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**Gender Identity as a Marker of Cultural Crisis in Marriage. A Study of Two West
African Novels.**

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ABSTRACT:

A majority of West African women, like most other African women, are victims of society regulated by cultural norms and traditional values, especially in the marital institution. The present comparative study of Mariama Ba's *So long a Letter* and Buchi Emechita's *The Joys of Motherhood* seeks to explore Gender Identity as a Marker of Cultural Crisis in marriage. This comparative study reveals the increasing attention being accorded to the mediation of gender relations. Most African women are powerless and voiceless victims of ever deepening oppression rooted in layers of male-supremacist tradition. During and after colonization most West African women declined from a position of power and self-sovereignty to becoming a man's helper. Patriarchy was established firmly in a macho conviviality and a one-dimensional and minimalised presentation of women who assumed peripheral roles. Most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalization of women: the female characters created by male writers were made marginal to the plot of the fiction while a few emerge as credible protagonist. The female gender was trivialized through practices like patriarchy, tradition, gender socialization, polygamy, class religion and domestic enslavement.

Using comparative methodology, this thesis shows how African female writers like Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta make the culture of African art relevant to the understanding of gender relations, suggesting how women can be redeemed in contemporary writings, and also how these writers react to sexist depictions of women and gender power or identity. A countervailing set of images change the notion of African women as victims, casting them as assertive and self-reliant heroines. African female writers' attempt to bridge the gender rift through their writing gives a voice to the silenced, oppressed women.

KEY WORDS: Culture, Patriarchy, Gender, Polygamy, Class

1. INTRODUCTION.

Women in sub-Saharan Africa continue to lead difficult lives that have changed little over time. African women have a lack of leisure and the right to examine themselves. However most records that give historical facts about African women in ancient times were usually prepared by foreigners that neglected how women lived their daily lives of work. Oral tradition exposed women's lives in more meaningful ways: although there are a lot of differences between men and women, women's autonomy remains variable across Africa. Culture continues to restraint women. "Women in development" today is a catch-word for men to continue oppressing women. Women therefore need development by women themselves and education as well, to enable them to come out of their varied situations. (Coquery-Vidrovitch: 1997).

Colonial administrators and Christians missionaries introduced the assumptions of European patriarchy into Nigeria society and Africa at large. Their ideas of the appropriate role for women differed very much from the traditional role of women in indigenous African societies. The ideas of the colonizers resembled the patriarchal European assumption that women belonged in the home, engaged in child rearing, an exclusively female responsibility and other domestic chores. They instilled the thought in Africa that if a woman acquires financial independence she might not give the husband and his family their entitled respect. However, in indigenous African societies, indeed a woman's role included providing for her family financially. Therefore her traditional responsibility made her financially independent. The colonisation of Africa by Europeans brought Africa into the world economic system as a major target for exploitation. The restrictions placed on women by colonial government changed the economic and social endeavours of women in indigenous societies. There was legislation that restricted women from performing their duties towards their family and focusing colonial economics on men. Thus reinforcing the existing systems of social inequality and introducing oppressive forms of social stratifications (Rojas 1990). This seems to reflect the experiences women have had all over the world as they fought for their independence and equality. However it is difficult accepting that these beliefs are still practiced in some areas of the world.

The relative status of women is poorer in developing countries, than those of the developed countries. In most of these poor countries the rule is that women are less educated than men; preference is always given to the male child to be educated. The men's healthcare is catered for more than that of the women, and women have no legal rights in the economy. In marriage they have no legal rights to property and have less political power, as seen in their low representation in parliament. Even voting rights were restricted for women in most countries, in the past only men had the rights to vote. However women attained voting rights in most of these countries in 1962 while in the rich countries in 1926. (Dollar and Gatti 1999: 22.)

However these differences are more visible in terms of women's rights in marriage. It can be seen in other domains as well, but in marriage it becomes very striking. For example, according to the Human Rights Development report 1995, in west Asia and North Africa the transfer of citizenship to men by women who are married to foreigners is impossible. Women are under their husband and have no right to property, as in Namibia. In the economic domain a husband can influence his wife's employment outside the home, as in Bolivia or Syria. In most Arab countries the husband's permission is always needed if his wife has to travel, but the husband needs no authority from the wife like in Iran. (Dollar& Gatti 1999: 4-6.) Moreover the idea of educating the male child more than the female is backed by the fact that the female child will probably one day leave her house to marry another man and become part of the family she has married into, but the male child will bring a wife, who will bear children and continue the family lineage. (Dollar& Gatti 1999: 7.) This type of thinking is found in Africa as a whole even though it varies from country to country: the male child is always consider first before the female child.

Nevertheless the analytical category for addressing gender inequalities so far as development is concerned leads to the focus on women in isolation from the rest of their lives and from the relationships through which such inequalities are perpetuated. However the problem and solution concerns only women. The term *gender*, *gender relations* and *gender roles* has been widely adopted. To some people, when we talk of gender, they feel or think gender is another word for women, but if we want to

understand gender literally, it will refer to man and woman respectively. (Kabeer 1994: xii.)

Gender identity as a marker of cultural crises in marriage especially in Africa and West Africa in particular are something of long standing. Women face a lot of challenges and are the most oppressed members of society in marriage, work, school and so on. In this work I dwell on the effects of western education on African women, class distinctions, gender roles or girl children or woman in marriage, the effect of traditional attitudes towards polygamy, and childlessness. It has always been realised that in marriage women stand to lose most of the time. Men embrace modernity but with hypocrisy; women alone observe and preserve culture. Culture is defined most of time on the basis of which decisions are made in society. Professor Kibiti, who is self confessed gender activist, says that culture is oppressive and objectionable to women because this said culture is owned by men. Culture provides rules for social behaviour and other characteristics while the concept of gender which can be seen as a subset of culture covers the social relationship between men and women even though they are intertwined. (Arts matters 2006: 2).

Marriage culture in most African countries is seen as more like cultural fulfilment, especially in Senegal and Nigeria, a woman who is not married is regarded as being wayward, although if she marries and is unable to have children it becomes worse. So motherhood becomes the real reason for getting married in the first place. With colonialism, women, especially the educated, are caught between tradition and modernism, womanhood and motherhood, cultural laws and universal laws and gender issue, in a way trying to understand the socio-cultural problem of their society, especially their own plight.

Most third world nations or developing countries as in the case of Senegal and Nigeria find it difficult to give away their traditional way of life for modernity. To claim women during the pre-colonial period were strong, but during the colonial period were relegated to be house wives is not a valid position. As an African woman myself, I understand the plights of most women especially in marriage. Although I might be vested with my own

culture more and cannot move from one African country to another to find out what is happening there, I resort to African female writers such as those in the present study, who express their experience of gender, marriage etc in prose. Their books are representations of realities of the lives of African women, and are in a way trying to understand how women themselves perceive and act upon their varied situations and struggle. I have decided to use theoretical work and fiction from female writers as well as cultural production, analysing the diversity and communality of gender ideas and practices across the continent to try to show how gender is viewed in most of these societies in terms of marriage, class, nationality and gender role, that is to say how the society views both men and women. Although my study is limited to West African novels, the issues discussed have some colonial influence. This colonial influence affects African women's way of life in particular and the society as a whole when the issue of polygamy as a system of marriage, gender, class distinction and religion is concerned. However the images of women are changing both in life and literature.

Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1980) asserts that literature does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by political, social, cultural and economical ideologies. Some male writers like him, are making fragmented presentations of the African female in their write-ups. However there is a looming question of inequality in African literature through a gender lens. Male writers have not been spared the criticism based on their amplified presentation of the male gender. The tendency has always been to draw hasty conclusions on the dilemma of the African woman.

Women have not been entirely trivialized, for their instrumental roles in family and community is eulogized especially by African poets. Even though writers like Achebe and Soyinka have been accused of their priori approaches in instituting a male hegemony, they cannot be blamed totally because their epoch was marked by a fight to restore the tenets of African tradition that had witnessed a backlash and denigration from the imperialist invasion. The men were on the offensive, which had to be acknowledged, thereby effacing the complementarity of roles and traditional mechanism of gender relations.

Female writers like Bâ, Emecheta and others feel women are not given a fair treatment. Thus they try to revisit the female question in order to present their own case. They argue against the negative attributions given to women, motherhood, patriarchy, polygamy, female subordination and enslavement, particularly in the marital institution. African literature in the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial eras depicts how men and woman in particular are presented. The presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased, as Chukukere (1995), contends that male writers who examine women also assist in endorsing an institutionalized and one-sided heroism in African fiction. Cyprian Ekwensi, for example, presents female characters in contemporary life through preconceived stereotype of prostitution versus motherhood and wifehood, making motherhood looks like a symbol for Africa. Women's role in childbearing and their contribution as mothers, particularly in food provisioning and household management, has been, to say the least, presented paradoxically. However, Omar Sougou contends that "to write about Africa as the Mother, or to write the mother as a substitute for nurture and security, is not the same as paying attention to women as mothers" (Sougou 2002: 92). Mother's role in society is to bear children, and their importance is attached as to what they can do best, while men play the role of ruling the social and political sphere.

Again as Kumah (2000), puts it, in many instances African women writers are marginalized by their male counterparts and their works either remain unacknowledged or tokenized by literary critics. In order to detect the origins of gender inequalities in the African artistic landscape, it is relevant to address the imbalances in the portrayal of female persona which, Rutheven (1984) says reduce women to mere objects of voyeuristic attention, only fit as portrayed through types and stereotypes, for cinders and smoke of literature's backyard.

For example, Chinua Achebe, one of the celebrated novelist and patriarch, presents his early women as victims of a society regulated by cultural norms and traditional values. Writing at a time of nationalist ferment and motivated by the desire to recapture the strength of the African past, hence he stresses more on macho heroism and masculinity reflected in his novels like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. (Oriaku 1996.) Female

subordination as a result of tradition and culture features in most of the male narratives. Leslie (1994) identifies traditional structures as one of the mountains on the back of African woman. It is fostered through the gender socialisation process which connects macho strength and heroism to males and associate traditional roles of wife and mother to females.

Also, Sardomirsky (1998) says Senegalese male writers, like women, began writing autobiographies and rejected art for art's sake for social commitment, and usually dealt with themes like clash between modernity and tradition. However, they differ because in novels by women, the cultural conflict is always related to female condition, even if other aspects of problems are treated (1998: 144) In men's writing, on the other hand women generally play secondary roles, lacks psychological in-depth, do not emerge as individuals but remained confined and defined by their roles as mother, wife etc (1998: 150). In women's writing they predominate and try to assert themselves.

Black African female writers are aggressively breaking the silence imposed on them for a long time by a racist world or a sexist one. This is done through their analysis of work and the powerful statements from their female protagonist. One of the books I will use is by a Nigerian woman Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, published in 1979 and one by the Senegalese Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter*, [*Une si Longue Lettre*] published in 1981, respectively. Buchi Emecheta is an African feminist; she is a female activist in colonial and post colonial African life. Her works give name and voices to the silent, forgotten mothers and co-wives of novels by male African writers such as Chinua Achebe. The most common images presented by male writers of women are images like mother, wife, prostitute etc. But with education, modernism, feminist movement and so on, the position of women in their family and community is changing to an extent. Nevertheless, the challenges faced by African female writers are also a call for concern. According to Tuzyline (2001), many modern African women continue to produce sophisticated narrative art, even though they do not have the attention they deserve. There is widespread social justice that continues to deter African women progress in writing. These forces include the unchanged attitude towards women, publishers, critics, male writers and customs. Therefore the representation of women in

text books and literature has not change; this has to be done, because women have been writing for a long time as men. Yet the colonial bias that favoured the education of boys had not been overcome or very little progress has been made. Men dominated the modern African writings, in the 50s and 60s. Some female writers came up but on a small scale, and were usually produced by men who can usually decide to publish it or not. There is also the looming question of the complex ties between African women and African-Americans. The first generation African writers were ignored but the emerging literary criticism prompts African American feminist critic to look into the problem. The international women's movement also helps change the opinion towards African women writers in the 80s, and a number of female writers attention rose.

For example, Buchi Emecheta, who lived in London, then, made a remarkable transformation. As an ex-colonial subject and an embattled wife, encourage by a sense of cultural exciting experience in Britain became a writer. She wrote many books and this marked a breakthrough effort for women writers to create new canons of cultural experience that envision women as central to the work for social change. Most of the novels she has written represent women in different scene of conflict and their struggle to overcome tradition as well as other obstacles that prevent them to self realization. The *Joys of Motherhood*, which is her most widely read novel, makes an irony, seriously weakening the despair of a childless woman in a culture that overvalues motherhood. However, there is a quiet cause of destruction in her work but there is also the validation of ordinary women living heroic lives.

Further still, Mariama Bâ also drew the adulation of readers around the world with the publication of *So Long a Letter* (1981), the novel in the form of a letter, is a poignant look at polygamy through women's eyes, examining a wife in an Islamic marriage, who is abandoned for a much younger wife and the pains she endures. Ramatoulaye the protagonist sets out on a journey to seek self-healing. To make valid this hope she forges a strong friendship between herself and Aissatou, who have an expanding view of African life. They challenge the social control of women and demystifying the beliefs that exploits women's vulnerability. Bâ is interested in the consequences these social customs have on people and particularly women. Many other female writers also

developed a dramatic profile into this period, though there is critical neglect, African women continue to write perhaps out of desperation to be heard. Most of the male writers have become international celebrities, but if the female writers operated under radar, it is not in a vacuum.

Emecheta provides a much needed glimpse into the world of the African woman, a world harsher than that of the African male because women are doubly marginalised. As a female in Africa the opposite of male, woman suffers sexual oppression as an African. As an African is the opposite of white in an ever-colonised nation, the African woman also suffers racial oppression. Nnu Ego, Emecheta's protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*, to an extent becomes the symbol for the female of Africa, a representative of all subjugated African women, wrongs that can only be righted through feminist discourse.

Mariama Bâ for her part also writes of colonial and postcolonial African life, though her intention is not primarily anti-colonial. Her novel *So Long a Letter* exemplifies how African literature provides a different perspective of their culture from European writers' views of Africa, and despite not fitting the model of the African canon, is valuable and significant on its own terms. Bâ is not writing in defence of Africa. She is writing about Africa, gender, polygamy, religion and class are much more fundamental to her work than race. It can be said that rather than writing back to empire, she is writing back to African male authors on behalf of African women, reclaiming the voice that has been previously denied to them.

On the other hand, according to Justine Bond (2002), the result of women having sex outside marriage, and polygamy, depending on the culture, and a general loosening of morals as women use their sexuality to increasingly out bid each other for a limited supply of men, is also a call for concern. This in effect are the problems women face with each other, polygamy for example comes as a result of women trying to outbid one another using their sexuality. Although it is believed men are in limited supply, this can not make women to have a general loosening of morals. This depends on the culture;

however, women are to check their relationship with each other, so that they can live harmoniously with each other as well as with men.

Chandra Mohanty (2003: 19), gives a distinction between the representation of “woman” and that of women, the latter being material object of their collective history. However, like the colonialist treatment of Africans, most African male authors reduce women to an imagined mirror of male supremacy or a symbolic object used to advance a counter-discourse to racist depiction of Africa in general. African male authors view gender as merely a construct through which issues of race can be symbolically illuminated.

With regard to such an approach, women are not included in the process of reclaiming ownership of dignified African society and tradition. The anti-colonial male-centred African literary tradition was challenged in the 1970s, by female authors who tried to make an impact on African literary scene. These women had two main goals, to discredit the depictions of Africans by imperialist, including those of the international feminist, and to write the framework of African. (Andrade 1990.)

A comparative study of literature will be used, based on Susan Bassnett’s *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* 1993 and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek: *Comparative Literature Theory, Method, and Application* 1998. Comparative literature is a field that examines the interrelationships of literature from two or more cultures of languages and a study of literary works from different cultures often in translation.

According to CODESRIA (2006), there is the need for more comparative work to expand the gender knowledge about positive and if possible negative messages from cultures, religions, literature and science. There is the need to work with a broad perspective that subjects the rigidity of the normative to a critical evaluation that presents a more progressive alternative in the face of challenges of social change. The practice of sexuality in Africa presents many difficulties to researchers and scholars due to the ambiguity of beliefs and attitudes in traditional cultures. It is even more

problematic in received world religions, global popular cultures and post-colonial African modernity.

However, in this thesis, comparative study is the best option to know and correlate the message of both writers. Most African female writers have the same goal of expressing their feelings about the social constraints which affect women, especially when marriage is concerned. African women who are educated take it as a moral duty to write about the experiences of different women or their personal experiences using an autobiographical voice, thereby bringing the social reality that can influence the lives of women and the community at large. Thus in both Buchi Emecheta's novel and Mariama Ba, I will examine each writer's attitude in regards to polygamy, gender, class distinction and religion, taking into consideration each writers view points on these topics as well as their similarities and differences. Although they are both female African writers, their experiences may be different and thus the manner in which they convey their message might also be different or similar in one way or another.

In addition, in comparing both writers' view point on polygamy, class distinction, gender and religion, I will also look at how these themes in both novels are portrayed by these writers, examining how they affect especially women in most African societies, thus bringing out the aspect of gender identity as a marker of cultural crises in marriage. This means analysing how African women themselves are coping with these problems and how they are trying to assert themselves, seeking solutions to come out of their plights or oppression, which they have undergone during traditional systems, cutting across the colonial and postcolonial systems. These female writers are feminist who because they have had first hand experiences of the traditional cultural practices that affect women, by writing their own experiences or that of other women is to portray the patriarchal system or cultural practices that bring about problems in society and women are the most affected. Gender issues in most African societies is also a call for concern as women has to rethink or adjust their relationships with each other as well as their relationship with men.

The way we live comes with each culture and how we face challenges depends on our upbringing and experiences through family and also the cultural background we have grown to learn from (Prokochak and Prokopchak 1999: 3.) Our judgement about certain things will be based on our own world view and this is how we form our prejudice of other cultures by these internal views of ours

Every day people all over the world, especially young people, make decisions about love, marriage and sexuality; the decisions of their personal lives and the trajectories of the cultures in which they live are greatly affected by this decision. Every marriage faces trials, hardships and breakdowns in communication; some couples manage to limit conflict better than others but every marriage faces difficulties. (Mattox 1997.) However, individual marriages are affected by culture, especially in societies with patriarchal social codes; polygamy, gender disparity, class distinction and religion. These four aspects of society as a social norm affect individual marriages in West Africa or Africa in general in a particular way. In a patriarchal cultural structure, the man is most of the time the head of the family and takes most of the decisions, which are usually in favour of men against women. For example, a man can decide to marry another wife without the consent of the present or first wife; male children are mostly favoured to go to school etc. Women are always relegated to the background, and this cultural practice affects individual marriages one way or the other.

The role of culture in marriage is very important because the war that is waged on women and other minority groups in Africa is a traditional and national dictatorship by the patriarchal family structures that come out of culture. Most African women or a vast majority of them, are wretched, starving and poor and patriarchy does not allow them to express their own view point. Women are continuously oppressed by men because of the social structure.

However, marriage is an important issue in society, and different cultures have different views of marriage. Talking about marriage interculturally will depend on how one defines culture. If culture is thought of in national terms, intercultural marriage will be marriage between two different nations. If we look at culture from a wider perspective,

intercultural marriage will occur between any two people with group-based differences in values, norms, beliefs, role expectations, and so on. Even if marriage is between regions, urban -rural, social classes, religions, or families, it can be considered an intercultural marriage. However, not all relationships can be considered intercultural. Even if we marry someone who looks and sound like us, he or she has cultural influences; families too seem to develop their own culture (Dodd & Baldwin 2002.) Culture is a very complex term and differences in culture affect marriages depending on how one looks at it. The values and beliefs of people are different, knowing the cultural values of a people are very important for the understanding of that society especially when marriage is concern.

Also, one could think, or not be wrong, to say that marriage in most societies is not about `love` but about a network of social relations respecting property, status, society etc, that the man or the woman gains when he or she is married. A social order that, if a man or woman is not married he or she is not respected in the society, men and women tend to marry because it is a status symbol. This status symbol is to be achieved no matter what the circumstance. Most women in most African countries go in for polygamy so as to affiliate themselves as married women in order to gain respect. Men on their part marry more women, because they think it makes them great in society. However, women are at a disadvantage. If a man is not married it is normal, but if a woman is not married she can be given all types of names, (`wayward`, prostitute and so on) and is not respected by the community.

Moreover, marriage adds an extra set of dynamics to relationships. Every marriage has its challenges; it requires commitment, dedication and work. Marriage needs attention because of the many obstacles or challenges faced by couples. These obstacles are problems in marriage which can come from family, which are in-laws, friends, personal values expectations, and bureaucratic procedures. Communication, differences in values, religious conflict, sex role expectations, economic adjustment, political issues, legal complications and so on. (Prokopchak & Prokopchak 1999: 3.) These challenges come in as a result of the cultural codes of society, which stipulates what is expected of

each and every individual, especially women; they are always expected to be of very high morals, while men can do whatever they want.

Comparative literature is the most advantageous approach for the study of literature and culture because it is a priori, a discipline of cross- disciplinarity and of international dimensions. In particular the basic concepts of systemic and institutional theories allow a comparative point of view for studying literature. This means literature in the wider sense, apart from the traditional and historical approach to compare literary texts from different languages and cultures. Comparative literature also includes the study of literary texts in their relationship with extra-literary areas like sociology, history, economics, the publishing industry, the history of the book, the other arts etc.

Comparative literature means the recognition of and the engagement with the other, which may be a non-canonical text, for example, popular literature or the literary and cultural aspects of another race, gender, nation etc. In examining comparative literature and cultural studies, it is realised that, while cultural studies is concerned with literature as one of many cultural activities and cultural production, comparative literature focuses on literature proper although in the widest possible definition of literature.

Comparative Literature is the knowledge of more than one national language and literature or the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature. Comparative literature also reflects ideologically the inclusion of the Other, be it marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types etc. However, comparative literature has had frequently be criticised for focussing more on European and American literature. To an extent it is true that the nature of the discipline is Eurocentric; nevertheless the discipline paid more attention to the “other” literatures than any of the national literatures. (Tötösy 1998).

Susan Basnett (1993) makes us understand that, new developments in critical theory have changed patterns of reading and approaches to literature, gender-based criticism, reception studies, the growth of translation studies, deconstruction and orientalism. They all have profound impact on work in comparative literature. She asks questions

not only about the current state of comparative literature as a discipline, but also about its future. Since the beginning of 19th century, comparative literature has been closely associated with the emergence of national cultures, and its present expansion in many parts of the world indicates that this process is again underway, after a period of narrowly Eurocentric research in the field. She states that “today’s comparative literature in a sense is dead” (1993:47).

However, no matter how great the questioning and attempt to redefine the discipline, comparative literature remains an embattled approach and discipline of the study of literature, and produces that meaningful dialogue between cultures and literature that is marked theoretically, applying it to basic and higher level education. Comparative literature is valued because of the knowledge involved and also the inclusion of the other in the widest definition of the concept, its realities, its global and international nature, its interdisciplinarity, its flexibility and its objective and ability to translate one culture into another by the exercise and love of dialogue between cultures (Tötösy1998:2.)

In examining both novels from a comparative view point, we can have an insight of what women undergo in West Africa through these writers. Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta are both African female writers from West Africa but have had two different colonial masters. While Nigerians were colonised by the British, Senegal is colonised by the French, but both women has western education and in a way they try to portray some problems faced by women. This includes tradition versus modernism; particular cultural values and what is considered universal, marriage, womanhood, and gender relations in particular. Comparative studies help us to understand the country’s sociocultural plight of women in West Africa. The plights of women are the same in most African countries and it’s only through a comparative study that we know what is happening in other countries .through the female writers’, women in West Africa or Africa as a whole can see clearly their problems as well as possible suggestions as solutions to their suppressed voices that has been silenced for so long.

Mariama Bâ's first novel, *So Long a Letter (Une Lettre si Long¹)*, features two female characters, Ramatoulaye Fall and Aissatou, Bâ, whose lives follow trajectories similar to the author's own. Like these women, Bâ was educated in a Western-type school in her native Senegal. She, again like her heroines, not only witnessed Senegal's transformation from a French colony to an independent country, but as a teacher was active in easing her country through the transition. However, while Bâ's heroines seek personal fulfillment after their marriages fail, Bâ herself became an advocate for women's rights.

SLAL is Mariama Bâ's first novel, and won the prestigious Norma Award for Publishing in Africa soon after its publication in 1980. The epistolary novel traces the story of Ramatoulaye Fall, a recent widow. She recounts how her husband, Moudou Fall, betrayed their marriage by taking a young second wife, Bintou. Ramatoulaye records her anger at both Moudou and the customs that allow polygamy in her long letter to her lifelong friend Aissatou. In her letter, she muses on how Aissatou's marriage was ruined, also by polygamy. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, both highly educated women, seem victimized by traditional customs that deny women status equal to that of men. However, as Ramatoulaye relates, each woman is able to become successfully independent; neither accepts the position of submissive wife. Even while railing against her fate, Ramatoulaye also takes comfort in many traditional values. She hopes for a world where the best of old customs and new freedom can be combined. While well received, *SLAL* has been the subject of some critical controversy. Bâ's feminism can be questioned, noting that women are pitted against each other in this novel. Others are put off by what they call class elitism in Bâ's novel: They find her portrayals of lower-class characters unsympathetic. However, Bâ accurately describes the social, religious, and gender differences that can divide a people even as they strive to forge a strong new nation. Bâ is sympathetic to all women, even the perceived enemies in the novel, the youthful new wives who displace the middle-aged women. In letting one woman eloquently tell the anguish of her heartbreak, Bâ suggests that all women have important stories to tell and that their plight should be given voice. Women should be able to speak up for themselves and not be spoken for as it used to be.

¹ *So Long a Letter* will henceforth be abbreviated as *SLAL*.

Ramatoulaye, as the narrator and writer of her letters in *SLAL*, is both protagonist and narrator, in a tradition of a speakerly text. Her interpretation of what the other character says is free and indirect discourse. Although she uses quotations marks showing that she is quoting a character's exact words is important to an African woman. As she starts to tell her own story, she wants her sisters to tell their own stories so that it should not be misrepresented when someone else tells it. Therefore, she creates a situation, where her sisters tell their own stories.

Again, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are educated and therefore assume liberation from public pressure on women. However, this is only to an extent, since women are relegated to a certain position prescribed by the society. This is a position that makes women, to be important only when they are identified with men, the postcolonial position she has been assigned to by Islam, the Wolof view of fatalism that says everyone's destiny is a fixed reality impossible to avoid. Assiatou and Ramatoulaye will always have the privilege of choice, as opposed to non-western educated woman. The economic circumstances make other women like Bintou to have little or no choice in the kind of lives they live. This raises questions on the interlocking systems of oppression of women in Dakar, Senegal; caste, education and class become important and apply to other places in Africa: Bâ forges a strong friendship between Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, in their expanding view of African life; challenging the social control of women and demystifying the beliefs that exploit women's vulnerability.

Mariama Bâ's other novel, *Un Chant Écarlate [Scarlet Song]*, is about the marriage between a European woman and an African man, and was published posthumously. It is about the failure of an intercultural marriage between a young, poor Senegalese boy and the daughter of a French diplomat, focusing on the difficulties of interracial marriage, such as family opposition from both sides, the weakness of the husband and the culture shock of the wife, and the injustice of the Africans towards the white woman. The two lovers, Ousmane Guèye, and Mireille De la Vallée are in an interracial relationship. The intellectual attraction between these two characters, combined with physical good looks, became the foundation for their marriage. Both of them endured their parental oppositions to the relationship, but Mireille receives the bitter part of the marriage at the

end. Her father disowns her when he discovers her secret wedding to Ousmane, not caring about his father's repudiation; she follows her husband to his country Senegal. Their marriage is unable to withstand the tradition and expectations of her in-laws. Her mother-in-law mocks her and calls her names. Ousmane is a weak willed man and is gradually drawn into his culture; he abandons his wife Mirielle for his once secret lover Ouleymatou who had refused Ousmane's advances because he has been so devoted to his mother. He starts an illicit romance with Ouleymatou with the approval of both families and the union becomes very strong. When Mirielle gets to know what is going on, legalized by society, she suffers a breakdown and kills her only son with Ousmane and at the end of the novel she is about to be deported to France by the French Embassy, so that she will be judged in France for her crime. The main themes in the novel are marriage, race, class, gender, and Polygamy. Cultural problems involved in an intercultural marriage are what make the novel. It centres on an intercultural or interracial marriage. The issue of class and race is very eminent in the novel as the story unfolds.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*,² Emecheta deals with the portrayal of the African woman with regards to marriage and motherhood. The novel depicts the life of a Nigerian woman whose sole concern in marriage is her children: she dedicates all her life to them. The protagonist Nnu Ego is a very traditional woman who has married in her village Ibuza but cannot have children and is sent back to her father, Agbadi, for being barren. Her father marries her off to a man in Lagos who she has never seen. In Lagos, colonialism influences traditional tribal values, and she is caught between tradition and modernism. She struggles with the new ways of her people, but decides to stick to her traditional values. She gains respect from her society through her children, but is faced with new truths that she must learn to live with. She struggles between understanding and accepting her people or clinging to her traditional values. Nnu Ego's whole destiny is centered on her children: she places all her hope in the happiness and prosperity of her children. However, she is constantly disappointed and as a result finds no joy in her grown up children: the title of the novel becomes ironical.

² *The Joys of Motherhood* will henceforth be abbreviated as JM.

Buchi Emecheta emigrated from Nigeria to London with her young husband, only to find herself ultimately alone, raising children in a hostile and poverty ridden climate. Through hard work and study she becomes an influential writer, focusing on the roles of women in both traditional and emigrant societies. Her portrait of Ibo culture is very different from Chinua Achebe's; but it should be noted that she is writing as a woman. Her novel is also set long after *Things Fall Apart* (1958), when traditional structures have started to malfunction seriously under the impact of urbanization. The novel is set in a great time of political and economic change for Nigeria. The main characters of her novels show what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society. She looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only way by which to define femininity and womanhood. She also devotes in depicting the changing position of many African women after the labor and family transformations that took place during colonialism.

Emecheta's other novel, *Second Class Citizen*, talks about the struggle of Adah the main character and her survival, not only of herself but also her dreams, while growing into a woman, moving from a high class position in her native Nigeria to a very poor class in a predominantly white European society. She struggles with motherhood and with being a wife and supporting her entire family along with her own independent person. Part of her struggle also deals with the issue of race and being black in the face of the English racism (1974: 4.)

Adah the main character in the novel seems to be different, she is educated and after her high school, she could not continue to the university because she had no body to sponsor her and she has no money to continue by herself. Having no where to live because her father died and her mother got married to her uncle and because she has been refusing the men who have proposed to her through her parents or arranged marriage. She is regarded as a wayward girl and nobody will keep her and girls can't live on their own in the name of going to school they will be considered prostitutes and no man will ever marry them. Faced with these cultural challenges or societal pressure she is forced into marrying Francis, who though educated has not gotten a job and one

could not tell if it were out of love or because she is desperate and needs a home. (Emecheta 1974: 10-20.)

Even in marriage she is faced with challenges even as a working class woman, she becomes the bread winner of the house instead of the man according to African tradition because the husband has no job. Adah's in-laws had encouraged their son, Francis, to marry her for the simple reason that, she has a good job and her salary will help him to further his studies which his parents are unable to pay the school fees. However, Adah, on her parts also wanted to further her education and so decided with her husband to save some money from her salary for that purpose but when the time came for the execution of their plan, Francis's parents said going to London with the husband is not a good idea and further education is meant for men and not women. Besides she already has a good job in Nigeria why not stay at home as a woman and take care of the children. Not even considering the fact that the money spend is provided by Adah, yet as a woman she is being told what to do with her own money. A good wife is supposed to take orders from the husband without any complaints. (Emecheta: 22-27.) The husband finally travels leaving Adah behind, and she still has to be sending money from home for Francis's education. But at the end she too travels with her children to meet the husband. The culture shock Adah meets in London is so great, the houses are so small as compare to the large houses they have back home, the way things are done is different. Even in London she is the one who still carters for the family and her husband takes the pretext that he is studying and would not look for a job. Adah still get a job and is taking care of the family, but while in a different culture the situation changes. In Europe both men and women have equal rights and opportunity, the way men treat their women is different, and they express emotions by offering flowers to their wives when they give birth and a lot of many other gestures. With an African man no matter how he loves his wife showing it means a weakness.

Getting in contact with the Europeans, Adah starts admiring the way they do things, and wishing she was in their position. Francis too despite the long time he has been in London nothing has changed about him. He is still the African man and still sees things from the African men's perspective. His encounter with the west has not influenced him

in any way. For instance Adah's idea of taking contraceptives without his acknowledgment is a taboo in their culture and he got to tell his parents about it. With Adah's readiness to adapt to the culture in which they find themselves and Francis' ethnocentrism, they could no longer put up together and what transpired next is divorce. Adah is trying to copy the European style for a change and Francis is still practicing and maintaining the Nigeria culture in Europe and they could not see things from the same view point. However it shows how protective he is of his culture and cannot easily be assimilated.

The impact of culture has had a measure effect in their separation though from the same cultural background, Adah trying to acculturate the European life style leads to the destruction of their marriage. Back home she will be regarded as a sell out because she has no respect for her husband by moving out. Tradition demands that she has to be under the man and need not do things alone without the accord of her husband. Her people will fail to look at the sacrifices she has made for the sake of her marriage; she has been of great help not only to her husband but the husband's family as well. No matter what happens in your marriage, as a woman, tradition stipulates, she has to do everything to save it; the cultural and traditional idea that women belong to men and any woman who does not follow the norms is cast off or rejected for offending one custom or the other. Francis is a very lazy, selfish and less intelligent than the woman he mistreats. Adah struggles in her marriage both financially and sexually but finally leaves the husband when he burns her manuscripts she has been writing and it is only when she moves out that she discovers her intelligence and character. (Emecheta 1974: 33-45.) Female subordination as a result of tradition and culture features prominently in the narratives of female writers.

2. BACKGROUND THEORIES UNDERLYING CULTURAL PRACTICES AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO MARRIAGE.

The theories as cultural practices, that acts as an impediment to marriage include polygamy, class distinction, gender issues, and religion.

2.1 Polygamy.

Polygamy or plural marriage has been practiced for much part of history in many parts of the world. For example, according to Esplin-Oleski (2006), the Mormon Church in United States of America or the Later-day saint (LDS) in the 19th century supported the practice of polygamy and those who did not practice it could be punished. American polygamous marriages were similar to national norms in fertility and divorce, and that they also helped in moulding the churches attitude to divorce. Plural marriage also made wives acquire professional careers that would not have been available if not in polygamy.

Nonetheless, no matter how advantageous polygamy could be, its disadvantages are many. It is said that wives with one husband often develop strong sisterly love, but however strong the claims of sisterly love there are bound to be quarrels between wives. Polygamy is also regarded as oppression of women, and most marriages usually break up as the men insist on taking another wife. The wives usually complain, saying that their husbands are insensitive or show little insensitivity to the needs of plural families or not treating them equally and also show discrimination amongst children and wives as well.

However, due to the fact that the disadvantages surpass the advantages, the Mormon Church of America issued the first law against polygamy in 1862 and the church president Wilford Woodruff issued the first manifesto in October 1890 announcing an official end to plural marriage. This was contradictory because people claimed not to understand if the manifesto applied to those already married or those who were about to marry. A second manifesto was issued to be taken against those who still practiced

plural marriage. This made some people to have one official wife in the United States and one in Canada. It still did not stop the contracting of plural marriage and in the 1940s and 1950s plural husbands and wives continue to cohabit till death. Though plural marriage is still practiced today, most of it is outside the church. (Esplin-Oleski 2007.)

Today it is viewed as the most incomprehensible and unacceptable, in the church the most controversial and least understood practice. This practice lived for a very brief period though it is still practiced in some parts of the world. However, polygamy in Africa is not as common amongst the city dwellers as in the rural areas or villages. Polygamy is a cultural practice that brings a lot of problems in marriages. Looking at polygamy, women's attitudes towards polygamy will be examined, how or why men even the western educated still see polygamy as the best form of marriage? What are the ills involved in a polygamous marriage?

In most third world nations, the educated elites find themselves torn between tradition and modernity, especially when the issue of marriage is concern. The social structure of many African societies had strong cultural and traditional ways in view of marriage. For example in Nigeria, most of the time, for a man to be respected and honoured as a wealthy man in society, he is judged by the number of wives he has. Wealth is measured by the barn of yams, wives, social titles and someone who is strong enough to be a successful farmer and can feed many wives and children all year round with his farm produce. For example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Nwakibie is recognized and respected in society because he has three big barns of yams, nine wives and thirty children and a title that is not given to just any man but a man of worth. A warrior is also highly respected for his strength, Okwonkwo the protagonist in the novel, is a warrior in his village of Umoufia and this makes him gain respect in his society, and can have as many wives as he can because he is a strong man. (Achebe 1958: 21.) However, polygamy is the order of the day and a marriage system where nobody finds anything wrong in the tradition. It should be noticed that a traditional woman's attitude towards polygamy is different from that of modern woman.

Nevertheless, polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa is not only a type of marriage but also a value system. Polygamy coexisted with the primitive system of agriculture in which women did most of the farm work. When a man got a new wife he cleared a new farm and later her children, to cultivate. Men were motivated to have many wives and children because they would serve as cheap labour on the farms as well as a means for them to expand their ownership of farmland cleared from communally-owned land (Boserup 1985.)

In addition to farming, there are also domestic chores like fetching water, firewood, cooking and nursing of children. Women at times encourage their husbands to take a co-wife to share her heavy work load. The first wife is usually vested with the authority to assign and distribute domestic chores to her co-wives, and thus enhances her status as the first wife. Having authority over the other wives gives her some sense of satisfaction and makes her important or superior to the others. Women in most African countries have little or no right to property and are treated essentially as material goods between families. Women in the polygamous system of sub-Saharan countries have much lower status than men and are more venerable when they are spouseless or childless (Boserup 1970.) Indeed, because women have no right to their husband's property, the women in this system bear many children; hoping one of the children can be a son. A male child is entitled to one of his father's fields as opposed to a girl child, so a woman who has a son will have land to farm on after her husband's death. But if all her children are females then she has no right to farm land. The women's greatest fear is not to be able to have children, which is not only a reason for the husband to send her away or marry another woman but the community will make her an outcast.

According to Caldwell, Caldwell and Orubuloye (1992), sub-Saharan Africa has had a long history of contact with the outside world and this form of rather ancient culture was based on the economy. Due to the high mortality rate caused by unfavourable climate conditions, deadly diseases and wars, population density remained low for many centuries, so the core of this culture's values and customs is to promote reproduction. Sterility is considerably not only undesirable but an evil, so moral judgement on sexuality becomes low. Polygamy is also said to control sexually transmissible diseases

and this culture of polygamy also helps in maintaining a high level of fertility. Consequently this has led to the population explosion in Africa today as well as diseases.

Another main feature of polygamy is that women marry at a very early age, exposing them to pregnancy, and the men marry late. Men marry late because of the high bride price and if their family is unable to pay for the marriage or to support the household, then a man remains single until he is able. The quick remarriage of separated, divorced or widowed women is another point that helps extend the reproductive duration. The bride price is usually very high: although it used to be in the form of livestock it has been replaced by cash. The remarriage of the widow is usually of the nature of a levirate, that is, the younger brother in the deceased husband's family takes the widow as his wife. Thus polygamy serves as a means to maintain the endless line of birth and rebirths, strengthen the power of the family status, size and expansion of conjugal linkages to other clans (Ueda 1992.) the fact that bride price is very high, therefore only the wealthy men can have several wives because their social class is higher than others who cannot afford to pay the bride price to have one wife.

Again, the bond that a couple should have is weakened because the women are many, and most of them have experienced divorces and remarriages through their life courses. The high bride price is in exchange for the reproductive capacity of the bride: in the case of divorce the wife's family pays back the bride price the husband's family paid for her, and if she remarries the new husband's family refunds the money paid for her bride price to the former husband's family. However, in a patrilineal system the repayment can be partial if the wife has given birth to a son or can decide to remain in the family if her husband dies. Polygamy seems to be an unstable system of marriage; jealousy between co-wives is likely to be a problem that threatens harmony in polygamous family (Wilson 1962.) Although the wives live in separate huts with their children, the tendency for a wife and her children to be jealous of a co-wife and her own children is eminent. In some cases where one wife has only daughters and the other sons, the wife with sons is highly respected because it is known that the boys will continue the family lineage while the girls will be married off to another family. Therefore the preferential

treatment of children means that boys are sent to school while the girls stay at home and help their mothers at home. This causes a lot of conflict in the family.

However the culture of polygamy existed till the expansion of the European colonial powers in the late 19th century. The Christian missionaries and colonial administrators tried to replace polygamy with monogamy, giving preferential treatment to monogamous men. (Ngondo a Pitshandenge 1994.) The opening of schools and teaching the western ideal of a nuclear family based on strong bond, commercializing the economy, creates income opportunities to young adults. It helps to weaken parental authority and make young people to be able to have their own houses and liberate them from the social constraints of the family compounds. This has also reduced polygamy to a smaller percentage (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann, & Meekers 1989.)

Despite the appearance of polygamy to outsiders as a highly undesirable social system, polygamy has been well developed, coherent and even preferred or generally acceptable way of life for many sub-Saharan Africans since the pre-colonial period. Married women's propensity of being in polygamous unions is high, especially in Senegal and Ghana in West Africa (Caldwell, Caldwell & Quiggin 1989.) As a value system it resists the idea of monogamy, which is imported, that is, the transition from subsistence to a money economy and urbanization. Although polygamy is declining, it is very common for men to have "girl friends" or "outside wives" (Karanja 1994, Mann 1994.)

Nevertheless, a majority of educated women have the scientific knowledge of western values and thus prefer monogamy. Also educated women are aware and have recognised the fact that women are also individual human beings and not family property that can be tossed around. Therefore to an extent women with better education are less likely to be in polygamous unions. On the other hand men who are highly educated still see the advantage of polygamy, like a greater kinship network and a greater a sense of achievement: this makes them counter the imported values against polygamy. The tendency that men who are educated are more likely to be rich gives more reason for a man to be polygamous. Since he will always pay the additional bride price and be capable of maintaining a large family too.

2.2 Gender issues

Gender is another marker of cultural crisis in marriage in Africa. According to the social classification of many societies in Africa, gender is an important dimension that defines the task and roles people play in life. There is a variation in the roles that are appropriate for males and females respectively. Gender is an important dimension of description analysis in many cultures. Historically, the interest of gender has emerged from studies of women in society, including questions to do with domination and exploitation between the genders. This emerges from many neo-Marxist approaches concerned both with gender and the control of male juniors by senior men. Women may or may not themselves assent to male control, while seeking in practice to exercise influence on their own account. Cultural subordination is found in many but not all societies and is sometimes but not always linked to the categorizations that oppose female to male domains in terms of “natural” reproductive functions versus “cultural” capacities. (Paulme: 1971.)

The family constitutes the initial framework in which the rules of socialization are built, and provides a situation where gender equality and justice prevails or fails. This relation is relevant to the dynamics of gender, which controls the development of the society. There are assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of male or female in the household and the family at large. This is applied to a particular situation or context which is very common in most African countries. A child grows learning or assuming roles through their interaction with the society. The social psychological process shapes the children’s gendered subjectivity.

Furthermore, according to Nfah- Abbenyi (1997), the concept of gender has influenced, defined, and oriented much feminist discourse for a long time now. Gender is a concept that disputes the naturalization of sexual difference in many scenes of conflict. Feminist theory and practice around gender seek to explain and change historical systems of sexual difference. Men and women are socially constituted and position themselves in relations of hierarchy and active opposition in this system. Gender has been used in the Anglo-Saxon discourse to stand for the social, cultural, and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity. Earlier feminist literary criticisms were

primarily concerned with women and their writings, but the introduction of gender into the field of literary studies marks a new phase in feminist criticism. It has been noticed that all reading and writing by men and woman is marked by gender. Thus feminists were able to look gender beyond the limits of sexual difference. The shift became very important because sex difference has been the point of focus by critiques of representation in feminist writings and cultural practices in the 60's and 70's. Feminists now differentiate sex from gender. Sex is a person's biological maleness or femaleness, while gender, refers to the cultural or behavioural aspects of sex, a group of attributes or behaviour, shaped by society and culture. These attributes are defined as appropriate for the male or female sex. Gender is a fundamental dimension of societal stratification.

It would seem that all women are oppressed all over the world. However this oppression is different depending on the various socio-cultural settings. Women have varied situations which lead to a situation where they react differently to oppression from men. This is to say that both African and western women have something in common: all of them are concerned with gender issues. Women are always relegated to the position of second class and they seek solutions to improve on their plight. (bell hook 2000: 2-5.)

It can also be seen that gender in conceptual analysis, its application and applicability to African women's issues and experiences, can be critically looked at. Gender studies consider that all women all over the world are not regarded as one single unit of analysis. This gives the opportunity for women in the world to be studied considering their region and sub- regions in their particularity. The particular experiences of women are relevant if we take it that gender is socially constructed. This particularity has to be understood knowing it emerges from a people's history (Majúbaolu Olúfúnké 2001: 1.) The construction of gender reflects the social, political and economic realities of the cultures from which they are drawn. The universalization and essentialization of the woman question trivializes the natural multidimensionality of the social, economic and political realities of entire areas of the world. Hegemonization of the woman question is primarily attributed to western hegemony in scholarship, funding and in the production of knowledge. Thus the new and dominant ideologies are hybridity and cosmopolitanism.

However, it is generally accepted that women are disadvantaged and discriminated against world wide. Feminism as a movement lays out the nature, form and extent, the evidence that exists of man's inhumanity to woman. Feminist have also proven the inequalities that proliferate in all parts of the world against women. (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974.) Nevertheless from the feminist contention that gender is socially constructed, then, construction of gender must take on different forms in different geographical locations.

Moreover, looking at gender from an African perspective does not automatically take the same form as observed in the western world. Africa has fifty two countries; Nigeria, for example has about two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. There are cultural differences that make the social construction of any category more complex than in the west. Therefore the relevance and applicability of gender should be studied focusing on each of the continent's ethnic groups. (Majúboalú 2001: 3.) The hemogenic process where, the hegemony of the day creates consent by defining for everyone else what the common understanding of the world should be. In this process, powerful groups in society can generate a definition of strength and weakness and the assignment of gender roles to fit the common sense understanding of the world. Indeed what these roles are for African in the pre-colonial era differs from what they came to be in the colonial era and also different from what is observed today. (Majúboalú 2001: 5.) It should be noted that Africa was exploited both in its human and material resources. The colonisers after conquest used tricky and brutal wars to bring peace and try to establish its hegemony such that its values, principles and ideas became accepted as common sense. The behaviour and attitudes preferred by the hegemonic became the norm and those of the people who had been subjugated become unacceptable, illegitimate and backward.

Even though African women used to play important roles in the past, with colonization these were ruled out. The traditional religion of African had key roles for women, as deities and priestesses: with Christianity this was defined out of existence. Motherhood to an African implies power, but now it is seen as encumbrance. Motherhood and participation in the economy has been ruled out as Africa moved toward westernization. In the past, being a woman was not considered as the weaker sex, now it has become the

norm. The most important institution upon which a woman's claim of power could be exercised – motherhood became irrelevant because of the separation between the public and private spheres that was an integral part of the colonial enterprise. Women were restricted to the private realm; they were domesticated and subjected to the discipline of those recognised as the heads of household- men. If we look at women all over Africa and maintain that tradition is a problem and if we are among the progressive, then we can argue that women are oppressed by patriarchy. Patriarchy is a tradition that is set in motion by colonization.

Adrienne Rich, in her classic work *Of Woman Born* (1976), asserts motherhood is very important so far as patriarchy is concerned. Heterosexuality has been challenged and criticized, but there is less critique of motherhood (1976: 43.) Motherhood almost does not exist in feminist texts, even though it plays an important role in women's lives. Attempts are being made in the name of gender equality to replace 'motherhood' with 'parenthood' in order to involve men as a responsible partner in caring for children. Gender equality is highly developed in the west, but inequalities persist in most women's day to day lives. Modern motherhood, namely young mothers who work, are torn between demands at work and demands from children; these are not usually analysed in feminist theories. However, African feminist scholars such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyerónke Oyéwumi are members of societies where, in the not-so-distant past and even today, mothers were and are still held in high esteem. This honoured social position of mothers is reflected in their thinking and obviously motherhood and marriage is rooted in African realities. If 'wifhood' in many African context is regarded as subordination, the position of 'mother' is central and respected in all societies, be they patrilineal or matrilineal.

Motherhood is individualized in the west. Despite the interest in overall gender equality, there are unequal social expectations for mothers and fathers. Different approaches are needed in studies of cross-cultural patterns of gender in order to be able to influence development trends, and contribute to strategies as women struggle for social transformation toward justice and equity. (Arnfred 2003: 1-4.)

Religion also influences gender roles in marriage in most cultures. The Muslim or Hindu religions are tied to the idea of inequalities between genders, while Protestants and other high civil liberties are associated with low inequalities. The countries policies that support rapid growth also contribute indirectly to gender inequalities. (Dollar&Gatti: 20-23.) It should be noted that gender identity is a marker of cultural crisis in marriages; women are constantly oppressed or discriminated against from the time when they are born till they die, women have no rights on their own, but are regarded as persons if they are affiliated with men.

2.3 Class distinction

Class distinction is also a marker of cultural crises in marriage in Africa. Women's status in most third world countries is low, since women always play secondary roles in society. Social power is the ability to influence or control the outcomes of others. Status implies power dominance; it relates to the ability to influence or control others, but also involves group consciousness. (Ellyson & Dovidio 1985.) However sex has been correlated with prestige and status difference in society. Different expectations always exist, when it concerns the social power of men and women. (Berge et al.1985.) Women are always relegated to the background because men dominate and control every aspect of life in society, from economy, politics and social domain or structure. Women in most African countries can be likened to subaltern groups. Literally, the term subaltern refers to a group of inferior rank, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. In post-colonial theory it refers to marginalized groups and lower classes and was coined by Antonio Gramsci in philosophical and critical usage, to describe a person rendered without agency by her or his social status. This sense owes its influence to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1988 essay "Can the subaltern speak?" (Wikipedia.) Women in most African countries are amongst the subaltern group. Men always speak for them, they are voiceless and the reason African female writers through their novels try to give a voice to these women who have been suppressed for so long.

In West Africa for example, Masaki Kakizaki, in his review of Jimmy D. Kandeh's book, *Coups from Below: Armed Subalterns and State Power in West Africa* (2004), he

explains that coups in West Africa are usually a result of a class clash between senior officers and junior ones who are young and uneducated, and whose social background is closer to subalterns. Their culture also resembles that of lumpens especially in regimes that are corrupt, elitist and exclusionary. As Gramsci puts it, subalterns are those who are marginalized by those who are privileged in society. Coups conducted by the lowest social class within the military, for instance, signify a failed state. African social and economic structures do not allow leaders to be tied to society, so it becomes very difficult to be able to become a ruling class. This means that men from different ethnic groups who do not have the same social status might manifest and exercise different male behaviour. Indeed there is a disparity between a man as dominant and of a man as subordinate: the dominated, in trying to assert themselves and lacking the means, tend to be violent. This violence is most of the time also extended to women by their husbands.

However, class formation in Africa is not the same as that of Europe. In Europe, ownership of the means of production puts the owner in a certain class. In Africa it is the domination of power that creates class structure. Men in most African countries; always control the political, economic, cultural and social aspects of the country. This makes it such that women are voiceless and are considered powerless. They have no say and culturally they have no free will to make their own decisions: their husbands make all the rules. The class of women is therefore lower than that of men.

Mohanty (1991) asserts that women's position relative to men deteriorated under the constraints of European rule, a fact which is rarely acknowledged. The partial loss of their economic, political, and social agency remains unaddressed by Western feminist theory. Furthermore, the public and private spaces of pre-colonial Africa are juxtaposed according to gender, despite women's actual participation in both arenas.

There was also the unprecedented growth in the nineteenth century of the slave trade, where human beings were exchanged for firearms and western manufactured goods. Slave raids were also very common, with young girls and women suffering the most. When these women were abducted and their husband happened to find them, a ransom was demanded from the man for his family. If he were unable to pay, the women

became the raider's slaves. As a result of this aggressive slave trading, Africans also began using slaves intensively; men began taking women slaves as wives. No bride price was demanded from slave women and they could not run. This status of women led to a situation where they could be sold in time of need or tossed around as objects, with each protector getting the most from them all the time.

In other areas, as in the Saharan ranked societies, a slave could at least be a concubine but produced fewer children than free women because of their servile status. Slaves were denied family lives and treated as objects. Whether a woman was married or not, as a slave, they served as laborers in the fields. Pawning a child to pay a debt was also common, and little girls were targeted being subordinate in their own kin group. If the girl's family was unable to reclaim her; she became dependent or a slave to her new protector (Coquery 1997: 1-2.)

In fact, there were more female slaves in Africa than men. Taking a slave woman by force was normal, this helped increase the reproductive capacity especially in matrilineal societies. The father's line was strengthened by the children of the female slave; the children belonged to the father's family. Neither slave mothers nor free women were allowed to have extramarital affairs. The Igbo of Nigeria, for instance, had slaves who were children from large and poor families of the neighboring villages. However marriage between a free person and a slave was forbidden.

Islamic West Africa which was highly hierarchical had different categories of slaves. The chief's servant, for example, could be integrated into leading families. They did mostly domestic work such as water bearing, caring for children or story telling. Indeed these were the only slaves who could emancipate and regain their social and political prerogatives of a free person. This was accorded only to those concubines who had children with their masters. It was kept secret because it was considered a stain. Even today it is repellent for a free man to marry his daughter to a person of slave origin. Women were sold or given as a gift and were killed more often than men. They were worthy as workers as well as producing the slave stock. A union between a slave man and a slave woman was not considered a marriage. If the man did not have the

purchasing power to buy the woman and the children he had no right of paternity. The men hardly succeeded in purchasing their wives and children because the prices were very high. The offspring of women belonged to their masters just like animals. (Coquery 1997:1.)

Women were sold for the price of a gun and she could buy her freedom by purchasing the gun. Buying the gun meant, she had bought her freedom mostly from her husband, the man who bought her. Otherwise, when they went to the field, she walked behind her husband but if she had bought her freedom she could now walk by his side, eat at the same table or sat on the veranda with him. She could also gain respect as a wife that formerly was lacking. (1997: 2.) No matter how intelligent or energetic a woman was, because of her status as a slave and her environment adhering to customs, she could not recognize herself or be recognized in the community until she bought her freedom. However, very few women were given the chance to purchase their freedom. Their value was high since they were traded as cows, ivory and guns; most masters were not willing to let them go.

On the other hand, young men had different opportunities within the colonial world and as such did not feel the group pressure. They had the power to set up new lineages, albeit inferior ones. Women were not allowed that modest freedom. Slaves or not, they always belonged to someone; their lineage, their husband or their masters. A widow who was young would become the wife of a relative but if old, she was neglected; her social status became more delicate because her daughter could marry only slaves. The men did servile work and lacked inheritance rights. They were deprived of free ancestors, wives, and children. Their manhood or adulthood was not recognized because they were unable to father a lineage. Nevertheless the status of women was known to be domestic. She could become a member of the family because of the ambiguity of the task she had to perform for her master. Sometimes a servant, a concubine or a wife, this made it look as if their position as slaves was far less difficult than that of men. But women's propensity to withstand the stress of sexual abuses by men was far more traumatizing and difficult (Coquery 1997:4.)

Women in the Baule region, which is called today Côte d'Ivoire, had some sort of equality between the sexes. Women could inherit the position of the lineage elder, such as the village chief. In order to become a chief, the woman had to remain with her maternal line. Marriage was patrilocal so women could maintain or have two residences. She could also divorce her husband because the bride price was very low. These women were not supposed to get married if she was to become a chief. Her profit-making activity was an economic guarantee of their enjoying real power. Some women refused marriage in order to become chief. Indeed a woman could only gain power once she lost the source of her original power to procreate. (Coquery 1997: 6.)

In the South African region, women could have freedom when they were old. The children of a slave were considered slave automatically. The children inherited the servile status from their mother. A slave owner could rent a concubine to a settler or offer a slave to a passing guest, and children resulting from these relationships belonged to the mother's owner. This practice spread polygamy among white settlers; keeping women enslaved meant the preservation of the stock of slaves their descendant would produce. Marriages between slaves were not legalized. It is for this reason that today South Africa has a highly hybrid population.

African women's condition was very difficult in the nineteenth century. It became even more difficult because of the political and social disturbances inside Africa. In the west, the transatlantic slave trade took slaves who were used across western Sudan, serving as tools for production. These slaves' wove clothes or harvested new export products like palm kernels. There was no doubt that female slaves were many if not the majority, although western observers showed little interest in them and traditional African sources remain silent on them. It is not until very recently that the issue of domestic slavery was addressed as opposed to international slave trading which to an extent was addressed long time ago. However this servile position that women occupied in the past is still affecting their status today, especially in the marital institution. To an extent they continue to play secondary roles in most African society.

2. 4. Religion

Religion is also a cultural problem in marriage. Religion plays an important role in the lives of African society, and has shaped the people's way of life. Sub-Saharan countries are dominated by one of the two world religions, Christianity and Islam. However before the established order of these two religions, African traditional religions existed. Their belief in ancestral worship or rites is usually presented as unfounded generalisations, distorted or omitted information. In these regards, African traditional religion has never been regarded as a real religion, referred to as "pagan", "uncivilized". It is also looked on as a form of history that cannot survive in today's world. The specific practices of this religion are usually presented with stereotypes. This affects the position of the continent on the world scene in terms of economy, society, political and international relation. This renders Africans at home, and in countries of the Diasporas to have a low self- esteem of themselves (Mezzana 2002). Since it is usually classified as primitive, to be civilized you have to belong in one of the colonials established religion catholic, Presbyterian, Islam etc.

African traditional religion and Christianity as in Nigeria and Islam in Senegal gives the people their own particular vision of life, which connects them with all the areas of human experience and therefore directs substantially the intelligence, emotions and existence of individuals with their respective communities. The religiousness is expressed as spiritual background shared by these people that blends Christianity and Islam, but which is usually misrepresented. However, with regard to marriage, while Christianity prohibits polygamy, Islam permits men to marry up to a maximum of four wives. Islam also stipulates these women must be treated equally, so women who have no choice will prefer a Muslim husband so as to be treated equally and not as slaves to their husband or his first wife (Boserup 1970.) Christian women are therefore less likely to be in polygamous union than Muslims and the followers of African traditional religion, will marry more than four wives, which is the maximum permitted by Islamic authorities. This is because in these regions farming is usually done by women to support themselves. It should be noted that polygamy existed before the arrival of Islam.

The role of women changed through history. Women and religion have historically been at odds with each other. Most religious tenets have placed the female sex well below socially, politically, economic and education status of men. While Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and others do not reflect the same degree of oppressiveness, Islam has reflected an overt intolerance to women and their existence.

Women's experiences of gender colour and class rendered relationships very complex and problematic, with the religious institutions. Having lived and evolved in a traditional set-up where god and goddesses were equally revered by all; colonialism with its religious hierarchy certainly constituted a traumatic experience. (Mainimo 2002.) The various religions affect the lives of individuals or groups of people, writers of all ages, while different socio-cultural backgrounds and various ideologies have entered into religious issues. Black women writers like Emecheta and Bâ, have also started to treat religion as a thematic concern due to the invisibility or silence imposed on them by traditional mores. They started writing at a late stage and the imported norm which changed their social position, a transition from oral to writing or modernity. This also helped to delay their literature because most of the people who could tell the stories of the oral literature could not write. However religion is a call for concern now, especially, when marriage is a concern too. The religious conflicts that exist when people are about to get married or when they are already married and also the fact that religion is used to oppress women needs to be addressed.

3. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*.

Looking at gender identity as a marker of cultural crises in marriage, a woman's life is resolved firmly by her socio-cultural background, her interactions, personal knowledge and experiences that help shapes her attitude to life as an individual. She gains self-awareness and is able to control her fate and influence others to change their behavior as well. An individual's self-identity is greatly influenced by a cultural sense of belonging and this is directly related to one's behaviour, personality and mental state. Cultural and gender identity gives power or some sort of self fulfillment. It is a means for women to have an endless process of transformation from the cultural stronghold where women are relegated to the background. African female writers, in their fictional or autobiographical work, try to bring out the realities of what transpires in their respective societies. Their personal experiences as members of these communities make the reader see vividly the realities of what is going on in most African countries. The themes are the same in their works, but there are also differences as to how these themes affect the various individuals, because of some cultural differences in their various region of origin. In the novels, polygamy, class distinction, gender issues and religion are the main themes that will be examined.

3.1 Polygamy

The most distinctive pattern of Senegalese marriage is polygamy, the social factor underlying high polygamy rates are religion, pronatalism, high mortality and levirate. a levirate system whereby a brother inherits the wives of a deceased.

In Bâ's *SLAL*, Ramatoulaye who is widowed, in a letter to her friend Aisatou, she writes of her emotional struggle to gain her life after her husband Modou's decision to take a second wife. Although the law of Islam accepts that a man can have up to four wives, Modou's action to her is some sort of betrayal of trust and an abrupt reflection of the life they have lived together, the act of polygamy and its aftermath. The husband decides to take a new wife without her knowledge. Aisatou understands better what her friend is going through because she also had to deal with the heart breaking ordeal when her husband decided to take a second wife. Aisatou moves out and leaves her problems

behind her. Ramatoulaye has never thought it could happen to her. After twenty two years of marriage and twelve children he wants somebody new and younger, a classmate of his oldest daughter. Bintou, the younger wife, starts life with pressure of poverty and seeking for security and a way out of poverty, at nineteen marries a man twice her age. She informs her friend of her husband's death when she says, "yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow" (SLAL: 1). Modou's promotion to the rank of technical adviser to the Ministry of Public Works has given him more power in society and having many wives is a show of wealth. He does not only take a second wife but abandons her first wife with twelve children, (SLAL: 9.) Nevertheless this aspect of abandoning a woman in the African context is different from that of the west. Because despite the fact that he has moved out of the house, Ramatoulaye still remains his wife according to tradition, even though the western practice of divorce is official. This also brings to mind the aspect of polygamy where even educated African men who have affluence still find nothing wrong in polygamy. According to these western educated men, they can embrace the western way of life but cannot afford to lose the traditional advantages that are attached to marrying many wives as opposed to monogamy.

Nonetheless, the official way she could be informed is by Modou's elder brother Tamsir, Mawdo Ba and the local Imam, who have come from the wedding. The wedding has already taken place before she is informed, and is supported with the excuse that God wants him to have a second wife. With this she just has to accept it since it is God's design. She is consoled with idea that she is the first wife, and because first wives in a polygamous home are considered to be very important, implying first wives should not always resist if the husband takes a second wife (SLAL:36-37.)

Furthermore, Farah Udegbonam, in a review of Ba's novel, points out that, although Modou's action is supported by the laws of Islam, which allow a man to marry up to four wives, he forgets the part that the holy Quran admonishes that the man must be a maintainer and protector of the woman and children, and if he is to have another wife he should treat them equally. Modou seems to have forgotten he is a protector to his family after marrying Bintou. He forgets the many years of marriage with Ramatouyale and commitment to his children, and moves on with his life with Bintou (Udegbonam).

Modou therefore adopts only the part of the Quran that talks of men marrying more than one wife which was an already existing tradition. The contradiction in polygamy today is that men have accepted the western economic system and a lot of its social mores but they refuse to give up the tradition of polygamy, a tradition that seems to have no place in modern Africa (Jagne 2004: 2.)

Bintou, for her part, because of economic circumstances, has limited choices. Her mother also wants to get a taste of wealth, and the only means is forcing her daughter to marry a man twice her age. Bintou has been brought up in an environment where “survival was the essence” (SLAL: 48-50). She has no choice than to adhere to her mother’s proposal abandoning her education. Modou for his part, being wealthy and because he wants a younger girl, gives all promises money, car, monthly allowance of fifty thousand francs just like a salary due to her, an apartment house for the mother, jewellery and rich boubous, to name just a few. She has to accept because she has no choice: she is poor. Modou takes her poverty as an alibi to get the young girl, and the oppression of women and class here becomes significant. (SLAL: 10, 48 & 49.) Men practice polygamy not only as a show of the man’s wealth or to assure the continuation of the man’s family as they argue, but as a strong indicator of a man’s virility and need for sexual satisfaction. Such women are constantly oppressed by men who have affluence in the community. Men control the economic, political and social system of most African countries. They occupy influential positions, so a majority of African women are bound to be poor. Poverty makes women victims of their circumstances as men take advantage of the situation to victimise them, marrying as many wives as they wish, thereby also creating antagonism between women. Bintou is a victim of such circumstance and is pitted against Ramatoulaye, her friend’s mother.

Aissatou, the friend to whom Ramatoulaye is writing the letter, has also been a victim of polygamy. Her husband Mawdo, under the influence of his mother, takes a second wife under the pretext that he wants to please the mother before she dies. Mawdo’s mother is a lover of tradition; she believes in her ancestral descendants and wants the son to marry in their clan. She refuses her son to marry Aissatou because she is from a different clan.

But he stands firm on marrying Aissatou saying “marriage is a personal thing” (SLAL: 17).

Here one would think he is a modern man who prefers to make his choice of wife and wants monogamy, but later he falls back to the traditional way by marrying Nabou, his cousin as a second wife. Although he keeps complaining about the inconvenience he is having with the second wife, this “did not in the least prevent the periodic swelling of young Nabou’s belly” (SLAL: 33). He further defends polygamy with a film he once saw where the survivors of an air crash fed on the flesh of the dead victims in order to keep life going: “you can’t resist the imperious laws that demand food and clothing for man” (SLAL: 34). Thus he talks of the force of his instincts, and to justify his action for becoming a polygamist, he debases young Nabou to a “plate of food” (SLAL: 34). Women in this society are always relegated to a position where their voices cannot be heard (Jagne 2004: 3). In order to make his point why he is a polygamist, he debases the woman he calls his wife. He makes it look like he has no choice; after all, Nabou is a woman who is of use to satisfy his instincts even if he does not love her.

Aissatou is a western-educated woman and is not supportive of polygamy so she decides to leave even though she is a woman from an Islamic background. In a society where women don’t have their own way except under the auspices of a man, a single woman cannot be regarded with respect. That notwithstanding, Aissatou takes the challenge of renting a house with her children. It is a difficult task but she has to stand up as a woman, and being educated she can work and stand by herself: “The power of books.....books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enable you to better yourself. What society refused you they granted” (SLAL: 32). She divorces her husband and takes the challenges of life and finally succeeds in passing an exam into the school of interpreters. After her graduation she is appointed to the Senegalese embassy in the United States, and there she finds peace and leaves her troubles behind her. Unlike a woman who is not educated in an African community, life is hard, and due to the multiple burden society and tradition requires of her. She relies on her husband or farm products for her upkeep; she will not be able to assert herself the way Assaitou did. She succeeds because she empowers herself through

the western model of individual success, which is hard work and determination. Education gives you the opportunity to better yourself, but a woman who is uneducated is limited in the choices she can make. Culture and poverty makes her depend on her husband for everything. When a woman finds herself in such a position, she becomes subordinate to the husband. She is marginalized more because she has no other choice. Women are known to be persons only when they are closely related to men, rather than independent with free wills and choices.

Ramatoulaye can accept Modou's marrying a second wife according to the tradition of Islam, which requires equal sharing in polygamic life. Yet her husband avoids her and does not come home again and forgets his old family (SLAL: 46.) However, she is caught between an established order and the present given by western education. She is caught between tradition and the move towards modernity that is tradition, colonialism and modernity. But Aissatou moves out like a modern woman who frees herself from the grip of a tradition that favours men and where women are always at a disadvantage. In a sense this proves that women can also succeed even without men. Senegalese women are subjected under multiple layers of oppression. In the name of tradition that is something that cannot be changed. a woman who divorces her husband can't become rich or successful in the society. But Aissatou breaks this tradition and becomes successful; despite the fact that the city of Dakar, economically and structurally is constantly transforming in to a modern city yet tradition and culture seems to be constant: this is where the problem lies. (Jagne 2004: 5.) The people of Senegal embrace modernity partially and reject the part that has to do with altering some of their cherished values. These values have no place in modern times.

Furthermore, the levirate system whereby there is the possibility of inheriting the wives of a deceased brother is a common practice in Senegal. This contributes to the observed high polygamy rate. Nevertheless inheriting the wives and children, tradition stipulates that both the woman and her children will be supported, both financially and emotionally. Tamsir, an elder brother to Modou; comes to take Ramatoulaye who is the wife of his junior brother in the family. However Tamsir informs Ramatoulaye that after she comes out of mourning he will marry her. Nevertheless, Ramatoulaye has been

quiet for the past thirty years and has the courage to speak up because she cannot bear this aspect of tradition. She reminds Tamsir of his low income, which is not even enough to meet the needs of his wives and children. The wives struggle tirelessly day and night to help provide for the family as well. One of the wives dyes and sells fruits while the other sews and despite the way they toil for the upkeep of the family, the husband is highly respected and regarded as a lord. Ramatoulaye is a working class woman; if she marries Tamsir she will really help him much with his financial difficulties. But she tells Tamsir, that because his interest is material based and not love she will not marry him. (SLAL: 57-58.)

From the above, it should be noted that Ramatoulaye is torn between tradition and modernity; she rejects the aspect of tradition that allows women to be tossed around. Women are not allowed to choose who to marry. The levirate system of marriage forces women to marry a man not out of love but tradition. Women are tossed as material objects in the name of tradition. Tamsir on the other hand, is a lover of tradition yet he is practising customs without accepting all the responsibilities that comes with it. He is a traditional man who believes in polygamy, but forgets the part of the law which states that inheriting your brother's wife you are in a position to support them both financially and morally. He is unable to meet the expenses of his family but wants to inherit a new wife with twelve children just because he thinks it's traditionally correct but forgets that his financial position cannot meet the task (Jagne 2004: 10.)

Nevertheless, Ramatoulaye's reaction to Tamsir's proposal according to her is like revenge for the day that he came in her house with Mawdo and the Imam to inform her that Modou has a second wife. As first wife she has to bear it because it is God's design for him to have another wife. So she decides to speak out, meaning that women are oppressed and always spoken for; they have no rights to their own decisions. Ramatoulaye says her voice has been silenced for thirty years as well as the harassments she has been subjected to, but she will not accept this any longer because the right time has come for her to speak. Here again she is caught between tradition and modernity but chooses the modern side where women should decide what is good for them, expressing their feelings and also speaking for themselves not being spoken for as before (SLAL:

57-58.) It should be noted that Ramatoulaye, who finally speaks after thirty years of silence represent all subjugated African women. Polygamy, or the levirate system of marriage, is a form of oppression that women have to say no to and be able to make their own choices in life. Polygamy in Senegalese society is influenced by Islam. About 95 percent of the population are Muslims and polygamy is a way of life for the people and they see nothing wrong with it.

In *JM*, the Nigerian institution of marriage is unconventional by western standards. There is the traditional and Islamic system of marriage that flourishes within every social class. Polygamy is accepted in the Islamic religion and traditional culture as well. Women expect very little from their husbands in terms of companionship, personal care, and fidelity. Emotional attachment is less in the relationship that exists between couples. Polygamy is a crucial component of many women's lives as is depicted in *JM*. Women depend on their co-wives; the younger wife takes on many of household chores. As a woman gets older she has the comfort of knowing that the burden of marriage does not fall on her alone, given the multiple burden society and tradition requires of her. Polygamy in the novel is seen mostly from the traditional point of view. In the first chapters of the novel we are introduced to the protagonist's father Nwokocha Agbadi. He is a very wealthy local chief in Ibuza village, a wrestler who is gifted in oratory and uses a lot of proverbs in his speech. Strength is what determines one's role in his community, for this reason he is accepted or considered as a leader. As a leader he is entitled to many wives. According to tradition, when his village raids another village: he has the right to bring back with him the most beautiful woman or women he wishes to take as wife and others as slaves. The woman has no say in the matter but just has to follow him, whether emotionally attached to him or not. He prefers women from very rich and large families. Agbadi has seven wives and two mistresses. Polygamy becomes the order of the day, and despite the many wives, he is not satisfied and has mistresses or 'outside wives' according to Karanja and Mann (1994.) Girls are forced into marriage at very young age; she has to accept the situation: even if the man already has twenty wives she will become the twenty first without being given the opportunity to make a choice (*JM*: 9-11.) This traditional aspect of polygamy is a marker of cultural crises in

marriage; it degrades women in the society. They are treated as objects that have no voice to express their feelings.

However, in *SLAL* polygamy is the distinctive pattern of marriage because Islam is predominant in Senegalese society. Islamic religion allows a man to marry up to four wives. In contrast, the traditional polygamy in *JM* allows the man to have an unlimited number of wives. Even though Islamic law stipulates that all the women should be treated equally, it should be noted that it is rather said than done. Traditional polygamy is culturally binding; there are no laws to ensure the women's well being. Nevertheless, in both systems, women are still neglected and do not cancel the fact that constant quarrels usually arise among co-wives.

Nnu Ego, the protagonist, is the daughter to one of Agbadi's mistress's daughters; she is more loved than the other children, which distresses the other children and their mothers. He marries her off to one of the Amatokwu's; being unable to have children, the husband marries a second wife, saying "I have no time to waste my precious male seeds on a woman who is infertile" (*JM*: 32). If a woman is unable to conceive, the problem is considered to be the woman even if it is the man who has the problem. Within marriage, women have an obligation to have children. Traditionally, society blames the women for a marriage without children. It does not only condemn women who cannot bear children but unmarried and divorced as well. This is considered a very good reason for the man to take another wife, that notwithstanding, what of a case where the woman is fertile yet the men go for other wives? The issue of polygamy becomes controversial because it has no fixed criteria or laws why a man should be polygamous. In spite of this, there are always flimsy excuses as to the reason they marry another wife. It can be seen that in all it is the men's ego.

Further still, Nnu Ego is treated with disdain because she cannot bear children. Women risk being returned to their parents not only for not producing children but also of the sex desired by their husbands, preferably male children. This in effect makes women feel secure in a polygamous marriage where there is less attention on a single woman and the sex of her children. The protagonist accepts her position of not being able to

have children, the more reason she takes care of her co-wife's son just to save her marriage. She is blamed for the least error she makes as to how she handles the child. Being returned in disgrace to one's family is not only an embarrassment to her and her family or parents but also a hardship, as the bride price paid to her family has to be repaid. She is married off to Naife, who has lived in Lagos for five years. The fact that she does not know the man makes the matter more complicated. Naife works as a servant for the British and they live in the boys' quarter. Nnu Ego gets pregnant. Naife tells her not to let the madam of the house know. Because they have not had a wedding in the Catholic Church, their names will be removed from the church register and he might lose his job. Ubani the cook has had to secure his job by getting married in the church. This aspect of marrying in church is the way colonial influence, especially the church, works to stop polygamy.

Nevertheless Nnu Ego is more confused with the colonial changes that are taking place in Lagos (*JM*: 49-50.) She is a woman who has been sent back to her parents because she is unable to bear children. It is supposed to be their happiest moment and for everybody to know that she is not barren as the Amatokus thought. Instead she is to stay quiet because it is considered a sin. This introduces her to the changes she has to experience living in Lagos as opposed to Ibuza. Tradition is also challenged, as opposed to Christianity. Emecheta does not depict colonialism as a catastrophic event, but as a social process that has gradually changed the lives of the novel's characters, like the protagonist. However Nnu Ego's life contrast that of her mother, Ona, who in the turn - of -the- century, while treating Agbadi during his illness, threaten to return to her father's compound, illustrate her choice between accepting subordination to her father or to her lover. Although Ona's and Nnu Ego's lives in Ibuza illustrate patriarchy in traditional society, Nnu Ego's life in colonial Lagos is different (*JM*: 16).

However, the British who Naife works for are to return to Britain, so they move out from the boys' quarter and rent a room where they are crammed with all the children they have. In spite of this, Naife's brother dies in the village, raising the custom of levirate marriage. He gets a job as a grass cutter in a railway station, yet the salary is not enough to take care of his immediate family, still less of his new family, a burden

imposed on him by a tradition that he cannot refuse. The low salary is a means of exploitation and slavery imposed by the colonial masters. The deceased brother's youngest wife, Adaku immediately moves from Ibuza to Lagos to her new husband since she is young, she needs to bear more children. They live in a one room house and a curtain separates their bed. Nnu Ego cannot complain much or turn to her father, considering that her father has had seven wives and two mistresses and she is a daughter of one of the mistresses. She accepts the situation, coupled with the fact that she has the title of `senior wife` and it is usually said that "a happy senior wife makes a happy household" (JM: 129). The appellation `senior wife` is used to make the first wife feels she is important and has a cherished position, but the real intention is that women should accept their co-wives with no problem, thereby simplifying the ills that go with polygamy. Whether a woman is first or second wife does not cancel the fact that they are sharing the same husband, nor will it change the constant quarrels that are bound to arise among the women.

Despite the fact that he has been unable to properly care for his wives and children, who are living with him in Lagos, his enrolment into the military to fight a war he does not know the cause of. He comes back from war and has to go to the village to see what his other wives and children are doing (that is, his brother's wives which had become his). He impregnates Adankwo, one of the wives, and goes further to marry a sixteen-year-old girl Okpo. As he has just come back from the war, he is regarded as rich, so the bride price he has to pay for his young wife is doubled (JM: 182-185). His young wife will eventually bring forth more children. He is a polygamist, and careless about the constraints of having a large family with a meagre income. All he cares about is respecting his culture by becoming a polygamist, but he is not financially viable to carry the responsibility that goes with it.

In view of the above, Naife can be likened to Tamsir in SLAL, who is a lover of tradition but fails to practice what tradition preaches. Although polygamy in Senegal is reserved for the rich, Tamsir is not financially viable to marry another woman, yet he proposes to Ramatoulaye after his brother's death. The levirate system of marriage gives room for that, but fails to respect the part of the Quran that states you should help

the wife and children of your deceased brother financially and morally. In JM there is polygamy too, if we consider that polygamy is a show of wealth, and then Naife, who claims to be a lover of tradition, will not be entitled to many wives. Lagos is different from Ibuza. He cannot meet with the living standard in Lagos but tradition must be maintained despite all odds. Therefore, polygamy is not really a show of wealth as the men claim but an instrument of women's oppression.

In Bâ's *Un chant Écarlate*, the cultural differences that exist between Mirielle and Ousmane are so obvious and have brought a lot of misunderstanding in their marriage. The marriage fails because before they got married, as Mireille complains, they were seeing things from the same light, but later things changed. Mirielle denounces her Christian faith to become a Muslim but when it comes to practicality as a real Muslim she is not willing to do what it takes to be one. She decides to keep her own values rather than imbibe her husband's culture. Ousmane takes this as an excuse to turn to his childhood love Ouleymatou because he thinks that with her he feels at home. He therefore becomes a polygamist, he goes to her place with who ever he wants and when ever he wants, he sleeps where he wants and is highly respected. His friends on their part also likes to meet him when he is at Ouleymatou's place because there is always a variety of food and drinks that will be sufficient for everybody and they can stay or leave whenever they want. But with Mirielle, "Elle aurait parlé de gaspillage, Elle qui est si riche! Elle trouve qu'on encourage la pareses et l'oisiveté!" (Bâ 1985: 222). [If it were Mirielle, she would have complained of waste, she who is so rich and thinks you encourage laziness by giving too much]. To Mireille when you offer food and drinks to people they become lazier and she sees it as wasting money. Ousmane also complains, "Elle se posait en partenaire. Elle raisonnait en terme d'égalité (223). [She puts herself as a partner and reasons in term of equality]. She is not the type of woman he wants, for her, things have to be done equally, and not only women have to do all the work. So Ousmane finds this uncompromising because to him women are supposed to be relegated to the background and obedient to their husband and not measure up with men.

Ousmane's father Guéye Njibril has not openly criticized his son's union but when he learnt that Ousmane has impregnated Ouleymatou, he believes that according to tradition he has to marry her. His reaction is that "Mirielle est musulmane, dit-il. Elle sait qu'Ousmane a droit à quatre épouses" (193). [Mirielle is a Muslim and ought to know that Ousmane has the right to marry up to four wives]. Ousmane's father has one wife but finds nothing wrong in his son being a polygamist. The real reason is the fact that Mirielle is a different race and from a different cultural background and the marriage is not working because of differences in ideas and ways of doing things.

Ali, is a friend of Ousmane and reminds him that the new wife he wants to marry Ouleymatou is not educated, if Mirielle is not good enough for him, would she be the one to satisfy him and he responds "mais Elle connaît la légende de samba Gueladio, Elle connaît nos proverbes. Nous pouvons communier dans une remarque, un salut, un clin d'oeil et c'est importante. Nous avons les mêmes références anciennes" (209). [But she knows the legend of samba Gueladio; she knows our proverbs. we communicate with a remark, greetings, caricature and it is important. And we have the same ancestors]. Ousmane does not care if his second wife is uneducated. All he cares about is the fact that they can easily understand themselves and share the same cultural values. After all there is always a preference for the male child to be sent to school while the female child is given out to marriage and her duty is to take care of the house, children and cook food for the family. So it is not surprising that an educated man gets married to an illiterate woman provided she adores him as a feudal lord.

In both *SLAL* and *JM*, the protagonists react differently to polygamy. Ramatoulaye is an educated woman; she accepts polygamy but refuses the levirate system of marriage. Nnu Ego for her part believes that since they are in Lagos, things have to change, but has no say because she is from a polygamous family; for that reason she has no choice but to concur. In an attempt to understand polygamy, it should be noted that, this practice was around for years before Islam was introduced to African culture. The social structure of many African societies, like Senegal in *SLAL*, is governed by Islam. However, many of these societies had strong cultural and traditional ways that

influenced them. Both writers try to repudiate with disgust, the irreparable sense of poignant pathos deeply fixed in polygamy, especially on the womanfolk. Bâ uses the intellectuals Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, who have both been victims of polygamy living against a background of a well-expressed Muslim culture. She extols the need to revolutionize through their actions, thus breaking the scurrilous shells of introvertness to challenge the status quo and it becomes a medium, an opening through which she advances her views of her envisaged status for women. This is to help women identify that they are human beings who can also have their own free wills and choices. Polygamy functions as a male preserve to control women's sexuality.

3.2 Class distinction.

Class distinction is another gender identity as a marker to cultural crises in marriage, highlighted in SLAL and JM. In SLAL, Senegalese society is still influenced by hierarchical class structure of its past. The caste system is closely aligned with the division of labour, and the order is clearly associated with political power. These groups are free-born, including the upper and lesser nobility. The 'Géer' are royal lineages and great warriors' families that comprise the top level of society. Traditional noble families engaged in warfare to protect and expand their states. The 'Tégg' are blacksmiths or metal workers: in addition to working with the magical element of fire they also perform circumcision and are traditional healers. It is believed they have supernatural power, usually of a negative character. The 'Griots' are persons of caste formerly attached to a royal family, who live by words: songs, recitations and musical instruments etc. They announce prayers and religious chants, and are also valued for the knowledge of family history. (Diop 2000.)

In JM, women, hold a basically complementary, rather than subordinate, position to men in indigenous pre-colonial Nigerians society, which is based on seniority rather than gender, even though, patrilineal and patriarchy kinship dominates the structures of the society. However, the position of women in pre-colonial Nigeria often differed in the vast number of ethnic groups. A woman's position varies according to the kinship structure of the group, and the role of women within the economic structure of the society. But a common factor is the domestically-oriented jobs and a range of economic

activities that the societies reserved for women. Indeed, (the fact remains that) the societies of pre-colonial Nigeria believed men superior to women and, to some extent, in control of women. Nevertheless, a woman could achieve power by means of their lineage or marry into ruling families. In achieving such power, they can obtain indirect political influence but cannot show it in public.

Class distinction in both novels is different, while in *SLAL*, the class hierarchy is believed to be static. In *JM*, there is the possibility for a woman to change class, especially through marriage. A woman's position changes vastly once they marry; they become a possession to their husbands and only through her husband can she be known. In *SLAL*, society believes class should be maintained at all cost; if you are born poor, you would remain poor the rest of your life. Nothing can be done to elevate your condition. The Nigerian class system can be likened to the European class system where the owner of production is placed in a certain position. You can improve on your situation if you are a determined and hard-working person.

In *SLAL*, the protagonist, Ramatoulaye is a western educated woman. Education in this society is reserved for the rich or the very few who can afford it. Even though there is awareness of the importance of education, not everybody can afford it. Only those who are financially sound can have the opportunity to go to school, so education is meant for the privileged few. Those who are unable to go school because of finance could learn a trade; craftsmanship is transmitted from father to son. But it seems to be declining because everybody wants to become a clerk. Apprenticeship to a traditional craft is now looked on as something for the lower class. This implies that traditional manual workers are no longer important. Education is regarded as modernity, in contrast to apprenticeship, which is traditional. (*SLAL*: 18-19.) Since only those who are wealthy can afford to attain a higher level of education and those who cannot learn a trade which is meant for the lower class. It should be noted that everybody wants to become a clerk, because of the awareness that education can bring a lot of changes in one's life.

The Wolof people got in contact with European cultures long before other neighbouring tribes so they see themselves as more important and civilized than the other entire ethnic

groups in Senegal and live mostly in the urban area. Islam does not have a caste system, but the Wolof people cannot leave it out. Thus, they are torn between keeping their tradition intact and at the same time trying to embrace modernity with all their might. The caste system has an upper and lower caste; keeping the family name is also very important. (Jagne 2004:2.) There is a clash of hierarchies, since the traditional caste system does not correlate the modern economic class system. The caste system believes nobody can change his or her class, but with the modern economic class, one could be very poor but become a very rich. So their fatalism that says everyone's destiny is a fixed reality, impossible to avoid, is challenged.

In SLAL, Aunty Nabou has always been against the marriage of her son to Aissatou. Aissatou is merely the daughter of a goldsmith and will not bring happiness to her son compared to the happiness a griot (noble birth) woman can bring. It is believed that a goldsmith's daughter "will just burn everything on her path like the fire in a forge" (SLAL: 26). For this reason her son will never be rich because his wife is believed to be the cursed daughter of a goldsmith. Aissatou is from the lower caste and is married to Mawdo who is of noble birth; society persecutes her for marrying a man she loves. The only fault which makes her mother-in-law detest her so much is because her son is a "superior caste" (Jagne 2004: 11.) as it is believed he will not become rich.

Nevertheless, Aunty Nabou sees herself as superior and of noble birth; she sees no reason why her son Mawdo has to stoop low by marrying a woman from the lower caste. She is living in the past, a real traditionalist; the changes that take place in the world have nothing to do with her. She believes in tradition, where her position in the society has to be kept intact with the respect and honour that goes with it. Modernity has no place in her life; she clings to her old beliefs, that anybody who is of the noble birth can be seen by the way the person carries his or herself. However, she acknowledges that tradition is fading but refuses to change when she says "you need to come away from Dakar to be convinced of the survival of tradition" (SLAL: 27). If times are changing and tradition has shifted to a particular area, it means there are forces that are out to eradicate the cultural practices of a people. These factors will include the political, economic and social changes that modernity offers.

Tradition can now be found only in the suburbs, where she feels her dignity can be maintained. When she goes back to her home town Diakhao, she resumes her position as the elder sister. She eats alone; nobody addresses her without kneeling down and so on. She cannot compromise all these privileges with her son marrying out of what reminds her “of the truth of the law of blood”, and therefore swears that “Aissatou will never tarnish her noble descent” (SLAL: 28). Aunty Nabou is clinging to tradition because the new world that evolves around her gives no room for her traditional music. Attaching herself to the privileges of tradition is a means of raising her self esteem. She has a poor image of herself, now considering she used to live with her songs and recitations. In modern days, education seems to be the main focus that changes the class of people; especially in the economic domain she is not happy with this because her era will soon be history, so she decides to live in the past. She cannot mediate between tradition and modernity since the caste, as archaic as it seems, thrives because the upper class are reluctant to give up caste privilege, which is at the centre of this perpetuation. The kind of ordering is based on society’s view of inferiority and superiority.

Nevertheless, despite the rejection of his mother, Mawdo still goes ahead to marry Aissatou, thereby raising her to his own level. Ramatoulaye mentions that “Mawdo raised you up to his own level, he the son of a princess and you a child from the forges” (SLAL: 10). He is the son of a princess and a graduate from the African School of Medicine and Pharmacy and goes to marry a woman of low birth. The society even questions “what, a Toucouleur marrying a goldsmith’s daughter? He will never make money” (SLAL: 17). Despite the colonial influence that affects the social life of the people, they still hold on to traditional beliefs challenged by modernity. They fail to see that in modern times one can change their varied economic situation through hard work.

On the other hand Mawdo’s mother, as a princess of noble birth, has all types of title, that are to honour her nobility, and she does not need to mingle it with lower descent. The reason she insists and encourages her son to marry another wife is because young Nabou is the daughter of her brother Farba Diouf who is a customary chief in Diakhao. Young Nabou has been brought up by her aunt with traditional ideas such as that a

woman does not need to be too educated, so she is sent to the State School of Midwifery. Since she is of noble birth, she is the perfect wife for her son. She refers to the sons of young Nabou in an exalting way, saying “blood has returned to its source” (SLAL: 30). The oral tradition in Senegal is the major outlet for women’s voices. The griot woman is not controlled in society the way other women are regarding speech, and had a license given by the society to say whatever they want without censor. So if tradition is maintained by marrying from the same class, then the privilege that goes with her nobility will be maintained, since it is one way that the griot women are heard or listened to, implying that in the traditional Africa, women had a role to play, although not a significant one. At least they could contribute to a decision or actions for the welfare of society.

Aissatou’s sons are never mentioned because they are the sons of a goldsmith’s daughters and do not have dignity or honour. A goldsmith’s daughter is of the lower caste and is classified as somebody who does not have a heart or flesh, unlike the Guelewar, who are honoured. However with this gross disrespect of Aissatou’s personality in the name of class she decides to leave her husband Mawdo, despite her Islamic background. (SLAL: 26-32.) She denounces a kind of ordering based upon the society’s view of inferiority and superiority. It should be noted that Aissatou is a woman who identifies her potential as a human being too: she denounces this form of oppression that puts women in second class as servants to men or society because she is poor. She challenges tradition and ends up succeeding.

The issue of class is seen again when Bintou’s mother, because of her selfish interest to elevate herself from her poverty-stricken life, wants to move from the lower caste to the upper caste. This promotion of her status will make her respected and recognised by society. She forces her daughter to marry a man who is old enough to be her father. Bintou’s mother wants to live in a villa and go to Mecca with her husband so as to acquire the titles of Alhaja and Alhaji, new furniture for her house and so on. Modou Fall for his part because of his affluence can get what he wants, so he wickedly removes this young girl from the world of her youth. He decides to give all her mother demands as compensation to the girl. He agrees to give the sum of fifty thousand francs every

month just to dissuade her from writing her baccalaureate. (SLAL: 10.) This limits the girl to grow intellectually because she will not continue her education. He does not want her to upgrade herself but to depend on him for everything so that she maintains the subordinate position meant for women. He deliberately distorts her future; men in power always take advantage of their strength to oppress women, especially poor young girls, since men control every aspect of society.

Society for its part questions why Modou of such status could marry a girl from a very poor family. Bintou, who is a child of the same age as Daba, Modou's first daughter, is said to have been promoted to the rank of Ramatoulaye's co-wife. She is promoted because her getting married to Modou has raised her from her lower class to a higher class, that of Ramatoulaye, and she can now enjoy the privileges reserved only for the rich (SLAL: 39.) Ramatoulaye is of the upper class, like her husband Modou. But to marry Bintou of the lower class is not worth mentioning because tradition shuns interclass marriage. However, the caste system that is class-based is also challenged. Despite the fact that no one can change her status quo, Bintou marries Modou and her status changes. She now equates herself with her co-wife Ramatoulaye. The changes brought about by colonialism or modernity cannot go unnoticed.

Although Bintou is a victim of circumstance or a sacrificial lamb, she has no choice because her mother has made her understand their lives will change. All she sees is the present and cares very little about what becomes of her daughter in the near future. Her main concern is to live a life void of poverty and hunger, a life she has always dreamed of, and this can be fulfilled only if her daughter marries Modou. Bintou for her part has no choice because of poverty; the option her mother proposes to her, will enable them to become rich and be recognised in society (SLAL: 11 & 39.) The issue of class affects individuals who are poor, in order for them to enrich themselves so that they can live a life void of poverty and hunger. Young girls become victims of oppression. The life they are supposed to live while young is snatched away from them by the greed of men in the name of marriage. By marrying Modou she thinks her life will be better and she abandons her school, which would both make her become employed and she will get out of her destitution.

Nonetheless, with the death of Modou Fall, their newly-gotten wealth and position is short lived. During his funeral, various groups come to condole with the family members, especially with the wives. These groups are classified depending on the relationship, blood ties, area and corporations. The various groups make contributions to the wives. These contributions used to be in the form of goods like milk, oil, sugar and so on. In modern times these goods have been replaced by bank notes. This contribution is also very competitive, and every group or individual wants to give more to show their greatness or level in the society. This contribution is also like a debt, because when a person gives something to you when a family member of yours dies, she expects the same reaction from you when he or she loses her own relative (SLAL: 6.) The class system functions even at funerals: people from the higher caste will receive more goods, which have been replaced by cash, so that the amount of money obtained during a funeral depends on your position in society.

Ramatoulaye is from a large family and also a school teacher; she knows most of the pupils' parents. Her class, and the fact that she has been a companion of Modou for thirty years, makes her well known in the society with people from all walks of life. She receives a greater share of money, this raises her above her co-wife, and shows her class and the esteem in which people hold her in society (SLAL: 7.) Your position makes you popular and recognition goes with class. It is applied in every aspect of life of this people, be it funerals, marriage, baptism and so on.

On the other hand, Bintou's mother, referred to as Lady Mother-in-law, also receives her own share of bank notes, because she has been "newly admitted into the city's bourgeoisie by her daughters marriage" (SLAL: 7). Her class has obviously changed due to her daughter's marriage to Modou, so she too is recognised in society and her acquaintances have also increased. She finally gets the status symbol she has been looking for, through her daughter marrying a man old enough to be her father. What matters to her is to become rich and be secure.

Because of this security that she wants at all cost, the rich boubous, jewellery brought to her by Modou when he comes back from trips abroad, she now joins the category of women “with heavy bracelet” (SLAL: 49). Lauded by the *griots* (noble birth), with cars always dropping her, she gains respect from her family, as the best place is reserved for her during ceremonies; she gives bank notes to people. Her daughter for her part, used to go to the night club wearing a gold belt offered by Modou as a present for their first child; however, the royal tips were short lived (SLAL: 50.) Both mother and daughter now live a classy life reserved for the wealthy; Bintou’s mother in particular dream has come true.

Consequently, with the death of Modou, Bintou’s mother still believes that she will continue to have these benefits. She believes the heavy bracelet she is able to wear now which has made her rise to the category of women who put on this jewellery as a symbol of wealth. When she hears her name over the radio she feels important and it’s a sign to show that she is now a member of the *higher society* (Jagne 2004: 7.) Unlike any patriarchal system the death of the man usually changes the standard of living of many families. Because the man is the sole bread winner, it becomes difficult for the mother and children to continue the live they have been living.

Nevertheless, it is some sort of false security that Bintou and her mother have been seeking, Ba implies here that her sense of security is not well grounded, which is the reason it is short lived. Wealth acquired through this means can never last, for if her daughter had not married Modou she would never have had the opportunity to enjoy wealth. Bintou’s mother convinces her to abandon or forgo her school to marry an old man because she wants to be rich and does not care about the consequences of her actions. The death of Modou sends her back to the class she belongs to (Jagne 2004: 8.) If they had invested more on the education of her daughter it could have been long lasting.

The *griot* woman of the cowries, Farmata, is a childhood friend of Ramatoulaye. She is sent by Ramatoulaye to give a letter to Daouda Dieng. She gives her instructions, saying “this letter must be given to him personally, away from his wife and children

(SLAL: 67). Farmata is of the lower caste, yet “she was happy, having dreamed of this role right from our youth” (SLAL 1981: 67). She feels accomplished to serve a *guer* [upper class person]; she plays her role of subordination by giving a letter to Daouda Dieng, another *guer* and a suitor to Ramatoulaye after her husband dies. Farmata is of the lower caste so she is glad to do something for those who are superior to her in society (Jagne 2004: 12.). Farmata and Ramatoulaye are childhood friends; Ramatoulaye has never taken any advice or been in the position that she would need help from Farmata. Instead she can give her help or advice because she is superior to Farmata. This implies that women are against women themselves; if they could have one voice, and deliberate on a common ground to assert themselves from the oppression of men, it will be a beginning of a solution to their problems. Class which is what men use to oppress women, if this same class is used against women then instead of unity, it will separate them instead and their voices will never be heard.

However, if fate is a determinant factor of one’s position in society, that if you were born poor then you are bound to be poor all your life no matter how hard you work to elevate your condition. A person born of the lower class will never rise or change his or her fate in this caste system of hierarchy. They will remain in the class they were born into. So culture determines your status and manners in society (Jagne 2004:3.) However, Bâ seems to refute this idea of a static culture, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye a *tegg* and a *guer* respectively, come together in friendship based on equality and mutual respect (SLAL: 11.) The daughter of a goldsmith who is considered a lower caste *tegg* [lower class] buys a car, a cream coloured fiat-125 for Ramatoulaye a *guer* [Upper class]. Her fate has changed: she is no longer poor as society used to think and has looked down on her. She has become rich; she is rich because a car in this society is a status symbol of wealth, and if she can help her friend, who is of the upper class, then it means values have been reversed, thus implying that class is not static as the society puts it, but there are bound to be changes in one’s life at any time. Modou does not believe the story when he hears that the car his wife is riding has been bought by Aissatou. He too believes a goldsmith’s daughter does not have a heart. Bâ goes further to prove the worthlessness of traditional beliefs that make people not work hard in life (SLAL: 54.) The aspect of social class being static has been challenged. The European

class system is about how somebody has the edge over the production of good and services: through hard work anybody can become wealthy, unlike the caste system, which believes that if you are born poor you will die a poor man. Assiatou moves away from a culture that is static and becomes independent through her education. Indeed this is a clear example of a woman who identifies her self-worth and moves on with her life, becoming successful without the help of a man.

Nevertheless, the caste structure continues to exist even if the functions are no longer the same. The segregation of castes intervenes most significantly at the level of marriage. Even today marriages between castes or between nobles and castes are problematic. Those that do exist are usually found among the urban people with positions of social privilege due to money, political power or religion. Children from these unions always assume the status of the lower-castes parent. There is no upward mobility among castes and endash only downward (Diop 2000.) Therefore, even with the colonial influence, which has changed many aspects of the people's lives of Senegal, they still believe in the hierarchy in their society. This also because of their religion: Islam is a way of life to them; there is no separation between the state and the church so it becomes difficult changes and everything in their culture. No matter how hard a member of the lower caste works to elevate herself from poverty and acquire wealth, she is still seen in the eyes of her people as one not born of noble birth. If someone of a noble birth is poor, she will still be respected by society because of the position she has by birth.

In JM, the class structure is not as hierarchical or as static as that in SLAL; however, there is an element of class. In the village, the chiefs are regarded with higher esteem more than any other person. In Lagos it is different: your hard work and how you can be productive to acquire wealth is what brings respect. The class system here is tilted towards the European style of individual hard work. The colonization of Africa by Europeans powers brought Africa into the world economic system as a major target for exploitation. Colonialism disrupted the traditional system of production in indigenous Nigerian societies, strengthening the existing systems of social inequality and introducing oppressive forms of social stratification throughout the country. This aspect

can be seen in JM, the Yaba housing estate, which was built by the British in Lagos when they colonised Nigeria, has bungalows where the British lived. But many Africans work there as servants, while very few of them, or only those who are junior clerks, have the opportunity to live in the modest estate. Colonialism has affected their lives in many ways; people have become servants in their own country. The issue of slavery, which is thought to have been abolished, still lingers: Most of the men leave their villages in search of greener pastures in the city, yet the salary is so menial that Naife and her family cannot afford big houses but are crammed in one room. Doctor Meers, whom Naife works for, calls him “Baboon” (JM: 7). in a racist way despite the fact that he works for the whites for a menial salary.

While criticizing the patriarchal system, the real enslavement is of a colonial and imperial nature, where Nnu ego loses respect for her husband, Naife, who unlike real men in Ibuza, is condemned to cooking for white woman washing her underwear and eventually going off to war to defend her country. When Adaku says, “the British own us just like God does, and just like God they are free to take any one of us when they wish” (JM: 147-148). This goes to show the oppressive system, which brings a breakdown to Naife’s family. Nnu Ego’s predicament concocts a racist image of the irresponsible black man who cannot provide for his family. Adaku’s survival is an argument for agency of victimhood and self-inflicted wounds, so she succeeds on her own without a man, according to the code of individualism in the west.

Furthermore, Adaku is regarded as rich because she is a business woman. She becomes wealthy after moving out of Naife’s house and sets up her own business. She wears expensive dresses and sends her children to school. Nnu Ego, her co-wife, admires her liberty, yet she is so caught up with being a mother and focussed almost excessively on motherhood that the two women show the difference between realism and illusion. Adaku realises that things are changing and she can succeed on her own; she represents the modern woman according to the model of Europe. Adaku is similar to Aissatou in SLAL, who pursues her personal goal and refuses polygamy and ends up being a successful woman.

Although Adaku is not as educated as Aissatou, both women have to work hard to change their class from being poor and become wealthy. However in the case of Adaku not only the educated can better their life through hard work; everybody from all walks of life can be successful if they are hard working. Again, this also goes further to refute the claim that women are known to be persons only when they are closely related to men, rather than as independent people with free wills and choices their powers pertain mainly to sexuality or as potential child bearer. Thus the idea that men are superior in marriage and acts as the breadwinner of the family is challenged. Although women in traditional African societies always contributed to the upkeep of the house, with colonialism the women's position was shifted to be at home. However, Adaku in JM and Assiatou in SLAL seem to go back to the traditional era where women had economic power. In deed the difference is that they are independent and not under the canopy of a man because they reject polygamy that subjects women to psychological and financial stress.

3.3. Gender Issues.

The gender issue is another cultural problem of marriage in both SLAL and JM. The caste system in SLAL is not gender-based, but they are viewed differently. Women are given due respect, but this respect is tied to the beliefs in the society that revolve around the idea of the evil and conniving nature of women. This makes the relationships between women very complex, because a woman is recognised only when she is married and therefore under the control of a man, and what becomes of those who are not? (Jagne 2004: 3.) Women are not independent with free wills and choices; they must be attached to men for them to be regarded as persons. Those who are not married are usually shunned by society as wayward and irresponsible.

In JM, Emecheta focuses on the role of women in traditional African cultures and the conflicts they face as they are forced to assimilate into a colonial-influenced life style. She looks at the status relative to gender and brings out the reality of gender discrimination in the African education system. Female children are sent off to marry at a very early age; daughters are looked upon as investment, because they will marry well

and bring in a good bride price, which will go towards their brother's education. Emeheta looks at traditional woman, who were very strong in contrast to women during the changing time of modernity. Since no allowances are given in traditional culture for infertility a woman's role as a mother is very important. In both novels, which are set in two different West African countries, women receive the same treatment. They are always relegated to the background, and male dominance is the order of the day. Gender discrimination is the foundation of most marriages.

In Senegal, as in most other African countries, when a woman's husband dies the widow must remain in seclusion for four and a half months after the death, during which special prayers are said (SLAL: 4.) According to Abdoulaye Bara Diop (2000), this practice is to ensure that, if a wife is pregnant, the husband's family will know that the child belongs to their lineage. With the death of Modou, Ramatoulaye and her co-wife are placed in a tent made of a wrapper pulled over their heads and their sisters-in-law unbraid their hair. They take off their jewellery and must do nothing to look attractive during the entire mourning period. The sister-in-law (the husband's sister) traditionally performs the hair unbraiding. She may do it roughly if she believes that the widow did not treat her brother nicely. Also if you have been stingy to your sisters-in-law, or unfaithful, they will not touch your hair because praises are given to the wives for all the good things they have done to the family of their husband. The women in mourning are not allowed to take a bath; this period is a terrible one for these women as they can take a proper bath only after this mourning period. Every Senegalese woman hates this moment because you give up everything you have as a gift to your family-in-law, including your personality, and you are treated like a thing in the service of the man (SLAL: 4.) In her novel *Bâ* brings out the hypocrisy of the husband's family, which is highlighted when the same praise is given to the wives. Ramatoulaye, who has spent thirty years with Modou and has twelve children, receives the same praises as Bintou her co-wife, who has given just five years of marriage with three children, and the lady mother-in-law rejoices in her new fame. (Jayne 2004: 7.)

If a widow is employed, her job is protected by law until she can resume working after the sanctioned mourning period. However a widower does not follow the same

seclusion, although he is expected to remain discreet and subdued for several months (Diop 2000). Men do not have to undergo this same treatment given to these women. What the women are experiencing in the funeral are laws or rituals that women have to go through when their husbands die, but nothing has been stipulated for the men (Jagne 2004:8- 9.) The rituals stipulated for women are so harsh that one has the impression women are usually the cause of their husband's death. It is always the woman who has to treat the man well and not vice versa.

Working women, as well as those that do little trade are responsible for the upkeep of their homes. The working woman therefore has a double task because she steps in to make sure things are done rightly at home as well as at her job. This applies to Ramatoulaye, who is school teacher. Some of her sisters-in-law envy her because of her comfort and purchasing power; while others are happy for the peace they have in not doing a double task and for being looked after by their husbands. She has the purchasing power and comfort because she works hard, the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed. (SLAL: 20.) Ramatoulaye is western-educated and a working class, this does not stop her, from performing her duties as a wife who is supposed to take care of the entire family. Even though she is educated, that does not spare her from the chores women are supposed to carry out. However she has some few choices to make more than an uneducated woman.

Furthermore we get a picture of discrimination of gender preferences when it comes to educating children. A majority of women in most African society are uneducated: education is for the privileged few and not everybody can afford it. Men are given preference to study over women. The society believes that "school turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from their right path" (SLAL: 17). Bâ might be implying here that those women who are educated have gone out of their senses and might mislead the men. This is because, when women are educated, they no longer live according to the rules of tradition. It is for the same reason that Tante Nabou, an epitome of tradition, told young Nabou that a woman has to be docile. This docility makes her a valued woman. She goes on to say, "a woman does not need too much education" (SLAL: 30). Her attitude towards a teacher is a negative one, wondering

how a woman could talk all through the day in the name of earning a living. This is the reason we hear our protagonist asking “when will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex but of talents?” (SLAL: 61). Women are also as intelligent as men, since her opinion does not count in most communities, no matter how talented she is her position as society has put it is always at the second place and men first. Though not clearly spelt out in the novel the treatment given to adult females must have started when they were young and most women in this type of society are regarded as second rate citizens and their existence is only to make the man whole.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, and a few others who are western educated and trying to promote the rights of African women, are called scatter-brains or devils yet some of the men prefer educated women. The impact of the west comes in when the protagonist talks of the white woman who brought them to the same destiny by teaching them. The knowledge they acquired helped them to the same mission of emancipation, and to also know the ills of tradition and custom, to get to know other civilizations while not denying theirs, as well as to acquire universal moral values. This was what their headmistress wanted them to learn, to make a new Africa that would promote black women (SLAL: 14-16.) Colonial power influences women’s lives in that the women able to explore what they can do best but on the other hand they are torn between tradition and modernity, especially Ramatoulaye. She is confused: at times you find her standing for tradition and at another point rejecting it. In such a situation one is more frustrated because she is neither for tradition nor for modernity. However, it portrays the effect of modernity on women and also the ills of tradition, thus bringing out the advantages and disadvantages of both.

Women are relegated to the background and the men make the laws and rules in Senegal, which also applies to other African countries. In the dialogue between Ramatoulaye and Daouda Dieng, we are made to understand that only four women are deputies in the National Assembly out of one hundred deputies. Ramatoulaye talks of the rights they should have, equal opportunities in education, well paid jobs like men’s and also voting rights. This will serve as a weapon for women to gain their rights, and the family code, which will ensure that a woman should know her worth or dignity

which men have subdued for so long. There has never been a women minister after twenty years of independence, and women have no say in the development of their country, yet as Ramatoulaye says, “women have raised more than one man to power” (SLAL: 60-61.) women in the past and even now in Africa and other parts of the world have not gotten voting rights. Bâ implies if they are granted the rights that will make them have their human dignity then it will be the beginning of a solution to women’s plight.

Even though men control every aspect of society, there are a few exceptions that are in authority and yet advocate for women’s rights. Daouda Dieng is called a “feminist”, because he is one of the men in the novel who advocates women rights in the National Assembly, and he wants women to have a role in the political arena or sphere of the country, not just companions or just there for decoration, because women are known to be the primary root of the nation’s building. The women too have to be interested in taking up the challenge in participating in politics that will help in building the country, because he cannot fight alone in changing the rules. The women, on the other hand usually prefer being taken care of by their husbands, children and class to participating in politics (SLAL: 62.) Women should take their rights; nobody has seized their rights they have ceded their rights to men.

According to Udegbumam, women in this society have no say and are only there to make the men fulfil their dreams while they are not given the opportunity to meet their own dreams: “Women’s existence is mainly for the gratification of the man” Ramatoulaye also says women educated or not will always “remain powerless” (SLAL: 47). No matter how knowledgeable they are, they will only excel in what they best have experience of and all women in general share one thing in common, they have the same problem. (SLAL: 48.) Women cannot enjoy the pleasures of love because they can not make their own decisions.

Nevertheless, Bâ seems to be aware that new sets of gender relations must emerge from within, rather than be imposed from the outside. Such new relations will refute the pervasive stereotype, emanating from the colonial past, appertaining to women’s plight

and will prove that these roles are subject to change as culture itself is reshaped, by new experiences and knowledge, rejecting the outdated limitations of indigenous patriarchy and gender roles. Assiatou in the novel rejects a tradition that women are pitted against each other in the name of polygamy and pursues her personal goal. She is a replica of a modern African woman struggling against patriarchy, male supremacy and social customs. The fact that she deserts her husband symbolises African women yearning for emancipation and efforts at conquering a wider public space.

In JM, women always play the role of subordination as depicted in the novel; a woman is not regarded as somebody if she is not affiliated to a man. According to tradition a woman is not supposed to sit at the same table when her husband is eating. Nnu Ego sits at the table while her husband is eating; he tells her that a woman is not supposed to look at the husband when he is eating. Nnu Ego says “that applies in Ibuza not here” (JM: 48). In JM, gender is the foundation of most marriages, and the Nigerian society is gender based. This means that it does not apply in urban Lagos, but in villages like Ibuza. One will think she has become a modern woman but she is torn between tradition and modernity. When she says so her husband reminds her, “what did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?”(48). Women are considered commodities that can be bought and sold. In her husband’s eyes a woman becomes a possession when she marries and is usually treated as a slave, always assuming the subordinate position.

Naife for his part only speaks of tradition when it is in his favour. He forgets that, if he were in Ibuza, he would lose respect among his people because a man is not supposed to wash the clothes of another woman or clean the house, which are jobs that are meant for women. He only points out what the woman should not do. The fact that he is doing a job meant for women according to his tradition is because they are in Lagos. Traditional values are mingled with that of Lagos. The changes that are taking place in Lagos seem to apply only to women, and not to men, even if they too are not living up to the expectations of their most cherished tradition.

In addition, the idea that daughters are less important than sons makes women feel that they are unimportant and have a lower status to men. When Nnu Ego gives birth to a set of twins, both girls, her husband is very angry and says “Nnu Ego what are these? Could you not have done better? Where will we all sleep? What will they eat?” (JM: 127). He reacts as if his wife is responsible for the children being girls or as if before they came he never thought of what the children would eat or where they would sleep. Women are held responsible for the sex of their children and risked being returned to their parents for not producing children of sex desired by their husbands’ preferably male children. Obviously, if the twins were boys he would have been happy. He is over reacting because they are girls. But Adaku says that after twelve years when their bride price starts coming, he will be singing another tune. These children to whom he is giving inanimate attributes will soon be very important when he starts exchanging them for money.

Adaku, who seems to know that both male and female children are important loses a son yet she cries until Oshia, her stepson reminds her, she still has Dumbi her daughter, but she retorts saying, “you are worth more than ten Dumbi’s” (JM: 128). This makes Oshia know he is very important and if he is asked to carry water or cook, he refuses, saying it is a job meant for women. The importance of the male child starts from childhood and is made known to them by their parents. Nnu Ego for her part is preparing her daughters to follow in her footsteps by giving them an inferior education and training them in housework. She has grown up knowing that male children are very important, and for this reason she discriminates between the girls and the boys. She too usually spares Oshia when he refuses to do any work assigned to him by telling his sisters that housework is meant for girls and not for boys. So from when they are young they start learning that a man is powerful and a woman is inferior. Adaku knows the importance of both male and female children, yet the way she mourns her son confirms the traditional knowledge of the importance of male children and what she knows is right.

Furthermore, one of Nnu Ego’s daughters Taiwo is married to a clerk. A clerk is highly educated, yet he prefers a woman who is uneducated. Bearing children, cooking and

taking care of the house is what matters to the men. Naife quickly accepts the marriage because he needs the bride price. The money will help him when he retires. Since he has no elder brother who, according to tradition, would have to share the money with, all the money will be his. For the same reason he proposes a suitor for Kihende, one of the twins he had rejected when they were born. He prefers male children but as his wife Adaku rightly says after twelve years when the bride price starts coming he will be singing a different song (JM: 127.) The time has come when and he will force them to marry because he needs the money that will be paid for the bride price, and when his daughter refuses to marry the man he proposes, he becomes very angry. Kihende refuses the husband chosen for her by her father for the mere reason that he is from the village. She has her own person in mind whom she loves Aremu, a butcher's son. Kihende's attitude towards marriage shows a split between generations. The problem is that, culturally a woman is not supposed to refuse a husband given to her by her father. Secondly, the said Aremu is a Yoruba and a Muslim. Thirdly, according to her father, she cannot marry a Yoruba because they are regarded as cannibals and look down on the Igbos. When Naife realises his daughter did not come home but spent the night at the Aremu's, he gets so angry so much so that, he goes to Aremu's house with a cutlass and severs one of his family member's hands. This means that she has been renounced and he is not going to have any bride price because girls are expected to be chaste before marriage. Consequently Kihende's behaviour will scare men and he will not have the bride price money he desires so much (JM: 203-210.) The issue of religion and what can be called 'tribalism' in such nations is the natural result of very different peoples being forced together during the colonial period into artificially created "nations"(Brians !996). There are bound to be tensions especially when it comes to the issue of marriage, they want their children to marry only from their own tribe.

However, Kihende's behaviour, and Oshia's refusal to assume responsibility for the family as the eldest son, provokes Naife' anger and he disowns his son. The blame for Kihende's disobedience is laid on the mother, since women are also held accountable for their children's conduct. If the children are good, they belong to the father, but when they are bad they are the mother's children. When things don't always unfold the way men want it, the father distances himself from the children. Nevertheless, Nnu Ego

understands the changing times as a woman more than her husband. She believes help can only come when the child settles down and has a good job, whereas her husband wants immediate solutions to his poverty at all cost. He is still living in the past and does not face life objectively as his wife does (JM: 211-213.)

Naife is taken to the court, for severing one of the Aremu's hands; he is questioned on the responsibility of his family with regard to the paying of fees and feeding. He says he is the one paying the fees, and when the same question is asked of Nnu Ego, she also says she is the one who paid the fee. The court tells her the husband has said he is the one who pays. She says "he owns me just like God in the sky owns us" (JM: 217). This means Naife owns them according to tradition, but she forgets that they are in twentieth century Nigeria and things have changed. He is sent to jail; Nnu Ego takes the blame and is called a bad woman because she is responsible for her husband going to jail. She goes back to her father's house and is no longer considered a wife of the Owulum's, and she dies with nobody around her. However, what causes the breakdown in Naife's family cannot be blamed on tradition alone, but can be attributed to the oppressive colonial system, which brings the breakdown and Nnu Ego's predicament, and concocts a racist image of the irresponsible black man who cannot provide for his family. It is very common in modern Africa for men to have to leave their families in order to earn enough to support them.

In the novel Nnu Ego and her husband give up everything so that their eldest son, Oshia, can have the benefit of education. The left-over money, if there is any, is intended to educate their second son, Adim. There is no thought given to their daughters, who are regarded as an investment. Nnu Ego assumes that her sons will come home to live and will care for her as she ages. She realises that part of the pride of motherhood is to be a little unfashionable and be able to drawl with joy: "I can't afford another outfit, because I am nursing him, so you see I can't sell anything. And one usually receives the answer, "never mind, he will grow soon and clothe you and farm for you so that your old age will be sweet" (JM: 80). However, she finds that her dreams are not realized and the only time she questions tradition is when she says, "Who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? Until we change all this, it is still a

man's world which women will always help to build" (JM: 187). Here she questions motherhood and womanhood, implying a hope for change. Women have to take their rights from men by themselves, because men, who enjoy the privileges that go with their superior position in the society, will never give them.

Nnu Ego is brought up to believe that children, especially males, make a woman and that in old age they will be there for her. However, Oshia, who is educated till he leaves to further his education in America, has never written a letter to his mother: she only hears from other people he is married to a white woman. This breaks her heart, because it is regarded as an abomination to marry somebody outside Igbo culture. Oshia is not communicating with the parents as tradition demands; he is caught up with choosing between the western values and those of his people back home, a shift from a collective society to an individualistic one, Oshia, who is from the latter, as a first son is supposed to automatically assume responsibility for the entire family from his father. Especially if he gets a well-paid job, he is expected to support the rest of the family. It might be that, he embraces the western idea of individualism whereby you cater only for yourself. He therefore becomes a loner because he puts ambition first at the expense of his family. If the father gets enraged about their daughter getting married to a Yoruba, who is a fellow-Nigerian, what more of somebody from across borders and a different race? She becomes psychologically tortured, and dies by the wayside with no child to hold her hand and no friends. However it is said Oshia comes back on hearing his mother's death and gives her a befitting burial. He therefore retraces his roots after a long time. Nnu Ego has been busy building up her joys as a mother; indeed it becomes ironical to the title of the novel, because Nnu Ego ends up not only as an unhappy woman but a lonely woman. Even in death she will be blamed for not answering the prayers of barren women, so women have no peace in this society even when they die. It is believed that when a woman is barren she performs some traditional rites to become fertile, but when she does not become pregnant, she blames her female ancestors. (JM: 224.)

The novel also shows different attitude towards motherhood. Nnu Ego sees her children as part of her life and wants her son to grow up and be somebody for her. Adaku, her co-wife, wants her daughters to grow up and be somebody for herself. Adaku stretches

out a hand of friendship to women and men while Nnu Ego “never really made friends, so busy had she been building up joys as a mother” (JM: 224). However Adaku survives and Nnu Ego does not. The life of these two women shows the difference between realism and illusion.

Furthermore, the economic activities women engage in, in Africa are often difficult and demeaning, carried out in order to pay for male children’s education in a European-run school. Women’s responsibility leaves them with little or no money for their wants or needs. Adaku and Nnu Ego illustrate the powerlessness of women within a colonial economy. In the description of the cooking strike of Adaku and Nnu Ego, though women are charged with food preparation, Naife survives as he shares meals with his co-workers. (JM: 135.) Thus in JM, patriarchy as illustrated in *Ibuza* is reinforced by new colonial ideologies in Lagos, which also introduce new forms of women’s subordination. As Stratton notes, Nnu Ego faces two forms of oppression, that imposed by colonial society and that by *Ibuza* patriarchy (1990:113.) Emecheta seeks to dismantle aspects of both colonial and traditional patriarchy in order to construct an alternative nationalist vision. The issue of motherhood and the importance attached to it in both the pre-colonial and colonial context is of central concern in JM. Again, Emecheta also seeks to correct the idealization of motherhood, by illustrating the problematic social values attached to it in pre-colonial, colonial and by attention post colonial contexts. As Katrak (1988), says, the joys of motherhood are experienced by Nnu Ego as sorrows of motherhood (JM: 166-167.) At the beginning of the novel Nnu Ego is about to commit suicide over her personal failure to bear offspring, yet at the end, she dies alone despite having nine children. Emecheta criticizes the social construct of motherhood, illustrating both the successes and failures within it.

Adaku and Aissatou in *SLAL* are two women in the novel who challenge the social control of women and the beliefs that exploit women’s vulnerability and each of them succeeds in her own way. Adaku survives, although she is not educated but she succeeds through her business, while Assiatou uses education to better herself. This is an example of gender identity where women are able to assert themselves without the help of a man and ends up being very successful.

In the novel, Adaku is a small business woman who is regarded as rich. She is rich because she denounces polygamy and all its problems. She has only daughters, and because of that she is not considered worthy to be praised. She has a problem with her co-wife Nnu Ego for letting a relative of hers in the rain because she refused to let her in; this also goes further to show the tensions that are common amongst co-wives. She consults Nwakosor and Ubani to help solve the problem, since their husband is away. Nwakosor says, "I know you have children but they are girls who in a few years will go and build another man's immortality" (JM: 166). In the eyes of society, the only person who makes Naife "immortal" is Nnu Ego; she has male children who will continue Naife's lineage. But the girls will be sent off to marry and will belong to the family she is married into. Ibo men admire hard-working and rich women, but they always ask the question of who will inherit the wealth when she is gone since she has no male child. The men therefore lay the blame on Adaku; since she has no male children she does not have the right to complain about her senior wife's conduct. Nnu Ego, however, is confused herself because she has sons and goes hungry, wearing rags and in abject poverty. Yet she is praised for having male children, this shows men are very clever, when a woman does wrong she is favoured because she has given them what they want, male children. So no matter what the outcome of the antagonism that is created among the women, all they do is please themselves. (JM: 166-167.)

Nnu Ego contributes to Adaku's unhappiness, feeling of inadequacy and eventual departure. According to Adaku, the straw that breaks the camel's back is the unfair way the men settled her dispute with Nnu Ego, Nnu Ego is at fault but they absolve her from blame because she is the mother of sons. She therefore gloats in her status as senior wife and mother of sons. Adaku decides to become a prostitute because she believes that it will liberate her from the oppressive structures of male-dominated society influenced by traditional and colonial sexism. Rather than an image of corruption and poverty, Adaku inspires awe at her wealth and autonomy. Nnu Ego never entertains the idea of abdicating her role as a senior wife and mother. However, the way in which women uphold patriarchal system and use it to abuse and oppress other women is also a call for concern. Adaku decides to stand by herself and grows in her business rather than

depend on a man. She also decides that she will send her daughters to school, as most rich Yoruba do. The Igbo tribe especially are the ones who don't send female children to school. Nnu ego refuses to even visit her former co-wife after she left due to fear of other people's gossip. She maintains a strict, and problematic, interpretation of morality. Therefore both traditional and western influences affect Nnu Ego and influence her interpretation of morality. It is not the sudden catastrophic event of colonialism that leads to her downfall but the gradual shift in society caused by the intersection of traditional and colonial values.

Although the action of the novel takes place in Nigeria, many other different areas of the African continent reflect the same values of gender education. The author attempts to highlight the unfairness that exists between sexes regarding education. However the power of Emecheta's work lies in her realism and subjective experience of each character. As an attack on the subjection of women, neither Nnu Ego nor Adaku will be read as a "symbol" of African women. Salome Nnoromele contends that, to view Nnu Ego as a symbol of African women is inaccurate and reproduces the very problem Emecheta seeks to address, the objectification of women. She argues that Nnu Ego is a flawed character, who's "failure to change with the times to adapt psychologically and to make tangible plans for the future is a form of madness" (Nnoromele 2002: 43, 2.) Nnu Ego's adherence to tradition or what she believes tradition to be is evident in the book, because even Adaku has noticed how old fashioned Nnu Ego is when she remark, "oh senior wife, I think you are sometimes more traditional than people at home in Ibuza"(JM: 127). Nnu Ego is afraid of not living up to the legend and high birth of her parents. She believes Adaku's relative, who is rich, is not from a renowned or famous family like hers and thinks she looked down on her when she refused to let her in. However, faced with these realities, her refusal to adapt may indeed be considered strange behaviour and is not representative of African woman as a whole. She refuses to make her choice and sticks to tradition.

Nevertheless, despite the subjectivity of Emecheta's characters, the protagonist's existence cannot be separated from the oppressive structures of the society around her. While she is free to make her own choices that can shape her destiny, like all African

women, she must do so within the context of her sexist society. Therefore she makes clear the imperative to adapt and make society compatible with the needs of women. Nnoromele also asserts that “I see Nnu Ego not as an object on which society heaps its ‘unfair’ practices and demands, but as a subject of her actions, an active determinant of her own destiny” (Nnoromele 2002: 181). Her point of view is to illustrate that, though her assessment is harsh, JM is not merely an indictment of African patriarchy but also an illustration of the failure of adaptability in the face of enormous change. Thus, as a nationalist text, it offers a strong revision of male-centred anti-colonial narratives that excluded women from their vision of post-colonial society. Moreover, just as imperialist claims the realm of humanity to himself, so too do African male authors have the tendency to claim the realm of African society for themselves. At the end of JM, Emecheta uses irony similar to discredit imperialist depictions of Africans. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the district commissioner’s decision to dedicate a paragraph to Okwonkwo in his book “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger” represents imperialist approaches to Africans. At the end of JM, a bus driver represents the inaccurate views of male authored text by noting what the driver says “this life is unfair for us men. We do all the work; you women take all the glory. You even live long to reap the reward. (JM: 223.) This is very ironical because Nnu ego dies at the roadside with no one to hold her hand, although we are not told whether Naife reaps the reward but he surely does, because the woman dies instead of the man, as the bus driver states.

According to Rojas (1990), the support of co-wives in recent times has diminished; modern development of mandatory education, urbanisation and capitalism are changing Nigerian society. Educational opportunities have expanded for women. Men are slowly beginning to see the value of higher education. Now more female children are being sent to school. Although, women have also been granted the right to participate in politics, they still play a very minimal role. During the pre-colonial period, women had a larger position in politics. Unfortunately, western influences restricted women in the political sphere and their rights were taken from them. The most important part is that women have not attempt to rise in their male-dominated society and patriarchy continues to thrive. Nevertheless, in modern times, women are beginning to demand

some equality. Perhaps they will be able to reconcile the rights of the past to the freedoms of a modern age

3. 4. Religion.

In both novels the conflicting ideas of Christianity, Islam or traditional religion are another cultural problem of marriage that oppresses women. “The religious institutions have a crucial role in the ethical and moral formation that sustain a culture” (Landolt 2007). Islam did impact on the social structures of Senegal like most other countries, though many of the societies had strong and traditional values that shaped the way one looks at Islam. Polygamy is not an act known only to Islamic faith; it was practiced in Senegal as in Nigeria before the introduction of Islam.

In *SLAL*, there is a problem in the Islamic implementation of polygamy. The Imam, Tamsir and Mawdo come to Ramatoulaye’s house to inform her that her husband has married a second wife. Although all these messengers are influential men in the village, they show no tact in their explanation. They are coming from a wedding, according to religion or tradition, Modou has taken a second wife, ‘they simply pass it off as something God wishes and Ramatoulaye should accept it with no questions asked. This implies that the first wife has to understand that, according to Islam, she knows her husband is entitle to have a maximum of four wives, so she will just have to accept it because it is fate. (*SLAL*: 37.) According Udegbonam, in a book review of Ba’s *SLAL*, it is considered insensitive for a man to come home informing his first wife that he has taken a second. If he has never mentioned it to his wife but sends somebody else to come and inform her, then it is absurd. However to women of third world it is as easy as the sunrise because polygamy is part of their culture, especially in regions where Islam is the mode of worship. Notwithstanding this acts of cultural tradition should not often be mistaken for Islam.

These religious beliefs and all that they stipulate, are what Ramatoulaye could accept, and the reason she did not want a divorce. It is her strong belief in fate, tied up with her Islam religion that makes her strong enough to go through the difficulties (Jagne

2004:2.) In her letter to her friend, she talks of one of their friends Jacqueline, an Ivorian girl who is married to Samba Diack. He is also a graduate of the African School of Medicine and Pharmacy. Jacqueline disobeyed her parents by going ahead to marry Samba Diack: they object to the union for the mere reason that he is of Islamic faith and they are Protestants. (SLAL: 41.) However, tradition seems to work in situations like this. When it comes to getting married, parents usually have a say: in the novel, marriages that a parent usually opposes always fails like that of Aissatou.

However, Jacqueline does marry Samba and move to Senegal with him. When she gets to Senegal she finds herself in a world very different from hers in everything. She finds herself in an environment with practices different from the one she has grown up with. This is because of the different culture she has grown in that has shaped her thinking as well as the way she perceives life. The husband's relatives are not welcoming at all to her because "she refused to adopt the Muslim religion and went instead to the Protestant church every Sunday." (SLAL: 42). This religious conflict is what destroys her marriage.

In addition Jacqueline, as an African woman, is also expected to cope in any other African society, because Ivory Coast, like Senegal is also colonised by the French, but the cultural differences are still great. Religion therefore plays a role in many cultures when it comes to marriage. Even within the same continent, marriage between two people of different faith is not always easy to contain in most families, especially a Muslim and a Christian. She is being called a "*gnac*" by the people of Senegal, which is someone who comes from the hinterland, also known in West African English as *bushman*, or uncivilized (SLAL: 90.) Religion has a major role to play in most marriages.

However, this difference in culture and the way of life of the people becomes a problem as Jacqueline's husband starts chasing slender Senegalese women and does it openly, neither respecting his wife nor children. This could be tied up with the idea of a man having more than one wife, which is normal in his Muslim faith, and Jacqueline with her Christian background cannot stand it. Jacqueline tries to persuade her husband to

change, but to no avail, she becomes depressed and no amount of laboratory testing could detect what she is suffering from. She is ordered to have an electrocardiogram and various blood tests. She takes tranquilizers to subdue the pain and the lump she has in her chest but it does not help her, because she is suffering from a psychological problem. (SLAL: 42-43.)

Nevertheless the protagonist also gives an insight into what doctors, especially psychiatrist and neurologists should know about such pains: they are a result of emotional torments, vexations or continued frustrations that accumulate somewhere in the body and causes pain. This pain can also be attributed to the fact that, since women cannot speak up or are not listened to, they accumulate thoughts in their minds that causes stress in the long run. Jacqueline is advised by the doctor from the neurology department that she has no problem except that she is stressed and should go out and give herself a reason for living. Thus she becomes morally uplifted and aware of what is troubling her, and instantly decides that she has to overcome it. She writes a letter to her parents asking for their forgiveness because she did not adhere to their advice concerning her failed marriage. (SLAL: 42-45.) This emphasizes the way that, within the same culture, you have cultural differences in marriage; it is therefore obvious between different cultures. Bâ gives a critical view of those modern religious practices, especially Islamic practices in Africa, that usually cause psychological illness to women.

This mental trauma is also found in JM, where the protagonist is faced with religious conflicts. She is torn between her traditional beliefs back at home in Ibuza and the Christian faith in Lagos. At home she believes that what makes a woman is her ability to bear children, but when she gets pregnant in Lagos, her husband Naife, make her to understand she should in no way let Madam Meers know about the pregnancy because they have not had a white wedding. He also risks losing his job and their names will be removed from the church register. Ubani the cook got married in the Catholic Church in order to save his job (JM: 50.)

Thus Emecheta and Ba are both interested in a world where women could have choices and where monogamy could be order of the day. And religion will not be a determining factor as to how many wives a man can marry. They also show that women should re-examine their relationship with each other and with that of men, if this is done, then it will be the beginning of a solution to their various problems or plights. The autobiographical voice in Ba's letter means coming out of muteness and speaking out which is important to an African woman who has always been spoken for. Both writers are talking or exposing some cultural aspects, especially religion, that discriminate against women. Emecheta has been living in England most of her adult life but still has a deep emotional attachment towards Nigeria. She is frustrated most of the time when she goes home, especially with women and feels Nigerian women and African women in general need to band together to support each other instead of "bitching about each other" (Adeola 1990:36). Emecheta learnt to speak her mind through British culture, and this goes against her native culture. "In Nigeria women are riddled with hypocrisy, you learn to laugh or not too loudly" (Adeola 1990: 38). This means that women are not allowed to express themselves, if they are happy or sad, they are obliged to put their emotions under control by pretending all is well. Emecheta's Africanness is becoming diluted and her publishers have stopped putting her books on the African book section because she has lost her African perspective and voice. However, she still feels Africa needs more support to African writers. When writing about women she asks questions like: "why are women the way they are? Why are they so pathetic? When you hear about traditional women who were very strong, you wonder, why are we today so pathetic, so hypocritical?" (Adeola 1990: 42).

Emecheta sees the motive for marriage as a form of slavery. In her *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Adah fights the pressures of poverty, patriarchy, marriage and social customs that assail her. She fights tirelessly to extricate herself from the discrimination that entraps the girl child. She prefers to keep aside some money meant for the household management to permit her to register for an examination and welcomes battering whole heartedly for her actions. When her husband demands that she should not practice birth control, she defies his authority and gets a birth control device. When her husband asks her to get a job at the shirt factory, she chooses to pick up a job at the library instead.

Female assertion reaches its peak when Adah refuses to have sex with Francis, until he accepts that they see into the problem of their new home, a problem he has been negligent about. Adah is aware of the odds against her, but fights on as an existentialist heroine. She resolved in her tender age “never in her life to serve her husband on bended knee” (1974:20). Again when Francis attempts to frustrate her dreams of becoming a writer by burning her manuscript of her book *The Brain Child*, Adah gets depressed and leaves him. This depicts a yearning for emancipation: though she suffers assaults and destruction of property, the court adjudicates and restitutes her entitlements. Adah’ story is a replica of the Modern African woman struggling against patriarchy, male supremacy and social customs. The once timid woman has been replaced by an individualistic and assertive woman fighting for her rights. She identifies herself as a human being who has potentials and moves out of the dehumanising marriage and succeeds.

In the novels *Polygamy*, class, gender and religious issues are cultural or traditional factors that men use to oppress women. Nevertheless, Bâ and Emecheta reveals cultural value alterations are taking place slowly in the world and the economic possibilities and necessities have an influence in the process of gender roles changes. The stereotypical way that men are superior or the bread winners of the family is not enough anymore. Adaku in *JM* and Aissatou in *SLAL* are examples of women who have proven the changes of this stereotypical role, they reject polygamy and succeed by themselves without the support of a man. The value assumptions have to change due to the changing identities; these changes are as a result of the fact that the universalization effect of globalization comprising both the export of European and American gender order to the post-colonial world and the growing economic pressure on these societies and individuals has a greater effect. West African women or a majority of African women are seeking for empowerment in order to reach global justice. However, they are resisting the external pressures; to reconsider their roles and reality in conformity with regional and national levels. Ramatoulaye in *SLAL* refuses to divorce her husband when he takes a second wife but denounces the levirate system; she is torn between tradition and modernism. However, these writers prefer and insist on addressing the whole aspect of women’s condition in Africa rather than focussing on sexual issues.

This way they will be able to come out of this oppressive nature of traditional gender limitations without distorting the cultural frames.

4. CONCLUSION.

Looking at gender identity as a marker of cultural crises in marriage, both Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta in their novels reflect the experiences African women had, as they fought for their independence and equality. Although women have been liberated in some parts of the world, like the west, in Africa gender discrimination is still the order of the day. Through their writings both authors attempt to bring to light the unfairness that still exist between genders regarding education, marriage and so on. Even though both writers were able to eventually receive an education, they realize that many of their African sisters do not and will not have the same opportunities unless someone speaks for them or at least until they speak for themselves. Both authors had the privilege of being members of the traditional society and the new society that emerged in the post-colonial period. They are therefore the spokespeople of the African woman.

Bâ raises many issues in trying to understand the logic behind the often contradictory world view of her society. She portrays different women of her society and their locations. As a female writer, she shows her interest in a world where women will have choices and monogamy the best system of marriage. This can be realised only when women, re-examine their relationships with each other and also their relationship with men.

In order to discredit the objectification of women, and the idealization of motherhood in many texts written by men, Emecheta represents her female characters as subjective beings that are forced to interact with constraints imposed on them by society. Many male authors use similar techniques to those of the colonialist; they objectify the existence of other Africans or women to show subjectivity to themselves. In so doing male writers get away with the existence of women as subjective beings in what Florence Stratton calls “conspiracy of silence, a silence that protects the male interest”(1994). Though Emecheta has been criticized for stereotyping men, her work repositions women at the centre of colonial experience and thus challenges the overvaluation of male voices in earlier works. (Stratton 1994: 117.) She uses Adaku’s success as a prostitute to attack the historical construction of imagery text, in anti-colonial texts written by men. Throughout most African male-authored texts, women

are depicted as morally deficient characters such as, prostitutes or objective symbols of African tradition.

Today, the value given to procreative capacity and motherhood, female identity likened to fertility, is probably a major difference between the concepts of women's emancipation in Africa and the west. In western society, to associate woman with nature in opposition to man, the symbol of culture, is to condemn her to inferiority. But the educated African woman still sees the need to be with a man and accept the differences while seeking for recognition as a mate not as a servant. (Coquery-Vidovitch 1997.) They should be treated as humans, who are capable of having psychological depth that can contribute to building the society.

In JM, Emecheta deconstructs many of the myth perpetuated in male- authored African literature whereby women are representative of traditional values, the supposed moral decay of modern woman as well as motherhood. According to Joya (2000:7), Emecheta is concerned with defining what makes her nation postcolonial as a country that must include women's input. She like African male writers, assert claims to African subjectivity but the difference this time is her desire to include women.

The most obvious and disruptive change affecting women in their marriage and life in general, especially in the urban environment, is the shift to accept a capitalist market economy based on money. Nnu Ego and her co-wife become dependent on the meagre salary earned by their husband to feed themselves and family. However, unlike European feminist, Emecheta does not locate traditional society as the sole source of African women's oppression but also on the colonial government that exclude women from power. As Katrak (1988), rightly says, Emecheta's protagonists are depicted as belonging at every stage of their life to some male figure. Adaku who despite the fact she is leaving her husband still intends to seek favour from men when she says "the men too have their own use" (JM: 170). Men and women need each other in one way or another; deserting her marriage does not mean she is keeping away from men. Men have their own role to play in a woman's life.

African literary texts are complex; feminist critics should be more objective in presenting the diverse and opposing views on the themes, than a selective and one-dimensional reading which makes it superficial. They should take into account the complex and sometimes conflicting issues that are apparent in the text, rather than engage in questionable selectivity which undermines its validity, authenticity and legitimacy.

Contemporary female writers have made giant strides in an attempt to redefine and concentrate on the one-sided presentation of African woman in African literature. Lapin observed in 1984, that nearly three dozen women are currently recognised as authors across the African continent, although the number is now in the hundreds today, and some male writers have joined them in order to give a serious treatment and realistic characterisation in all-round perspective of the female gender. Writers tackle the gender equation in myriad ways, as they strive to reverse aspects of female marginalisation. Mother stands for traditional African society, struggling to uphold its standards against the corroding influence of the west, while a wife reduced to servitude represents the cruelty of badly-managed polygamy. Female protagonists often deploy their energies in righting the wrongs of the past by attempting to restore women to their rightful position. This is done head-on in the probing style of Emecheta's multidimensional woman or Bâ who acts like an illuminator of the female condition.

In JM, Emecheta provides a unique dimension that challenges the myth that motherhood is synonymous to female self-fulfilment. The symbol of Nnu Ego, who labours all her life to nurture several children, yet they desert her. She lampoons the blatant yet often stuck to the fact that childbirth brings joy to the mother, which helps define her self-fulfilment and position within her household and society. Aissatou in SLAL is a replica of a modern woman struggling against patriarchy; she does not stick to the idea of motherhood but moves on to better her life, deserting her marriage. Emecheta and Bâ have filled the gaping gender gap between male and female characterisation and have shown the other side of the coin.

Bâ's feminism extols female solidarity, monogamous marriage based on mutual love and respect, the sanctity of the family and the Allah of Islam. At the same time she is fighting societal hypocrisy which is hiding behind tradition and religion, depriving women of dignity and freedom. Bâ becomes an advocate of the female condition; it is the duty of African women not just to write but to use writing as an arm or weapon to destroy the age-old oppression of their sex. Stringer attaches great importance to the fact that women of francophone Africa have started publishing. Writing helps them to bring to the forefront issues which affect their own gender, and which needs to be addressed all over Africa. (1998:11.) Emecheta in JM, also traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. Consistent wife beating and physical assaults is an attempt to transform their matrimonial homes into battle grounds (JM: 135).

Nevertheless it is clear today that women writers can no longer be kept on the fringe of African literary culture. Although international recognition is small but is significant, because the Noma award for Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and others creates awareness of African female writers. Among critics, female writers have gone from being viewed as collective oddity to being widely seen as talented individuals who inspire more depth in the study of African literature.

Despite the differences between female and male writing, in contemporary era, they have to come together to retrace their roots and in this process find a point to converge. This will create a better meaning in their interaction and will help in the construction of an African feminist standpoint based on cultural specificities. It will also help to redefine the literary terrain that will take full account of women and men's changing roles in community engagement to be revisited. Literary genres should show individuals, family and society as complementary. Practices like widowhood, polygamy, succession rights, discrimination against girl child, religion, class distinction and forced marriages, needs a stronger interrogation without any biases or prejudices. This will fill the missing gaps of resituating the role of men and the dignified place of the African woman in the African literary landscape, in the global world context especially where marriage is concerned. This can be achieved by write ups by African male and female writers.

Emecheta and Bâ present the development nature of the female character through a varied exploration of the theme of female assertiveness, in the various societal facets which enslave women. Basically, the thematic message is that even in the face of an oppressive system, of deep rooted norms and practices that foster female subordination, the female must strive to assert herself. Both writers' messages are for African women and all women to take charge of their own destiny, refusing to be denied freedom or reduced to a depressed state. By doing this they will disrupt the predestined patriarchal hierarchies. Bâ prescribes writing which also implies reading as a weapon that would reinscribe African woman in ways that transgress and destroy hegemonic male representations. Writing as a weapon is not only to defend themselves, lament or criticise, but also offensive, invading the battlefield that has been occupied and dominated by their male counterparts.

Nfah-Abbenyi reveals how women seek to affirm their identity and subjectivity and to achieve social, political and artistic empowerment. Although these writers seek to paint a realistic picture of the African woman conditions, they also wish to dissociate themselves from the concept of feminism by the west (1997:6). While advocating general solidarity for women, African writers reject any form of cultural imperialism. They posit, reclaim and reaffirm the anteriority of an African feminism, one that can share with Eurocentric feminist movement and at the same time teach something, since African feminism is always grounded in lived experiences.

In both novels, therefore, the cultural tenets associated with social and sexual relationships should be considered in understanding texts by African women writers and the contradictory gender roles they may depict. The issues involved are not usually separated but problematicized as different facets of women's struggle against patriarchal oppression. A focus on multicultural dialogue and a shared search for areas of overlapping concerns will avoid reductive, negative feminist politics. African women writers reinscribe other African women's protest through their fiction, since the women for whom they speak are already fully aware of their predicament, they use writing to demand social changes through concerted effort.

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