

Epistolary Narration as Healing in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

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ABSTRACT

The oppression of women in patriarchal contexts across the world and cultures has attracted numerous literary studies. Contemporary literary feminists and writers have countered the positionality of women as marginalized victims through their writings by using strong-willed female characters. These female characters have subverted their marginalized positions through assertion, defiance and other forms of protest. While there has been an increase of creative texts by women featuring these struggles over male-hegemony, few scholarly debates have considered self-narration especially through letters and journals as, not just style, but as a form of healing. This paper examines how epistolary narration pegged on friendship and sisterhood is healing to female characters in patriarchy. The analysis makes textual references from Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. The analysis espouses the views feminist literary theory as propounded by Simone De Beauvoir (1949) and Hellen Cixious (1976).

Key words: Epistolary narration, Healing, Self-narration

INTRODUCTION

Smith (2007) avers that patriarchy is a universal phenomenon that continues to thrive even with the coming of colonialism, technological advancement and globalization, and in view of this oppression, there is a possibility that women could be quietly enduring oppression. Abdallah (2015) also confirms that patriarchy is a construct of cultures in Africa and elsewhere, and that women continue to suffer psychological and physical torture in many ways by the dictates of such cultures. Udenweze (2009) further confirms that a woman in patriarchal African societies is just a thing as well as a liability to her parents and to the husband she gets married to. The only purpose of her existence according to Kaur (2015) is "to get married at a 'proper' age and to bear sons." These biased ideologies and dehumanizing practices have left women feeling unwanted, unvalued, degraded and discriminated in these societies thus hindering their development (Jamili & Roshanzamir, 2017). This paper argues that when aggrieved women narrate these experiences, they succeed in voicing their trauma, purging the pain in them hence healing.

EPISTOLARY NARRATION IN SUBVERTING PATRIARCHY

The Map of Love (1999) and *So Long a Letter* (1981) present the ground on which female characters feel free to share their experiences, learn from them and reconstruct their identities to become stronger and liberated women. By narrating their stories, they heal socially, psychologically and economically just as Derrab and Dahmani (2017) postulate, that the epistolary narration is a great contributor to females' expression and thus healing from the challenges they are experiencing. They argue that though sentimental in nature, epistolary novels are acknowledged as a mode of communication. They are frequently composed as a means of addressing moral concerns. For a long time, this new kind of writing has been linked to women's inferior and domestic roles. Because of this, it is frequently employed by female authors to convey the sensitivities and predominant feminine issues through the usage of female protagonists in their works (p.65). Thus, *The Map of*

Love and So Long Letter, being epistolary novels from their repetitive use of letters, journals and diaries as style in the narration, provide an opportunity for women to freely express the challenges they face in their respective patriarchal space.

Soueif's *The Map of Love*, gives the story of four female characters through different perspectives. The women go through similar experiences, and by sharing with each other, they find comfort and healing through new ideas. Anna, Amal, Isabel, Zeinab and Layla are victims of patriarchal injustices in the society where they live. However, the bond they create and the moments they share through writings and physical memories build them into women of honour and great strength. Ba's *So Long a Letter*, on the other hand, uses the first person-narrator, Ramatoulaye, who skillfully shares her deepest secrets and trauma arising from abandonment, abuse and betrayal to her female friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye's husband's death, weaves in Aissatou's story of divorce and Jacqueline's story of betrayal by Samba Diack to underscore the agency of sisterhood and friendship in healing from patriarchal excesses.

Women in patriarchal setting go through different patriarchal injustices such as sexual objectification, polygamy, wife inheritance, biased gender roles-allocation, domestic and gender-based violence and female genital mutilation among other abuses that leave them negatively affected (Tahameed, 2020). They encounter financial constraints, mental, psychological, religious and emotional lapses due to traumatizing experiences embedded in their patriarchal societies. Story-telling of individual and collective experiences lay the basis for healing of the victims. Nnamaeka (2005) contends that women appropriate and change oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and unity and in the process rediscover themselves (p.19). Although the victims might not restore their lost dignity or erase their past, they heal from sharing these stories either by speaking about them or by writing them down. Cherekar (2014) also argues that Ba's novel fronts the healing powers of female friendship that mollifies pain and facilitates women with enough vigour to endure the male biases (p.2). This means that female friendship and solidarity in trying times provide grounds for victory and healing against male injustices that they experience.

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye reminds Aissatou on how her (Ramatoulaye's) support and that of books raised her from the depths of loneliness, regrets and depression, after divorcing Mawdo Ba. Jacqueline who has also suffered severe emotional turmoil after Samba Diack's betrayal of her and her children finds relief, half-moral healing, after she diagnoses the cause of her physical illness that has kept her bedridden, moving from one hospital to the other. She confides in her friends and that heals her even more.

The optimistic attitude with which Ramatoulaye closes her letter reflects a strong-willed woman, ready to be bright even as she passes through shades of darkness each day. And that is a great sign of healing. Cherekar (2014) observes that *So Long a Letter* foregrounds the healing powers of female friendship that soothes pain and facilitates women with enough vigor to survive the male prejudices and that the sisterhood Ramatoulaye and Aissatou build and maintain safeguards their survival against the constraints of patriarchy, tradition, polygamy, colonialism and any form of prejudice. This interdependence and impenetrable relationship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou secured on sisterhood is a form of indemnification against predatory cultures of patriarchy and colonialism that undermine gender sensibilities.

Similarly, Soueif (1999) presents optimistic women who, having gone through several patriarchal injustices and life challenges, share their experiences with each other and heal. To begin with, Anna Winterbourne who loses her husband Edward a few years after their marriage continually confides in her father-in law and friend, Sir Charles. He mostly listens to her and unpuzzles some of her life riddles. After persuading her to find a different life apart from that of loneliness and sadness, he gives her blessings to travel to Egypt where she explores, learns the Egyptian ways and luckily gets married again to Sharif Basha and bears a child, Nur.

Apart from continuously sharing her experiences and turmoil with Sir Charles and friend Caroline while she is in Egypt, she as well forms friendship with Layla- Al- Baroudi and Zeinab which equally help her adopt to the new culture and lifestyle, fulfill the position of her 'sacrificed' family in Europe, and walk with her through the pain of losing Sharif Basha during national clashes in Egypt. Porter (2003) underscores the importance of narrating individual experiences in a bid to heal. Oluwanowo (2021) explains that since female characters go

through almost similar experience, their friendship or rather bonding and solidarity enables them to empathize with each other therefore providing relevant help and encouragement at every challenge of life that they face.

Lastly, Amal's outspokenness enables her to fight for women and children's rights in Tawasi while confiding in Isabel over her patriarchal experiences. This enables her to survive her divorce and the distance of her children. Anna becomes an important friend, for, her story heals the affected Amal and Isabel in several ways. Giving his positivity over female relationships and sisterhood, Hudson-Weems (2019) concludes that the kind of friendship Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Anna, Layla, Isabel and Amal have is more than just confiding in one another and sharing origins. It involves sharing feelings and material things as well, leading to the possibilities of healing from the wounds they nurture due to the patriarchal injustices they go through in their societies.

SELF-NARRATION IN BONDING AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Contemporary female African writers have adopted various literary techniques that suit the technological changes in the literary field, especially in feminist literary discourses. To suit their individual communication needs, they have manipulated the traditional epistolary form that gives an expressive opportunity to female characters (El-Hindi, 2019).

Remembering the genesis of her friendship with Aissatou, Ramatoulaye gives a descriptive detail on how their Headmistress, who introduced them to school stressed on sisterhood and education as a way of escaping from the burdens of patriarchy. Thus she narrates to Aissatou:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny ... (p.67).

The above citation gives the basis of Ramatoulaye's strength and unfailing sacrifice towards making their friendship with Aissatou strong regardless of distance and other life challenges. Hence, Derrab and Dahmani (2017) conclude that the experiences of Ramatoulaye for colonialism (through the Headmistress) make her aware of better options in life like being a schoolteacher and creating a strong link between her and her childhood friend Aissatou.

Ba's use of a letter reinforces the bond between the two and the intimacy still prevails for through letters, they both pour their deepest pains, secrets and experiences although Ramatoulaye remains in Senegal while Aissatou moves with her family to France (Sy, 2008). During her forty days of mourning, loneliness and seclusion, the whole four months of grief on widowhood, Ramatoulaye writes a letter to her friend describing the joys and sorrows of their lives, starting with the most current of the affairs of divorce, abandonment and widowhood (p.2). Derrab and Dahmani (2017) emphasize that the writing of a diary in form of a letter to Aissatou during her mourning period enables Ramatoulaye to overcome her solitude and remove a heavy burden off her mind

Androne (2003) underscores the intensity of this relationship that survives the set of time and distance saying that Ramatoulaye's letter which happens to be an intimate and personal form of response to Aissatou enables her to pour out her soul: her innermost concerns, worries and beliefs. The emotive tone reveals the confiding aspect of her letters hence suggesting the trust, love, respect and friendship that is between the two. This unity founded in the context of patriarchal norms seeks to subvert these prejudices, not for Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou alone, but for the future of the society. The two female characters become the necessary force required to confront and compromise patriarchy.

By reminiscing on the recollection of their shared memories to her friend Aissatou, Ramatoulaye finds it easy to overcome the four months and ten days of seclusion Islam requires of widows. The letter reduces the distance between them and establishes communication. Katherine (1992) observes that Ba makes a potential contribution for women's bonding through the involvement of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's "enduring friendship and of their shared world without men" (p.68). The use of the long-letter structure conveys a sense of unbroken unity and communication between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, hence a source of relief and healing to these women during their traumatic experiences.

The narrative takes the form of a letter, journal or a diary because as it begins, Ramatoulaye says that, “I am beginning this diary, my prop in distress” (p.1) and as she speaks to Aissatou within the text, she as well converses directly with her late husband Modou. She reminisces how they met, the way she chose him over Daouda Dieng and the sacrifices she made to let their love-life workout. Ramatoulaye finds the changes she is confronted with almost unbearable due to the clash between modernity and traditions. However, friendship allows Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to challenge these diversity of oppressions and confusions of parenting and ultimately overcome the cultural and social differences despite the distance (Derrab and Dahmani, 2017).

The epistolary form gives the characters a platform to describe their ordeals in a culture that undermines any hope of female voice (Kehinde, 2022). Although, the letter is interweaved with these journal and dairy entries, Ba seems to give a stronger foundation to the relevance of letter writing in sharing and healing. In Aissatou, Ramatoulaye finds a confidant, a reliable friend and a compatriot during these epochal challenging times. The long letter relieves Ramatoulaye from the grief and her confidant helps her to get rid of the burden which hardships had brought in her life. Gueye (2020) argues that the epistolary insight of their relationship yields a hastened effect on the way they anticipate the future of women (p.4).

Similarly, in *The Map of Love*, Soueif uses letters, diaries and journals to bridge the gap between the two generations of women whose stories are narrated in this text, and to reveal the similarities and differences in their subjugating patriarchal experiences. Soueif therefore brings forth this kind of unity by expressing the closest and most private correspondence that the female characters have as friends and relatives, and how they expose their spirits and divulge their deepest fears, anxieties and convictions (Androne, 2003, p.38). The pieces of papers and writings that contain the story of Anna Winterbourne, which Amal al-Ghamrawi puts together from the trunk brought to her by Omar, prove to be of great help in understanding her culture, the patriarchal injustices and their continued existence, her relationship to Anna and finally a healing that comes from realizing that someone else also went through the challenges you’re experiencing but came out victorious. She ‘pieces a story together’ (p. 19) out of the writings of Anna that were “wrapped in tissue or in fabric, or concealed in envelopes: a box full of things, a treasure, a trunk actually” (p.4). These writings, as posited by Begum (2016), become a space in which these women, Anna, Amal, Isabel and Layla, share their experiences and join forces to resist all forms of oppression and abuse to which they are the victims and survivors (p.18).

Bearing the connection and deep friendship she has created with Anna through her journals and letters, and the healing that comes with it, Amal remembers her own relationship with her mother and wishes that she had left her something to remind her of their time together and to speak to her during times of distress. She says “I wish she had left me something: a letter perhaps, written on a quiet evening, when I was out and she was alone. A letter that I would when I was older and more able to understand” (p.55). Amal’s nostalgic reference to her absent mother is edict of trust, friendship, dependability and sisterhood with her mother, a fellow woman.

Apart from Anna’s journal’s being a source of inspiration, healing and a spring from where they get more knowledge of who they are, that is Amal and Isabel, the very journals are a source of pouring her deepest fears, frustrations, disappointments, wishes, joys and sorrows she goes through in her day to day life. Those that she is unable to tell her father in law, Sir Charles, and her friend Caroline Bourke, she gets to empty them in her journals. Thus Soueif uses journal as a method of storytelling to oneself and to those who will later get access to the journals just as in Anna’s case.

Anna’s journal expresses the value of friendship and sharing stories among friends. One female character’s burden is borne by both of them making it bearable to the victim. It is during such times that Caroline cannot bear Anna’s trauma that she wishes her mother was alive to help her through. She records “Oh, how I wish now more than ever for the presence of my beloved mother! For I feel sure she would advise me...” (p.25).

The power of a mother, a fellow woman, is re-lived here. It is a network of bonded individuals where a mother and her daughters share common stories and support each other through patriarchal limitations. A mother is more experienced and would definitely be relied upon during such difficult times. But by virtue of remembering an absent mother, Caroline alludes to making a decision which her mother would approve of if

she were alive.

When Edward finally dies, the torments Anna goes through are recorded in her journal, the only place where she unburdens her mind and soul without questions nor prejudice. She laments his destitute death. She mourns for over eight months pitying herself for being a lesser help to Edward. She wishes she had done more to salvage him. She wishes he had died contented. However, it should be noted that it is not Anna's fault that Edward is dead, but because of the societal expectations of a woman to fully care for their spouses fully, she feels inadequate in her previous dedication to Edward. Did she really have the power to maintain Edward's life? No. In her journals, she laments that he should have died contented, peacefully and less desperate had she loved him better (p.35).

The reader might wonder whether the journal is just for expressing fears and negative emotions. Not really. Even the times when Anna's life changes to that of happiness, she expresses her feelings in her journal. For instance, she records her happiness of being married and removing Edward's ring as a sign of moving forward and forgetting the past. On 6th May, 1901 she says:

I am to be married.

I look at the words and I can hardly believe them-and yet it is true. I am to be married in just over two weeks. (To Sharif Basha) (p.243, 251).

The progress step made by Anna to get into another marriage after Edward's death is a sign of healing. She breaks the bondage of limits to explore other available opportunities to continue with her life. She goes through this by confiding in a fellow female friend in whom she finds encouragement.

In the same attitude, full of energy, Anna writes to her confidant Caroline. Thus the use of letters becomes the mode of communication which these three friends use to maintain their cordial relationship that has been separated physically by time and distance. Amal Al-Ghamrawi through the use of her memoirs and journals "weaves and tells her story, recording them depending on Anna's, as if she was urging her to tell history from her point of view" (Bishara, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This paper has elucidated how female characters find healing through sharing their painful experiences from two novels by two different women authors. Through the feminist literary lens the study has illustrated how sisterhood, friendship and mutual trust create unbreakable bonding which helps in healing during despicable moments of oppression, tyranny and patriarchy. Through *So Long a Letter* and *The Map of Love* the reader is invited to critical gender issues of inequality that must be confronted by victims' assertion and unity of purpose. Ramatoulaye narrates the painful stories of betrayal, desertion and marital annulment that are experienced by herself, Aissatou, Jacqueline and other women in that society. Through these narrations, the women gain strength and ideas on how to overcome their misfortunes. Similarly Amal, Anna, Isabel and Leyla who get to know each other and share their experiences through journals, letters, diaries and face to face conversations find healing and rest in sharing. These women, though separated by time and distance learn from each other's experiences and find healing from their emotional and psychological turmoil through friendship and sisterhood.

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