

# Comparing the polygamous marriages in so long a letter essay



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Comparing the Polygamous Marriages in So Long a Letter BY raja2793 the differences among the polygamous marriages in So Long a Letter. I think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences. In return for the ephemeral joys of change, I am sure you are motivated by love, a love that existed well before your marriage and that fate has not been able to satisfy. " I think this quotation captures the true essence of the novel and represents the central conflict.

Two of the plot lines in Mariama B's So Long a Letter revolve around the effect of polygamy. The issue of polygamy also remains one of the central issues in the book. In a letter which is written to her friend Aissatou B, Ramatoulaye Fall describes how her husband decides to take a second wife Binetou. In the course of the novel Ramatoulaye also remembers the circumstances which led to Aissatou eventually seeking divorce from her husband Mawdo B. So Long a Letter aptly describes the grievances and the sorrows felt by women who are bound in polygamous marriages.

The novel gives several examples of women undergoing this situation; however I will be focusing on the differences among the polygamous marriages of Ramatoulaye and Modou Fall, and Mawdo and Aissatou B. It is quite evident from the beginning of the novel, of the close friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. It shows that their association is not a new one and that their friendship has survived their youth and hence strengthened over time. " We walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present".

This signifies the growth of their friendship over time, and that even after such a long time their friendship remains intact; they both have someone who they can count on, who they can truly count as a friend. Even after they both matured their lives “ developed in parallel”, they experienced the “ tiffs and reconciliations of married life”, and in all senses Ramatoulaye and Aissatou led very similar lives. Each woman sought to marry for love but was tipped up by tradition.

Aissatou because her husband follows the directions of his mother as the “ knocks and disappointments of life have weakened her heart”, and Ramatoulaye because her husband manipulated the laws of Islam to satisfy his lust born of a mid-life crisis. So Long a Letter speaks about three different polygamous marriages; however one of the main differences between these marriages is the motives of entering a polygamous marriage. The experiences of the co-wives also drastically differ, and finally the decisions the wives reach also differs largely.

Mariama Bâ speaks eloquently against polygamy in her novel , however the differences among these polygamous marriages is a good tool of understanding Senegalese culture post independence as a whole. It is first necessary for one to understand the kind of relationships which Ramatoulaye and Aissatou shared with their husbands. Ramatoulaye married Modou by choice; it was not hindered by their parents even though her mother found him “ too handsome, too polished, and too perfect for a man”. Ramatoulaye knew that first sight that “ he was during the holidays” strengthened in her with his intelligence and sensitivity.

All in all Ramatoulaye truly loved Modou; she was entirely captivated and enchanted by him. Then came the marriage of Aissatou with Mawdo Bα , their marriage was one which was frowned upon by the people as well as the family of Mawdo , it was seen as an insult towards the mother of Mawdo as Aissatou did not share the nobility of her in laws . However Mawdo was different, in this case he did not give into customs and “ remained firm. Marriage is a personal thing, he retorted to anyone who cared to hear”. Mawdo raised Aissatou up to his own level; he was the son of a princess whereas Aissatou was the child of the forges.

His mother’s rejection did not frighten him. In both cases, we can see that the relationships at least at the start were happy ones , both couples seemed content with their lives. Modou was steadily gaining reputation and climbing up the social ladder, and Mawdo remained as loving as ever toward Aissatou. However, these relationships eventually changed, however the reasons behind these changes varied, this is one fact that Ramatoulaye recognized. But unlike in your own case, the source was not my family in law. The problem was rooted in Modou himself, my husband”.

The novel clearly shows that Modou is breaking the customs of Islamic faith, in taking a second wife. Even though the act of polygamy is one which is very common among the followers of the Islamic faith, his decision to break all contact with his family is what destroys Ramatoulaye. I can argue that rather than the fact that even though Ramatoulaye extensively condemns polygamy through the novel her real grief is with the total abandonment which she feels because of her husband. Ramatoulaye always knew that Modou was “ Interested in the pair” however she was never worried.

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In both cases, the coming of the co-wife comes as a complete shock to both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Ramatoulaye decides that she loves her husband too much to break away from him. She follows the customs of Islamic faith in keeping with her husband, "Leave again start again at zero after living twenty-five years with one man, after having borne twelve children?". This paints the conflict within Ramatoulaye's mind, however in the end she realizes that she just may not have the strength within herself to break away from her husband.

She had prepared herself for "Equal sharing", however she never really got the chance to share her husband as he decided to completely abandon her. It is the old story she says, after twenty-five years of marriage Modou desired a "newer model", or as Ramatoulaye says she was exchanged "like a worn of boubou". Ramatoulaye puts down the reason for his betrayal toward the age of her body "My stomach protruded from beneath the wrapper that hid the calves developed by the impressive number of kilometers walked since the beginning of my existence.

Suckling had robbed my breasts of their round firmness. I could not delude myself: youth was deserting my body." In contrast, Binetou is "incontestably beautiful and desirable." As Ramatoulaye notes, "Her beauty shone, pure. Her shapely contours could not but be noticed." The intentions of Modou, in this case are completely for himself, to satisfy his lust, to fulfill his desire. Through her novel *Mariama B* also exposes the tendency of men, to offer justifications for even the most unjustifiable acts.

Modou in this case turns to religion he says that “ god intended him to have a second wife, that “ there is nothing he can do about it”. However upon reading the *Ramatoulaye* mother never seems to have trusted Modou in the first place The little we do get to know about Modou seems to suggest that he was very much concerned with physical appearances, he foolishly spend money to show that he “ lived it up”, he even mortgaged the house in which *Ramatoulaye* lived in to pay for the new “ SICAP” villa.

*Ramatoulaye* also makes it very clear to the reader that it is only the “ spiteful” people who believed that Modou sold out the workers he represented as a trade union leader, even though *Ramatoulaye* provides a very real picture on Senegalese culture and her own life, I think in this case it can be argued that she may be a biased observer . Of what we know about Modou, his need for money, and to show off could have driven him to become a corrupt person. It is quite possible that he did quell “ the trade union revolt” to become the technical adviser in the Ministry of Public Works.

We can draw a parallel here that he abandoned his workers in the same way that he abandoned *Ramatoulaye* for a “ newer model”. In this case, we see that Modou has no regrets, Modou doesn't seem to care about how *Ramatoulaye* reacts to their separation, he never bothers to even inform him about the taking of Binetou as his second wife himself. The abandonment of his kids and his wife, do not seem to weigh down upon his conscience, he emotionally and physically detached himself from his first household, and I think that is what hurt *Ramatoulaye* the most that their twenty five years of marriage mean such little to him.

This is completely contrasting to how Aissatou's separation eventually pans out. From the get go, the reader is made aware of the difference in nobility between Aissatou and her husband Mawdo " a Toucouleur marrying a goldsmiths daughter ? He will never make money', it is this difference in their social standing which becomes the root cause for their separation. According to Aissatou Mawdo's family in law " looked down on me from the height of their lost nobility'. It is this " height of lost nobility' because of which Mawdo's mother plotted her revenge against Aissatou.

This thirst for revenge led Aunty Nabou to take young Nabou under her wing; her aunty never missed an opportunity to remind her of her " royal origin". Aunty Nabou then confronted Mawdo, telling him to take Young Nabou as his wife, otherwise she would " never get over it", and using emotional blackmail upon her son she ended up destroying the marriage of Aissatou. Aissatou then decides to divorc© him soon after she found out that she now had a co-wife in the shape of young Nabou.

Hence the reader can clearly see that this marriage took place due to family obligations, the daughter of a goldsmith Aissatou had never won the approval of Aunty Nabou. Aissatou's reaction to this betrayal is completely contrasting to that of Ramatoulaye; she decides to break with her husband, to abolish the traditions and customs. She then decides to leave Africa together and move to America to work in the Senegalese embassy. Unlike Modou, Mawdo responds very differently to entering a polygamous relationship.