



## Gender Inequality in *So Long a Letter*, *Blossoms of the Savannah*, and *A Crooked Rib*

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### Abstract

This paper examines three African novels: *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, *Blossoms of the Savannah* by Henry Ole Kulet, and Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* as a way of focusing on and uncovering the major issues of gender inequality, forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and unequal access to education. The article demonstrates ways each novel reflects the inequalities due to patriarchal societies using qualitative textual analysis. The study is guided by social and radical feminist literary theories. *So Long a Letter* depicts patriarchal oppression through a polygamous Muslim culture, dysfunctional marriages, oppressive inheritance practices, and bold female characters driven by ambitions to seek independence through education. In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, FGM and arranged marriages of the Maasai and criticised by the heroines who refuse circumcision and refuse to get married because they want to get access to universally beneficial education. On the other hand, in *From a Crooked Rib*, Somali women are represented as a commodity who are married forcefully, exposed to FGM, and denied access to education. This is a symbol that inequality is evident in the texts, and the communities do not enable them to gain autonomy. The analysis was based on the African feminist theory, which stresses the colonial roots of patriarchal standards and a radical feminist argument that rejects domination by men. Moreover, the article exemplifies the condition in which tradition and modernity entrap women on the margins, and it highlights education as one of the means of empowerment.

### Introduction

Gender refers to the social identity and opportunities that are associated with being either male or female. It describes a person's sexual identification according to nature. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023) defines gender as the unique characteristics that distinguish a person as male or female. These characteristics vary from society to society and can be altered. Gender inequality refers to the state of being unequal to the other person based on gender. (UNESCO, 2003). It is caused by discrimination and harassment by one gender against another, leading to a state of inequality. It affects all societies, specifically in Africa. Most African cultures are patriarchal, which promotes male superiority, leaving many women at the mercy of men. Gender inequality is a persistent problem all over the world that can be traced back to patriarchal social organisations. Retrogressive customs such as child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are practised in many countries around the world and violate the rights of girls and women. For example, more than 230 million girls and women have been subjected to FGM worldwide, with the highest prevalence



occurring in Africa. Child marriage is a type of forced marriage, which affects over twelve million girls annually, making them drop out of school and denying them a chance to mature. In sub-Saharan Africa, one in every three women marries before 18 years, while girls are less likely to receive any formal education. These figures highlight the real lives that African writers touch on in their books.

African feminist critics contend that colonial legacies and conservative cultural practices augment patriarchy in most African societies. According to Oyèrónkó Oyèwùmí, the perception that women are owned and controlled by men is strengthened by colonialism and cultures of impunity that are reinforced in patriarchal societies. These efforts helped bring about the emergence of African feminisms that address the realities of women on the continent, emphasising their control over their bodies and lives. Radical feminist theory points to patriarchy as the form of dominance in which men hold mainstream institutions and are kept on a pedestal. By using these frameworks to analyse African novels, scholars are in a better position to appreciate how fictional women experience gender inequality (Oyèwùmí, 1997).

This article reviewed gender inequality in *So Long a Letter* (Bâ, 1980), *Blossoms of the Savannah* (Kulet, 1996), and *From a Crooked Rib* (Farah, 1970). It focused on the three themes of forced marriage, FGM and educational barriers for women. All these novels are set in postcolonial African societies, where women fight against cultures and laws that oppress them. Several questions guided the article: What do these writings portray about forced marriage, FGM, and lack of access to education for women? What do they tell us from a feminist perspective? Through close textual analysis and feminist literary criticism, the paper identifies the similarities and differences in the way the issues are addressed in works of literature. It thus situates the novels within the broader context of discussions on African patriarchy and women's rights.

### **Literature Review**

Interpretations of these novels have been heavily focused on their feminist aspects. Criticism of polygamy has made *So Long a Letter* a widely studied work. According to Christopher Miller, Bâ's epistolary format offers a depiction of the state of women in Western African society. The friendship between the two protagonists, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, is highlighted in mainstream analysis as a manifestation of feminine agency. In the article *Polygamy in So Long a Letter: A Misunderstood Concept*, Ouarodima posits that "it is ignorance, not the Islamic law itself, that drives patriarchy and education is its liberating force." Other critics have discussed the conflation of Islam and feminism in the novel, observing how Ramatoulaye can assert a measure of autonomy as a religious duty. (Miller, 1990; Ouarodima, 2023)

*Blossoms of the Savannah* by Henry Ole Kulet has been under-represented in scholarly circles worldwide because it focuses on the Maasai and the plight of women in the region. The novel won the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature (Kenya, 2009) because it uses the voice of women to broach both the marginalisation of women and the practice of female genital mutilation. In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, the heroine Resian is against an arranged marriage; she refuses circumcision and, together with her sister, flees so that the patriarchy does not control them. In the novel, the Maasai women argue about FGM and forced marriage, depicting conflict between the old norms and new education. (Kulet, 2007).

According to Bilal Ahmad Dar (2017), the novel by Farah criticises the Somalian patriarchal society because it portrays women as slaves of predatory marriages. There are also accusations that Farah has unwaveringly described FGM: one peripheral character, Ebla, narrates some grotesque infibulation in graphic detail. This is in line with the other works, which Farah is directly against FGM as part of his feminist critique. The novels demonstrate that even Western education does not inoculate men against



patriarchy: the character Awill, an employee of colonial authorities, despite his education, rapes and tries to make Ebla submit to him.

This article attempted to conduct a systematic study of forced marriage, FGM, and education obstacles with the help of feminist theoretical approaches to enhance the comprehension of the texts.

### **Methodology**

This paper applies textual qualitative analysis. It employs three novels, focusing on feminist literary criticism, as the analysis method. In each text, a detailed and in-depth reading was done to detect the signs of forced marriage, FGM, and restriction of education for women. The selection of these themes was done because they are significant aspects in the novels and answer the research questions.

### **Findings**

The study found evidence of gender inequality in the three texts. These were: forced marriages, female genital mutilation and education barriers. In the three novels, forced marriage, FGM, and lack of education are portrayed as tools of oppression and exploitation in various cultural settings. All the main characters are oppressed by their societies due to their gender. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou face inequality due to Islamic polygamous structures, Resian and Taiyo face the challenge of FGM and early marriages. They are denied the opportunity to receive an education by their parents. Ebla, on the other hand, is faced with two arranged marriages to older men.

The three novels reveal that in Islam and the native traditions, men take possession of women through the excuse of culture or religion. These power structures are shown to have been maintained by the patriarchal customs, as demonstrated by the three novels. The men are given the power, and they use it to stomp on women and deny them their rights.

Patriarchy, a theme highlighted by radical feminist theory, is critiqued in these novels. Farah claims that marriage is social slavery; it resembles radical arguments on male dominance, according to which patriarchy is a wholesome system that keeps male dominance intact. In the same regard, coerced marriage and inherited marriage in *So Long a Letter* are illustrations of a patriarchal institution that aims at ensuring that property and women remain part of the male lineage.

Overall, these novels show that there is gender inequality in our societies due to a complex patriarchy. The way female characters organise themselves against this inequality indicates that they are not admitting defeat; they are finding ways to resist, such as pursuing education and standing by each other. It confirms the earlier feminist works, which have identified gender disparities in our societies, demonstrating that there are ways to address this issue. This way, they complement feminist theory, and it can be seen that they also illustrate the theory by showcasing it in the plot and by refuting the idea that the female body is a property, as well as by defining women's ability to choose what to do and when to marry.

### **Discussions**

#### ***Forced Marriage***

Patriarchy occurs through forced marriage, arranged marriage, or child marriage. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye's agency is ignored by marital arrangements. Her husband leaves her emotionally and financially crippled without support. He secretly marries a teenage schoolgirl, Binetou, who becomes her co-wife. The brother-in-law, Tamsir, anticipates inheriting Ramatoulaye as a widow, in line with customary wife inheritance practices. She is tired of the oppression she has gone through in Modou's hands, and she decides to speak for herself. "Did you ever have any affection for your brother? Already you want to build a new home for yourself over a body that is still warm. While we are praying for Modou, you are thinking of future wedding festivities." (p.58). Ramatoulaye shows that women are



strong and can fight societal expectations. She refuses to be added to the list of his wives. According to the Qur'an, a Muslim man can marry up to four wives as long as he can take care of them, but Tamsir has three, and they have to work so that they can support their children. She also declines another offer, this time a more decent one, from Daouda Dieng. He also wants to marry her without even giving her a chance to heal. He sees her as something he can own.

Daba's friend, Binetou, is compelled by her family to abandon her education and marry Modou Fall to gain financial benefits. *So Long a Letter*, therefore, illustrates how social norms restrict women from becoming wives.

In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, the reader encounters forced marriage as described by the Maa people. Resian is betrothed to Oloisudori, a relatively old and criminal man. He is her father's age-mate and already has six wives. Her parents betrothed her because he is wealthy. They don't care about Resian's wishes; they are greedy and see her as a commodity. The repetition of the fact that Maasai girls are married off according to specific principles makes this novel particularly impactful: the narrator provides an example of Maasai girls, such as Ole Supeyo's daughters, who have been circumcised and married to highly respected elders to strengthen social bonds, whereas their brothers attend school up to university level. Resian's sister, Taiyo, is also bound by an arranged marriage, chosen by her father. When Resian refuses to marry Oloisudori and runs away from home, she is tricked into an arranged marriage to a junior Moran. She has to be rescued from Esoit by Joseph Parmuat with help from Minik Ene Nkoitoi's people.

In *From a Crooked Rib*, forced marriage is shown to be endemic to Somalia. The heroine, Ebla, narrates being betrothed at 18 years to a 48-year-old man called Giumaleh by her grandfather. She is being exchanged with camels, and this is not her choice. She escapes to Belet Wene, where she soon realises that her cousin has planned to marry her off to a man who has tuberculosis to pay his debt. She admits that she has just run from one arranged marriage into another. Since she does not want to be married to a sick man, she decides to marry Awill and run away with him to Mogadiscio. Marrying Awill was a way to save herself and liberate herself, but she soon realised that Awill was also a horrible man. She talks about marriage as a prison: she says that marriage is an oppressive agency, and she is a subject of oppression. It suffocates women and takes their voice. Ebla is a depiction of a Somali girls who have no choice in their marriage partner, and her attempts to escape try to straighten the rib that is said to be crooked. Awill rapes her and does not even care if he hurts her. He then leaves her, travels to Paris, and begins a relationship with another woman. The narrator says, "From experience, she knew girls were material just like objects or items on the shelves in a shop. They were sold and bought, just as shepherds sold their goats in the marketplace or shop owners sold goods to their customers." (p. 86) Farah reflects the Somali marriage contracts as completely corrupted; women are considered as objects of sexual gratification and breeding machines. The main idea that Bilal Dar (2017) stresses is that in the novel, Somali women who are traded in forced unions are vulnerable and prone to abuse by their husbands, and this is seen in the story of Ebla. By highlighting such inhumane dynamics, the story that Farah, Kulet and Mariama wrote concurs with the radical feminist theories that in a marriage system ruled by the patriarchy, the women are set up as social slaves. They are denied their voice and have unequal opportunities in society.

These findings agree with Miller's assertion that polygamy is a point of gender inequality in *So Long a Letter*. It also agrees with Bilal, who believes that marriage is a predatory system that oppresses women. The analysis extends beyond merely illustrating the extent of gender inequality in the three books; it also demonstrates that women have begun their journey toward self-liberation. The three texts show that forced marriage has been used to oppress women, as previous literature has realised. (Miller, 1990; Bilal, 2017)



### ***Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)***

FGM also comes into the spotlight of the novels as a violent cultural practice that stamps patriarchy through the manipulation of female bodies. It is the circumcision of women which has been demonised globally. FGM has been condemned as an abuse of women's human rights throughout the world, and especially in Africa, where it has long-term impacts, both physical and mental. In *From a Crooked Rib*, Ebla talks about it when she is in Mogadiscio. She sees a young girl just after circumcision, which reminds her of her ordeal years earlier. She believes circumcision is a barbaric rite that needs to end. She wonders, "Are there any people in this world who are not circumcised?" (p.146). During her circumcision, they sliced her clitoris and stitched her lips, leaving only a small inlet for short calls. They tied her legs together and laid her flat without a mattress." If a girl screamed too much, they tucked a piece of cloth into her wound." (p.146) From this, we can see that the rite was barbaric. Ebla sees this rite as an oppression of women that needs to end. She pities the young girl but hopes that this will come to an end someday. FGM has been legally prohibited since 2011 in Somalia, but the law is not thoroughly followed. Women are still going through it and getting lifelong complications, too.

In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, FGM is a serious conflict. When Resian and Taiyo moved to Nasila, they realised that they had been ushered to a community that practised the archaic rite. The novel is very critical of FGM. The practice started because Iralinkon warriors were taking advantage of women's instincts to harass them and their daughters sexually. The modern woman is saying no to this rite as it is no longer necessary. A vagabond harasses the two girls because they are not circumcised. A girl in Nasila has to undergo the rite to be considered a woman. After the homecoming ceremony, Ole Kaelo asks Mama Milanoi to prepare the girls for circumcision. Resian believes that even though women started circumcision, it's all men's fault because, even though the war ended, the men in the modern Nasila community still want to marry a woman who has gone through the rite. This is because circumcised women are stoic and never say no to their husbands.

Nabaru helps Resian vow to resist, and helps her escape circumcision the second time, she meets her role model, Minik, Ene Nkoitai. Her sister, however, is unable to escape the blade of Enkamuratani. Resian learns later that Taiyo has been tricked into circumcision in a village called Esoit. She was tricked because most of the time, girls do not give consent to circumcision. Her mother told her Resian needed her in Esoit, and Taiyo follows them blindly. She is circumcised and was almost married off before Parmuat exposed the story to Minik and helped her people rescue her. Nabaru sees the plight of the girls and understands the evil that the rite emits to the girls; she realises that this is a retrogressive rite, and if Enkamuratani stops circumcising more girls, then the rite will be over.

Overall, *Blossoms of the Savannah* and *From a Crooked Rib* show that circumcision causes intense suffering to women. It agrees with Bilal that circumcision is a horrible practice meant to cause women harm. (Dar, 2017). Our findings also show that women can resist and find ways to empower themselves through education, a strategy that past literature has found to be successful. They also support Oyèwùmí, who says that women have no right to choose what happens to their bodies. (Oyèwùmí, 1997)

### ***Educational Barriers***

In all three novels, the issue of women's empowerment is emphasised through education or its deprivation. In *So Long a Letter*, the two friends, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, are educated. Aissatou is a university graduate. After her husband, Madwo Bâ, picks a second wife, she divorces him. She can take care of her children because of her education.

On the other hand, Ramatoulaye is a schoolteacher. When her husband takes a second wife, she can take care of her twelve children because she is educated. When she pays the bills, she often notices



that she is the only woman in the queue. This is because most women in the region lack education, so men typically lead the households and pay the bills.

Younger characters, such as Binetou, are denied the opportunity to receive an education. We see how Binetou is coerced into a marriage. She stops going to school, leaving her education behind. Her family push her because Modou is rich and he promises to take care of them. Explicitly, the narrator regrets the practice of child marriage as it discontinues her education, which becomes a detriment to her prospects. In this way, the novel is an illustration of a gendered gap where boys get to universities, whereas girls stop studying to be married. Her life takes a very different turn from that of her friend Daba, as she can get an education and a job later on. Binetou is at the mercy of her husband and is widowed at a very young age.

*Blossoms of the Savannah* is more straightforward in its approach to education. Instead of going through the traditional rites, Resian dreams of visiting Egerton University in Nakuru. She says, "I do not want to work at a shop. I want to return to Nakuru and join Egerton University. I want to take a course in veterinary science and become a veterinary doctor. I want to read everything that can be read and put on the graduation regalia at the end of the four years. Yes, I like to be called Dr Resian Kaelo." (p. 4). Her sister also wants to get a university education, so she can help Minik, their mentor, to empower more girls in their community. The two girls represent modern women in Africa who understand the value of education and will stop at nothing to get it. They try to convince their father to take them to Egerton University so that they can realise their dreams. Resian and Taiyo are not allowed to attend school, and their mother does not speak on their behalf because she follows her husband blindly. She contributes to denying the girls a chance to go to school by keeping quiet.

According to *From a Crooked Rib*, the problem of education is not straightforward. Somali girls' schooling does not form a significant part of the plot, but the novel makes an indirect reference to it. Ebla herself, a peasant, has no formal education to take her anywhere; her solution is marriage. She runs away to Mogadiscio with Awill. He is a man who is educated and works in the colonial service. In Mogadiscio, instead of showing compassion to her, Awill commences to exercise his brute virility on Ebla on their first night together. He rapes and violates her, illustrating that Western forms of education, through colonial institutions, did not change his patriarchal mentality. He is still possessive and sees Ebla as a commodity. Ebla, on the other hand, has no say because she has no education. She has no way to resist. Her lack of education makes her vulnerable to men like Awill. Even after she remarries Tiffo, another educated man, he continues to treat her poorly because she lacks empowerment. Therefore, all three novels suggest that there may still be some tolerance of patriarchal culture, even among those who are educated.

According to Chekerer, the woman who has access to education plays an active role in societal development and cannot be compared with those who did not attend school, who merely stand by as change happens. Education helps them challenge the injustices. (Chekerer, 2014).

This agrees with UNESCO, an organisation which believes there are gender inequalities in our societies. Women who were unable to access education were not empowered and had limited options. It also aligns with Chekerer, who believes that education is a means to give women their voice. This means stakeholders should do everything possible to ensure that women in Africa and around the world can access education. (UNESCO 2003, Chekerer, 2014).



## Conclusion

The analysis of the three novels, *So Long a Letter*, *Blossoms of the Savannah*, and *From a Crooked Rib*, shows that forced marriage, FGM, and educational deprivation are salient points of patriarchal expression of the chosen African realities. The subjugation of women by the practices is depicted in each novel. They foreground women's agency and chances of saying no to these inequalities. Mariama Bâ show how polygamy and forced second marriages in Senegal can be put into question by female kinship and calls to justice; they are archaic and unnecessary. They hurt women and deny them a chance to grow. Ramatoulaye's life is greatly affected by polygamy as she is left to take care of twelve children alone. Her society hates her because they expect her to accept a second marriage, something she does not believe in. Henry Ole Kulet portrays the rites of Masai culture as instruments of oppression in Kenya, but his heroines escape and seek an education. In Somalia, Nuruddin Farah portrays marriage and FGM as naked assertions by men to take charge and oppress women.

Through his main character's plight, we learn how complex the situation is for girls in Somalia and that no matter the situation, girls can resist and gain their independence. In conclusion, these texts highlight the existence of gender inequality in one society, emphasising the need for action. Further reading will reveal that there are tools available to create a better world for both genders. Such an analysis, through the lens of feminist theory, shows the social role of African women's writing as a form of social criticism.

This study recommends that further research be conducted to investigate the reasons behind the gender disparity in Africa and globally. This will enable stakeholders to find ways to address this issue and ensure gender equality in all societies.

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