While Papa-Nnukwu prays for the protection of his children and grandchildren because he cares about them and their wellbeing, Papa prays for Papa-Nnukwu's conversion because he only cares about religion. When Papa finds out that his children lived in the same house with Papa-Nnukwu when they visited him, he gets angry at them for staying in the same house, touching and eating with a "heathen." He decides to punish them very cruelly for the sin of associating with their heathen grandfather, and he does this by forcing them to stand in boiling water a physical reminder that the feet that led them into sin will be punished. He asks Kambili a series of questions while pouring the hot water on her feet: "You knew you would be sleeping in the same house as a heathen?"; "So you saw the sin clearly and you walked right into it?" (194). He also tells her to strive for perfection because that is expected of them as Christians. Papa considers living in the same house with an unbeliever of his religion a sin and places high demands and standards on his young teenagers; he is quick to punish them for not meeting those demands and standards.

Papa has been greatly influenced by his religion and would punish anyone that goes against it, including his father and children. Papa-Nnukwu believes that it is the Catholic religion and the leaders of the church that taught his son to disobey and talk ill about him. He believes that the Catholic religion does no good but to tear families apart. Even when Papa-Nnukwu dies, Papa does not show any form of remorse but instead requests that he is given a Christian burial and scolds Auntie Ifeoma for not calling a priest to pray for Papa which Auntie Ifeoma declines saying Papa-Nnukwu was not a Catholic.

Unlike Papa-Nnukwu, Papa and Auntie Ifeoma are Catholics. While Papa denounces Papa-Nnukwu because of his traditional religion, Auntie Ifeoma accepts and encourages his faith. She follows him to some of his festivals and is open to learning about the old traditions. She does not allow their different religions to affect her relationship with her father. She has a close relationship with her children because she does not present herself like a god to them as Papa does. She also has a close relationship with her priest, Father Amadi, who is just as liberal as she is. Father Amadi is a young, Igbo priest who has welcomed the Igbo traditions into his Catholicism. He believes in the progression and modernization of the Catholic practices, and he is also in tune with the Igbo culture and traditions. He blends the two perfectly well.

While Papa and Auntie Ifeoma believe in the same God and practices, they have different approaches on how to serve God. Papa believes in his Westernized ways, and he thanks the colonial masters for bringing the religion into Africa. He does not see the other forms of oppression that the colonizers brought. He appreciates education and language as well, and he has been brainwashed to believe that the western language and education are better than his traditional language and education. Kambili says, “He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English” (13). He blindly believes in his priest, Father Benedict. Unlike Father Amadi, who is Igbo, Father Benedict is a white man from England who practices and teaches his European customs and rejects the traditions of the people he teaches and mentors. Papa follows the conduct and practices of Father Benedict, hence abandoning his Igbo traditions. The way Papa raises his children is based on his misguided understanding of religion. Mama and Kambili are not allowed to wear trousers because in Papa’s understanding it is sinful for women to wear trousers. All of Kambili’s skirts were well past her knees because

Papa said that was the decent length for a Christian woman. Papa has taught his children that people who do not share his religious belief are not good people and that they should not be around them. He does not even want his children to be in the same space with their grandfather because of his beliefs. Papa does not see how oppressive his religion can be towards him and his family. He is a Catholic fanatic, and this has led him to be oppressive and violent towards his family. His religious leaders also refuse to acknowledge his violence towards his family. He constantly punishes both his wife and children for going against his religion.

The novel begins with Papa being angry with Jaja for not going to communion. Kambili narrates, “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère” (1). Papa becomes violent whenever he thinks that his religious beliefs have been violated or whenever he feels his power and position is questioned and/or threatened. Jaja begins to question his faith and religion because it is linked with Papa, whom he has lost all respect for because of how he handles religious situations. Jaja begins to link religion with oppression because of how Papa treats his family. Obiora, Auntie Ifeoma’s son, has also noticed the oppressive powers of religion which is why he questions whether their religion exists without oppression or oppression exists without their religion.

Adichie, through this novel, provides vivid pictures of how religious fanaticism and misunderstanding can oppress and overshadow the thinking of Nigerian men, how religious extremists behave and treat their family members. Adichie provides descriptions of how people of the same religion can practice their faith differently. The idea of multiple stories is evident in religious practices as well. While Papa and Auntie Ifeoma are both Catholics, their stories are not the same at all. Adichie also shows the different effects of religion on the African family. Auntie

Ifeoma and her family are happy and their home is filled with singing and laughter because they embrace the progression of their religion; Kambili's family is sad and lonely because Papa is a fanatic stuck in the old ways of practicing the religion. He calls a priest a "troublemaker" for singing Igbo songs in church. The joy and laughter in Aunty Ifeoma's home create a solid bond in her family, a bond that is missing with Papa and his children. He allows his judgments to become clouded by religious rules, which he enforces on his wife and children through violence and physical torture; he believes that confessions of sins are important, but he also believes he has to take the law into his hands by making them suffer physically for their sins.

Mama never questions his decisions whenever he is violent; she is represented as the "typical" African woman who listens and obeys whatever her husband says. She also never tries to stop this violence, either because she is too afraid or she has completely lost her voice. Mama always listens to Papa even in matters of religion, when Mama declines to visit Father Benedict after mass on Sunday because she feels ill due to her pregnancy, Papa insists she visit the Priest, which she eventually succumbs to. After lunch that Sunday, Papa punishes Mama for this sin of attempting to disobey by physically assaulting her in the room and this punishment leads to her losing her pregnancy.

Adichie reveals the different impacts of Western religion on African families and the different ways families react. Some are oppressed and some are liberated. Papa oppresses his family because of his religion, and this has led to the withdrawal of the children in the home and community. They are unexpressive and unable to relate to their mates because they have been sheltered by their religion. Kambili is called the class snob because she does not know how to communicate with her classmates while Jaja is rebellious towards his father. Mama on the other

hand loses her pregnancy because of a refusal to greet a priest. All these are forms of oppression are caused by Papa because of the way he views his western religion.

### *Patriarchy in Purple Hibiscus*

Aside from religion controlling the lives of the Achike's family, Papa is also a patriarch who controls his wife and children. There is a connection between misguided religion and patriarchy that leads to gender oppression in this novel. Papa is the head of the home and sees himself as a godlike figure in the house. The Achike family is defined by Papa and his rules; he makes the schedules for the children, and everything done in the house revolves around him. Adichie paints a picture of how a controlling misguided religious Nigerian man behaves in the home. He is in charge of all the financial responsibilities, which is one of the reasons he has absolute control over Mama. She is an uneducated full-time housewife who depends solely on Papa to support her, the house, and the children financially. Mama does not use her voice or say her opinion most times. She is very silent and resigned throughout most of the storm that comes her way. Kambili says about Mama, "She did not usually say so much at one time. She spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts" (20).

Audre Lorde, in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," claims that fear is the cause of silence in most women, either fear of recognition, loneliness, or separation, but above all the fear of not being heard or seen (42). Mama's silence is caused by the fear of not being able to provide for herself and her children if she leaves the marriage. Papa provides a form of safety for her and the children that she could not provide because she has always depended on Papa for it. Also, Mama's silence is caused by a fear of separation from her husband. Mama knows because Papa is wealthy and successful that many women would want to marry Papa and that some were willing to give their daughters to him. She tells Kambili about

her struggle to have a child after having Kambili and how members of their clan pressured Papa to have children with someone else. In this conversation with Kambili, she says, ““So many people had willing daughters, and many of them were university graduates, too. They have might borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out. . . . But your father stayed with me, with us”” (20).

Mama feels like she owes Papa for remaining with her and not yielding to the pressures to marry another wife. She and Kambili both praise Papa for not taking a second wife because that was what society expected of a man who did not have many sons or who had problems with his wife. It was expected of him to marry a new wife. Men were allowed to marry multiple wives while women were not. The women were often left to bear the burden of infertility alone because a woman not being able to bear children was always entirely to blame and the society rarely looked at the man as a possible source of the problem. Adichie paints a picture of patriarchy, polygamy, and female oppression with that conversation between Mama and Kambili. This shows the standard of most Nigerian marriages; they were held together by the presence of the children. Despite having children, Mama still fears replacement and so is indebted to Papa for not replacing her, and this leads to Mama’s silence and tolerance of Papa’s violent behavior. It is as if Papa is doing her a favor by keeping her as his wife.

Mama’s silence towards the abuses of Papa leads to a decline in Mama’s health; she exhibits a kind of distance in behavior and expression and is always in deep thought. Kambili describes the effects of Papa’s abuse on Mama physically: “Her face was swollen and the area around her right eye was the black-purple shade of an overripe avocado” (190). Despite the physical evidence of Papa’s abuse, Mama continues to make excuses for his behavior, a common practice of abuse victims who have resigned to their situation and see no way out.

Mama is fully submissive to Papa because of her total dependence on him, and this has led to her inability to escape oppression. Despite Papa's being abusive over the years, Mama endures the abuses because of her children and the societal expectations that she stay with her husband no matter the problem. After Papa abuses Kambili physically to the point of going into a coma because of a painting of Papa-Nnukwu, Mama realizes, with the help of Auntie Ifeoma, how much danger she and the children are in. She still does nothing but tries to make more excuses for him as she has always done. She wants to make him seem fair and considerate to Kambili by telling her, "Your father has been by your bedside every night these past three days. He has not slept a wink" (214). In a response to Auntie Ifeoma on why she is still with Papa, she asks where she would go if she left Papa's house because she is totally dependent on him and could not survive on her own.

Besse Van Der Kolk's claims in her book "The Body Keeps the Score" that relief from trauma can only occur when the victim can acknowledge what has happened and the battles they're struggling with (247). After this incident, Kambili begins to understand the importance of having a voice. She has always lived in silence, just like her mother. Although she sees how Auntie Ifeoma stands for herself, she has never really had a good role model in her mother.

All the years of Papa's abuse causes such trauma in Mama that she does not know what to do or how to get out; she is mostly in a catatonic state and barely talks. Mama knows that she is abused and oppressed, but instead of leaving the marriage she stays on. She realizes that the only way to escape the abuses of Papa is not by just leaving the marriage because Papa's wealth and affluence would have been able to destroy her, so she devises a plan to get rid of him completely by poisoning him slowly. Mama tells Jaja and Kambili that "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka" (290). Mama's response to the oppression in her

marriage is murder. She has to find a way to get rid of the cause of her trauma. Besse Van Der Kolk's proposes in her book, that victims of trauma struggle to heal because they can't get rid of the cause of the trauma (242). Mama reaches a point where she realizes that the only way she can heal from her trauma is by getting rid of Papa. Instead of Mama voicing out her opinion on how Papa was treating her and standing up for herself, she resorts to murder because of her fear of Papa and his affluence and the societal expectation of her. Would there have been a better way to resolve her problems? What if she had spoken up? Her decision to kill her husband lands her son in prison, because he decides to take the punishment for her actions by claiming to have killed his father.

Instead of this silence, Audre Lorde encourages women to speak when scared and also speak when tired because women have more respect for fear than language and words and that silence and its weight can choke us (44). Kambili's trauma is different from her mother's. She was trained and groomed by Papa to believe that obedience is right and having a voice is considered defiance. However, Kambili decides to have her views and opinions after living with Auntie Ifeoma, and one of the ways she expresses her defiance is by screaming "No" when Papa shredded Papa-Nnukwu's portrait. Instead of obeying Papa and remaining silent, she protests Papa's actions. She also refuses to get up from the pieces even when he tells her to. Kambili's trauma is manifested through her silence because of her fear of Papa. After Papa's death, she begins to speak and use her voice more; she uses speech to comfort Mama after Papa's death, and she also does most of the talking when they visit Jaja in jail.

Through the character of Mama, Adichie highlights the marginalization, oppression, miscarriages, infertility, and education problems that some Nigerian women face because of patriarchy. Mama is calm and silent in nature, and her daughter Kamibili is the same way. Both

are mute about most situations around them. It is as if Mama's trauma has been passed down to her daughter. Because Kambili is not used to Mama standing up to Papa, she does not know how to be confrontational either. She cannot stand up to her cousin Amaka and cannot express her feelings towards Father Amadi because she lives a sheltered and controlled life where she only speaks when spoken to. She allows Amaka and her school friends to bully her without standing up for herself because of fear. She does not know how to stand up for herself.

Unlike Mama, Auntie Ifeoma, Papa's sister, is an educated and independent woman. She supports herself and her children after she is widowed. She doesn't seek a man's help. Adichie posits these two women in this novel to show the different kinds of women and their different stories in the Igbo culture. Auntie Ifeoma has a university degree and is a university professor who takes control of both her career and her home. Despite being educated, Auntie Ifeoma is still open to the Igbo culture; she speaks her language to her children and dresses in her cultural attire as a way of identifying with her culture. She also allows her children to participate in some cultural practices. Unlike Mama who is scared of Papa, Auntie Ifeoma challenges him and even advises Mama to leave him because of his abusive and oppressive nature. Auntie Ifeoma opposes female oppression and male domination. In a conversation with Mama, she says that "sometimes life begins when marriage ends" (75). She tells Mama to embrace her independence from Papa.

Auntie Ifeoma understands the importance of women's independence because she has made it on her own after the death of her husband. Even though she has struggled financially, she refuses to succumb to Papa's wishes because of his money. Because she was not entirely dependent on her husband when he was alive, it was easier to have a life and take care of her children after he died. She ultimately helps Jaja and Kambili find their true voice to stand up to

Papa and his abuses. Aunty Ifeoma and her family might not be financially stable, but they serve as a yardstick for Kambili and her brother. Kambili and Jaja realize that money is not as important as having a family in which members support each other, are happy with each other, and are expressive towards each other. The freedom of speech they lacked in their home is granted to them in Aunty Ifeoma's home. She is also more modern than Mama. She is independent and is open to trying on new things such as makeup and new styles of dressing which Mama could not even try because of Papa and his beliefs. It is her independence and strong personality that influences her daughter, Amaka. Amaka is a young, opinionated and expressive girl who is just as modern as her mother. She is allowed to wear makeup, trousers, and be her genuine self without fear of her mother. Amaka lives off her mother's legacy as a strong, independent woman; she has her own views on religion and politics. She does not go through any form of physical or mental abuse from a parent, but she did go through financial hardship and saw her mother pull through as an independent woman. Her mother sets an example of how to be a strong, independent woman for Amaka, and that is why Amaka is a young fearless, and expressive girl.

Adichie juxtaposes the experiences of these women to show that each woman's trauma is different and that they cannot be fitted into one single story.

### *Conclusion*

Religion and patriarchy are the bedrock of Adichie's novel, and she reconstructs the dominant thinking of women in Nigeria. She shows that some women like Aunty Ifeoma reject the status quo of male dominance in Nigeria, while other like Mama are forced to suffer silently under patriarchy. Adichie's characters provide a balanced description of how women deal with their oppression and how PTSD can be intergenerational; this trauma is passed down by mothers

to their daughters, like in the case of Kambili and Mama. She provides a balance between the dominant way of thinking and how women resign to this thinking and learn to live with it, though miserably, through the character of Mama and the new way of thinking through the character of Auntie Ifeoma.

Annalouise Keating, in “Teaching Transformation Transcultural Classroom Dialogues,” claims that “new stories call for social changes” (23). Through the character of Auntie Ifeoma, Adichie provides a new perspective to the story and dominant thinking of African women by portraying Auntie Ifeoma as an educated and independent African woman. She clears misconceptions that all African women are submissive like Mama. Adichie also shows the essence and importance of having mothers that stand up for themselves and reject abuse through Kambili and Amaka’s characters. She exposes some negative impacts of trauma on women like in the case of Mama. Sometimes when this trauma persists, the one way out is to try and get rid of the cause of the trauma. For Mama, that cause of trauma was Papa and to get rid of him as the cause of her trauma, meant killing him.

A new story about the status quo of women can be written through the character of Auntie Ifeoma’s view on male dominance and the subordination of women. She provides a new perspective on female independence and mothers’ legacy and leadership. Ultimately, Adichie shows the reader that each woman experiences and responds to trauma in her own unique way.

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