



A Critical Analysis of Resistance towards Gender Inequality in Selected African Novels

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Abstract

This article explores the various ways of resistance to gender inequality as revealed in three major African novels: *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, *Blossoms of the Savannah* by Henry Ole Kulet, and *From a Crooked Rib* by Nuruddin Farah. Using a comparative approach and feminist theory, the paper demonstrated how each of them occurs and subverts the patriarchal norms regarding character agency, education, physical autonomy, and defying culture. The study made a lot of reference to African, radical, and postcolonial feminist theories. This analysis outlines the many liberating tactics of the various characters in the chosen texts. The three texts attempt to fight for balance between men and women and find their place in society. The chosen novels depict a budding African feminist consciousness. The women revolt against established gender roles by finding their voice and becoming aware of who they are. They are courageous and struggle until they get their freedom. The article portrays that if women fight for their rights, they can reverse the strict patriarchal structures in our societies and also enjoy equality in society. They will also be role models to girls and women in African societies and globally because they give them tips on how they can resist cases of gender inequality in their respective societies.

Introduction

Literary texts have been a productive ground for investigating the relationship between gender, tradition, and power in postcolonial African societies. The three foundational novels for this research, *So Long a Letter* (Bâ, 1981), *Blossoms of the Savannah* (Kulet, 2009), and *From a Crooked Rib* (Farah, 1970), were chosen because they feature women characters who are at the forefront of the fight against gender inequality. They come from societies that are patriarchal and oppress women, but they rise and take a stand.

This article presents a comparative study of the three novels, aiming to shed light on the literary processes and themes reflected in the works, which highlight women's resistance. The investigation aligns with feminist thinking because it contributes to feminist literary theory by demonstrating how literature serves as a means of resistance against gender inequality. Literature not only portrays social and cultural realities, but it also catalyses social change. It starts the conversation on how women's rights are denied and how they can be empowered.

African feminist scholars argue that any discussion of gender resistance should account for cultural specificities that shape women's experiences (Mama, 1995). This study adopts an intersectional approach to examine how societal and cultural issues, such as class, education, and socio-economic status, influence the forms of resistance women use.



Literature Review

Gender studies of African literature in postcolonial times stress the point that although colonial backgrounds influence how cultures are organised socially, patriarchy is still a leading benchmark of oppression across cultures. Men have the power to do as they wish, while women are expected to do what men want. Meagher defines patriarchy as the rule of a father. (Meagher, 2011). The fact that a man has been placed on a pedestal gives him the right to control and oppress a woman. The postcolonial feminist theory also focuses on the impact of such colonial structures on gendered norms.

So Long a Letter is written as a series of personal letters that allows Ramatoulaye to give herself the narrative agency with which to critique Senegalese polygamous norms and rebuild. Similarly, *Blossoms of Savannah* symbolises women who seek emancipation in the form of education, to resist forced and arranged marriage and female genital mutilation. On the other hand, in "*From a Crooked Rib*," the author portrays a young woman trying to fight for her independence in a society that oppresses her.

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is a work of feminist consideration. With Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as core protagonists, the novel acts as a means of criticising patriarchal structures in Senegal. Mariama explains that women's inferiority and their power are the central themes of the story. She portrays the place of a woman in the Senegalese society, and all the issues she is facing due to inequality are primarily caused by patriarchy. Patriarchy concentrates power in the hands of men. He works and provides for the family, while his wife stays home to raise the kids and keep the house clean. (Gordon, 1996). This is what is expected of women, which is a way of oppressing them. In addition, Olaleru (2025) argues that what Ramatoulaye and Aissatou do in the novel helps rescue them as victims of a highly patriarchal society and helps to reverse the established male-female power relationship. Friendship, as depicted in *So Long a Letter*, is based on mutual empowerment, in the sense that even the act of writing the letter, by Ramatoulaye, leads her to self-discovery and a new life.

In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, Kulet gives attention to the way Maasai women are denied their rights. He shows how retrogressive practices affect women and how they deny them a chance to thrive. Critics typically focus on education as the most liberating aspect of the novel. Simwa (2021) explains that *Blossoms* is illustrative of female characters who are involved in the fight against male hegemony in the Maasai community. Simwa reveals in her analysis that the central conflict in the novel is a strange socio-cultural struggle between the liberal daughters and their father, who wishes his daughters to be subjected to (FGM) and married off to old men. In short, negative literature about *Blossom* highlights education, sisterhood, and rebellion against Maasai patriarchy as authoritative styles of feminist resistance.

The novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, explores the feminist discourse in the Somali society. She argues that women are denied a chance to control their bodies and choose their marriage partners. Ebla fights this and finds her agency. She has friends like the old woman in Belet Wene and Asha in Mogadiscio who help her find and assert her independence. These forms of resistance help the women break free and find their freedom. Ebla's story can be summarised as one of male oppression of women. Still, in the Somali society, her story is described by Farah himself as being about a young African girl who the men in her family have denied her voice. Odinye (2019) evaluated *From a Crooked Rib* using a feminist lens, and he explains that when Ebla runs away from an arranged marriage, it is a rebellious move against patriarchal forms of oppression. It is a way to liberate herself from a society that sees her as a commodity.

The three novels come together to show how women are oppressed and how they are liberating themselves from the constraints of gender inequality. They find friends who hold them together, working, getting an education and finding their independence. They are agents of change in our



societies, and without them, women globally would still think it is okay to be oppressed and exploited. Wodak believes that men and women should have equal rights, and no one should be treated differently. (Wodak, 2005).

This review provides the basis for understanding how African literature portrays women's resistance to gender inequality. It helps the researcher understand that women can use themes such as female solidarity, narrative autonomy and pursuit of education to assert their independence. Critics have demonstrated how these themes are reflected in society, but none have compared their manifestations across different African cultures. This article addresses this gap by comparing the ways women resist gender inequality in three African societies, which will help expand the views of feminist criticism theory.

Methodology

This article integrates qualitative and comparative analysis of three literary works: *So Long a Letter*, *Blossoms of the Savannah* and *From a Crooked Rib*. The study conducted an intensive close reading of the texts, paying attention to narrative voice, character development, and significant plot developments that shed light on gender relations in the societies. The analysis is presented in a thematic order according to the novel, with a comparative discussion offered to show the similar patterns that appear in the three works.

Findings

The research revealed various ways women resist gender inequality in the selected texts. These include narrative agency, female solidarity and friendship, the search for education, cultural defiance, bodily autonomy, and the pursuit of independence. In addition, the researcher has used in-text citation in this section to connect the empirical observation to the existing knowledge. They demonstrate that the current information aligns fully with past research, highlighting areas of divergence and subtle differences in interpretation.

Narrative agency and female solidarity in So Long a Letter by Mariama Bâ

So Long a Letter by Mariama Bâ is an epistolary novel written by Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye is writing the letters after the death of her husband, Modou Fall, who had taken a new wife and abandoned her and their twelve children. The fact that Mariama chose to use a letter technique is a mode of empowerment. It gives Ramatoulaye a voice to air her challenges as a Senegalese woman and her intimate desires. She breaks the code of silence and speaks out about what has been going on. She is a voice to the widows and women in polygamous marriages who are meant to be quiet. She refuses to submit and decides to give her view on polygamy and wife inheritance.

This type of narrative agency enables her and her friend to challenge cultural stereotyping and subvert power relations. It gives them the power to find their place in society, and they can act as a testimony that resistance is possible.

When her husband dies, two men vie for her hand in marriage: her brother-in-law and her friend. She rejected both men because she believes she is not a property to be passed around. She is mourning her husband, and no one should force her into marriage.

When Aissatou writes to her husband, Madwo, for a divorce, her letter serves as a testament to her husband's betrayal and a form of resistance, utilising the power of speech. When she learns that her husband, Mawdo Bâ, has married another woman, she decides to fight back. She refuses to be in a polygamous marriage. She decides to leave her husband and start afresh. She took her chances and decided to follow her dreams. She studies and gets a well-paying job in New York.



The two women can work together to fight and deal with these challenges (Chekerer, 2014). They display solidarity with one another. They offer a listening ear, a way to cleanse the soul from all they are going through. When Aissatou learns that her friend is struggling to transport her children around, she helps her out and gets her a car. Ramatoulaye learn how to drive so she can get more independent. This is evidence of how friendship can nullify patriarchal structures.

In addition, the novel incorporates feminist commentary on the larger socio-political level. This is seen when Ramatoulaye mentions the burden on women imposed by the patriarchal organisations of the society and unequal work. Ramatoulaye questions Daouda about why there were only four out of 100 deputies in the national assembly. She says that women are left behind in politics due to the oppressive structures and believes women should have equal representation in the government, too. She also challenges the traditional narrative that a woman is expected to stay at home. She hires nannies and works as a teacher in the school. She juggles between work and taking care of her children.

These findings are consistent with Chekerer because we can see that the two women have been able to empower themselves using the friendship they hold dear. They can sustain themselves using this bond, but it does not change the fact that societies will always oppress women.

Search for education, female friendship and cultural defiance in Blossoms of the Savannah by Henry Ole Kulet

In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, Kulet explores the struggles of women between resisting education and having the freedom to choose what they do with their bodies. These two are tools of liberation given to women in a rural Maasai setting. The main characters of the novel are teenage sisters, Resian and Taiyo, who are faced with their fathers' desire to marry them off to wealthy men. They are also faced with the fear of circumcision, a rite that is practised commonly in the Masai land.

After their move from Nakuru to Nasila, they are ushered into a community filled with patriarchal pressures. They value education and see it as the only means to escape these archaic practices. Resian, particularly, can be seen as a symbol of resistance. She disputes with the community elders and family members over the issue of women's oppression, and she challenges the Maasai value that women should not speak and should be submissive. She is angry that the men sit and wait as women serve them. She believes that men should also serve women, as both are equal. She thinks a woman can do more than just serve a man.

Yeiyoy Bottor complains about the unbecoming behaviours of Resian and suggests that she should be circumcised to make her stoic. According to Koskey, some women have accepted patriarchy as the norm. Resian's mother and her aunt chide her when she challenges the Nasilian Patriarchal norms. They want her to be quiet and submissive, but Resian will hear none of it. (Koskey, 2023)

She is not willing to accept mistreatment without speaking out. She challenges the patriarchy in the Maasai through repudiating FGM, a ritual that the Maasai people practice. Even when she and her sisters are accosted and demonised for not being circumcised, she still holds on and resists. The decision of Resian redefines the status of women in that society because she has demonstrated that it is worth pursuing an education even for the Maasai girls.

When she learns that her father plans to marry her off to Oloisudori, she refuses to marry him. She ran to Inkiito, where she finds herself facing another arranged marriage. Olarinkoi tries to rape her because he thinks she is helpless, but she resists. She bites his thumb so much so that he is unable to take her pride. Even when Resian is hopeless, she resists. Finally, with the help of Nabaru she can escape and is safely handed to her mentor, Minik Ene Nkoitoi.



Taiyo, the older sister, also demonstrates defiance but with some internal contradictions. She becomes angry upon learning that she cannot be with her love interest, Joseph Parmuat, because they come from the same clan. She decides to confront him and confesses her feelings. She says that she doesn't care about a culture that does not care about her. She is ready to fight for her feelings because she does not understand why the Nasila community stops her from being with someone from a different family.

Taiyo is rescued after she is forcefully circumcised and reunited with Resian at Ntare Naaju. By the end of the novel, the sisters have achieved success. They leave the community and begin their university education. By juxtaposing the modern desires of the girls with those of their society, the novel portrays patriarchy not as something set in stone, but rather as something women can overcome. If the two girls were able to overcome it, so can any woman in Africa and a global society. This can be related to the emphasis on radical feminism on the need to abolish male-dominated institutions, and African feminism's focus on education as a means to women's liberation.

Education can be used to empower oneself, as Simwa observed. (Simwa, 2021) Resian's desire to pursue education helped her escape forced marriages and circumcision. This finding shows that although some women are still left behind in the fight, as Koskey observes, the younger generation is taking the mantle and doing things right. (Koskey, 2023).

Bodily Autonomy, search for independence in From a Crooked Rib by Nuruddin Farah,

In "From a Crooked Rib" by Nuruddin Farah, we find that the life of the main character, an eighteen-year-old Somali girl named Ebla, is one of rebellion against the traditional authority of men. The novel opens with a scene in which Ebla refuses to enter a conventional marriage with a forty-eight-year-old man named Giumaleh. Ebla does not understand why women are not equal to men, yet they were both born after the same period. She is bitter with the fact that society is patriarchal, and women are constantly oppressed. The first act of resisting and reminding others of her existence is the act of running away from her clan to escape being exchanged with camels. She rejects the patriarchal commodification of women in the dramatic opening scene, whereby her protestation indicates that she does not want to be sold like an animal. She said Giumaleh is not a good match, and she ran away to Belet Wene.

In Belet Wene, she stays with her cousin, Gheddi and his wife, Aowralla. She soon learns that Gheddi plans to sell her to a sick man from the old woman living next door. She decides she cannot marry an ill man and plans to run away again with a young man called Awill to Mogadiscio.

In Mogadiscio, the life of Ebla is filled with challenges. She labours to save her dignity with her new husband, who does not respect her. He rapes her on their first night and does not even give her a chance to resist. He hits her and abuses her. Ebla is angry and questions him, but he says she is his wife. This shows that even though she resists, she is still at risk of being oppressed by a person she considers a husband.

When her husband leaves for Paris and she learns that he is seeing another girl, she resists. She marries a second man called Tiffo. She decides that if Awill can have another lady, so can she. By asserting a right to two spouses, Ebla violates the most fundamental gendered rules that women should be monogamous and submissive. Such a bold move identifies Ebla as a woman who rejects the traditional norms and decides to do what she feels is right for her.

Ebla's friendship with Asha also helps her. Asha protects her and feeds her when her husband leaves. She also arranges the marriage with Tiffo and protects her from Tiffo's wife when she tries to hurt her. When Asha realises that Tiffo was treating Ebla as a harlot, she does not hesitate to tell her. She tells



her that Tiffo should be treating her as a wife since she is his legal wife according to the Islam religion. (p. 142)

The decisions made by Ebla, unconventional though they become, ultimately seek reconciliation and peace in her life. By uniting the most radical form of personal rebellion with the intention of personal peace, the character of Ebla is an especially postcolonial feminist hero. She finds her voice and takes back her power. Ebla's bodily autonomy and refusal to be treated as a commodity to be priced by the men in her family fully align with the views of Okwokwo and Bilal. (Okwonkwo, 1984, Dar, 2017). The two believe that running is also a way of resisting.

Discussion

The three novels reflected several trends of resistance to gender inequality. The intersectionality of gender, culture, and tradition in the texts examined for this research reveals the complex and layered experiences of women's resistance in Africa and globally. First, search for education stands out as a tool of empowerment. Ramatoulaye, Resian, and Taiyo strive to get an education to liberate themselves. They open doors for economic empowerment. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye is a schoolteacher, and Aissatou seeks higher education; she now works at the Senegalese embassy in New York. This makes them self-reliant and helps them provide for their children when their marriages break. In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, Resian insists on pursuing university education, and she and her sister end up attending university, which changes the marital plans their father had made. Similarly, in *From a Crooked Rib*, Ebla has had only a limited education, but despite this, she remains devoted to improving her life. This echoes what Okonjo-Ogunyemi says, as the essence of women's struggle is to establish their needs and pursue a self-fulfilling life.

In addition, body autonomy is also a common point of conflict. Embodiment of patriarchy is the centrefold in each novel through the violation of women's bodies. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou lose their marriages to this as they refuse to be in a polygamous marriage. They refuse to be submissive and decide to start their life as single mothers. On the other hand, Resian and Taiyo are forced into a society that practices FGM and child arranged marriage. They reject this and decide to pursue education.

Furthermore, the stories of resistance can be tied to the critique of a conventional and social order. The three books compare female agency in a patriarchal society. *So Long a Letter* is a satire of Senegalese Islamic patriarchy, and it counters the practices that legitimise polygamy. *Blossoms of the Savannah* is a protest against the regressive rites that demean girls in the Maasai community. *From a Crooked Rib* points blame to the customs of the Somali clan that subjugates women and shows how men hide behind Islam to treat women as the other.

Each author makes it clear that women are exploited and oppressed by traditions and religion, and the patriarchal structures continue to enslave women. For instance, Ramatoulaye is a committed Muslim mourning her husband's death; she applies Islam to reproach men's hypocrisy when they decide to get more wives. Similarly, Ebla reflects on the Islamic teachings of equality, but her clan ignores it. It places men at the top, and they make all decisions in the home. On the other hand, Resian and Taiyo reflect on the oppression women face simply because they are women. They have to follow the rules blindly, even when they hurt them. By doing this, the protagonists may be portrayed as the flag bearers of a decolonised feminism focused on safeguarding cultural identity, critiquing regressive cultural practices, empowering individuals through education, fostering friendship, and searching for personal identity.

Together, the findings align with all the past studies of researchers like Meagher because they realise that patriarchy is in our African societies. Ebla resists gender oppression caused by patriarchal Somali



society. Resian, Taiyo Ramatoulaye, and Aissatou suffer because they live in a male-dominated society, and they must rely on friendship and education to rescue themselves. They use these modes of resistance to find their independence and realise their purpose in life. This comparative research reveals divergence across various contexts. *So long a letter* emphasises education, the search for autonomy, and the self in politics. *Blossoms of the Savannah* focuses on education, while *From a Crooked Rib* focuses on the search for autonomy in risky ways.

Lastly, the novels underline collectivism and the unity of action. Although *From a Crooked Rib* is a solitary heroine story, Ebla's story is completed by the connections she makes and the people who help her, such as the old woman in Belet Wene and Asha in Mogadiscio. They help her to make decisions and grow. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendship helps them go through their marital issues. Similarly, the friendship between Resian and Taiyo in *Blossoms of the Savannah* helps them achieve their dream of going to Egerton University. This communal aspect coincides with the spirit of African feminism: Women working together to empower themselves. This means that resistance is both individual and networked.

Conceptually, these stories illustrate essential doctrines in feminist theory. They confirm the radical feminist perspective that patriarchy is a structural code in society and demonstrate how the male authority determines facets of the heroine's life. The three works show that a woman can be set free when she fights for her place in society. They reflect postcolonial feminism that gender inequality is merged with the legacies of imperialism. For example, *So Long a Letter* and *Blossoms of the Savannah* occur in post-independence periods, showing that whether legally liberated or not, patriarchal oppression could not be eliminated. This confirms that women fighting back can be interpreted as a decolonisation of gender roles, which is happening in all African societies.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how authors in these novels depict women's agency in education, voice, and bodily autonomy as they seek to counter the patriarchal traditions in the novels. *So Long a Letter* breaks the conventional silence of women through the epistolary narrative of Ramatoulaye, as well as through the presence of two friends who help each other survive a society that subjugates women. In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, two young girls in the Maasai community resist female genital mutilation and forced marriage and find a way to get a university education. This is a move critics have characterised as a restructuring of the roles of women in society. The fact that Ebla runs away to avoid two forced marriages and takes two men as her husbands at the same time in *From a Crooked Rib* serves as an epitome of radical questioning of male-dominated norms. Based on African, radical, and postcolonial feminism theories, we conclude that the three texts show that patriarchy is neither natural nor indomitable. Approaches by women, including loving friendship, education, the pursuit of independence, and cultural critique, are presented to invert the domination of males and reopen the world to all those who are ready to join in the fight. Overall, these novels can be jointly utilised to map a rich landscape of feminist contestation in African literature. They demonstrate that gender inequality can be addressed through individual action, learning, and social connections. The researcher recommends that, since gender inequality is not set in stone, further research can help women discover additional ways to liberate themselves. The fight for gender equality should be on everyone's mind, and collective action will help societies achieve gender equality.



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