

RECONFIGURATIONS OF POLYGAMY IN MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND PAULINA CHIZIANE'S *NIKETCHE: UMA HISTÓRIA DE POLIGAMIA*

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ABSTRACT

It is a given that men have long enjoyed cultural and symbolic superiority in traditional patriarchal African societies. The hierarchy of social importance among women seems to cascade down from married to single women. Polygamous marriages, though widely accepted in many African societies, remain contentious and draw divergent sentiments from women and men alike. Drawing on African feminist perspectives such as those broached by Sylvia Tamale, this paper argues that polygamy is presented in the literary works of Mariama Bâ and Paulina Chiziane in two polarized viewpoints. Polygamy is at once considered a utopia and a dystopia. The utopian dignity of marriage is framed against the tarrying dystopian flip-side of polygamy in which women are objectified and used more for the sexual pleasure of men. This confirms the assertion that the perception of polygamy must be reconsidered and reconfigured, in particular the manner in which it replicates patriarchy where women are dominated by the rule of phallus.

Keywords: polygamy; patriarchy; phallus; African societies

INTRODUCTION

Polygamy is presented in Mariam Bâ's *So Long a letter* and Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* against the backdrop of the juxtaposition of religious and cultural norms in postcolonial African settings. The Muslim religion and its appreciation of polygamy as an acceptable cultural practice presumably coexists peacefully with many Afrocentric values on the same. However, these two are critiqued by Bâ who, in her epistolary novel highlights the abuses of Muslim doctrine and African traditional values by men who, in order to satisfy their bigot desires, misinterpret doctrine and societal values. From Bâ's letter, it is clear that women must unite and educate themselves so as to strip themselves of the bondage of oppression brought about by the patriarchal society that imposes undesirable realities such as polygamy on them.

As for Chiziane, she apprises how even within the same geographical space, there exist conflicting views on polygamy. Set in Mozambique, the story of *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* illustrates the reactions of different women in the face of their polygamous status when they discover that they share one man, Tony. The protagonist charts a fraternity with her co-wives to become equally recognised partners in the polygamous union, a demeanour upheld by Bâ who celebrates "female bonding in the face of male oppression" (Ali 2012).

Mariama Bâ's *So long a letter* is about women who are victims of a polygamous and patriarchal society. Two women who happen to be friends (Ramatoulaye and Aissatou) are also victims of a polygamous marriage but they react differently to it. Ramatoulaye's husband Modou marries his daughter's friend and classmate, Binetou. Aissatou's Aunt in-law Nabou had to find a second wife for her son (Aissatou's husband). While Ramatoulaye decides to endure the polygamous marriage, Aissatou decides to move on with her life and leaves her husband behind. Ramatoulaye's husband dies and following tradition, his property is shared amongst his wives and children. Ramatoulaye writes the letter describing how the funeral is going on and the pains that she goes through before and soon after her husband's death. The challenges that women face when taking care of the children in the absence of the husband, how second (core) wives behave due to the polygamous circumstance as well as what pushes young girls into marrying already married men.

Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* recalls what her mother told her when she was a young girl, that a woman must marry the man who loves her but never the one she loves; that is the secret of lasting happiness. It is upon this backdrop of the wisdom shared by her mother that Ramatoulaye reflects on the ills of making daughters the object of attraction to men as a means of gaining a stable subsistence. Binetou's mother and Aunt Nabou who looked at the material things of men and the family background of other women are examples of such manipulators of class, who in turn perpetuate polygamy. In order for Binetou's mother and Aunt Nabou to escape the discrimination of not being counted among the elite of the society, they persuaded their children/nieces to marry rich men, regardless of the marital status of the men. On the other hand, Aissatou got married

to her husband who came from a relatively rich family and her husband's mother could not bear the fact that her son married a goldsmith's daughter. Cherekar (2014) observes that:

Bâ portrays class as caste prejudice that does not take into consideration the economic status of people but rather focuses on their family background. This ranking causes problems for the lower castes who suffer a social discrimination from the nobles. (Cherekar 2014, 407)

POLYGAMY AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

Greed and lust are portrayed as the major reasons for men acquiring more wives in both *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* and *So Long a Letter*. Although Tamsir is mourning the death of his brother, Ramatoulaye's husband, and has a family in *So Long a Letter*, he cannot control his feelings or lust for Ramatoulaye. He goes the extra mile in trying to take Ramatoulaye as his wife although he knows that it is not the norm. He states:

I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife... Usually it's the younger brother who inherits his elder brother's wife. In this case, it is the opposite. You are my good luck... (Letter, 58)¹

This clearly shows that Tamsir wanted to marry Ramatoulaye not out of love, but because of greed. He does not love her, neither is he attracted to her, it is just 'luck' that he is going to marry her. Lust and greed are shown here to be the inspiration behind Tamsir's desire to marry another wife, Ramatoulaye. As Tamsir mentions that Ramatoulaye is his good luck, it is clear that he is not interested in what Ramatoulaye feels or thinks, but all that interests him is what he wants: to have her as his other wife. To portray Ramatoulaye as his luck is to degrade her to nothing more than just a pleasant benefit gained by mere chance. He openly exclaims that "I prefer you to the other one" (Letter, 58) and it seems Tamsir had the liberty to choose what should happen to Ramatoulaye, even against her will. Tamsir brings out the idea that women have no say in issues that have to do with them or marriage. Men have to decide for the women, even to the extent of choosing one woman over the other as indicated above. However, Ramatoulaye refuses to be objectified by men. She stands her ground and does not allow tradition to trample on her. Ramatoulaye goes on to tell Tamsir:

You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you. (Letter, 58)

Ramatoulaye speaks the words of many women as she communicates her definition of marriage as an act of faith and love where one surrenders oneself to another. This shows the different mentalities that the men and the women in the society have about marriage.

¹ The reference "Letter" refers to Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* in this article.

Women, according to what Tamsir brings out, are only supposed to wait for men to propose to them and they are supposed to accept them. What Ramatoulaye portrays above is a changed mentality of women about men and marriage. Women have the liberty to choose who they want to get married to. This implies that women can refuse men if they are not interested in them. To add on to that, Ramatoulaye has this to say about women:

But we are not incendiaries; rather we are stimulants! ... In many fields and without skirmishes, we have taken advantage of the notable achievements that have reached us from elsewhere, the gains wrested from the lessons of history. We have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to be able to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. (Letter, 60-61)

This shows how other women in a polygamous and patriarchal society think about themselves in relation to men and the society they live in. Women, who in the past were docile and continued to allow men to decide their fate in marriage, have now developed a voice to speak for their once suppressed rights. They claim their space in the marriage arena, choosing to throw off the veil that once covered them in subjugation.

In *Niketche: um história de poligamia*, Rami, a faithful wife, makes an attempt to carry out a heart-to-heart discussion with her husband about his multiple women. Sadly, Rami hits a brick wall as Tony exclaims:

A pureza é masculina, e o pecado é feminino. Só as mulheres podem trair, os homens são livres, Rami.

(Purity is masculine and sin is feminine. Only women can betray, men are free. Rami.)² (Chiziane, 2004, 29)

Bigot stereotypes concerning women and men have influenced the attitudes of some men, to such an extent that Tony, for example, absolves himself from his unfaithfulness to Rami, because he is a man, and men are free to have multiple partners. From a puritan viewpoint, he believes that he is right to choose polygamy against his wife's will plainly by virtue of being male, and therefore "pure". In patriarchal societies, masculinities and femininities are constructed vis-à-vis ideas about sexuality, respectability and decorum based on gender. A person's identity is more subscribed to gender than it is to character, abilities and achievements. Tony, because he is a man, views himself as principally right in all that he does and therefore incorrigible, more so by a woman. Anderson (2014) posits that the culture of purity is the treatment of men as superior to women and how they are trained to view women as objects. Added to this culture is the Catholic background of Tony and Rami which does not uphold the woman much as the biblical history of the original sin is purported to have been committed by the woman, Eve. In reference to this (Adam's purity until Eve was created), Tony finds a plausible cause for him to defend his choice to marry more women as history has it that a woman originally

2 The citations from *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* in this article were translated by the authors.

sinned and not the man. This is evidence of how even the advent of Christianity does not necessarily eradicate the subjugation of women as it brings another rendering of female subordination with the story of Adam and Eve, and the male being the head of the family. Males who still desire the power of patriarchy and puritan culture can still, like Tony, misconstrue biblical scripture and use it to support their authoritarian interests.

Many African cultures are patriarchal in nature, thereby eliciting male domination. With men seen as the heads of family units, there is the risk of these units suffering victimization at the hands of abusive men. These are the abuses that Rami, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Binetou and many other women suffer. Misconceptions about gender roles (men control and women are controlled) lead to the undermining of women like Ramatoulaye and Rami who value monogamous marriages. Their role as wives is tantamount to sexual objects that should gratify men, who, when not satisfied, can simply look for alternatives. With regard to Ramatoulaye's position as a first wife whose husband dies and who denies other men with families who want to marry her, Androne propounds:

The specific values that Ramatoulaye's open and complex forms encompass include her wide-ranging compassion and sympathy for other women as well as her reasoned and sometimes vitriolic diatribes against the injustices women have been forced to suffer. Because she is not compelled to conform to a strict genre, Ramatoulaye is able to push the boundaries of conventional thinking and posit alternative visions of what could be. Her remembered conversations with Daouda Dieng on everything from women's right to vote, and equal pay for equal work, to employment opportunities for women, suggest Ramatoulaye's liberal ideas on the better future she envisions for women. She defends women when he describes as "mortar shells". (Androne 2003, 40)

Marriage to her was something that should have been kept holy and she did not expect other women to go through what she went through when her husband married another woman. Daouda Dieng is Ramatoulaye's friend. This is one friend of whom Ramatoulaye's mother had approved as her suitor before she was married to Modou Fall. Ramatoulaye, however, turns down Daouda Dieng's proposal when he comes to ask for her hand in marriage after the death of her husband. She refuses Daouda, not only because she does not love him, but also because she is unwilling to "bring myself between you and your family" (Letter, 68). It is evident that Ramatoulaye did not want other women to go through what she experienced after her husband had married a second wife. She suffered and struggled physically and emotionally as she took care of her twelve children and managed the bills. She realised that polygamy is a tool used by men to feed their egos and satiate their appetites at the expense of women.

Jacqueline is another woman whom Bâ describes in *So Long a Letter* as suffering because of the religious and cultural tenets that are woven into the marriage setup. Androne states the following about Jacqueline:

Jacqueline's alienation and breakdown after her marriage is an admonitory one. Isolated by culture and religion from Senegalese society, Jacqueline must put up with a philandering husband, hostile in-laws, and an urban world that considers her a "hick." (Androne 2003, 45)

Androne here describes how women are, more often than not, the victims of polygamous arrangements as these are usually the choice of men. Further to this is the adversity that some women face at the hands of in-laws (who include women!) that fraternize with their male relative to provoke the daughter-in-law's outcry. In *So Long a letter*, the Muslim religion coupled with peculiar African traditional observances are portrayed as major catapults for forced polygamy on women. A woman who rejects polygamy is seen as defiant, as this practice of many wives for one man is allowed in Muslim communities.

Pursuant to religion and tradition, due to lack of an exemplary model, some women of younger generations like Binetou in the letter view polygamy from a utopian perspective. Binetou married Ramatoulaye's husband out of her own will, coupled with some serious persuasion from her mother. Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, a friend of Binetou's, reports to her mom about Binetou when she says:

She [Binetou] is going to marry her sugar-daddy [Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, Daba's father]. Her mother cried so much. She begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, as the man has promised them. So she accepted. (Letter, 36)

This shows that Binetou agrees to satisfy her mother's wish and she is too attracted to the material things that Modou offers. Women are seen as their own villains where a mother indirectly forces her daughter into marrying her best friend's father. For the love of comfort (a proper house) which she could not afford, a mother manipulates her daughter into marrying a man who already has a family commitment, thereby destroying his marriage and subsequently his family. Motivated by respect for her mother, a daughter marries an already married man in order to fulfil the material wants of the mother.

Out of the need for upward mobility concerning the social ladder, women present themselves, or at times their daughters, as candidates for marriage, even as co-wives. This is the case with Binetou's mother who wanted a decent life she could not afford. She sees her daughter's marriage to Modou as a solution to her "plight". Modou also wanted to marry a young girl, because tradition allowed this and he did not care to consider that the young girl is his daughter's friend and classmate. Ramatoulaye's narration of Binetou's history suggests that she sees her as a victim of her mother's ambitions and Modou Fall's lust. Like Jacqueline, Binetou suffers because the fatal combination of the class system, working together with Modou's deliberate misuse of polygamy, conspire to rob her of her youth, her opportunity for education and her physical vitality (Androne 2003, 46).

In her letter to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye is very critical about the practices that encourage young women like Binetou to marry for the sake of boosting their family status economically and socially.

This also applies to the in-laws in the letter. The greed and class bias of Modou Fall's mother are evident. Aunt Nabou cautiously trains her niece Nabou and she entraps her son to marry the niece whom she taught to be docile to her son. Nabou does this in

order to pacify Aunt Nabou's social standing: "Modou's mother, a princess, could not recognise herself in the sons of a goldsmith's daughter" (Letter, 30).

Much of the marital distortions in this case are a result of the lust and greed of men and women alike. The literary characters of Binetou and young Nabou portray the side of a polygamous life that clearly shows the greed, the assertiveness and aggression of men, who take advantage of the naïveté of young girls for their gain. The greed of Binetou's mother for financial stability and Aunt Nabou's hunger for class and status for her son and grandchildren cause the first wives unnecessary suffering in these marriages. This is reflective of the social ills of cultural expectations that are imposed on women's lives.

In *Nikette: uma história de poligamia*, Rami, based on the colonial Catholic precepts of monogamy, is shocked at discovering her husband's several other women. She is even more appalled to learn of her companions' full cognisance of this polygamous setup. As impossible to accept as a polygamous marriage to Tamsir is for Ramatoulaye, so is the absurdity of sharing a husband with four other women to Rami, at least initially. The insupportable nature of polygamy for many women is demonstrated by Rami's reflections on womanhood after discovering the demise of her monogamous union that used to be perceived as solid. She reflects on how Tony's choice of marrying other women is a drastic betrayal. She ponders:

Como é que o Tony me despreza assim, ... Obedecer, sempre obedeci. As suas vontades sempre fiz. Dele sempre cuidei... Vinte anos de casamento é um recorde nos tempos que correm. Modéstia à parte, sou a mulher mais perfeita do mundo. Fiz dele o homem que é. Dei-lhe amor, dei-lhe filhos com que ele se afirmou na vida. Sacrifiquei os meus sonhos pelos sonhos dele.

(How does Tony despise me like that, ... To obey, I always obeyed. His will I always did. I always took care of him. Twenty years of marriage is a record in these times. Modesty aside, I am the most perfect woman in the world. I made him the man he is. I gave him love; I gave him children with whom he became fond of. I sacrificed my dreams for his dreams.) (Chiziane 2004, 14)

Rami's reflections on the situation she is faced with convey the value she gave to her marriage in relation to the sacrifices she brought to the hearth. The idea of polygamy, at first inconceivable, brings her to Julieta's (her husband's secret mistress) home, where she finds out that there are three others and is now faced with the shameful reality of having to accept the redefinition of her marriage against her will. Having gone through a trajectory of self-identification and auto inspection, she comes out as a different Rami, with a new aura and confidence as she deliberately takes the stand to weave a new tapestry of what polygamy is going to mean to her and her co-wives.

Rami in *Nikette: uma história de poligamia* echoes the value given to marriage by Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* when she reflects on how she sacrificed her own dreams for her husband, Tony. In both cases the first wife considers the husband's decision to take another woman as an act of betrayal.

The blatant attraction of men's riches is evinced in *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* as one of the perpetrators of polygamy in that women are portrayed as ardent seekers of provision by men. With that backdrop, an affluent man in society is seen as a good potential husband, regardless of his marital status. Luisa, the third wife of Tony, a wealthy Mozambican, exclaims to Rami, the first wife:

Muitos homens há, sim, o que falta são homens com dinheiro.

(Many men there are, but what [is] lacking, are men with money.) (Chiziane 2004, 56)

The subservient status that most women have traditionally been subjected to in many Afrocentric cultures has over time bred a heavy dependency on men as the providers of subsistence for women, hence the scramble for affluent men. By virtue of having many prospective partners, wealthy men have the obvious possibility of engaging more than one partner for a marital arrangement.

The willingness of women to be involved with men regardless of their civil status only serves as a catapult for male chauvinism. For example, Tony, in *Niketche: uma história de poligamia*, acquires two more women to have seven wives. He is not satisfied by the new "authentic" polygamy that his first wife Rami has orchestrated, with all co-wives working together to ensure the success of their marriage. He prefers his former secretive life of clandestine engagements with several women while they are oblivious to their sharing of the same man. For the love of unaffordable comfort and in worst cases, the need for subsistence, women allow men the "luxury" of multiple partners/wives who can offer variegated sexual experiences. However, women here stand united to care for their needs first, before those of the man, as in traditional African marriage settings, whether monogamous or otherwise.

When women come together to weave a new reality that fits their needs socially, this is seen as despicable by men who in a patriarchal setup tend to impose undesirable and stringent conditions on women. The liberty of women turns out to be constringent to male patriarchy. The man, Tony, derived his sense of power and control through the subordination of women against their will, in this case by clandestinely subjecting them to a polygamous family arrangement. Tony is therefore deposed from his seat of power and control when his wives freely dissociate from him with the help of their first co-wife, Rami.

Regarding women and their views on polygamy, Chiziane in *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* propounds the way several women achieve a serene acceptance of polygamy even with full knowledge of its implications on them. Of Tony's wives, four of them, Julieta, Luisa, Saly and Mauá, belong to cultures that in one way or another accept polygamy as a common practice. Another woman, Tony's mother, is presented as an ardent defender of polygamy. Rami says of her:

A minha sogra (...) grita não à monogamia, esse sistema desumano que marginaliza uma parte das mulheres, privilegiando outras, que dá tecto, amor e pertença a umas crianças, rejeitando

outras (...). Grita contra o novo costume de ter uma esposa à *luz e várias concubinas, com filhos escondidos*.

(My mother-in-law... shouts no to monogamy, this inhuman system that marginalizes a part of women, while benefitting others, that gives love, and belonging to some children, rejecting others... Shouts against the new custom of having one woman exposed and various concubines, with children hidden. (Chiziane 2004, 123-124)

Women like Tony's mother, because of their upbringing, know no other alternative to life beyond that which they have been exposed to. Limited to no formal education that can open doors to particular careers, they observe their roles as those of spouse and mother who ought to be faithful to keeping the hearth for the man, according to his desire. And when he chooses other women to add to the hearth, she accepts his choices. Rami's mother-in-law exclaims in appreciation of her son's ability to "afford" marrying five wives as a great achievement:

O meu Tony, ao lobolar cinco mulheres, subiu ao cimo do monte ... Ele é a estrela que brilha no alto e como tal deve ser tratado. E tu, Rami, és a primeira.

(My Tony, by marrying five women went up to the top of the hill ... He is the shining star on top and as such should be treated. And you, Rami, are the first.) (Chiziane 2004, 126)

It is upon such a foundation that women like Rami's mother-in-law who is profoundly rooted in support of polygamy perpetuate its existence. Rami is therefore left to fight her way through to discovering her worth as a woman, Tony aside. She has to keep her head above water amidst the glaring eyes of women like Tony's mother who find no reason for her to despise her husband's polygamous status.

WOMEN EMPOWERED AND FIGHTING BACK AGAINST PATRIARCHY

The utter refusal to be tied to a polygamous man is presented as a woman's right by Aissatou. In her response to her husband's choice to marry another woman in addition to herself, she states plainly:

'Some women' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them... I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heart love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance, however little that may be. If you can procreate without loving, ... then I find you despicable... Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. Goodbye. (Letter, 72)

With unreserved expression, Aissatou discloses her stance to Mawdo, her husband, whom she has decided to leave. She explains how, unlike the common woman who would most likely accept, against her will, the redefinition of her marriage, she chooses

to reject an imposed definition of marriage, which to her is the commitment of one's body and heart to the union, not just the body. Aissatou's definition of what she calls "the happiness we once had" embodies the commitment of one man to one woman and vice versa, the addition of another partner being seen here as utter betrayal to the commitment once made. This absolute rejection of polygamy is an act of grand bravery in a society ordered by patriarchal tendencies that sanction polygamous marriages as a possible choice for men. Aissatou responds to polygamy by freeing herself from its bondage when she says: "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (Letter, 32). This is a definitive split which Aissatou makes from her husband after she discovers that he has married another wife. What she says indicates her declaration of independence from the polygamous marriage and the patriarchal society. This is a show of independence and poise; she is able to say no to an undesirable development within her marriage. Because of her education that emancipates her, she has the power of decision-making and the open mind to consider her options. This liberty is not afforded many other women faced with the same reality. Coulis observes:

Aissatou has known the same betrayal as her friend. And yet, she, unlike Ramatoulaye who chose to stay and remain a co-wife, refuses to accept the situation and leaves. She will not accept the othering by her husband, or his attempt at colonizing her and their children. (Coulis 2003, 31).

When Modou Fall dies, Ramatoulaye still mourns her late husband and Daouda Dieng emerges a clear chauvinist when he asks for her hand in marriage, as a co-wife to his first wife. He does this, not according to the traditional precepts of marriage to protect and care for a widow, but only to satisfy his ego. Ramatoulaye refuses and does not succumb to the pressure of tradition and societal expectations. Although she was still mourning the death of her husband, she stands up for herself and refuses to sabotage the happiness of another woman by accepting to be a second wife.

Bâ uses the characters of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to show the implications of a polygamous marriage on a co-wife and a single mother. She shows the power of education in women that enables them to be courageous and change their lives for the better. Education allows Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to have the lives they want. Ramatoulaye does not fulfil her mother's wish to marry Daouda Dieng as she is sensible enough to discern what she wants: the choice to choose her own husband. Aissatou, her friend, does the same. Hayslett notes the following:

Even when their marriages do not succeed, both women have the intelligence to determine ways to better their lives. Neither woman has any desire to remarry after the failure of their marriages. They conclude that a woman needs to be independent, that there is nothing empowering about living on a man's payroll. (Hayslett 2003, 144)

Through acquiring an education and living on their own, earned money, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou represent the image of an empowered sect of women who, even in the face

of adverse developments to their social life, are not limited by financial matters, for they already have the means to subsist with or without support. Unlike the age-old notion of man as benefactor and woman as beneficiary, they work their way through the adverse effects of polygamy with dignity.

Of sharing men and the marriage bed, in *Niketche: uma história de poligamia*, Rami learns that not every woman in Mozambique considers this a social ill. To her surprise, Rami is openly offered a chance to enjoy a sexual encounter with Luisa's boyfriend by Luisa herself. To dispel the confusion in Rami's mind concerning this unusual occurrence, Luisa explains to Rami:

Não sou possessiva. Venho de uma terra onde a solidariedade não tem fronteiras. Venho de um lugar onde se empresta o marido à melhor amiga para fazer um filho, com a mesma facilidade com que se empresta uma colher de pau. (...) Se já partilhamos um marido, partilhar um amante é mais fácil ainda. (...) Adulterio? Vocês, mulheres do Sul, perdem tempo com essas histórias e preconceitos.

(I am not possessive. I come from a place where solidarity is infinite. I come from a place where one lends her husband to her best friend to give her a child, as if one were lending a spoon. If we shared a husband before, it will be even easier to share a lover. Adultery? You, Southern women, waste time with those stories and prejudices.) (Chiziane 2002, 84)

Luisa becomes the voice of those women who are involved in reconfiguring the meaning of polygamy. They are women who participate in polygamous marriages as co-wives, yet beyond this role they free themselves and choose to explore their sexuality by doing just as their male counterparts are doing: choosing other partners to sexually gratify themselves as they please.

Having gained more confidence in herself in spite of her husband's betrayal, Rami develops a sense of self-worth and emancipation which she freely shares with her co-wives by assisting them to start their own trades in order to earn money and become financially independent of Tony. As Tony's wives leave him one by one (like Aissatou who left Mawdo in *So Long a Letter*), thanks to their financial independence which they achieve gradually with Rami the first wife's help, it is evinced how women can be the main agents of each other's emancipation as they share their wisdom and expertise to empower themselves.

Where the empowerment of women is concerned, women like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* show that they can soar above the challenge of being 'left' for other women. Their husbands leave the hearth for other women and they have little choice in the face of imposed polygamy. Ramatoulaye takes on the role of a bereft yet responsible first wife, while Aissatou chooses to officially end her marriage and live free of the strings tied to polygamous settings. Ramatoulaye and Modou Fall seem to be a happy and stable couple before Modou falls for another woman, his daughter's friend and of the same age. Chukwuma (2003) applauds the strength of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye who are able to survive after the break with, and abandonment of, their

husbands respectively because they are educated. Aissatou goes overseas to develop her career and raise her children there. Ramatoulaye pays all the bills (sometimes she would be the only woman standing in the queue). She would try to solve the problems of her twelve children by herself and single-handedly cared for these children as well. Azodo makes the following assertion:

What Ramatoulaye spells out in rehearsing the events, decisions, crises, and joys of her life is what it means to live a feminist life that can tolerate contradictions, overcome challenges, endure loss and find fulfillment [sic] in the interstices of an imperfect society as she struggles to raise her children, work at her profession and participate in the life of the community. (Azodo 2003, xix)

The strength displayed by Ramatoulaye in the face of her husband's betrayal in *So Long a Letter* is mirrored by Rami in *Niketche: um história de poligamia* as she helped her husband Tony's other wives to begin a trade that would bring them financial independence. As Rami redefines what polygamy means for her and her co-wives, she takes charge and tries to enforce a true, traditional polygamy where all women are equal and have the same rights in family matters. Tony's visits are therefore arranged so that he spends the same time with each woman, much to his chagrin as these visits strip him of all of his "perceived" masculinity.

CONCLUSION

Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's different reactions to polygamy "reflect their different stands on women's issues; while Aissatou regards polygamy as an injustice to fight, Ramatoulaye sees it as a burden that society imposes on her with which she has to cope" (Cherekar 2014, 409). As for Rami, she chooses to challenge the perpetrator of polygamy. By ganging up with her rival co-wives to openly declare their disapproval of Tony's clandestine polygamous status, Rami opts to take a bold stand, to empower the other women in their quest to oppose and overturn their subjugation.

Rami, like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, exudes an aura of power and control through her ability to fashion her imposed polygamous status to suit what she believes it ought to represent. By bringing all of her husband's wives out to meet her in-laws so that everyone would know them as a single family, she refuses Tony, her husband, the liberty of choosing a secretive polygamous life. She forces him to bow down to the new configurations of polygamy dictated by her understanding of what polygamy means traditionally. She interrogates her status as first wife to Tony and defines her role as helper of the other women who, because of their financial need, cling to the man they know they are sharing.

Rami, an educated woman who comes from a Christian background that harnesses values of monogamy, makes it her responsibility to lift her co-wives from the social peripheries so that they stop depending on Tony for subsistence. In turn, Tony is dethroned from his position as benefactor of needful and helpless women as the women leave him to live their lives independently.

It is through Ramatoulaye's rejection of Tamsir's proposition that she gives another woman the chance to remain as the one and only wife, forming a fraternity with her. Emancipation in these cases is encapsulated in the ability to choose, the agency of women in their respect for womanhood, and the ability to say yes, or no, to polygamy. This acceptance or refusal indicates the freedom to decide independently, without having to remain entangled in traditional or religious bonds against one's primordial and personal beliefs of what is acceptable or not: what is right or wrong.

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