GENDER POSSIBILITIES IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT AS EXPLORED BY MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER*, NESHANI ANDREAS' *THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU* AND SINDIWE MAGONA'S *BEAUTY'S GIFT*

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this thesis is my own unaided work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in any part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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_____30____day of __November____, 2016.

Abstract

Gender oppression has been a significant discussion to the development of gender, cultural and feminist theories. The primary focus of this study is to investigate how patriarchal traditions, colonialism, and religious oppression force women to struggle under constrictions oppositional to empowerment. Thus, the project provides a comparative analysis of three texts from different African postcolonial societies by three African female writers: Mariama Bâ, Neshani Andreas and Sindiwe Magona. The author's biographies and historical context of their novels will be analyzed, as well as a summary of their stories will be included in order to provide the context for gender criticism. These writer's work; *So Long a Letter*, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and *Beauty's Gift* depict patriarchal, cultural and religious laws which exist in Senegal, Namibia and South Africa, respectively, that limit the position of women. Therefore, this study will interrogate the experience of African women as inscribed in these selected texts, uncovering the literary expressions of gender oppression as well as the possibilities of empowerment. The selected texts will be analyzed through the lens of Gender studies, African feminism and Cultural studies. From these theories, the focus of the study is on the struggles of the female characters living in patriarchal societies as well as on the idea that gender is constructed socially and culturally in the African context.

In conclusion, the emergence of these renowned female African writers together with the emancipation of African countries from colonial supremacy has opened a space for women to compensate and correct the stereotyped female images in African literature and post-colonial societies. Most contemporary African writers like Buchi Emecheta,

Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sindiwe Magona, Mariama Bâ and Neshani Andreas have shown that women are seeking to attain empowerment.

As a result, this study can be viewed as an opportunity to highlight such experiences by continuing to interrogate the writings of African women writers and to explore their gender-based themes so as to inform and or inspire the implementation of women empowerment. It will broaden and encourage further academic discussion in the field of Cultural studies and gender criticism of women's literature within the African context.

Key words: Gender Oppression, Empowerment, Gender studies, African Feminism, Cultural studies, Mariama Bâ, Neshani Andreas, Sindiwe Magona, Patriarchy.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandmother, Evelyn Roselyn Zimba (1929-2009), who is a continuous source of inspiration, and believed in faith, hard work and determination.

Keep your dreams alive. Understand to achieve anything

requires faith and belief in yourself, vision, hard work,

determination and dedication. Remember all things

are possible for those who believe. (Gail Devers)

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INTRODUCTION

> *Women's empowerment should lead to the liberation of men from the false systems and ideologies of oppression. It should lead to a situation where each one can become a whole being regardless of gender, and use their fullest potential to construct a more humane society for all.* (Akhtar 1992 quoted in Batliwala 1994, p. 131)

From the above quotation, we can deduce that women's empowerment is not about replacing one form of empowerment with another. Rather, empowerment is all about challenging the oppression and inequality that exist in many African societies. Thus, the analysis of gender possibilities enabling women's empowerment in the African context is not new, but it remains a significant area of inquiry for the development and application of gender, cultural and feminist theories. This study investigates the limitations of African women in post-colonial patriarchal societies. Their power is further eroded by oppression and subjugation by patriarchal, cultural and religious structures. The focus of this project is to critically analyze literary representations of female empowerment, hegemonic masculinity, female oppression and subjugation by traditional, cultural and religious practices as represented within selected texts by African women writers. This will assist in illustrating how Mariama Bâ's, Neshani Andreas' and Sindiwe Magona's literary approach serves to highlight gender limitation and emancipation.

One of the main objectives of this study is to examine the literary inscription of gender oppression found in the three primary texts: *So Long a Letter* (1981) by Mariama Bâ, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) by Neshani Andreas and *Beauty's Gift* (2008) by Sindiwe Magona. Within their texts these three African women explore gender-based themes so as to inform and or inspire the empowerment of women and to examine the

pressure exerted on the characters to submit to gender stereotypes that are entrenched in African societies. Furthermore, it will also explore how gender oppression may be aggravated by these practices and how women seek to attain emancipation and empowerment.

This study focuses on the gender restrictions that disturb the emancipation of women in the African context. For the purpose of the study, gender is understood as the social roles and behaviors deemed appropriate for the sexes (Sloane, 2002). This means gender not only indicates forms of self-presentation but other aspects as well. Oyeronke Oyewumi defines gender as "the non-physiological aspects of sex, a group of attributes and or behaviors, shaped by the society and culture, that are defined as appropriate for the male sex or the female sex" (2005, p. 259). Thus having such an understanding of the term, it helps to examine the ideologies that conceive masculinity and femininity as ideals. Amina Mama (1995) asserts that within the African context the analysis of patriarchy is intensely pre-occupied with ideological fundamentals such as gender, race, class and culture in response to the construction of the black woman as the subject. Therefore, such fundamentals under interrogation assist in elaborating how patriarchal concepts further oppress women. In African culture, women are regarded as subservient, docile and traditional subjects relegated to the domestic sphere, whereas men are the dominant group occupying the public spaces.

Many scholars have commented on the notion of gender to explain the construction of masculine and feminine ideals within specified social contexts. According to Candace West and Don Zimmermann, (1991, p. 14), gender is "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's

sex category." In other words, gender is a social and cultural construct, which means we are not born with it, but rather, as de Beauvoir argues (1953) we become feminine or masculine. Therefore, this study supports the argument that gender construction entails social and cultural processes that determine or differentiate between male and female patterns of behavior as well as their social status or gender roles (Babatunde and Durowaiye, 2015). This means that, gender is not what one is or has but what one does. Thus, gender can be viewed as a process through which an individual's social life is organized at the level of self, family and society as a whole because cultural ideals play a major role in the construction of our gendered identities (Shefer, 2001).

On the other hand, according to Chavella Pittman (2010, p. 184), oppression refers to "both the system of obstacles and the individual acts that maintain the privilege and authority of the dominant group". Thus, gender oppression can be understood as oppression that is associated with gender norms, relations, and stratification within a given society. It is any form of abuse or violence perpetrated against women and girls due to their gender and in this case by men as the dominant group. This means that oppression, just like gender itself, is ascribed by society; it is socially and culturally constructed. According to Martha Gimenez (2005, p. 14):

> any consideration of the oppression of women brings to mind a variety of psychological, economic, social and political phenomena affecting women's lives, ranging from rape, incest, domestic violence and sexual harassment, to social stereotyping, low-paid and gender segregated employment, discrimination in educational and occupational institutions, the sexual division of labor, domestic labor and the contradiction between domestic and work demands, reproductive

issues and the struggle for reproductive self-determination, the under-representation of women in political offices and public leadership roles and, unavoidably, patriarchy.

It is of concern that gender oppression in African culture is exacerbated by forms of patriarchy or tradition, colonialism and religion. Therefore, this study investigates the limitations to the empowerment of African women from these forms of oppression. Women are seen as the subordinate group in patriarchal societies, which are male-centered and or male-dominated, and where men appear obsessed with controlling every aspect of life. This in return gives the idea that men are superior to women; thus, they see women as powerless and act to perpetuate this view.

Gender discrimination and division of labor based on 'naturalistic' arguments assert that women are naturally suited to managing the household and looking after the children, as females are seen as naturally maternal and socially-orientated. Males, on the other hand, are assumed to be brave and aggressive, not easily influenced by emotions, and are therefore said to be suited to managing government, war and commerce (Popenoe et al., 1998). It is this attitude that keeps women in their subservient position.

The research topic is on gender possibility which is a term that speaks of the expected outcome by women who suffer from gender oppression. Gender possibilities have been used in this study to show that in the midst of gender or women oppression there still exist possibilities of empowerment that women can enjoy without constrictions fed by traditional or religious norms and patriarchal subjugation. Thus, the purpose of the study is to examine the issue of gender oppression and what possibilities exist for the

transformation of women. Therefore, the selected texts explore those gender possibilities within the African context.

The emergence of renowned female African writers like Bâ, Andreas and Magona together with the emancipation of African countries from colonial supremacy has opened a space for women to compensate and correct the stereotypical female images in African literature and in post-colonial societies. Bâ comments on suffering and hope for women, and states in an interview in 1980: “There is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world a woman’s cry is being uttered. The cry may be different but there is still a certain unity” in their voiced suffering (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 8-9). Further, Dianne Shober (2014, p. 2) reveals how Magona’s desire to empower women is showcased in her work:

> Magona exposes the heartache of the black South African woman striving to reach higher despite carrying the six mountains on her back...Her oeuvre reflects female characters who are visible and integral members of their community, enabling them to vocalize their despair and discontent as well as their dreams for personal and social histories.

Thus, it will not be an overstatement to say these female writers seek to empower African women with one voice.

The aim of this study through careful literary and theoretical analysis is to add more to the investigation of African women’s literature by furthering an understanding of the various forms of oppression that many African women still face. It also explores the tension between possibilities of emancipation and its realization. Furthermore, this cast

light on the pressure to submit to gender stereotypes that are entrenched in African societies. It focuses on issues from a black woman's perspective and her sexist experience in gender relationships, marriage, politics, education and employment. Although contemporary society have begun to address gender equality as part of political and social agenda, these writers indicate that at the grassroots level these changes are not yet part of women's lived realities. As this study will focus on selected texts by Bâ, Andreas and Magona, it will broaden and encourage further academic discussion in the field of Cultural studies and gender criticism of women's literature within the African context.

The researcher selected the three fictional texts: *So Long a Letter* (1981), *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) and ***Beauty's*** Gift (2008) because of their strong correlation in tackling issues that affect women in the African context. All these texts, in particular *So Long a Letter* which was written twenty years before the others, are used in this study for three main reasons. Firstly, it is seminal text which is highly recognized. Secondly, Bâ successfully captures the religious aspects of a Muslim from a women's perspective. Lastly, the novel encapsulates the notions highlighted in this study.

Mariama Bâ, Neshani Andreas and Sindiwe Magona are some of the African women writers who have addressed issues important to women that have been neglected for centuries. Their novels depict how important it is for women to unite in confronting subjugation and oppression. This can be seen in Magona's *Beauty's Gift* where the Five Firm Friends console one another in their relationships. Their friend Beauty's final gift of disclosure encourages them to protect themselves from the consequences of their husbands' unfaithfulness. In Bâ's *So Long a Letter,* Ramatoulaye uses the epistolary

form to express her grief at the death of her husband and to share her experiences prior to and after the tragedy with her friend Aissatou. In *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* Andreas portrays Ali comforting her friend Kauna from the brutality of her husband. All of these representations illustrate how some African women unite to help each other resist the hegemonic constrictions of patriarchy, religion and culture.

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One provides a historical background of the authors and the social contexts in which the novels were written. Chapter Two offers an explication of the three theories: African feminism, Gender, and Cultural studies is used to analyze the selected texts. Chapters Three, Four and Five provides a close textual analysis of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and Sindiwe Magona's *Beauty's Gift* using the selected theories. These chapters further explore the oppression faced by the female characters as depicted in these texts and examine the possibilities for emancipation.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

> *One way of enriching your study of history, is to go to the literature of the time, whatever the period you are studying, go to the novels, letters whatever the correspondence of that time, you will get a better grasp of what that period was about because history books kind of summarize things and look at events that made headlines, but if you look at life, life is not about headlines, life is not about stars, life is about ordinary people. My life, your life may never make headline, but it doesn't mean you didn't live. It doesn't mean you didn't make a contribution. (Sindiwe Magona, 2006)*

1.1. The historical context

To better introduce Bâ, Andreas and Magona's texts, it is useful to place each novel within its unique historical context. Senegal, Namibia and South Africa are generally considered patriarchal societies where men dominate the social, political and economic spheres, whilst women are forced into subsidiary positions. This state of affairs is embedded in the socialization process and is tied to culture (Kambarami, 2006). Thus, patriarchal traditions, colonialism, and religious oppression place women under constrictions oppositional to empowerment, mainly due to their weakened and unequal status relative to men. This research aims at exploring the works of female writers from three different patriarchal African societies who seek to empower women through their literary offerings. Bâ, Andreas and Magona's texts reveal how women are gendered into submissive roles by both culture and society.

Senegal, Mariama Bâ's birthplace, gained independence in 1960 after being under French colonial rule for three centuries. Leopold Sédar Senghor, a renowned poet, became the first president of this independent nation. On the examination of French imperialism in Senegal, Aisha Bawa (2013, p. 3-4) states that:

> Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.

This means that every aspect of the French culture and the language itself was integrated in Senegal. In spite of Senegal's expressed resistance to colonial power and influence, after independence, Senghor (the president then) continued to strengthen the ties between France and Senegal. This may be the reason why up to now French is the official language used in administration and schools although the majority of its population speaks Wolof an indigenous language (Pires and Beck, 2015), which suggests that the colonization process continues.

Senegalese literature is rich and abundant, and includes the former president Senghor, who is a renowned philosopher-poet, as well as the novelists Ousmane Sembene and Boubacar Boris Diop. Renowned African American slave Phyllis Wheatley was captured at the age of seven from Senegal and wrote poetry in her native French language, becoming the first African American writer to publish a book of poetry in 1773. From the mid 1970s to 1980 there was an expansion in women-authored Senegalese literature: Mariama Bâ, Mame Younousse Dieng and Nafissatou Dia Diouf to mention a few (Volet, 1996).

The country is predominantly Muslim by religion. Although the majority of the people are Muslim, the Senegalese constitution provides for the freedom of religion; thus, there are those who practice Christianity as well as other traditional religious belief systems.

According to the International Religious Freedom Report of Senegal (2008), Muslims constitute 94 per cent of the population, whereas Christians constitute only 4 per cent and traditional religion 2 per cent. In the 1980s, according to Penda Mbow (2009), the role of women in the Muslim society became a new and interesting field of study and it was noted that Senegalese women were not even allowed to talk about the Qur'an as a source of emancipation. He states:

> Certain passages in the Qur'an were often interpreted in ways that were unfavorable to women, giving rise to religious discourse about the obedience of women, the superiority of men and the duties of women to manage a home, have children and accept polygamy as an inevitable occurrence (Mbow, 2009).

Therefore, we can clearly see the influence of the Islamic religion on women oppression and how Mariama Bâ's writing of her novel *So Long a Letter* which was originally written in French highlights the Muslim faith and its effect on women's rights.

Similarly, Neshani Andreas' geographical roots also impacted the core elements of her novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. Namibia, Andreas' home country and one of the postcolonial societies under investigation, gained its independence in 1990. It was known as South West Africa and first colonized by Germany (1884-1907), then South Africa which was under British rule until 1990. Namibia's linguistic background is diverse, with two Bantu languages, Oshivambo and Otjiherero widely spoken. Before independence Afrikaans was selected to be the language of wider communication, but upon independence English became the primary language and is used in schools and

government. When it comes to religion, the majority of Namibians are Christian although a small percentage of traditional religions exist.

During the colonial period men were allowed to work in mines and on farms while women were marginalized in the rural economy. The division of labour in Namibia was established by gender which led to unequal opportunities for men and women both in the domestic and economic sphere. This led to the passing of laws that attempted to counteract gender inequality, such as the Married Persons' Equality Bill (1996). However, the bill faced a lot of opposition and criticism. According to Heike Becker (2000, p. 171), most opponents based their criticism on the notion that "according to African tradition and Christian law, men and women could never be equal." They saw the law as impossible to attain. Despite this opposition, some men supported the bill, and President Sam Nujoma made the final ruling for the passing of the law in the National Assembly. The bill paved the way for gender equality within marriage by removing elements of discrimination and oppression of women in Namibia. Before and after independence the ruling party's (SWAPO) women's league regarded "outdated traditional values" as a major stumbling block for women's advancement in society (Becker, 1995, p. 160-70). These ancient traditions, customs, cultural and patriarchal structures were seen as the reason for the oppression of women.

South Africa, the third postcolonial society under examination and the setting for Magona's text, was colonized first by the English and then the Dutch around the seventeenth century. After gaining independence from England in the 1940s, the Afrikaner National Party gained political control of the country. This is the same National party which decreed apartheid, a system which demanded deliberate and

institutionalized racial separation. The enactment of apartheid in 1948 led to white domination and racial oppression of blacks (Chokshi et al., 1995). The apartheid laws affected many aspects of black South Africans social, political and economic life because they had to carry pass books everywhere and most specifically when they entered non-black areas. The pass system regulated and restricted the movement of racial groups.

During colonialism the country had two dominating languages: Afrikaans and English. Attwell and Attridge (2012) note that independent South Africa now has eleven official languages; nine of them being indigenous languages, which are treated as equal national and heritage languages. With regard to gender relations, according to Shaina Hutson (2007, p. 83): “gender discrimination in South Africa is deeply rooted in the ethnic traditions of the multi-cultural communities, as well as by the compliance of women themselves.” This is the reason why gender equality has been a long, ongoing battle from colonial days into post-colonial South Africa.

Sally Baden et al. (1998) assert that South African women lost the autonomy and authority they had in the pre-colonial era because their value as agricultural producers was no longer appreciated during colonialism. The laws that were set by the colonial masters gave women fewer rights than men. This caused women to be relegated to low income jobs as domestic servants and casual workers on white-owned farms. Some women also made money by brewing beer in the local townships (Baden, et al., 1998).

According to Hutson (2007, p. 84): “In post-apartheid South Africa, despite the change in government and the writing of a Constitution, oppression towards women is still highly

rampant; in fact it seems to be growing, not only in South Africa but in the rest of the world as well." Thus, women are the most oppressed group in South Africa, suffering from the effects of both racial and gender-based discrimination. The widespread prevalence of HIV/AIDS is one of the problems faced by women, with statistics showing that "1 in every 10 uninfected young women in South African can expect to become infected each year" (Hutson, 2007, p. 84). Magona discusses the issues of apartheid, patriarchy and HIV/AIDS in her novel *Beauty's Gift.*

Magona is also recognized for her work in women's issues, the plight of children and the fight against apartheid and racism. The enactment of apartheid laws in 1948, enforced legalized racial discrimination, and the subsequent race laws affected every aspect of social life, including the prohibition of marriage between non-whites and whites, and the endorsement of "white-only" jobs as well as separate living areas. After years of struggle, led by various black political parties such as the African National Congress, black South Africans obtained the right to vote and govern themselves in 1994, with Nelson Mandela elected as their first black president.

1.2. Biographies of the writers

This research analyzes three novels by significant women writers in African literature: Mariama Bâ, Neshani Andreas and Sindiwe Magona. These three dedicated women writers examine the different ways in which African patriarchy and tradition, religion and gender limit the position of women.

Mariama Bâ was born in 1929 in Dakar and died in 1981. At the time Senegal was a territory of French West Africa and it had been under French control for several

centuries. Bâ's family was well placed in French colonial circles for several generations; her grandfather, Sarakhole, worked as an interpreter for French officials in the colonial city of Saint-Louis before going to Dakar. Bâ's father also worked for the colonial government and then moved on to be a treasury teller in the French West African government, securing the esteemed position of the first Senegalese minister of health in 1956.

Bâ's mother died when she was very young, and Bâ was raised mostly by her maternal grandparents. Her upbringing was in many ways a traditional one and one aspect of her traditional family life was that Bâ's grandparents did not believe that a girl should receive a formal education. However, Bâ's father was interested in his daughter's education. He taught her to read by giving her books and encouraged her to speak French and had the power to ensure that Bâ received the best education available in Senegal at the time.

While in school, Bâ had to do the domestic work expected of a young Senegalese woman, and received instruction in the Koran from one of Dakar's leading Islamic clerics. Her writing skills were acknowledged early and Bâ wrote a book about the colonial educational system and a widely discussed nationalist essay while she was still in school. In 1947 she received her teaching certificate and worked as a teacher for twelve years, starting at a medical high school in Dakar. She was married to a Senegalese politician Obeye Diop and together they had nine children. Life became difficult for Bâ after she and Diop divorced and she was forced to raise her large family alone. She began suffering from health problems that resulted in her resigning from her teaching job, and this illness finally claimed her life.

Bâ's experiences provided her with raw material for her novels, which she wrote at the very end of her life. She joined international women's organizations that were forming African chapters, and she began to write columns for African newspapers and lectured on such subjects as education and women's rights. One of her central concerns was the institution of polygamy, which often left married women with few legal rights.

Mariama Bâ worked for some time on her first novel, *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*). After it was issued in late 1979 by the Editions Nouvelles Africaines publishing house in Dakar, it quickly gained approval from African and French critics and won the inaugural Noma Award for publishing in Africa. The original version was written in French, but the book was later translated into English, Dutch, German, Japanese, Russian, and Swedish.

Neshani Andreas, the second female African writer under investigation attempts to use her work as a way to assert a woman's right to have a voice and to be heard. A member of the Oshivambo tribe, she was born in Walvis Bay, Namibia (then South West Africa, a colony of South Africa) in 1964. Andreas seeks to expose many key issues facing women from her region, including patriarchal violence, the injustices of traditional Namibian beliefs and practices and the influence of colonial Christianity and the church on women in rural Namibia.

Raised in a family of eight children, Andreas' parents worked in a fish factory. At an early age she had the passion to become a writer but such "an occupation was unheard of in their community" (Fallon, 2007, p. 24). After achieving her teaching certificate, she taught English, History and Business Economics from 1988 to 1992 in a rural school in

northern Namibia. During this period she developed an interest in rural culture as well as an intense respect for the women she encountered (Fallon, 2007). *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* was inspired by Andrea's work in the rural communities of Namibia's north, where women are often abandoned by their husbands who work far away in mines or in the cities. Thus her life experiences influenced the literary expressions in her novel.

According to the Woyingi blogger (2010), "unlike most other Namibian novels which focus on Namibia's resistance movement to South African occupation and apartheid, Andreas' novel focuses on issues related to women's rights, domestic violence, friendship, marriage, romantic love, AIDS, crop growing, African Christianity, and traditional customs as they relate to widowhood." She is the first Namibian writer to have a novel published in the Heinemann African Writers Series and the only Namibian novelist to be recognized internationally. At the time of her death in May 2011, Andreas was working as a program officer at Forum for African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FOWENA). This organization provides opportunities for girls' and women's education. Andreas' life experiences reveal her passion for helping women who are oppressed under traditional gender structures in Namibia. Her novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* is a manifestation of how such a traditional African patriarchal society thwarts women empowerment.

South African born author Sindiwe Magona also examines the African patriarchal society with regard to the position of women. One of eight children, she was born in 1943, in the village of Gungululu in rural Eastern Cape (formerly Transkei). Upon completion of her undergraduate studies, she won a scholarship to study for her Master's Degree in Social Work at Columbia University in New York. Magona

experienced apartheid which she recounts in her two autobiographies, *To My Children's Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992). Her novel *Beauty's Gift* (2008) was a finalist for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize (Africa) in 2009 (Hove, 2014), and has been reviewed as the manifesto of HIV/AIDS. The year of the novel's publication, 2008, was the landmark year of the HIV programme in South Africa. According to Simelela and Venter (2014, p. 250), this foresaw the events of May 2009, when the South African government acknowledged HIV as among the most important challenges facing the country with the Minister of Health bringing "a renewed focus to the HIV response." Thus Magona is an African woman who writes about social issues, exposing the effects of traditional polygamy and the hegemonic controls of patriarchy contributing to the deadly virus.

Magona is a teacher, civil servant, novelist, poet, playwright and women's activist who possesses an exclusive and easily identifiable authorial technique in the struggle for peace, freedom, emancipation and social change. As one of the many internationally prominent South African writers, Magona is one whose work is informed by her experience of poverty, marriage, abandonment, and single motherhood and which is representative of various professional and personal, emotional, financial and racial challenges. She passed through South Africa's racially-defined socio-cultural-economic spaces, while simultaneously being a wife, mother and a community leader in a township. These intertwined themes and realities have been evident throughout her literary career.

1.3. Introduction to the novels

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* focuses on the patriarchal, colonial and religious laws which coexisted in Senegal. As Dele Layiwola (1998, p. 153) states: "*So Long a Letter* narrates, in a personal correspondence to another friend, the woes of a woman embattled by patriarchy and by colonialism." Traditional, gender, religious and patriarchal practices are the most prominent hegemonic structures that have worked conjunctively to thwart the emancipation of African women. In addition, Bâ's novel explicitly highlights the relationship between the oppression of women and the Islamic religion. The protagonist, Ramatoulaye's, assertion that women have their fate "sealed" by "religions or unjust legislation" (p. 88) reveals a variance between her seeming devotion to Islamic law and the awareness of the injustices propagated by its practice of polygamy. *So Long a Letter* is seen as a novel that expresses the writer's desire to showcase women's roles in a strongly patriarchal society and how they struggle against and within those structures while striving for a reformed future.

Mariama Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter* (1981) is set in a Senegalese society and portrays the social experiences of the author, the colonialism of Senegal, cultural and religious norms; and reflects the female condition in postcolonial Senegal. Through the novel, Bâ as an African woman writer uses autobiography and epistolary form~~s~~ to explore ideal and actual issues concerning black women. Ramatoulaye, the narrator and protagonist responds to her friend, Aissatou which results in a series of episodic recapturing in the form of letters. The letters to Aissatou are prompted by the death of Ramatoulaye's husband, Modou Fall, following his marriage to a second much younger wife. Following the funeral, according to Islamic law~~s~~, Ramatoulaye has to face four months seclusion

for widows, a process of isolation she describes to her friend. She narrates how the Koran also stipulated the stripping of the dead person's intimate secrets, in this case Modou's betrayal. These were processes she dreaded.

In addition, Ramatoulaye, as the narrator of the novel, presents herself as a victim of polygamy. The novel shows how the Islamic religion and culture collectively undermines the position of women by allowing polygamy, just like African culture does. Both Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou become separated from their husbands after those husbands turned polygynous. When Modou marries his young wife, Binetou he does not have the decency to tell his senior wife personally, but sends his brother Tamsir and friend Mawdo Ba to convey the message after the ceremony. Aissatou husband's, Mawdo takes a second wife, Nabou, at his mother's insistence. Ramatoulaye does not leave her husband after the betrayal although her friend Aissatou does. Another character, Jacqueline, is an Ivorian and has emigrated with her husband, Samba Diack to Senegal. In Ivory Coast, her husband practiced monogamy, but in Senegal where other traditions and religion allow for polygyny, she too loses her husband to other women. These situations evidence how many African women are victimized by religion and culture. Regardless of how educated they are, they are often unable to resist the traditional practices that result in their oppression.

Neshani Andreas' novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) is set in the Northern Namibian village of Oshaantu. Kauna, the protagonist in the novel, finds herself trapped in a painful marriage as she endures both physical and emotional abuse from her miner husband, Shange. He is not ashamed of having blatant affairs with other women and expects Kauna to play the role of an obedient and subservient wife according to the

traditional customs. When one morning Shange unexpectedly dies in their house shortly after his return from an overnight visit to his ‘mistress’, Kauna is blamed by the villagers for her husband’s mysterious death. They accuse her of poisoning him out of jealousy.

Kauna's transition into widowhood is used as a catalyst to highlight the subordinate role of women in the novel's rural setting. Kauna and her children are eventually forced out of the homestead by her in-laws. By focusing on issues such as marriage, divorce, widowhood, reproductive rights, religion, inheritance and the economic status of women, Andreas explores the status and role of women in a traditional Namibian society that is heavily imbedded in patriarchy (Ogbeide, 2013). Thus, her novel *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* critiques the traditional system that seeks to silence women and close possible avenues of empowerment.

The novel attempts to undermine indigenous patriarchy which uses traditional practices and colonial Christianity to oppress women. Her novel can be seen as work by an author who understands the experiences of women in this culture since she was immersed in such an environment. In other words, she wrote as if it were her own lived experiences as a woman.

In her novel *Beauty’s Gift,* Magona explores how female characters are oppressed by men, tradition and culture. She also focuses on the male attitude that regards women as being less valuable than men, which often results in the displacement of women, yet she is able to conclude her text with her female characters’ successful quest for emancipation from male dominance. The novel narrates the story of Beauty who succumbs to AIDS contracted through her husband’s infidelity. On her deathbed she

pleads with her best friend Amanda to avoid such a “stupid death” and seeks her promise to warn the rest of their female friends to be tested and use condoms in order to avoid a premature death from AIDS. Following Beauty’s urgent counsel and subsequent death, Edith, Cordelia, Amanda and Doris all vow that they will not have unprotected sex, not even with their husbands or permanent partners and that they will discover their own HIV status and demand that their partners also be tested. This contemporary and emotion-charged novel depicts the power of patriarchy to subordinate women through men’s adulterous activities and their deliberate resistance to changing their behavior.

In conclusion, Bâ's, Andreas' and Magona’s novels depict the treachery of patriarchal traditions and the assertiveness of African feminist thought which frames the writers’ insights into “the death and the devastation of intimacy between couples...of faithful women being betrayed” (Magona 2009). Judith Butler (1990) suggests that possibilities for gender alterations are to originate in different performative acts of repeating, breaking or subverting routinized stylization. Thus, in ascribing new identities to her primary female characters (Doris, Cordelia, Amanda, Edith and Beauty) Magona in Beauty*’s Gift* empowers these fictional characters. Similarly Andreas uses fiction as a tool to undermine the hegemonic representation of women in dominant patriarchal dialogues, and Bâ uses the epistolary form of writing, a medium that allows her female characters to resist the hegemonic constrictions of patriarchy, culture and religion.

Furthermore, in ascribing new identities to these fictional characters through writing, these women writers are consciously interrogating the legitimacy of a gendered re-organization that seeks to protect women regardless of the existing hegemonic

structures. Thus, the works of Bâ, Andreas and Magona illustrate the significance of African women's literature in representing African women's oppression. They also open doors for investigation through gender, cultural and feminist theories because they focus mainly on issues from women's perspectives and experiences as women face sexist behavior, conflicted gender relationships, abusive marriages, and subordinating religious and traditional practices.

Chapter three, four and five of the study explore the gender, religious and cultural experiences of black African women in patriarchal societies. These chapters analyze *So Long a Letter* (1981), *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) and *Beauty's Gift* (2008) respectively, examining women's subjugation. The focal point of this exploration is an analysis of the role women play in the novel and how patriarchal and religious oppression fosters the discriminatory treatment of women. The established societal norms endorsed by culture as a whole, which demote women to inferior positions, are also investigated.

CHAPTER 2: LITERARY THEORY

It is literary theory that formulates the relationship between author and work; literary theory develops the significance of race, class, and gender for literary study, both from the standpoint of the biography of the author and an analysis of their thematic presence within texts. (Brewton, 2016)

2.1. Overview of Gender Studies (1970s- present)

Gender studies began with the feminist movement but broke away to formulate a new theory which examines relationships between the sexes, incorporating male and female, male and male relationships, as well as female and female relationships. Gender theory is influenced by such works as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1948), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1977), Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality* (1978) and Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (1990). The theory focuses on issues of sexuality, gender identity, and power, marginalized populations (women as other) in literature, society and culture. It is a field of interdisciplinary study devoted to gender identity and gendered representation as central categories of analysis. This field includes women's studies, feminism, politics, gender, men's studies, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender studies.

Gender theory is at the heart of this study, as it provides a foundation for the examination of how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works such as the ones under examination and enlightens the significance of gender and sexuality to the structures of literary representations and to the African society at large. Elaine Showalter (1999) argues this issue by saying that, "women's writing moves in the direction of all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially exploration of the daily

lives and values of women within the family and community" (p. xiii). This study in particular investigates selected literary expressions of gender oppression and emancipation by analysing the role of gender, patriarchy, religion and culture in the African context as illustrated in these novels.

Gender is not a static construct; rather, it is a variable. As a result, a range of different masculinities and femininities can be formed. This construction of gender characteristics and diversified femininities or masculinities is also seen as a dynamic and changing process. Thus, according to Andrea Allard et.al (1995, p. 24) we "are not passively shaped by the larger societal forces such as schools or the media, but are active in selecting, adopting and rejecting the dimensions we choose to incorporate, or not, into our version of gender." Gender theory also argues that, as girls and boys are growing up, they are actively occupied in assembling their own gendered distinctiveness. This proves the point that gender is not a stable identity but an active and continuous process. Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll (2004) argue that gender is not primarily an identity or role that is taught in childhood and then endorsed in family relations, but instead, gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories. These categories consist of men and women, upon whom social relations of inequality are organized.

Gender theory examines the relationships between different genders and the manner in which individuals behave, have converse and interact with one another. The theory highlights the manner in which texts may incorporate the performativity and projection of male and female roles. However, these gender roles differ depending on society and culture because society plays a significant role in adapting and prescribing behaviour for

the different genders. Therefore, doing gender or rather performing one's gender is to act knowing that one will be evaluated according to the normative standards applied to one's sex category (West and Zimmerman, 2009). This is apparent in the texts I discuss in this thesis when the female characters act as submissive and docile to the men in their lives. They allow the subjugation to occur because society and tradition allows it. For instance, in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* during the physical abuse Kauna receives from her husband, she feels hopeless to do anything because the society and even her family does nothing to help her. Thus, the internalized gender and social norms in African culture perpetuate the behavior of women.

Within Gender studies there are renowned theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir. According to de Beauvoir, gender is socially and culturally constructed, which means "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1973, p. 301). She argues that the definition of a woman is derived from that of a man. This means that a man can think of himself without a woman, but a woman cannot think of herself without a man. Therefore, the man sees himself as 'one' and the woman as the 'other'. This results in unequal power and social relations as men see themselves as superior and dominant in relation to women, and diminish woman as the 'other', a concept exemplified in patriarchal societies.

In *The Second Sex* (1948), de Beauvoir examines the development of patriarchy and argues that "it was neither an accident nor the result of a violent revolution"; rather, patriarchy established itself as a result of the "biological privilege [which] enabled men to affirm themselves alone as sovereign subjects" (p. 88). In the analysis of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Debra Bergoffen (2015, p. 9) contends that "...conflicting

ideals of femininity produce an ideology of women's 'natural' inferiority to justify patriarchal domination." Thus women are placed in a patriarchal social and representational order where they are bound to secondary or subordinate positions.

For de Beauvoir, motherhood and or marriage is a role that women are forced into which isolates them on two separate levels. Firstly, a mother is alienated from her body, as she lacks control over her reproductive function unless she uses contraceptive technology to actively prevent pregnancy, and secondly, it alienates her from social control, as society expects her to fulfill the role of the mother at some point in her life and, thereby, is able to force her from a public into a more private domestic sphere. Like other feminists, de Beauvoir regards marriage as an "oppressive patriarchal institution designed to rob a woman of her autonomy and independence. Not only does she take her husband's name but joins his religion, integrates into his social class, and owes him her virginity and strict fidelity" (1948, p. 454-455). In the case of one of the texts under investigation, *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, Ramatoulaye's twenty-five year marriage to Modou robs her of financial, social and personal independence; furthermore she has to give in to the oppressive forms of patriarchy, exacted upon her by her husband and other male members of his family. First is the fact that she bears many children for the husband who ends up marrying another wife. Secondly, even though the husband turns polygynous, instead of using it as opportunity to leave the marriage and claim her freedom, she subjects herself to his faithlessness by staying married to him.

Gender theory questions the establishment of binaries which are oppositional to each other and incorporates the perceived opposites, such as masculinity and femininity. In addition, it cross-examines the issue of deviance from normal relationships, including

same sex relationships and investigates existing male and female gendered societies. Michel Moon (2004) examines the psychoanalysis and the construction of gender as well. He analyses the performative and imitative aspects of perverse acts and initiation of male individuals into what he calls ‘perverse circles’. He states that our sexual orientation is created through disorientation and not gender, race, class or others factors. By this, Moon is not looking at deviances from a normality which comprises male and female relationships, but instead, analyses the manner in which individuals of the same gender regard one another. This contributes to the analysis of the selected texts as they provide a platform to examine female to female relationships in terms of how the female characters oppress or find solidarity with each other.

More so, in the exploration of gender identities, a new interest in masculinities has developed in African-centred gender studies, the so called ‘hegemonic masculinities’ (Connell and Messerschimdt, 2005, p. 829). Hegemonic masculinity is a term which defines successful ways of being a man, in specific places at a specific time. According to John Beynon (2002), this means other masculinity styles are seen as inadequate and inferior in relation to hegemonic masculinity, which becomes the favorable position. These other masculinities are therefore referred to as 'subordinate variants' (2002, p. 16). Subordinate variants refer to those men that do not have the power and authority to exercise their masculinity to the extent of the dominant one. These are masculine trends which are inferior or not up to par with the accepted one, which is hegemonic masculinity. For instance, in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, the protagonist Kauna’s husband, Shange’s overtly masculinized sexual behavior is shown through his socially approved multiple affairs in which he actively and overtly engages.

Moreover, research in this body of work is perceptive in analysing the impacts of colonialism and, particularly the effects of racism on creating a certain kind of man (Schefer, et al., 2007). During colonialism there was a Western disregard of African masculinity in which African men were dismissed as 'not men' (Egodi Uchendu, 2008, p. 2). However, according to Ampofo Adomako et.al (2008, p. 8), the study of masculinities has been significant in the areas of poverty, "health (HIV/AIDS) and violence, especially domestic violence and in situations of conflicts" Thus, men in poor conditions actually face a crisis in expressing their masculinity which results in displacement of power to the vulnerable people around them. This speaks directly to what Sindiwe Magona exposes in her novel *Beauty's Gift* (2008). She examines the way in which men are seen as depraved tools that spread the virus through their careless adulterous activities. Thus, for Adomako et al (2008, p. 150):

> The practice of power is an important component of masculine identities and this helps us understand how men who do not occupy positions of dominance face the crisis of masculinity which often leads to high rates of crime, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS and poverty.

It suggests that men are forever in search of areas where they are dominant or powerful and infidelity is one area where they are sexually and psychologically in control. Men who feel inferior do not want to be regarded as subordinate variants, and thus they may choose, instead, to become abusers, criminals, sexual conquerors, all behaviours which afford them the position of superiority.

Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell (1997) state that contemporary studies of masculinity disclose that many attributes of masculinity are socially, culturally and historically constructed through power relations rather than universal or biological givens. Masculine ideology is understood as the extent to which men believe that it is important to adhere to culturally defined standards of masculine behavior (Lindegger and Durrheim, 2001). This observation holds that men behave the way they do because of the internalization of norms from their cultures. Therefore, male ideology is concerned with beliefs about what men and women are like and how they should behave.

Moreover, the terms male and female refer to one's biological structure, the physical and genetic facts of being one sex or the other. According to Charles Morris and Albert Maisto (2002), 'masculine' inclinations, characteristics and interests are those which are typically associated with being a male in a given society and culture, while 'feminine' preferences, qualities and interests are those that are typically associated with being a female. Therefore, gender roles are seen as a set of apparent behavioral norms associated particularly with males or females, within a given social group or system. Within this social group, men's identity strategies are said to be composed through their natural acceptance or resistance to prescribed dominant masculine patterns of behavior. As highlighted by Foucault (1980), there are 'disciplinary systems', through which power is replicated and enforced through processes and institutions. It is through these disciplinary systems that hegemonic masculinities are formed in families and society as a whole. Therefore, gender is an institutionalized system of social practices that shape masculine and feminine behavioral traits.

Research in Gender studies has found that most men feel pressured to act in a masculine manner and are therefore forced into traditional gender positions. Men feel that they have to reign in situations that require physical strength and fitness. Therefore, to present themselves as weak, emotional, or sexually incompetent is a major threat to their self-esteem. In order to be secure in their gender, these men must consider themselves influential, self-assured, and rational. They therefore need to act accordingly (Brickell, 2005; Anderson and Accomando, 2002; Connell, R. W., 2001; Connell, R. 2000). Failure to do so will result in them being regarded as inferior or equal to women.

More so, in relation to this examination of gender identities is the issue of patriarchy. Theorists such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Judith Butler (1956-present), feminists active across three centuries, critique patriarchy, as it is continuously used to justify the view of women's inferior status; indicating that females are secondary to the superior traditional male. According to de Beauvoir (1948) and Connell (1987), the male is the one who sets the principles. Thus in this case, he is normal while the female has been historically considered as deviant and abnormal. They theorize that men are represented as the ideal which women should desire to serve.

2.1.1. Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

Historians Michel Foucault, and Alan Bray (1948-2001), point out that "gender is variable: in history and between societies, there is variation between different ways of practising sex and being one gender or another" (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004, p. 886).

Therefore, the understanding of gender as a term is an ongoing process that is not fixed but rather socially constructed.

Foucault states that “through various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed into mental illness, from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all possible deviations were carefully described” (2004, p. 892). This means that various notions of sexuality and gender are prescribed, thus gender stereotyped duties and roles are represented as the norm. Although Foucault’s text *The History of Sexuality* (1978) specifically explores the notion of homosexuality as abnormal, what is significant to this study is his notion of prescribed and accepted masculine behavior.

According to Ekundayo Babatunde and Babatunde Durowaiye (2015, p. 68), “Foucault discusses issues of sex and sexuality from a historical perspective and emphasizes power relations and its relation with the body.” To him, prescribed sexual behavior has become a cultural construction that is produced with the aim of social regulation and the control of sexuality (Foucault, 1978). From this perspective, Foucault argues that sexual proclivities are not based on natural forces but the production of knowledge which is always bound up with historically specific systems of power, so that every society produces its own ‘truths’ and social reality. Therefore, sexualities can be constantly produced, altered and customized, and the nature of sexual discourse and experiences changes according to the prevailing knowledge in a given society. Fundamental to this perspective on sexuality is Foucault’s idea that particularly in Western society the beliefs about sexuality which form people’s knowledge exist within multifaceted social relations that are organized, hierarchical and constituted through discourses and

practices, thus replicating knowledge. As he further observes, “It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1978, p. 100). For him, power operates on individuals through social norms practices and institutions.

Furthermore, Foucault argues that discourses on sex are located in the field of power and it is through such discourses that regulation and control are primarily achieved through efforts to identify, classify and establish particular forms of ‘truth’ about sex or sexuality. He contends that it is through this process that knowledge of sexuality is created and most often produces a ‘regime of truths’ (Foucault, 1991). The view within this social constructionist framework is that culture constructs the rules, beliefs, ideas, values and acceptable norms or behaviors which underlie the discourse and regulation of sexuality (Izugbara, 2005). Thus, one could conclude from Foucault’s arguments that every society produces its own social reality or ‘regime of truths’, dictating the socially acceptable meanings of sexuality which lead to the formation of gender identities.

Moreover, while Foucault argues that knowledge produces power and vice versa, he claims that sexuality is brought under control by the power that is exercised through ‘discursive strategies’ (Foucault, 1977). Nonetheless, rather than seeing power as a form of subjugation of citizens in a given state or a general system of domination, he sees the positive aspect of relations of power as a production of knowledge that is more complex and disseminated and not necessarily as an oppressive form (Foucault, 1978).

With regard to issues of dominance, Foucault explains that there is no centralized oppressor, but rather, it is the habits and attitudes of what is masculine and what is feminine which in return constrict or direct behavior. In addition, Gender studies scholar

Margot Llombart and Leache Patricia (2011) coins the term *dispositif* in trying to explain gender in relation to power. *Dispositif* means apparatus in English and Foucault uses this term to signify the various institutional, physical and administrative apparatus and knowledge structures which enhance and maintain the exercise of power within the social body. According to Llombart (2011, p. 6), "the notion of the *dispositive* allows us to consider heterogeneous and variable elements that operate to produce and regulate sexual identities and the subordination of women." Although "power is everywhere", the *dispositive* of gender operates, in different ways, to subordinate women. At the same time, gender always appears in interaction with other *dispositifs* of inequality which includes; class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and nationality.

According to Llombart (2011, p. 11) commenting on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* "the female body appears as a strategic space, a blank site for the exercise of biopower that is subject to a progressive system of objectivation and control by medical and psychological discourses, and Foucault names this the 'hystericization of the female body". Thus, women's bodies are socialized to be for others, specifically for men. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault conducts a genealogy of sexuality and proposes that sex is an uninformed and conditional element of identity. Somehow men are expected to desire and actively seek sex and women are expected to be providers of pleasure, but not desire it. Thus, according to Wijitbusaba Marome (2005, p. 123), "Foucault's history of sexuality would be a different story if it were written by a woman." If it had been a woman writing, then women would not have been portrayed as sexually passive as Foucault puts it.

2.1.2. Judith Butler (1956-

One of the major theorists in Gender studies, Judith Butler, explores the relationship between performance and gender identity. It is imperative to note that an examination of Judith Butler's performativity will be used for this portion of the gender theory and not the gay or lesbian aspects of her theory as these are irrelevant to this study. According to Butler (1998, p. 900), gender is "entirely imitative, performative and actuated". Therefore, the body becomes its own gender through a succession of acts that are restored, modified and combined through time. In other words, Butler (1998, p. 901) compares gender to a performative act:

> Just as the script may be enacted in various ways, and a play requires both text and interpretation so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporal space and enacts interpretation within the confines of the already existing directives.

With this in mind, it is possible to understand the conflicted female characters in Bâ, Andreas and Magona's texts. For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye, Kauna in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and Amanda in *Beauty's Gift* are expected to act or perform in a way a widowed woman should. Performances like grieving for the dead husband, and following all the traditional and or religious customs required of a widowed woman should be observed. The gender roles of widowed women are constructed or reified by performing certain acts such as wearing particular clothing, acting in culturally differential ways, suppressing their sexuality, that is, not involving themselves with any sexual behavior until a certain time allowed by the traditional elders, and so on. Thus,

for the widowed women their gender is performed and women's identities are socially constructed.

Female oppression can be examined according to Butler's theory of gender, as the female characters in *So Long a Letter*, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and *Beauty's Gift* 'perform' their gender based upon the hegemonic constraints activated by the male characters. In other words, although there may be restrictions, the authors offer a possibility of constructing gender differently because gender identity is constructed through acts women perform. In addition, Butler (1999) states that gender and sex are socially constructed concepts that are used to control people. She argues that we do not possess a gender identity, but that it is continuously constructed through the everyday (gendered) activities which are in turn informed by these discursive formations.

The work of Butler has been influenced by a post-structuralist perspective like Lindsay Allen (2005) who observes Butler's analysis, which takes a Foucauldian perspective, has significantly contributed to the understanding of sex and gender. Apart from Butler's argument that gender predetermines sex, she also sees gender as socially on–going process. Butler argues that gender is not a "stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow" (1999, p. 197), but socially instituted, a performatively constituted, active and continuous process and a 'becoming' (Butler, 1990). Following Foucault, Butler argues that both men and women are negotiated through regulatory discourses. In this context, the dominant system creates rules and discourses which determine what sex, gender and sexuality are to materialize as normal, natural and acceptable, as well as obliging subjects to perform expected actions or to take roles

which portray the ‘normal’ (Butler, 1990). For Butler, sex or biology do not predetermine gender.

In her theory, Butler pays specific attention to the construction of gender identity in a society. She utilizes the idea presented by Simone de Beauvoir who claims that women create or construct their gendered identity. It is only when the child is developing that he or she will be habituated to behave in a way that illustrates his or her gender identity. Consequently a person’s gender is entirely “imitative” as he or she will mimic the behavior of a person with the same gender and perform this gender in a similar manner to the original (Butler, 1998, p. 900).

In other words, according to Butler, gender is neither the cultural construction of sex, nor identity. Instead she introduces the concept of ‘gender performativity’, which suggests that gender “is a matter of doing and its effects rather than an inherent attribute, an intrinsic feature” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). In other words, “one is not simply a [gendered] body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body” (Butler, 1988, p. 521). Therefore, Butler’s notion suggests that gender is not a stable identity, but rather, gender is an identity, “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (1988, p. 519). As gender constitutes a series of repeated acts, Butler argues that there is no gender prior or beyond the experience of performativity. Thus, it is through the repetition of performance that gender identity is created.

A major focus of social constructionism is to examine the ways in which social phenomena are created, institutionalized and traditionally lived by humans. This idea can be used to strengthen Butler’s focus on the relationship between societal

proscriptions and gender identity. For instance, it is through daily interactions between people in their everyday lives that social knowledge or shared versions of knowledge are constructed. Thus, gender roles in society are products of the culture and the history prevailing at that specific time.

This is evident in Bâ, Andreas and Magona texts, as the authors' characters' understanding of the African world and their knowledge of society is understood in terms of racial and gendered categories where each character's identity is determined by these significant societal issues. Andreas' character of Kauna in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* is a woman who has created her gender by performing acts similar to the other women residing in her society. For example, women were conditioned to carry out household chores and live as obedient wives, who were primarily used for sexual pleasure and reproductive purposes. As a result, these are the gendered qualities that gave Kauna and other female characters their gender identity and value in their society.

In Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye also exemplifies a character who imitates the subjugated behavior of women in society at that time; she is also conditioned to carry out certain roles and responsibilities as a married woman living in a society where women are subordinate. The Five Firm Friends in Magona's *Beauty's Gift*, despite their professional careers, are also conditioned to live as obedient black African women, who are used for sexual pleasure by their partners.

2.1.3. Judith (Jack) Halberstam (1961-

Literary critic Judith (Jack) Halberstam has been crucial in moving the discourse from a stigmatized to a positive view of female masculinity, a notion she coined in 1998, by

resisting the perception that female masculinity is deviant and that it is a perverse supplement to dominant configurations of gender. Halberstam argues that masculine girls and women no longer have to bear their masculinity as a stigma but can project it with a sense of pride and indeed power. In the same way, women should accept their female masculinity, and they should also embrace their feminine traits. They should seek to express the autonomy and powers practiced in male masculinity and resist all the patriarchal ideologies that seek to suppress their independence.

She claims that female masculinity is an unique and original gender that does not replicate an authentic male masculinity. Instead, male masculinity often imitates earlier female forms. She not only categorizes but also credits female masculinity as a progressive social force, as she explains in a 2002 essay:

> Female masculinity, I have argued in a book of the same name, disrupts contemporary cultural studies accounts of masculinity within which masculinity always boils down to the social, cultural and political effects of male embodiment and male privilege. Such accounts can only read masculinity as the powerful and active alternative to female passivity and as the expression therefore of white male subjectivities (p. 345).

Halberstam states her goal as that of making maleness nonessential to masculinity. She believes female masculinity "offers an alternative mode of masculinity that clearly detaches misogyny from maleness and social power from masculinity (2002, p. 345). She asks the question: "Why shouldn't a woman get in touch with her masculinity?" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 269), as though doing so is an inherent drive toward activity and

social power. She also seeks to have “skill, strength, speed, physical dominance, uninhibited use of space and motion” recognized, not as human potentials, but specifically as aspects of female masculinity (1998, p. 272). Halberstam revalues female masculinity not as pathology but as something creative and desirable.

Female masculinity can be defined as female born persons feeling more contented when they behave or look masculine. It is important to note that Halberstam does not want to reproduce forms of masculine power or male masculinities, but employ unique forms of female masculinity. This enhances their levels of self-esteem, knowing that they can exercise some of the power that is normally suppressed by hegemonic masculinity. Halberstam defines butches as "women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles or identities than with feminine ones" (1998, p. 120). These female masculinities are declared ‘deviant’, but illustrate how women seek recognition, power, and autonomy.

Halberstam examines different gender possibilities and the manifold formulations gender performance can assume. She examines the notion of masculinity in our societies. According to her, masculinity “conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege”, which seem “to be extended outward into patriarchy and inward into the family” (1998, p. 936). She portrays women as endlessly victimized within the system of male power where “real” masculinity seems to exist. This is apparent in the selected texts, especially because the authoritative male characters address and communicate with the subjugated female characters in a demeaning way. For instance, men in *Beauty’s Gift* try to silence the four women, some verbally, others violently, and actively work against them by voicing their opinions and frustrations on these important sexual

issues. The violence of Cordelia's husband, Vuyo in blackening her eye illustrates how hostile men can be when their masculinity is questioned.

2.2. Overview of African Feminism (1900s- present

African feminism explores the distinct ways in which African women have been subjugated. The theory argues that gender ideology and hegemonic patriarchal beliefs play crucial roles in reproducing women's oppression. African feminism according to Ruvimbo Goredema (2010, p. 34):

> is a feminist epistemology and a form of rhetoric that has provided arguments, which validate the experience of women of Africa and of African origin against a mainstream feminist discourse. It is a justice that aims to create a discernible difference between women who were colonized and those who were deemed the colonizers, and a social movement that aims to raise global consciousness which sympathizes with African women's histories, present realities and future expectations.

With this background it is clear to see the distinction between African feminism and the mainstream women's groups. These include: First wave feminism which was concerned with women's right to vote and the equal contract and property rights for women. The Second Wave was concerned with other issues of equality in education and employment. Third Wave feminism sought to defy the definitions of femininity given by the second wave. They believed this exaggerated the experiences of upper middle class white women. The discourse of African feminism has already made a remarkable difference between African and Western feminisms. It incorporates culture or tradition,

socio-economic and socio-political issues, the role of men, race and sex or sexuality (Goredema, 2010). African feminists argue that women play a central but socially subordinate role in the African society. Just like western feminists they believed “white women could not speak for black women” (Goredema, 2010, p. 41). Therefore, it is only African women who can set their agendas and priorities. Obioma Nnaemeka (2005) suggests that western feminism does not recognize the full potential of African women because they portray them as powerless. Thus African feminism is a useful feminism that seeks to unsettle the universal subordination and or silencing of African women.

African feminism is imbued with the language of negotiation, collaboration and compromise as it invites men as partners in social change. They advocate for “complementarity” (Arndt, 2002, p. 74) between men and women, that is, a need to construct each other. More so, African feminists do not criticize motherhood but rather defend it (Arndt, 2002, p. 72). They actually aim for women’s self-realization or self-actualization beyond the confines of being a wife and mother. In the 1980s Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Alice Walker coined the term ‘womanism’, a theory which evolved out of African feminism. They believed that black women needed their own movement. This led to the birth of womanism which is basically a “black feminism against racism, sexism, classicism, sexual preference, physical disability, and caste” (Alkali et al., 2013, p. 239). Ogunyemi (1985) argues that this term is more appropriate to describe how African women are engaged in social transformation because it is rooted in African values. However, African feminism is the term that feminists have continued to use.

2.2.1. Oyeronke Oyewumi

Oyewumi defines gender as “the nonphysiological aspects of sex, a group of attributes and or behaviors, shaped by the society and culture, that are defined as appropriate for the male sex or the female sex” (2005, p. 259). For her, gender is first, and foremost, a cultural construct. As such, “it is intelligible only in a cultural frame; any theory of gender, therefore, must be attentive to the fact that there are many cultures in the world and Western culture is only one of them” (1998, p. 1050). Thus any claims made on the basis of studies in one culture cannot necessarily hold true for other cultures and should not be universalized. She denies the claim that gender is an essential social category in all other cultures.

In *Rethinking Gender as a Western construction*, Oyewumi offers a new way of understanding both Yoruba and Western cultures. The main theme of this book ~~to~~ demonstrates why and how gender came to be constructed in the Yoruba society of southwestern Nigeria. Oyewumi points out that woman as a social category did not exist in Yoruba society in pre-colonial times. She asserts that the Western concept of gender is body-oriented, which is a concept that never materialized in Yoruba society. Although Yoruba society was hierarchically organized, the ranking of individuals depended on seniority or age and not on gender. The social identity was relational and not genderized like that of the Western culture.

Oyewumi has confronted the usefulness of gender as a critical concept for Africa. She argues that “among the Yoruba, language is gender-neutral and that social roles and relations between men and women are based primarily on the notion of seniority, so

that men and women can assume powerful positions by virtue of their age and seniority within a family" (Adomako et al., 2008, p. 5). Seniority refers primarily to chronological age difference; however, it also refers to one's positioning within the kinship structure. Recognizing the fact that gender is absent, the Yoruba language does not 'do' gender; instead, it does seniority defined by relative age. Concepts of power and authority, according to Oyewumi, are not gendered, and no restricted male or female social roles or identities exist in this society. The only thing exclusive to female bodies is pregnancy.

According to Nupur Chaudhuri (2001), in a chapter titled "Colonizing Bodies and Minds: Gender and Colonialism," Oyewumi discusses the ways that colonial patriarchal structure changed Yoruba social and political structures; that is, "the British system selected African males as chiefs to transfer judicial power from the community to the council of male chiefs" (2001, p. 124-125). Thus, Yoruba women emerged as an identifiable category defined by their gender and they became subordinated to African men, marginalized because of their gender. In colonial societies African women were subordinate to African men. This notion is relevant for this study as we see that all the selected texts that are being analyzed are set in postcolonial societies. These societies felt the impact of oppressive colonial ideologies and these hegemonic ideologies contributed to the oppression of women. Women are still treated as subordinates in the postcolonial African societies. As seen in *So Long a Letter*, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and *Beauty's Gift*, female characters are not only subjugated by their gender, religion, culture and patriarchy but by the colonial structures.

2.2.2. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1940-

Ogundipe-Leslie examines the plight or condition of the African woman with what she calls “the Six Mountains on her back” (1993, p. 107). By this she metaphorically argues that women carry huge burdens which can be described as: tradition, backwardness of the African woman, oppression from outside, man, race and herself. All these contribute to the black woman’s subjugation. Firstly, tradition allows men to have power to control women through different customs. For instance, men practice the notion that they are “naturally superior to women” (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1993, p. 112). Secondly, her backwardness is due to colonization, neo-colonialism and capitalism where women (especially black women) were oppressed and relegated to the domestic sphere. During colonialism, “poverty” also contributed to the backwardness, “ignorance and the lack of a scientific attitude to experience and nature” (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1993, p. 113). Thirdly oppression is from the outside which includes all forms of oppression from the rest of the world. This includes the fact that historically the African continent has been subjected to various systems such as capitalism and colonialism. These created superstructures where men dominated the public spheres.

The fourth mountain is man. Every man is influenced by patriarchy which is a psychological and political system that values the male more highly than the female. This ideology gives them power to dominate by using various laws, tradition, force, rituals, customs and religion, to name a few. The fifth mountain is race. African feminists like Ogundipe-Leslie herself seek to change the conditions that made Africans dependent on their colonizers. They want to undo the history of imperialism and give assurance that African men and women can actually overcome this racialized trauma.

The sixth mountain on a woman's back is herself. Ogundipe-Leslie asserts that through the ideologies of patriarchy and gender a woman has herself to blame for her oppression. The mere fact that a woman allows herself to be inferior; leads to imprisonment by her self-image. Women are "shackled by their own negative self-image" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1993, p. 114). Therefore, women should not adhere to the virtues of domesticity and submission.

From all these mountains, we can see the relevance of Ogundipe-Leslie's six mountains in portraying the actual condition of African women. According to Meyre Silva (2004, p. 131), Ogundipe-Leslie believes that African women writers can empower African women by deconstructing the "African woman stereotyped images and fight against several forms of oppression that women still suffer in Africa." These mountains are fully explored in Bâ, Andreas and Magona's texts because all the issues affect the female African characters. Ogundipe-Leslie describes the notion of race as one of the six mountains that subjugate women. The following discussion of Cultural studies theory elaborates more on how being a black woman in the African culture results in their gender-based oppression.

2.3. Overview of the Cultural Studies (1963–present)

The Cultural studies theory is a theoretical field encompassing a range of perspectives on gender. The examination of Cultural studies necessitates an established definition of the term 'culture'. The simple definition can be explained as a person's way of life. Another definition comes from theorists Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan who define it as: "the way people behave while eating, talking with each other, becoming sexual partners,

interacting at work, engaging in ritualized sexual behavior such as family gatherings, and the like" (1998, p. 1233). Therefore, culture is the daily functioning of a human being, which makes culture a social construct.

Culture seems to encompass every aspect of one's life. Since it is acquired within the structure of established social practices, it creates a cultural bias which provides the foundation for inequality as it promotes the domination of one social class or group by another. These inequalities can be formed within and between social groups as people try to maintain the social norms. African cultures that are patriarchal in nature place the group of males at the apex of the cultural hierarchical structure. Therefore, intra-group conflicts arise between males and females due to patriarchal social systems and the resultant treatment of women in society. The male group label themselves as dominant, therefore, placing the female as a submissive subject. This is evident in the texts under investigation where the female characters seek to resist the subordination exerted by their male counterparts.

Hegemonic masculinity is a term which defines successful ways of 'being a man', in particular places at a specific time. In African culture, because masculinities are defined collectively in culture and are sustained in social institutions, other masculinity styles are rendered insufficient and inferior in relation to hegemonic masculinity, the complimentary position. These other masculinities are therefore referred to as 'subordinate variants' (Beynon, 2002). The literature discusses the 'subordinate variants' of masculinity by looking at Steve Biko's conceptualization of black men within South Africa during the Apartheid era. Kopano Ratele (2006) notes that the black man that Biko talks to (and the woman that he ignores) as well as his own identity, are in the

process of being constructed through testing, defending and rehearsing of the Black identity. The intention of Black Consciousness was therefore to make the black man conscious of himself. Thus according to Ratele (2006) the recovery of black manhood explains the concept of black masculinity, a type of maleness that is promoted as desired and acceptable.

Cultural studies focus on the relationship between social practices commonly separated so that culture is seen as a whole way of life, a social totality exploring and aiming to understand the maintenance and formation of inequalities within and between social groups. These inequalities and ideologies are perpetuated in literature. In addition, this study considers the centrality of ideology and cultural myths to the maintenance of gender relations. Feminists have long argued that gender ideology and hegemonic patriarchal beliefs play crucial roles in reproducing women's oppression. Literary works and criticism therefore provide important insights into culture, belief systems and ideology, all levels at which women's oppression is dangerously enabled. The selected texts of Mariama Bâ, Neshani Andreas and Sindiwe Magona reflect and emphasize the unjust and divided African societies of Senegal, Namibia and South Africa.

An important growing field within Cultural studies is media and mass communications. Recent advocacy work and research on the continent evidences a growing complexity of ways in which patriarchal media institutions are interrogated, gendered media representations are contested and alternative feminist forms are explored. There has been a development in women's organizations and civil society movements which are working to eliminate gender oppression expressed through gender biases in newspapers, magazines, radio, television and websites. They want to saturate public

and private life and intensely shape men's and women's sense of what their legitimate gendered places in the world are. Cultural studies encourage attention to the everyday, the ordinary and that which seems insignificant. It is in our everyday lived experiences and those incidents that are regarded as unimportant that most gendered oppression manifests. Therefore, Cultural studies is not only contributing interesting, innovative methodologies and concepts for work in the social sciences, but also helping to effect an important paradigm shift away from oppression. Oppression is one of the major issues that Cultural studies interrogate and it can be applied to this study, as well as within the African cultural society where patriarchy dominates and oppresses women at large.

2.3.1. Louis Althusser (1918-1990)

Louis Althusser is one theorist who asserts that “social institutions such as the media, family, the educational system and the political system produce the tendency in people to behave and think in socially acceptable ways” (1998, p. 695). These institutions formulate the tendency for people to think and behave in socially proscriptive ways. Thus, culture is not innate but inculcates roles and activities given to us by social practice. Althusser propounds that “social norms are biased and influenced by personal feelings and opinions; so these norms have been developed in the interest of those who hold the power” (1998, p. 693) and, in patriarchal societies, this is men.

Furthermore, according to John Fiske (2004, p. 1268) society “is not an organic whole but a complex network of groups, each with different interests and related to each other in terms of their power relationship with the dominant classes.” In other words, social

relations are to be understood in terms of social power, that is, the dynamic structures of domination and subordination. He defines social power as “the power to get one's class or group interest served by the social structure as a whole and social struggle” (Fiske, 2004, p. 1269). This means that society acts according to the prescription given by those in power.

Althusser rejects the idea that the economic base of society determines the entire cultural superstructure. According to him, “ideology is a dynamic process constantly replicated and reconstituted in practice” (cited in Steven Smith, 1984, p. 518). Therefore, the ways in which people think, act and understand themselves and their relationship to society is essential to ideologies. At the core of this theory Althusser places emphasis on state apparatuses such as the social institutions of media, family, the educational system, language and the political system as crucial in the reproduction of ideology (Smith, 1984). These state apparatuses are part of “every individual’s life and these institutions are continually conveying messages or are “speaking” to individuals about societal expectations whereby individuals must be represented in certain ways” (Smith, 1984, p. 518). Fiske explains that for Althusser (Fiske, 2004, p. 1270):

> these institutions are ‘relatively autonomous’, and there are no overt connections between it and any of the others-the legal system is not explicitly connected to the school system nor to the media, for example, yet they all perform similar ideological work. They are all patriarchal; they are all concerned with the getting and keeping of wealth and possessions; and they all endorse individualism and competition between individuals.

Furthermore, Althusser asserts that “social norms are not neutral or objective; they are biased and influenced by personal feelings and opinions; hence, social norms have developed in the interests of those who hold social power, and they work to maintain their sites of power by naturalizing them into common sense” (1998, p. 693). This is apparent in the selected texts of Bâ, Andreas and Magona especially because the male authoritative characters view their behavior towards the female characters as normal and naturalized and any deviation would be abnormal. They are able to do this with the help of social institutions like the church and the traditional family structure, which reinforce patriarchy. Female characters accept and to a certain degree, agree with their socially subordinate roles in African society. This is exacerbated by the African cultural belief that men are superior and hold social power. This point is emphasized in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, where Shange beats his wife mercilessly for no apparent reason; in *Beauty’s Gift*, Luvo, Edith’s husband sexually abuses her after she refuses to sleep with him without protection. Further, is the incident where Cordelia's husband hits her for refusing to sleep with him. Similarly, in *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are oppressed when their husbands follow the culturally allowed practice of polygamy.

2.3.2. Walter Du Bois (1863-1963)

Du Bois is an African American scholar and activist who examine the issue of oppression, especially the treatment of black people as the ‘other’. He coined a metaphor for the black condition which he calls “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903). This was to help explain the issue of being the ‘other’ in a world that considers the colonized as inferior and uncivilized. This condition suggests that persons are forced

to look at themselves through the eyes of others. Thus, there are two identities presented: one that has been historically oppressed and another which understands the privilege of being black. Through double consciousness Du Bois justifies the struggle over the politics of representation. He also argues against the unequal incorporation of black in national projects and world systems, which means that blacks are unjustly underrepresented in such portfolios. The struggle over culture in Du Bois' theory is dominant and can be seen in his concern for black culture and organizations.

Early in the history of sociology, Du Bois emphasizes issues such as gender, race, and class. However, oppression always was the central issue and for him sociology was a means to seek solutions to social problems like oppression itself. A social problem can be understood as the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through its failure to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life. Thus Du Bois' interrogation of oppression helps in the analysis of the selected texts in this study. This speaks directly to the issue of women's oppression that the female characters in *So Long a Letter*, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and *Beauty's Gift* experience.

More so, it is imperative to note the current literature on African women's fiction regarding the notion of patriarchy and negotiation of women's oppression. Some African women seek to empower women through liberated female characters. Shober (2014) asserts that, "Over the years, many black African women writers have been creatively correcting this notion of black African permissible aggressive dominance. Their narrative resistance to patriarchal subjugation and silencing has enabled them to craft female characters who voice their own autonomous, self-governing destiny" (p. 96). In the

same way, the literature that is under investigation in this study portrays how women have the urgency to subvert patriarchal domination.

To summarize, a close examination of Gender studies, African Feminism and Cultural studies in relation to the analysis of Bâ, Andreas and Magona's text provides the platform to carefully scrutinize issues of gender oppression in African society. From the exploration of various concepts presented within these theories, it allows for the examination of gender discrimination and racial prejudice through various lenses. This study further examines the predicament of female characters in the selected texts: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981), Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) and Sindiwe Magona's *Beauty's Gift* (2008). The following chapters investigate the perpetrators of gender oppression and explore any probabilities of gender empowerment.

CHAPTER 3: *SO LONG A LETTER*

> *I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings. To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other! If each could only melt into the other! If each would only accept the other's qualities instead of listing his faults! If each could only correct bad habits without harping on about them! (Mariama Bâ, So Long a Letter, 1981, p. 88)*

Mariama Bâ aims at complementarity, which is the need for men and women to support and encourage one another, as advocated by African feminists. The quotation that opens this chapter alludes to this; that if men and women could just treat each other with love, respect and care, then there would be no room for complaining or condemning. However, it seems this is difficult to achieve in African societies, which are founded on gender, cultural, patriarchal and religious ideologies that seek to oppress, subjugate, and relegate women to subordinate positions.

Bâ examines the conflict between tradition and modernity in gender relations in Senegal. In her novel *So Long a Letter* she criticizes the patriarchal organization of the Islamic-influenced society. Ramatoulaye, as the narrator of *So Long a Letter*, presents herself as a victim of polygamy. By allowing polygamy the Islamic religion and culture like the African culture collectively undermines her position and that of other women. Both Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou become separated from their husbands after their husbands take second wives. The following textual quote illustrates her humiliation and the rationalization of her position as the first wife:

> Every night when he went out he would unfold and try on several of his suits before settling on one. The others, impatiently rejected, would slip to the floor. I

> would have to fold them again and put them back in their places; and this extra work, I discovered I was doing only to help him in his effort to be elegant in his seduction of another woman....I told myself what every betrayed woman says: if Modou was milk it was I who had had all the cream. The rest, well, nothing but water with a vague smell of milk (p. 38-39).

Many scholars like Marame Gueye (2012) and Jayant Cherekar (2014) portray *So Long a Letter* as a novel that expresses the writer's desire to showcase women's maligned role in a heavily patriarchal society. According to these scholars, the novel also articulates how women struggle against and within that structure while striving for a reformed future. Bâ is seen as an opponent of patriarchy because patriarchy is legitimized into law in most West African societies. The fact that Bâ's novel employs the epistolary form gives her protagonist, Ramatoulaye, the power of the pen to act as a voice for other oppressed women. This power is seen as a perfect revenge for women against the patriarchal society which denies them freedom and a voice against oppressive structures.

Gender theory highlights the manner in which *So Long a Letter* incorporates Butler's concept of performativity and the resultant assignment of male and female roles. The novel incorporates the stereotypical gender roles in an African society where certain values, morals and appearances are expected to be upheld by different classes of individuals according to societal expectations. The novel also show how women are expected to be submissive and possess attributes concerned with the private sphere, looking after their husbands, domiciles and children.

Contradictory to this, men are assigned the role of working in the public sphere and controlling the finances of the home and family, being the dominant and controlling figure over all family decisions and relationships. There exists a classification of gender that dictates the roles and responsibilities befitting males and females. Therefore, using the lens of the Gender theory, it is possible to explore the way in which Bâ's novel examines the relationships between different genders and the manner in which individuals behave and interact with each other.

So Long a Letter examines the socially constructed gender roles within an African context which are depicted by the male and female characters in the novel. The assigned roles are highlighted through these various characters and their actions, as exemplified by this textual quote, outlining the specific responsibilities assigned to a woman:

> Try explaining to them that a working woman is no less responsible for her home. Try explaining to them that nothing is done if you do not step in, that you have to see to everything, do everything all over again: cleaning up, cooking, ironing. There are the children to be washed, the husband to be looked after. The working woman has a dual task, of which both halves, equally arduous, must be reconciled (p. 20).

This reveals the manner in which women are viewed in this society and the roles and responsibilities that they are expected to uphold. Although they may work in a professional setting, they are still required to assume all of the responsibilities within the domestic sphere, as well as take care of the male characters' physical and emotional

needs. However, some of the women characters in *So Long a Letter* refuse to allow the exploitation of their bodies as reproductive vessels or as instruments of sexual pleasure for men and objects of subordination. Ramatoulaye subverts sexual exploitation by refusing to remarry after her husband's death and Aissatou subverts this by divorcing her polygamous husband. As Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997, p. 151) puts it, these women "contest and reject the subjugation and commodification of women's bodies by men and sometimes, by other women". Thus, they seek to secure an autonomous gender identity and the home becomes a place of power struggles where domination and exploitation discourses are resisted.

So Long a Letter examines the issue of complementarity that African feminism promotes (Arndt, 2002). Thus, Mariama Bâ just like African feminists believes in the compromise and collaboration of men and women for social change to happen. These feminists argue that prescribed gender roles that promote female subordination in African societies play a crucial role in reproducing women's oppression. However, Mariama Bâ, through her proactive and independent female characters is able to unsettle the subordination and silencing of African women. Furthermore, Bâ's text explores most of the conditions associated with the six mountains pressing on an African's woman's back, as discussed in the work of Ogundipe-Leslie (1993) mentions; but it pays particular attention to the weight of tradition, a woman's own backwardness, men's domination and women's submissiveness. The next section will discuss this more thoroughly.

The sweep of colonization throughout Africa brought with it sexist ideologies that have persisted till today. Colonization perpetuated the imposition of patriarchy and the

relegation of women to subordinate positions. Women were not allowed opportunities to improve and or to prove their potential. Arndt (2002) argues that even before colonialism "there was a gender hierarchy that privileged men and subordinated women" (p. 56). Similar to what pertains in traditional African society, women were not allowed in the public domain. They were relegated to the domestic, private sphere that is, bearing and looking after children and working in the fields, to mention two. So, some of these sexist ideologies were not brought into Africa by the colonizers. They already existed but were reinforced by colonization. Although most African societies are now politically independent, these sexist tendencies still exist. Thus the objectification of African women as powerless and voiceless victims of oppressive and unchanging cultural practices is a persistent theme deeply rooted in many women's studies. On this point, Ayesha Imam and Mama (1994, p. 82) write:

> African woman is caricaturized as a limited series of stereotypes in many cases of social thought, with repetitive and oversimplified images underlying social science, much as they persist in literature. The docile, obedient, village woman, custodian of culture; the simple peasant grinding millet outside the productive life of the community; the matriarch of the shrine and market place; the corrupt urban prostitutes: these are the stereotypes of much Africanist, Western feminist and male scholarship on African women, such as it is.

Such negative stereotypes have been created by the patriarchal ideologies as well as by texts written by African men who portray women as being the weaker sex. Sherry Ortner (1974, p. 68) examines the cultural universality of female subordination, stating that it is a "universal fact of culturally attributed second-class status of woman in every

society". She argues that there is a culturally inscribed way of thinking that portrays women as inferior; thus encouraging their exclusion from public affairs, a traditionally male imprinted domain. Furthermore, Ortner (1974, p. 73) asserts that since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, them. She goes on to justify why women are considered part of nature. Firstly, she says it is because women's physiology is seen as closer to nature. This means that the bodies of women are structured, develop and function in a way similar to nature because they are seen as receptacles for the seeds of men. Secondly, women's social roles are seen as closer to nature because they are generally required to work in the field and harvest the crops. This suggests that it is more natural for women's bodies to do domestic work. Lastly, Ortner argues that women's psychic structure is also closer to nature than that of men. Therefore, female is to nature as male is to culture.

African society reflects the everyday experiences of women's embodiment, such as how they carry out duties or house chores. Such experiences create a difficult situation for women in postcolonial contemporary societies, knowing that their culture restricts the female to only male prescribed female roles. These roles are culturally assigned. According to Silva (2004), Ogundipe-Leslie believes that African women writers can "empower African women by deconstructing the African women's stereotypical images and fight against several forms of oppression that women still suffer in Africa" (p. 131). This applies to Mariama Bâ in her portrayal of female protagonists, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as strong, independent women, able to resist the norms and customs that their culture demands they follow. For instance, Aissatou's rejection of her husband for his

polygamous relationship and Ramatoulaye's quiet resistance at Moudou's funeral when she is forced to undergo customary rituals which she considers to be unfair and asserts that it "is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman..." (p. 4).

So Long a Letter portrays how the societal practices that exist in Senegalese culture are oppressive and disempowering to women and addresses the prolonged silencing of African women by traditional patriarchal society. Within African culture exists the abusive and dehumanizing institutions of patriarchy, polygamy, widow abuse and legal restrictions preventing women's access to property and power in traditional societies. Most African societies have remained stagnant and do not want to adapt to change which allows for greater women's rights and freedoms as customs and culture should do.

Additionally, there is a conflict between the Western-educated woman and the traditional society. The novel presents us with two educated, professional women: Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, who are both teachers. Even though these women are educated, they have to deal with the norms of African traditional society and assume the posture of conventionally obedient wives who submit to their husbands and in-laws. Yet Aissatou does not submit, but divorces her polygamous husband and moves with their children to America (p. 18-19).

In this novel, culture is portrayed as undermining the independence and autonomy of women. Ramatoulaye chooses to remain married to Modou, regardless of his betrayal through his secretive polygamous marriage. Modou is able to obtain a second wife (Binetou) because religion and culture allow him this opportunity. This highlights the

double barreled oppression of women, by both religion (the incursion of colonialist's spiritual ideals) and tradition (as part of African culture), both of which unite to applaud a man's decision to acquire numerous wives as a sign of his virility and wealth. Hence, as this text, shows, women are subdued by culture, religion and patriarchal oppression as men maintain a superior and dominant position over them.

Patriarchy refers to "male domination both in the public and private spheres" (Abeda Sultana, 2012, p. 2). Literally it means the authority of a father or a male figure over a woman. In most cases, it is a social system in which men rule, dominate and oppress women. This governance gives them privilege and power to be superior over the sex they deem weaker, and it is these institutions of patriarchy which lead to female subordination. Some scholars such as Millett (1977) argue that patriarchy is a 'political institution' because of the relationship between male domination and female subordination, with one group exploiting the other. According to Kamara (2001), feminist critics like Bazin (1985), Frank (1987) and Stranton (1994) argue that the "African man is directly responsible for the problems of the African woman" (p. 213). Thus, these feminists, like the African feminist Ogundipe-Leslie attribute women's subjugation to men.

Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter* describes the plight of women resulting from different forms of oppression and presents patriarchy as a potential threat to women's relationship with men. It demonstrates how women characters struggle throughout their lives to survive their predicament within African culture. However, Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's struggle against patriarchal subjugation in *So Long a Letter* makes a stronger petition to the average woman to develop female bonding, as well as financial independence to

liberate themselves from the burden of oppression, just as these two female characters did.

This is not the case for Bâ's character, Jacqueline, an Ivorian woman who is also a victim of polygamy in an African society that endorses patriarchal ideologies which permit men to act in abusive ways. We read of her husband's cruel exploits in this quote:

> Her husband, making up for the lost time, spent his time chasing slender Senegalese women, as he would say with appreciation, and did not bother to hide his adventure, respecting neither his wife nor his children (p. 42).

As a result of her husband's behavior, Jacqueline spirals into depression which leads to a severe nervous breakdown.

This is not an unusual consequence of marital mistreatment, illustrating that Mariama Bâ is an African woman writer who paints a realistic picture of the African woman's condition. She criticizes polygamy and observes female relationships in the face of male oppression. In patriarchal African societies, women play central, but socially subordinate roles. Women face the challenges of patriarchal institutions which subjugate them through polygamy, neo-colonialism, and tradition, caste prejudices, political instability and the patriarchal domination.

She primarily criticizes the exclusion of women from public fields such as politics. This is apparent in the novel when Ramatoulaye, the protagonist, during a conversation with Daouda Dieng, a member of the National Assembly, laments:

> Nearly twenty years of independence! When will we have the first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of our country? And yet the militancy and the ability of our women, their disinterested commitment, have already been demonstrated. Women have raised more than one man to power (p. 61).

Surprisingly, Daouda Dieng actually agrees with her: “Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises. Women are the nation’s primary, fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms” (p. 62-63).

For Daouda both women and men are responsible for the discrimination against women. He even suggests that women should take the lead in transforming the prevailing gender relationships:

> Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country. Even you who are protesting; you preferred your husband, your class, your children to public life. If men alone are active in the parties, why should they think of the women? It is only human to give yourself the larger portion of the cake when you are sharing it out (p. 62).

In this instance, Mariama Bâ portrays the need for women to engage and be recognized in the political sphere. They can do this in a way that is more active in securing their own freedom from the different forms of oppression circulating around them. The pertinent issue in this discussion is that a man (Daouda Dieng) is advocating for gender equality. This means that, although African society is multifaceted, with patriarchal

ideologies that oppress women; there are some men who support the emancipation of women.

The issue of gender is predominant in the novel. We are presented with two middle-class marriages which flounder as a result of men's decision to take second wives; Ramatoulaye's marriage with Modou and that of her friend, Aissatou, with Mawdo. Modou insults Ramatoulaye by taking a second wife who is the same age as their eldest daughter. To make matters worse, Ramatoulaye did not know about her co-wife until the day of the wedding. Modou does not even have the decency to tell his wife, but rather sends his brother, Tamsir, and other prominent men to tell her. Regardless of this affront, Ramatoulaye remains married to Modou. Her friend Aissatou, on the other hand, leaves her husband, Mawdo, and escapes with her four children.

In the novel, according to Arndt (2002, p. 118-119), "the humiliating and wounding sides of polygyny are poignantly described, and polygyny is roundly condemned. The fact that both men favor polygyny shows their inability to conduct truly egalitarian relationships." Modou does not even regret his behavior and abandons his family financially and emotionally by neglecting his first wife after he marries the second one, Binetou. Mawdo also does not correct his behavior even after his wife leaves him. This automatically shows the weakness of men and their inability to resist the opportunities presented to them through polygyny, and religious norms as discussed in the foregoing section.

In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ also explores the oppressive nature of the Islamic religion in its treatment of Senegalese women. During Modou's funeral Ramatoulaye is

forced to undergo customary rituals which she considers to be unjust: “the moment when she sacrifices her possessions to her family-in-law” (p. 4). Further, Ramatoulaye writes about how, as a widow, she is confined to her home in accordance with Islamic law, remaining in seclusion for “four months and ten days” (p. 8). However Ramatoulaye is not concerned about this seclusion because she turns it into something different, claiming: “The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of my bitterness” (p. 8).

She sees this as an opportunity to voice her anger after thirty years of enforced silence into resistance. This is evident when Modou’s brother (Tamsir) has the audacity to ask for her hand in marriage while she is yet in seclusion: “When you have ‘come out’ (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife, and further, you will continue to live here, just as if Modou were not dead” (p. 57). This actually alludes to how the Islamic religion permitted polygamy because Tamsir had three wives already and was seeking Ramatoulaye as his fourth. Nevertheless, Ramatoulaye raises her voice for the first time in front of all the men who have accompanied Tamsir: “My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous” (p. 57-58).

She is able to transform her thirty years silence into resistance against an oppressive religious and traditional law. Stratton (1994, p. 140) states that “Ramatoulaye… does affirm particular traditions, such as African Muslim eating and dress codes. Nonetheless, she comments “we suffered social constraints and heavy burden of custom” (p. 19). This shows her protest at and resistance to some of the extreme

customs required by her religion. However, Ramatoulaye insists on carrying on with her religious identity by striving to be a perfect Muslim woman. She declares during the mourning period after Modou's death: “I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail” (p. 8). By doing this Ramatoulaye obediently submits to some of her religion’s form of patriarchal decrees. She is portrayed as a woman who adheres to both cultural and religious forms of patriarchy but resists others that may harm her and other women.

Polygamy is an ancient practice found in many religions and cultures. The novel observes the marriages of two main characters, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, who are abandoned by their husbands to marry other wives. The husbands, Modou and Mawdo respectively, conform to the Muslim tradition of polygamy. The former marrying his daughter’s friend, the latter marrying a young girl who is also his first cousin. Although these men are educated Modou is a labour official and Mawdo is a doctor they nevertheless conform to the religious practice of polygamy even though it oppressed their first wives.

In addition, although the Islamic religion has a negative impact on Ramatoulaye’s married life she remains faithful to her religion. She wearily reconciles herself to the polygamous life by saying: “I had prepared myself for equal sharing according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life. I was left with empty hands” (p. 46). Furthermore, she actually tries to spiritually justify her husband’s behavior: “There is nothing one can do when Allah the Almighty puts two people side by side.....God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it” (p. 36-37). In

other words, she submits to the oppressive nature of her religion as she feels powerless to resist her husband's decision, claiming that there is "nothing he can do about it". Aissatou, on the other hand, takes a different position. She actually leaves the marital home and divorces her husband when he marries another wife. The letter she writes to Mawdo (her husband) shows how serious and committed she is to leaving him: "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (p. 32). Aissatou presents herself as a dynamic, evolving and independent woman who is unwilling to submit to polygamous laws. She resists both the norms of Senegalese culture and Islamic religion. Therefore, Akano asserts that Mariama Bâ's work:

> invites the world to behold and reject the culture of oppression, colonization and deprivation of the girl-child in her educational advancement; she equally invites the world to condemn and repudiate polygamy as inhibiting and limiting in its rapacious influence on the family spouses and destroying the bond of marriage and by implication causing irreparable damage to the bond of joy, togetherness and happiness of the infected family (2014, p. 25).

Bâ has her protagonist Ramatoulaye comment on the persistent gender inequality and the adverse conditions of many Muslim women because of the androcentric nature and teachings of Islamic law (Ali, 2012). At the letter's conclusion, she writes that women are: "Instruments for some, baits for others, respected and despised, often muzzled, all women have the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed" (p. 88). With this statement, she acknowledges that all women in Africa suffer the same fate of gender oppression by religious practices that subordinate women. In other words,

Ramatoulaye is saying no woman suffers alone; somewhere there is someone who is going through the same ordeal or predicament.

Mariama Bâ's portrayal of women's identities and subjectivities is not only shaped by gender roles, patriarchal ideologies, cultural and religious practices, but also by other women who perpetuate this abuse. She examines the relationships among women in her novel and investigates the discrimination and oppression of women by other women. According to Arndt, "the fact that older women use the power offered to them by social hierarchies to seek to satisfy their interests unconditionally, not caring that they are destroying the lives of their daughters, daughters-in-law, and other young women in the process" is what further oppresses women (2002, p. 119). This is apparent in the novel where the mother-in-law of Aissatou, Aunty Nabou, is a key agent in acquiring a second wife for her son, deliberately destroying the happiness of Aissatou and their family along the way.

The cruelty of women as depicted in the novel is further argued by Seago (1999) who states that most relationships developed by women are mainly "motivated by competition and jealousy, enacted along an axis of age and physical attraction and seen only in relation to men" (p. 85). He explains that "men are defined through their deeds while women's primary identity derives from their appearance" (1999, p. 85), which means that women are primarily concerned with how they appeal to and satisfy men and will do anything to promote these relationships, even if it results in demeaning or destructive behavior against other women.

In Bâ's novel, Binetou, Moudou's young second wife, is portrayed as a victim of her mother's manipulation and greed. Nabou, Mawdo's second wife, also suffers the same fate although it is her aunt who arranged the marriage. These two young girls were convinced by their mother and aunt to accept being second wives in a polygamous marriage. According to Ali (2012, p. 191):

> By exposing the victimization of Nabou and Binetou, Mariama Bâ as a female writer is committed to her womanhood; she is concerned with making these two oblivious women, indeed all victimized women, become aware of the deplorable condition they have been placed in by men. These two young victims have been allured by the illusion that through these marriages, they would be offered security and safety; but they are unaware that they have also been enticed into a state of passivity, silence, and acceptance.

Thus, men are not only the perpetrators and misinterpreters of the Islamic law. Here we have two greedy older women "who use their own daughters as a means to exit their state of poverty and to gain access to materialism" (Ali, 2012: 191). Even though Ramatoulaye is troubled with her loss, she is able to see that Binetou, her marital rival and her daughter's friend, is a "lamb sacrificed, like many others, on the altar of materialism" (p. 39). This suggests that other, often older, women help sustain the patriarchal system and marginalize other women. This is also seen at the funeral when, instead of the women offering comfort and support, they are greedy and abusive in taking food and other goods from Ramatoulaye, the widow.

Besides the examination of female oppression by her gender, culture, religion and the patriarchal system, Mariama Bâ also explores how the female characters react to these forms of oppression. These female characters are not stereotypically subservient or rigid in their ways of thinking or behaving. Instead, they transform themselves into speaking subjects and agents of personal change. The women are seen to refuse and contest the subjugation of their sexuality for pleasure, domination and exploitation. *So Long a Letter* introduces us to the predicament of three heroines: Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Jacqueline. For each of these women, although their husbands are polygamous, these female characters resist their subordination in dissimilar ways.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou adopt two different ways of coping with their marital oppression. On the one hand, Aissatou leaves her husband and even the country, ensuring a complete escape from her painful situation. Aissatou chooses to escape from the traditional society of Senegal by pursuing her individual goals. She continues her tertiary education in France and later gets a job in New York. On the other hand, Ramatoulaye remains in the marriage, experiencing not only her husband's outright neglect and abandonment, but the scourge of the mistreated widow as well. Yet she exerts her independence in refusing to accept the diminished position of other wife when numerous men ask to marry her, preferring instead to remain a single mother.

Ramatoulaye's decision to stay as Modou's wife comes from her belief in the sanctity of the institution of marriage. She firmly believes that a woman needs a man in order to maintain balance in the society. She reflects: "I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I

understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (p. 56).

Even though Ramatoulaye initially assumes the role of the traditional, obedient African wife; "she does not physically leave the house, she psychologically leaves the marriage" (Kamara, 2001, p. 219). Although she is more subservient, she "achieves a certain amount of self-empowerment within the confines of her traditional society" (Latha, 2001, p. 25). This is portrayed when she voices her opinion against her brother-in-law, Tamsir's insulting proposal, given at a time when she is mourning her husband.

While Ramatoulaye is more subservient, she still achieves a certain amount of self-empowerment within the confines of her traditional society. On the other hand, Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, appears to inhabit the middle ground between the two older women. She represents the type of woman who maintains her individual freedom by marrying a man (Abou) who joins her in contesting the traditional notions of marriage: "marriage is no chain. It is a mutual agreement over a life's programme. So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain? It may be Abou (her husband); it may be me. Why not? The wife can take the initiative to make the break" (p. 74). The husband even cooks for her and claims that: "Daba is my wife. She is not a slave, nor my servant" (p. 73). Through this relationship, Bâ portrays another type of African man who respects and does not oppress his wife.

Ramatoulaye had no choice but to deal with the humiliation inflicted on her by her husband, that is, his complete abandonment and rejection. However, some experiences in her letter reveal the burden of her pain from her husband's betrayal, and these inner

feelings she confesses to Aissatou: "I ask myself questions. The truth is that, despite everything, I remain faithful to the love of my youth. Aissatou, I cry for Modou and I can do nothing about it" (p. 56). It is her unburdening to Aissatou that helps Ramatoulaye endure her sorrow and loss.

Cherekar (2014, p. 409) asserts that whilst, "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." In other words, Cherekar is implying how helpless a woman is without her husband: a wife is dependent on her husband. In other words, this gives men power to ill-treat or disrespect their wives knowing that they are reliant on them. This is what Modou did to his wife by taking a second wife of his daughter's age. So, Ramatoulaye decides to reconcile herself to her role as co-wife and allow the traditional norms of marriage to contradict her own.

Unlike Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Jacqueline is one female character who does not do well with subjugation. She suffers physically, mentally and emotionally; to the extent that she must be hospitalized after her husband cheats on her. She experiences an emotional breakdown from her husband's repeated infidelities. Jacqueline, who enjoyed life, bravely endured blood test after blood test. Another electrocardiogram, another X-ray of the lungs...which revealed traces of her suffering" (p. 44). However, "after a month of treatment" she is finally diagnosed with depression: "The X-rays have shown nothing, and neither have the blood tests. The problem is you are depressed, that is...not happy" (p. 45). So even though Jacqueline does not leave her husband, her husband`s infidelity affects her to the extent that her husband, Samba Diack

sympathizes with her and we read that he is “kind and touched by his wife’s breakdown” (p. 44). In the end she eventually overcomes the ordeal.

Mariama Bâ’s writing has a clear emancipatory force for the predicament of African women. Her protagonist, Ramatoulaye, is not rebellious and in defiance of the patriarchal society, but she tries to make the best of the situation. Her weapons for survival are her intelligence and resourcefulness just like her friend Aissatou although she accepts the law of her patriarchal society and stays married to her husband. However, Ramatoulaye takes pride in the liberation of women from the patriarchal ideologies, and contends that: “My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present and male egoism resists” (p. 88). This reveals the existence of women like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou who emancipate themselves from these patriarchal ideologies. More so, in the midst of all the complexities of oppression, Bâ applauds female relationships in the face of male oppression. According to Deborah Plant (1996, p. 110), “Ramatoulaye knows what a treasure she has in Aissatou. She appreciates the possibilities of and sees the need for friendship and sisterhood.” It is through their long-lasting friendship that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are able to provide the needed support for each other after having been unfairly deprived of their husbands’ emotional and financial support.

Another tool of resistance Mariama Bâ uses is education and she presents it as a way out of the predicament that her female characters suffer. Aissatou uses education extensively as a vehicle out of the polygamous relationship her husband created. She feels betrayed and leaves her husband, taking the children along. Aissatou leaves the

country, furthers her education and starts a career of her own. Ramatoulaye envies her fiend for such an accomplishment: "…books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you (p. 32). In addition, she gives a long commentary on the importance of education:

> The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Juxtaposition of words from which springs the idea. Thought, History, Science, Life, Sole instrument of interrelationships and of culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted: examination sat and passed took you also to France. The School of Interpreters, from which you graduated, led to your appointment into the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. You make a very good living. You are developing in peace, as your letters tell me, your back resolutely turned on those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationships. (p. 32)

This clearly depicts Bâ's understanding of education as a weapon that women can use to empower themselves. Along this line, it is enlightening to note that before Mawdo's mother, Aunty Nabou, presents the young Nabou for marriage, she ensures that the girl receives an education. Aunty Nabou recognizes the value of education and makes sure that the young Nabou goes to secondary school and continues with her studies before marrying her son. The girl reads mid-wifery, which Aunty Nabou advises her to read; considering this role noble. This might also have been in recognition of Mawdo being a

doctor as young Nabou's profession would make it easier for both she and her new husband to relate to one another. It also means that Mawdo would not have to marry an illiterate. These textual events reveal the importance of education especially to an African woman.

The worst situation of an uneducated woman portrayed in the novel is that of Jacqueline whose unfaithful husband openly flaunts his affairs. Instead of leaving him, she remains but her resultant depression destroys her. It is possible that her uneducated state makes her feel trapped in the relationship. If she had been educated she would have found something to sustain herself financially and psychologically instead of surrendering her identity to the projected image created by her husband's mistreatment.

Similarly, the fact that Ramatoulaye is an educated woman gives her the strength to refuse the offer of marriage from both Tamsir and Daouda Dieng. She is insightful enough to realize that the disadvantage associated with marrying these two men far outweighs the advantage of having their questionable companionship. Additionally, she also recognizes how unfair it would be to the other wives of these men and chooses not to subject them to the grief she suffered from Modou's betrayal. This is what she clearly puts in the letter she wrote to Daouda responding to his marriage proposal: "Esteem is not enough for marriage, whose snares I know from experience. And then the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation. Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family" (p. 68).

In conclusion, Mariama Bâ's novella examines the plight of Senegalese women in an African society whose gender, patriarchal, cultural and religious ideologies oppress them. The novel acts as a platform to secure the emancipation of women so that they can be recognized as actual beings in the public domain or society. Bâ also demands the recognition of women for their contributions to the welfare of the country and the continent of Africa at large.

Her novel *So Long a Letter* provides a perceptive study not only of sexual oppression, but also of the complexities of colonization, culture and class. In fact she depicts black women's agonies brought about by a multitude of oppressions. In *So Long a Letter* all the female characters have had their poignant experiences exposed by Ramatoulaye's plight.

Chapter four explores the issues of gender, patriarchy, religion and culture in Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, a novel set in postcolonial Namibia. The chapter interrogates Andreas' portrayal of African women who are oppressed by different ideologies that exist in their society. She also investigates how these women react to or resist such oppression and their search for women empowerment.

CHAPTER 4: *THE PURPLE VIOLET OF OSHAANTU*

> *Well, I'm sorry you all feel uncomfortable about my behavior, but I cannot pretend,' she shook her head. 'I cannot lie to myself and to everybody else in this village. They all know how I was treated in my marriage. Why should I cry? For what? For my broken ribs? For my baby, the one he killed inside me while beating me? For cheating on me so publicly? For what? For what, Ali?*
> (*Neshani Andreas*, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, 2001, p. 49)

Andreas, in the above quotation, portrays how some African women suffer at the hands of their husbands in their marriages. Kauna, the protagonist represents other women who suffer the same fate under the heavy patriarchal traditions or ideologies that allow men in African societies like Namibia to abuse and oppress women. This novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* offers an exploration of this repression. An analysis of ~~it~~ the novel is significant to this study as it directly links to the notion of women's oppression by gender, religion, patriarchy and culture in African societies.

Andreas' novel explores an "indigenous patriarchal society which uses traditional practices and colonial Christianity to subjugate and silence women" (Rhode, 2003, p. 44). The traditional system of patriarchy in many ways seeks to close any possibilities of empowerment for women and Andreas examines the status and roles of these women in a traditional Southern African society. She also addresses the issues of domestic violence, marriage, inheritance rights and female oppression.

The novel explores the relationship between two friends: Kauna (the protagonist) and Mee Ali. Kauna's and Mee Ali's friendship develops into a close relationship as they have been neighbors since they arrived in the Oshaantu village. Although they are friends, their marriages are different; Mee Ali is married to Michael who is a loving,

caring and supportive husband and father, whereas, Kauna's husband is abusive and openly cheats on her. Through the power and influence of the friendship between these two women, Andreas portrays the value and strength of female relationships in the midst of the male-dominated Namibian society.

The novel portrays the physical violence of Kauna's marriage to Shange and the resultant silence or indifference of many of the other women in her circle. When Shange mysteriously dies after a night with his mistress, we are presented with a series of catastrophic events. According to Lisa Coxson (2006, p. 694), Kauna's "transition into widowhood is used as a catalyst for stories which highlight the subordinate role of women in the novel's rural setting." The death of Kauna's husband gives Andreas a platform to unveil other issues that affected Kauna in her marriage and highlight the plight of the other female characters in the novel.

Andreas' novel examines the issues surrounding patriarchal oppression and polygamy in Africa. Her protagonist, Kauna, presents herself as a victim of spousal abuse. Thus, this chapter will examine how this text reveals the representation of African cultural traditions which collectively undermine the position of women by allowing polygamy and female oppression.

The title of the novel *Purple Violet* comes from references to the beautiful flower that grows around the homesteads in the village. The protagonist, Kauna, is likened initially to this beautiful flower, however, over time, her beauty is diminished because of the beatings she suffers from her husband, Shange. We learn of this through the words of Mee Ali:

> We called her the purple violet of Oshaantu. She was so delicate and she came when these flowers were in bloom...Shange turned that child's beautiful face into something that looked as if it had been through some strange incisions made by a clam from outer space (p. 148).

This description of the cost of abuse heightens the extent of this man's brutality towards his wife.

The novel is set in post-independence Namibia, in a small village named Oshaantu. Andreas' novel explores the silencing of the submissive subject as a result of the dominant ideologies of colonialism and patriarchy (Gayatri Spivak, 1988). This scholarly insight aids in the interrogation of the plight of women as Andreas' expresses it, and opens avenues of investigation into the importance of women gaining emancipation from all the forms of oppression that they encounter.

Many African societies practice traditions which marginalize and dehumanize women. In *The Purple Violent of Oshaantu*, Andreas exposes some of these practices that oppress women: women inheritance rights, subservient gendered roles and widows' mourning customs. Andreas explores a society in which men are allowed to work in towns (mines and farms) while women are marginalized to the rural economy. According to Aletta Rhode (2003, p. 6): "women's mobility was seen as a threat to both indigenous patriarchal rules in the rural areas as well as to colonial rule." Kauna's husband, Shange, is a miner and Mee Ali's husband, Michael, is a migrant worker. These men are away most of the year and visit only when they are given holidays. Thus, women

are placed in the private, domestic sphere as custodians of children and often extended family members and are required to stay at home and labour in the fields.

Moreover, when Shange suddenly dies, Kauna, as a widow, has no right to their property, whether it is the home, animals or the fields. After his death, Shange's relatives compete with each other for access to his property:

> A week later Kauna received a message from the headman. He informed her that her in-laws had paid for the homestead and were now the new owners. Her destiny was in their hands...Why do you want to stay here and enjoy Shange's wealth? You didn't even shed one tear for him...Now you want to stay here and behave like a poor widow (p. 166).

According to Rhode (2003, p. 55), through these statements, Andreas exposes a "traditional custom in the Oshiwambo community which dictates that when a husband dies, his relatives inherit all his wealth and belongings, often stripping the wife and children bare and leaving them with no means of survival." This is supported by what Meme Katilina, one of the neighbors says to Mee Ali at Shange's funeral:

> You are her friend. You cannot allow these people to take away her belongings. She will not get anything from her husband's property, so why do you want her to lose her own as well? You know how few rights we have around here, especially after the death of a husband. His relatives always have more rights (p. 39).

This further explicates the issue of traditional customs in which the widow has negligible rights, even if they have been the ones who have cared for the home, animals and fields. The relatives even have the audacity to fight over the property before Shange is

buried: “Last night...they were all there, old and young. They were fighting over cattle. Some animals were already being driven away” (p. 40). This quote indicates that Kauna has no entitlement in the distribution of wealth, but rather, like vultures, relatives swoop in to feast on the remains.

The problem is generated from the fact that within the marriage Kauna had no rights to the property she worked for with her husband. According to Victor Ogbeide (2013, p. 55), “like all the other male chauvinists in the village who are afraid of an economically empowered woman, Shange had discouraged Kauna from owning animals of her own.” He further contends that this form of financial abuse is a “function of the patriarchal wisdom that prevails in the village that a wealthy bride is not good for a husband’s ego” (p. 55). This clearly shows the insecurity that afflicts men at the thought of powerful, independent women, and, as a result, they deny their wives the right to property, which, in turn, maintains women’s dependency on their husbands or male relatives.

The case of Kauna is worsened by her perceived lack of grief and apparent unwillingness to fulfill her role as a widow. Suspicions and accusations abound as this quote illustrates: “You will not stay here and bring other men into Shange’s bed” (p. 166). The point is clear that they do not want her staying at the homestead she once shared with her husband, and yet they prevent her from seeking another husband to provide her with financial support. As these events occur even at her husband’s funeral, it is evident that women face mistreatment immediately upon widowhood.

Mee Sara is also another female character who suffers the same predicament as Kauna. When her husband, Victor mysteriously dies his cousins take away every

inheritance from her: “They dragged her to the bank to withdraw their relative’s money. They took everything from the house even the electrical appliances” (p. 104). This mistreatment illustrates the extent to which the injustice of the system of inheritance rights robs women of their livelihood and their homes. Thus, women see their gender as a barrier to their access to property both within their marriages and, even more so, after their husbands die.

Andreas further examines how men of the Oshawimbo village exert their masculine strength and position on their women. This is apparent when Michael, Mee Ali’s husband, warns her against interfering with Kauna’s affairs: “Ali I think this time you went too far. For you to ask the church to end Shange and Kauna’s marriage...And now men are looking at me badly. They talk behind my back; they say that I have a wife who is not disciplined” (p. 9). Michael says this after the severe beating of Kauna by her husband, Shange, before his death. Michael is trying to silence his wife’s interference in Kauna’s marriage because it paints a bad picture of him as a man, as people are suggesting that he cannot control his own wife. This is pertinent to this study as it shows the power that men exert over women, especially in marriages where men control every aspect of the women’s life, even their speech and their level of compassion for the needs of others. Thus by their position and behavior, men take away women’s autonomy and freedom to make their own decisions.

In addition, Shange also controlled every aspect of Kauna’s life. According to Mee Ali’s reminiscence: “When I thought of how Shange treated Kauna, I understood her reaction. He controlled and virtually ruled her life. He decided whom she should befriend and when she could visit her relatives and friends” (p. 50-51). Mee Ali’s statement

indicates that she understands Kauna's refusal to mourn her abusive husband's passing because he repressed her in every area of her life. As this quote indicates, Oshawimbo men, according to traditions practiced in some parts of Namibia, had the power to determine every aspect of a woman's life, from her finances to her friendships. She is not allowed to make any decisions on her own or practice any level of autonomy.

Some of the women respond by exerting their power in the one area they can: their bodies. Thus, the women characters in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* refuse to allow the exploitation of their bodies as reproductive vessels or as instruments of sexual pleasure for men and as objects of subordination. According to Rhode (2003, p. 52), "because of the opposition to the use of contraceptives by men in many African societies women are often burdened with multiple pregnancies in quick succession during their childbearing years." Thus, women resort to secret contraceptive measures like the protagonist, Kauna who states: "He is the last one. Sustera gave me something. Shange doesn't know. He would kill us both..." (p. 79). Kauna subverts the exploitation of her body as a child bearer by taking an oral contraceptive without her husband's knowledge. This shows that even though a woman is in an abusive marriage, she has some means, however minimal, to undermine her husband's oppressive practices by seeking assistance from other women who can help control her reproductive capacities.

Apart from gender, traditional practices and assumptions, religious practices also reinforce the subordination of women by their husbands through this doctrine, especially laws of marriage. Hango-Rummunkainen cited in Rhode (2003) asserts that the subordination of women is done by "teaching Christian values which have to do with patience and obedience for the sake of diverting away from issues concerning their

lives" (p. 8). These values of patience and obedience are emphasized as women are told to appreciate the man with whom the church has united them. This is revealed by what Kauna's mother stresses to her daughter:

> Shange is the man God has given to you and you must accept him as he is. You have made a promise before Him and the whole congregation to love and cherish your husband till death do you part. You cannot break your word now (p. 67).

As the above quotation suggests, this interpretation of biblical principles further limits a woman's ability to respond to abuse. Kauna, therefore, represents women in African societies who are silenced by religious values suggesting a connection between this character and Mariama Bâ's protagonist, Ramatoulaye, in *So Long a Letter* who is silenced by her Muslim religious traditions and who thus remains married to her polygamous husband, Modou Fall. However, both these female characters break through the religious veil of silence when their husbands die; and through various acts of defiance towards their tradition and religion, resist their subjugation.

Fortunately, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* presents us with a religious man, Kauna's father, who supports women's empowerment. He is a minister in the Christian church who advises his daughter to leave the marriage before the violent abuse worsens. Hence, even though some men may try to use religion to oppress and silence women, Kauna's father, as a Christian, still recognizes that this abuse needs to be resisted and promotes his daughter's escape, cautioning: "Child, don't wait until it is too late" (p. 95).

Hence, it seems religion is only used as a catalyst to perpetuate women's oppression by those who are unable or unwilling to step beyond religious and traditional dogma.

In addition to some oppressive religious norms, African culture consists of many practices and beliefs that disrespect, devalue, suppress and destroy human dignity (Andima and Tjiramanga, 2014). Thus women are regarded as inferior and are expected to remain submissive to men. Within these culturally enforced traditions, it seems normal and acceptable for men to abuse women. The traditions stipulate that men should dominate and may implement cultural norms that subjugate women.

These practices and beliefs that exist in African culture assist in dictating the everyday experiences of women and how they carry out their assigned societal duties. Such experiences create a difficult situation for women in contemporary postcolonial societies, where their culture restricts them to only embrace assigned gender roles. Contrary to this, African culture prompts men to dominate women, demanding that women treat them with respect and honor; as they are deemed superior. According to Rhode:

> Andreas, however, in relating the brutality of masculinity to the excess of power a patriarchal society makes available to men, shows Shange as simply conforming to a cultural norm which regards women as the mere property of a man (2003, p. 47).

So, what Shange is doing in the eyes of the community is normal according to the cultural norms. The women in return were blamed for their suffering. According to Mee Ali:

> What I still do not understand was the way people in this community treated her. It was as if the failure of their marriage was her fault! They laughed at her and stigmatized her. It was her fault that her husband looked at other women. It was her fault that her husband beat her (p. 51).

This could be the reason why the community does not help Kauna until Mukwankala, an elderly woman intervenes. It could also be the reason why the women end up lying to the doctors and nurses about the wounds and the scars they receive in their abusive relationships. This is significant to the study as it shows the level of oppression that exists in African societies under everyone's watch and how society and or culture perpetuate it.

In relation to culture, Andreas further examines patriarchal oppression in an African society in which men undermine the freedom of women through their marriages. Kauna is dominated and oppressed by her husband; she suffers both physical and emotional abuse from her husband (Shange) who is always angry. He batters his wife mercilessly with anything at hand and even in front of the children. Shange feels embarrassed by the fact that his wife and son find out he is a cook in the mines: "As it happened, Kauna's third son, Kangulu, discovers the photograph. He thinks his father with a big hat and a white apron is funny...Shange cannot understand his own feelings. Is he embarrassed or angry? He is irritated. He starts to fume and cannot wait for Kauna to return from the well" (p. 58). This is when his rage erupts: She moved like an old cloth as Shange's shoes struck her mercilessly all over her tiny body. The heavy mine shoes sounded as if they were breaking every bone (p. 58).

This worst beating comes all because Kauna discovers that her husband is a cook at the mines. The photograph Mee Ali shows her friend is evidence of Shange's diminished position and she regrets showing Kauna the photo as it almost caused Kauna her life from the severe beating she receives.

Kandiwapa, Kauna's eldest daughter is the one who normally treats her mother's wounds when she can and states: "I do it every time he beats her" (p. 60). This shows that the children bear unwilling witness to their father's brutal beating of their mother, which is too much to handle at their age. Kandiwapa is only eleven years old and at such a young age, both she and her siblings find it distressing to watch their mother in such a condition time and again. Mee Ali's words, "This time... it was worse" (p. 58) followed by a "yes" from Kandiwapa portray the intensity of the beating which is overwhelming for the young girl.

However, on some occasions when the beatings turn out to be murderous and when Michael, Mee Ali's husband is around, he rushes from his house to calm Shange. What Michael finds is described, according to Ogbeide (2013, p. 56), as the "pathetic image of a helpless Kauna": "Blood mixed with sand all over her face, in her mouth, nose, eyes, ears, head and clothes, and the sight of her children crying helplessly (p. 59). The fact that these children are too young to witness their father's abuse of their mother makes the scene even more tragic as they can only offer tears not help.

The Purple Violet of Oshaantu portrays Shange as an archetype of patriarchal power, exhibiting violence and aggression when he deems his position demeaned. The oppression and violence forces Kauna into a deep silence which also extends to

Shange's funeral, when she refuses to give the widow's speech. During his life, he removed her ability to speak and her silence at this moment is her power that she enforces. Shange would not let her speak before and now she is choosing not to speak. Therefore, silenced women like Kauna become willing victims of their husband's emotional, psychological and physical abuses.

As many female characters in this novel represent how society allows women to be abused by their husbands, other members of the community acknowledge the power of patriarchy and its resultant cost to women's health. Andreas clearly portrays this when nurses complain about women who try to hide the abuse when they come for treatment:

> they lie to the doctors, saying that some cow had kicked them in their face while they were milking; and that treating these women was a waste of time because they always return, worse (p. 61).

Audrey Chapman and Patrick Ball (2001) call this 'internalized oppression' to the extent that the abused accept the violent treatment as part of marriage. So, not only are these women trying to keep their marriages by enduring the pain, but they are accepting that, as women, they can expect to be ill-treated by both men and society. This is shown particularly when women try to cover up their bruises and scars with "brown shoe polish" (p. 64) to avoid embarrassment and humiliation. They are forced to stay married to these abusive husbands because of the societal pressure to remain married, as well as the lack of economic, family and community support. Thus, Kauna feels helpless in her plight as she lacks the resources to fight. She states: "So I just gave up. I'm tired. Now, when he beats me, I simply nurse my wounds. Maybe my mother was right, this is

the man God has given me and I must accept him, bad as he is" (p. 67). This confession suggests that she has succumbed to her inferior role and acquiesced to her husband's right to abuse her.

Shange is not only abusive but is also unfaithful to his wife which furthers Kauna's humiliation. He openly engages in a sexual relationship with another woman because the patriarchal society allows men to do so without recrimination. Thus, the issue of unequal gender relations is predominant in the novel. One is through polygamy, whether legitimized through marriage or simply through sexual practice. Polygamy, a form of patriarchal domination, is an ancient practice allowed in many African societies, and men like Shange feel privileged to engage in it. Andreas examines the issue of polygamy within African culture by highlighting its effects in marriages. An extreme case of the consequence of a polygamous marriage presented in the novel is that of Mee Namutenya, "a wife who goes mad and becomes the village idiot after her husband of twenty-plus years takes a second wife" (Coxson, 2006, p. 694). Even though Mee Namutenya is an outstanding woman in the village, her husband, Tate Oiva's infidelity reduces her to insanity.

Yet Andreas also creates male characters that do not adhere to abusive patriarchal practices. Kauna's father and Mee Ali's husband, Michael, are two such examples. When Kauna visits her parents to recover from a violent beating, her father tries to encourage her regarding her marital decisions:

> I know your mother wants your marriage to work. But I have seen women who have died in this thing called marriage, or have done things you don't want to

> hear about. I don't want it to get to this...You must do what you think is best for you (p. 95).

The sensitivity of Kauna's father illustrates that even though Namibia is a society heavily embedded in patriarchy, there are still some men who are willing to advise women to seek autonomy. Although her father is atypical in his counsel, his guidance is to be noted as that of a man who does not adhere to these abusive practices, just as there are some women who endorse patriarchal traditions. Her mother who directs her to endure is one such woman.

Moreover, the reference to "some women who have died in this thing called marriage" (p. 95) suggests that there are many other women in the society who suffer similar abuses to Kauna's and others who endure even more excruciating experiences. Her father's statement implies that many women in Namibian society accept domestic violence as a normal part of the marriage.

Michael (Mee Ali's husband) is also represented as a man who is does not adhere to the patriarchal tradition of domination. Andreas portrays him as a loving husband who resists the traditional marriage roles that result in abusive relationships. In fact, his marital commitment is frowned upon by his society and his love for his wife is described as "abnormal love" and he is denigrated as being "under the petticoat government" (p. 17). Thus, he is presented as a weak man who is under his wife's control because he does not abuse her. This means that it is unusual to find men like Michael in the society. Michael also tries to protect other women in the community as noted when he stands against the greed of his relatives at the funeral of his cousin, Victor. He is embarrassed

when his relatives take all the possessions that Victor left at his death, leaving nothing for his wife (Mee Sara) and their children, complaining: “Please, people, let’s behave like adults...I don’t disrespect anybody, but we must think of Mee Sara and the children as well...Is this how you will treat my wife when I die?” (p. 104).

His defense of Mee Sara and her children illustrates his concern for their well-being and sustenance. This shows that, like Kauna’s father, there are men in these patriarchal societies who are supportive of women. They even suggest that women themselves and their relatives should take the lead in transforming the prevailing oppressive practices against women. Yet their voices seem to be few in number and they seem unable to stand against the power and influence of male hegemonic practices because they lack the support of their counterparts in stopping the oppression.

Furthermore, the novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, exposes the fact that many women in African societies impose traditional restrictions in order to oppress other women. Mee Maita is a village elder who “believes that marriage should be one miserable, lifelong experience” (p. 4). She suggests that all the women abused by their husbands should endure the pain. In addition, Kauna’s mother is another woman who wants her daughter to remain in an abusive marriage. Mee Fennie, Kauna’s aunt, explains:

> Your mother will certainly not approve of you wanting to divorce your husband, because when I divorced, she was angry with me. She gave me this long lecture that marriages are not easy and what did I expect...She claimed that I embarrassed her, our parents and the rest of the clan (p. 66).

This suggests that some mothers are not willing to support their daughters should they attempt to escape an abusive relationship.

Andreas also examines women who gossip and accuse each other of witchcraft. For instance, when Shange dies mysteriously after spending the night at his mistress's house, Kauna is suspected of foul play. She states: "Now they will say I was jealous of his girlfriend and bewitched him" (p. 34). Moreover, Kauna, when she is faced with the accusation of bewitching her husband, acts in the most unexpected way. She does not cover-up her husband's infidelity, but exposes it. The community complained: "She was not behaving like a widow. She walked straight up to the villagers and told them that her husband had not slept at home last night and had not eaten her food this morning" (p. 12).

Moreover, Kauna is not the only woman in the novel who suffers from such accusations. Mee Sara, another widowed female character is accused by her in-laws of killing her husband, Victor. They snarl: "You killed our relative...You are a murderer" (p. 103) even though Erik, a colleague of Victor's, identifies the problem and tries to clear up the accusations: "Victor was not bewitched by his wife or anybody else. Victor was sick. He had this new disease called AIDS" (p. 105).

Nonetheless, after this revelation, the relatives are not convinced and they still blame Mee Sara for her husband's death. According to Coxson (2006, p. 694): "the family concludes that Mee Sara, infected with the virus herself, is still at fault because she did not sexually satisfy her husband." In other words, they accuse the women of being

sexually unfulfilling, resulting in the men's unfaithfulness and subsequent contraction of the fatal disease.

In *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Andreas explores the complex reactions of her female characters to liberation which assists in examining their resistance to oppression. For example, Kauna refuses to cry at her husband's funeral:

> The first day she did not cry...the second day...the third day...the fourth day, she had not cried...Rumors that Kauna was not crying or showing emotion towards the sudden death of her husband spread like wild fire (p. 48).

Kauna justifies her reaction:

> I have been angry my whole life. I have been angry about this marriage and with this man, so at this stage I really don't think I care what happens to me if I don't cry for him...I have nothing to lose (p. 50).

Kauna, having suffered her husband's abuse and her female community members' indifference, now scorns their reaction or rejection.

Her second act of defiance is to refuse to give the widow's speech. She explains:

> No, I am not going to tell lies that widows tell at their husband's funerals. I am not going to say what an honorable, loving and faithful man he was, while everybody in the village knows what type of a man he was. No, I will not make a laughing stock of myself (p. 139).

Having suffered years of humiliation from his abuse, she is not going to further the disgrace by lying. Silence then is portrayed by Andreas as an instrument of resistance,

a tool to subvert patriarchal traditions and overcome the oppression, to which her husband's infidelity and battering subjected her. According to Huma Ibrahim (1997, p. 151): "the victim's silence is also a voice, and a mode of uttering." Kauna's silence evidences her disgust at her husband's ill treatment; to her Shange did not deserve her grief, respect or her accolades.

Kauna could be persuaded by neither her friend nor any of her family members to act like a widow. Her friend, Mee Ali, is concerned with what people will say about Kauna's defiance against the traditional customs for a widow: "You are putting me in an awkward situation. Your in-laws will think I have something to do with your decision" (p. 139). Still Kauna remains defiant in her silence. Eventually, her uncle makes the speech on behalf of the widow. It is a man who perpetuates the myth of a faithful husband, loving father, caring provider. By doing this, Andreas portrays how men will cover for one another, even when their behavior is cruel. Additionally, it also reveals the efforts that an African family will go to in order to ensure that its reputation remains untarnished. In the case of Shange's funeral eulogy, someone has to say something even if Kauna refuses to do her duty.

Although some women may preserve patriarchal values, Andreas also creates others who do not. According to Coxson (2006), *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* portrays the positive side of female friendships that can actually undermine dominant ideologies against women in a patriarchal society. Kauna receives comfort and encouragement from both her best friend, Mee Ali, and her aunt, Mee Fennie. These women try to persuade her to divorce Shange, saying: "Kauna this is the very last thing I should

advise you to do, but can't you leave Shange? Divorce him and go back to your parents or whatever, just to get away from him" (p. 66).

Their concern for her safety is genuine, but Kauna feels helpless as her response indicates:

> What makes you think I haven't tried...I have left my husband three times. The first was when we were still living with his parents. I pretended that I had gone to visit my parents. I did not say anything until Shange and his relatives turned up. The second and third times were after we had moved here. But it's always the same old story. He is sorry and he will never beat me again (p. 66).

Kauna has tried to remove herself from her abusive marriage, but Shange and his relatives enforce her submission. Attempts at escape seem futile, especially with the family's support of his behavior; even though they know of his propensity for violence and infidelity, they still acknowledge his claim on his wife. As Rhode argues, within African tradition, women may be treated as "mere instruments of their husband's will" (2003, p. 46). Thus, it appears, as a married woman, Kauna does not have a choice and neither does her family which may be the reason why her mother does not support her decision to leave Shange.

Yet, female solidarities are depicted as strong in challenging masculinity and male oppression, and Andreas' novel explores how female solidarity can undermine the social injustices and brutality that women experience. This is apparent when Mukwankala, an elder and respected woman in the village, stands up for Kauna. Publicly, she denounces Shange's wife-beating behavior:

> I heard you beat her again and this time I heard you almost killed her' she said coldly and with contempt. It was clear to everyone that Mukwankala was on the warpath...Why did you beat the child like that? ...Have you ever looked at yourself, your body, your weight, your height? How do you feel when you beat a person who cannot beat you back? ...Now, if you are such a fighter, tell me how many men you have beaten in this village the way you beat your wife? No, not one. Yes, it is only that poor child you beat like that... (p. 62).

Her vocal support of Kauna and denunciation of Shange is significant. By doing so, she defies the social custom which dictates that people should not intervene in other people's marriage. Andreas presents Mukwankala as a powerful woman in the village; one that is not restrained by patriarchal, cultural or religious norms. Through her outspoken statements, Mukwankala actually shames Shange into no longer beating his wife shortly before his demise. Kauna is grateful for her forthright intervention: "Mukwankala, I don't know what you said or did to him, but whatever it was, it worked...He has stopped abusing me. He doesn't beat me anymore" (p. 72). From that moment onwards, Mukwankala becomes Kauna's "confidante and counselor" (p. 73), and a significant support in her journey to autonomy.

Kauna's aunt, Mee Fennie, is another female character in the novel that Andreas portrays as strong and sympathetic to Kauna. She does not condone Shange's abusive behavior and has advised Kauna to divorce Shange: "Leave him. If you think you deserve more than what you get out of your marriage, divorce that man" (p. 66). Mee Fennie has gained this strength and self-actualization from her own experience as a divorced and a successful business woman, who is engaged as a vendor at an open

market in Kauna's home village. Her independence and self-reliance illustrates that women can live a better life outside of marriage where their labour is valued and financial returns are used to support the family. Thus, Andreas illustrates that some female characters in the novel are able to subvert their oppressive situation and progress out of it.

In addition, Andreas examines another experience of Mee Nangula, another female character who is a successful business woman with numerous supermarkets. Despite her accomplishments, however, she still suffers from the hegemonic limitations enforced by patriarchy which limits the achievements women may enjoy. Jacopo, her husband is jealous and feels undermined by his wife's successes, and thus, tries to sabotage her business. His relatives also intervene by accusing her of using witchcraft to achieve her business successes, thus enabling her husband to leave his fishing job and take over the businesses she has pioneered. However, under his mismanagement, "the shop went bankrupt and Mee Nangula, tired of the insults, the demoralization and her husband's complete lack of support, left him" (p. 134). Nevertheless, Mee Nangula did well despite the terrible ordeal she suffered in losing everything she worked for to her husband and his family. She suffered humiliation and abandonment but she thrived. Therefore, although Andreas may portray some of her female characters as weak and ineffectual, she also illustrates others as dynamic, strong, and resourceful survivors.

Even if the women in the Oshaantu village gossip about each other, they still come together to help Kauna and her children prepare the fields, a tradition known as *okakungungu*: "The women understood Kauna's situation. There was a wonderful spirit, a spirit of sisterhood. For once, all ill-feeling and hate were forgotten. We were one

again, sisters sharing a common cause" (p. 116). This unifying behavior reveals that there is a sense of sisterhood for the village women as they all understand their shared predicament. The tradition of *okakungungu* depicts women as hardworking help mates to one another, resourceful, supportive and friendly.

However, according to Jane Katjavivi (2002), these female solidarities are ruined by the patriarchal ideologies of power and authority in the village. The society at large does not acknowledge sisterhood in the midst of all the abuse, subordination and oppression that women suffer. Mee Ali is a case in point. She is very supportive of and sympathetic towards her friend, Kauna, to the extent that: "The men hated me. They thought I was bad influence. The women thought I was self-righteous. Shange ignored me whenever he could. My husband gave a lecture!" (p. 9). Others ostracized and criticized her for attempting to aid Kauna. She could not fathom why the people in the community treated Kauna in the way that they did, and explained it this way:

> It was as if the failure of their marriage was her fault. They laughed and stigmatized her. It was her fault that her husband looked at other women. It was her fault that her husband beat her. It was her fault that her husband did this or that. Oh, it was just too much (p. 51).

She could not bear watching her friend being treated as if everything that happened was her fault. Thus, Andreas' novel exposes a traditional society that perpetuates the oppression of women and does not support women when they need help, but rather blames them for their calamities.

Nevertheless, as in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Andreas' novel pinpoints education as a way out of the predicament that her female characters suffer. Kauna wishes she was an educated woman, which is extensively seen as a vehicle out of the polygamous relationship her husband has created. She explains: "Maybe if I had been a nurse, a teacher or any of those office workers, he would have treated me better" (p. 51). Her words suggest that the issue of women's independence and freedom from men's oppression is linked to female literacy.

Kauna persists in promoting the notion that education may bring women freedom when she visits her parents' village and advises her sisters concerning education and marriage: "They wanted to get married too and have plenty of children, but Kauna quickly said they should wait. They should study hard, finish school, and get a career and then get married (p. 76). Kauna endorses the idea that education is one of the tools women should possess in order to challenge patriarchal ideologies and resist male oppression, especially in marriages.

Yet Kauna is able to obtain freedom despite the numerous patriarchal obstacles. After Shange's relatives deny Kauna and the children access to all her husband's wealth, she chooses to leave the village of Oshaantu and settle somewhere else. She exerts what she deems her maternal rights by taking her children with her, explaining: "This is my baggage and your own baggage is never too heavy to carry. I am taking them with me" (p. 167). She takes full custody of her children, although according to patriarchal tradition the family could have refused to let her do so.

Kauna's triumph is noted in the last words she speaks to her friend Mee Ali:

> You have not seen anything yet. You know what happens to the *mahangu* millet? After it has been knocked down, stepped on and mercilessly destroyed by cattle, it finds the strength to repair itself and grow better. It is often bigger and more vibrant than the millet that has not been threatened by any danger and cut to the ground... No, I am not finished with them. I am only just starting (p. 174).

Kauna is very determined to start a new chapter in her life away from all the humiliation she has suffered from her abusive husband, her in-laws and the oppressive nature of her culture. She declares to Mee Ali that she is a strong woman who will rise again just like the *mahangu* millet. Thus, Andreas portrays that some women can break the restraints of the oppressive ideologies that exist in African society.

In conclusion, Andreas is a writer who examines the status and roles of women in a traditional Namibian society. She addresses the issues of domestic violence, oppressive marriage practices, and restrictive religious traditions which suppresses women's legal, emotional and physical rights to inheritance, autonomy and safety. She portrays how these issues thwart the freedom or emancipation of women in a post-colonial society, yet also gives voice to the men and women who support and inspire women to seek self-actualization.

In the following chapter, I examine how issues of religion, culture, gender, patriarchy and other women in their oppression or liberation are depicted in the novel *Beauty's Gift*. Through a close textual analysis I investigate how the female characters react to these complexities of oppression in their society and their aim for emancipation.

CHAPTER 5: *BEAUTY'S GIFT*

> *My beloved sisters our men have not loved us enough, they have not honored us enough; they have not respected us enough to make us equal partners. Thus, we have no voice. In the New Millennium, let us wait no more for the benevolence- it does not exist. (Sindiwe Magona, Freedom, 2000, p. 21)*

Magona's statement illustrates her response to the gendered oppression that women face at the hands of a patriarchal African society. In her South African society, traditional norms and patriarchal hegemonies subjugate women: physically, psychologically, emotionally and sexually. Through her works, Sindiwe Magona seeks to subvert the silencing and misrepresentation of African women. She advocates for women to take charge of their own voice by changing the silence into action. This is what her novel *Beauty's Gift* is centered on: giving women a voice to speak against the patriarchal and cultural sexual restrictions that are causing South African women to lose their lives.

Magona's novel *Beauty's Gift* depicts the story of five women who are best friends: Beauty, Amanda, Edith, Cordelia and Doris. Magona calls them Five Firm Friends (FFF). However, their friendship is affected by the untimely death of Beauty from the HIV/AIDS virus. This becomes Magona's main theme: looking at how women in Southern Africa struggle under the cultural and patriarchal and sexual proscriptions in their society, which possibly results in them being infected with the deadly virus.

In an interview with Kari Miller in 2010, when Magona was asked what inspired her to write the novel *Beauty's Gift*, she responded:

> I was provoked. I am very angry at the way our men are killing our women. It's mostly men. I am not saying men can't get infected by a woman, but it's mostly out of infidelity or out of these multiple partners. AIDS is preventable. We wouldn't be having these elevated figures of death and new infections... (p. 2).

This shows the importance of this issue to her as an African woman writer. The whole HIV/AIDS pandemic acted as a provocation for her to write this novel. Thus, she sees herself as a voice that educates, warns and sensitizes people to this crisis and its gendered causes.

In the process of doing this, Magona also explores other issues which arise from patriarchal attitudes: infidelity, polygamy, gender oppression, cultural mores, and religious practices. She centers her analysis on how black African women suffer from all these forms of oppression, particularly as it relates to their contraction of HIV/AIDS.

More so, Magona's examination of the issues mentioned above allows the reader to see women as central characters and get to know the perspective of these Five Firm Friends through their lived experiences within their marriages. She examines how African women can subvert traditional values that subjugate them to become objects of gender and sexual oppression. Additionally, she portrays how African men resist the changes that women aim to implement to emancipate themselves as well as the way women resist the silences enforced by men.

The main plot element of the text, Beauty's untimely death, causes dramatic changes in the lives of the remaining friends. They promise each other to go for the HIV test and demand that their partners join them as well. Amanda, the novel's main protagonist

states: “Aids will continue to kill us as long as we refuse to take responsibility for our actions” (p. 72). Therefore, in order for them to avoid getting infected with the deadly virus, they all make a vow, that they will not have unprotected sex with their husbands or partners until they know their status. However, the sudden changes these women are striving to implement in their sexual lives cause strife between them and their partners.

Through her novel, Magona displays how these female characters expose the flaws, failures and inequities of women’s marital and sexual relationships and their men’s behavior. According to Tanja Gruber (2014):

> In Magona’s novel women are depicted as the sole victims of this disease, but simultaneously also the ones who are taking action in the fight against it. As the novel suggests, their wish to use a condom is automatically linked with an accusation of disloyalty of the husband and thus immediately rejected (p. 54).

The men in the novel attempt to silence these four women, some verbally, others through the fist, and actively work against the women voicing their opinions and frustrations on these important sexual issues. For instance, when Amanda suggests to her husband, Zakes that he get an HIV/AIDS test, Zakes is surprised and at once presumes that she suspects him of being unfaithful: “Zakes jumped off the bed...Are you accusing me of something? He growled. What? Out with it! Or are you fooling around” (p. 80). As Zakes behavior indicates, the men immediately become defensive and accusatory, diverting the attention to the possibility of the women’s infidelity.

Furthermore, just like Zakes’ accusatory outburst, Edith’s husband Luvo stops speaking to his wife and also accuses her of betrayal. She sobs to her friends: “He asked me

what kind of a wife involves outsiders in her marriage...It's enough that we talked about condoms!" (p. 89). These men hoped to maintain their authority by silencing the women and overriding their concerns by shifting blame.

The worst situation presented in the novel is the reaction of Cordelia's husband, Vuyo, who not only leaves her and their children, but even physically abuses her, blackening her eyes with his vehement response to her request for condom use and AIDS testing. Further, he boasts of "a one-night thing" to prove his virility and sexual prowess (p. 80). Her friends remind her that it is no secret that Vuyo is unfaithful, yet Cordelia tells them that "this time he admitted it openly" (p. 80) and it is his unconcealed and persistent infidelity that provokes her concern for her sexual safety.

In Janet Bujra's article about AIDS discourse and activism in Africa, it is striking to note that "the idea of women telling their men what to do was unthinkable" (2000, p. 13). This heightens the issue of gendered oppression, wherein women are perceived as voiceless when it comes to matters in which men should dominate. In the African context it is unheard of for a woman to raise her voice and tell a man what to do. Thus, the determination of these FFF friends to require mutual AIDS testing appears to undermine the authority afforded men through patriarchal hegemony and traditional customs.

Male dominance is also apparent when Edith's husband, Luvo takes her by force after she refuses to sleep with him without an AIDS test or at least the use of a condom. As evidenced by Luvo's behavior, his wife's request is irrelevant and his marital rights to her body could be acquired without her consent. Hence, he rapes his own wife. Through

this violent encounter Magona illustrates the attitude of an African husband who believes he can dominate his wife both sexually and physically.

A similar situation occurs in Amanda's marriage. She states her case plainly in her effort to convince Zakes to take an AIDS test:

> You chose to be reckless with your life, but that choice had implications for me as well, something you seem to have forgotten. And I take exception to that, Zakes. I take very strong exception to being exposed to danger when I had no knowledge of it (p. 147).

To Amanda's surprise, Zakes does not understand how determined and serious she is. He tries to calm her down by just telling her how much he loves her and reminds her that they are married to each other. His insufficient efforts at placating her infuriate her even more and she wonders why "men seem to think that telling a woman they loved her gave them permission to do whatever they liked, irrespective of the consequences? Did they think that love miraculously protected both of them from infection?" (p. 147). This highlights how adamant and charming men can be when women strive to make them consider the health risks of their promiscuous activities.

Magona illustrates the difficulties African women face through marital infidelity through her description of Beauty's situation and her fatal contraction of the disease, exposing through Beauty's husband, Hamilton's behavior the patriarchal attitudes that subordinate women. According to Muchativugwa Hove (2014):

> Beauty's body suffers from a social construction that sanctions and proscribes how she could 'act' her body through quiet submission. Hamilton's hegemonic

> masculinity entails physical superiority, emotional violence and erotic treachery (p. 536).

As this quote illustrates, Beauty is presented as woman who suffers from both psychological and physiological marital abuse from her husband by submitting to the patriarchal requirement of wifely obedience. The novel portrays Hamilton as a reckless man who infects and kills his wife with the deadly virus as a result of his insatiable sexual appetites satisfied outside the marriage bed:

> We all know Hamilton likes yanga-yanga! But he looks fine, Edith said. Did you see how well he looked at the funeral? The brother's sure as hell getting some help, somewhere, Cordelia growled. But let's see how long that lasts. Unless he stops messing around, he'll just keep on getting himself re-infected and all the ARVs in the world won't help him in the end (p. 76).

Beauty's five firm friends are convinced that Hamilton has infected her as he is well known for his promiscuous activities and she has always remained faithful. What pains them most is the fact that he is still healthy and alive when by his duplicity he should have been the one they buried. According to the FFF, Beauty did not deserve to die through the treachery of her promiscuous husband.

Magona also explores how Hamilton exercises control over Beauty during her illness in an effort to silence her from revealing the nature of her illness, and limit or prevent her friends from visiting. Stridently, he condemns them: "this damn visit is over...Can't you people see she's tired out?" (p. 48). He does not want Beauty's friends to spend more

time with her, fearing that his secret would be revealed. However, Beauty manages to confess to her friend Amanda and convey her words of advice:

> Don't die a stupid death, like I am doing! Live! She says. Live till every hair on your head turns grey. Earn your wrinkles and, damn you, enjoy them! Enjoy every wrinkle and every grey hair on your head. Tell yourself you have survived! Sur-vived! Her voice drops. Live! She says. Don't die ...like this... (p. 74).

In her last words to her four friends; she asks them to be cautious about having hasty sex, attempting to protect them from the AIDS pandemic. She encourages them to live long "Ukhule". Her fervent, deathbed advice compels her friends to take charge of their sexual and marital lives and to take a stand for their right to know their own AIDS status and that of their partners.

It is noteworthy to realize how African men like the fictional character Hamilton exercise power and authority over their women. Hamilton, for instance, even moved Beauty back "to her home" against the wishes of Beauty's parents and as a result, Beauty's mother, Mamkwayi, is forced to come and nurse her daughter under Hamilton's supervision (p. 49). This autocratic directive reveals how Hamilton exercises his superiority over not only his wife, but even his mother-in-law.

Additionally, Cordelia's husband, Vuyo's resultant abuse at her condom request shows that male actuated authority gives them the freedom to use any form of power on women; even to the point of using physical violence. Obbo (1980) asserts that "the need to control women has always been an important part of male success in African societies" (p. 4). Thus, men's sense of superiority as the heads of households

encourages them to aggressively respond to women who challenge or diminish their authority and masculinity.

Of all the partners of Beauty's friends, it is only Selby, Doris' fiancée who willingly agrees to HIV testing. As it turns out, the couple needs to secure HIV/AIDS test results in order to seek approval from the bank for a house loan. Doris is confident of her test results as she entered their relationship as a virgin and has remained faithful throughout. However, it is Selby's anxiety over the test results that reveal to Doris that he has been sexually active outside their relationship. His unfaithfulness is an emotional blow to Doris and prompts her to terminate the engagement. Moreover when admitting his premarital affairs, he scorns Doris for imagining their relationship as monogamous: "I didn't think I was marrying a middle-class white chick!" (p. 111). Here Selby's comment about not having a "white marriage" is significant as is Doris' reaction to the knowledge of his unfaithfulness. According to Selby a monogamous relationship is a white people's notion, when it comes to black people it is unnecessary, thus his mockery of Doris for behaving like a white woman.

Besides the reason of presumed patriarchal power, male physical enjoyment is also explored. Condom use and its perceived diminishment of sexual pleasure are also examined within the novel. It is openly discussed between the four women and two male counterparts, Moses and Thandi, at the funeral of Lungile, a mutual friend who has died from AIDS. Magona presents a powerful exhortation by Mrs Mazwi, a teacher and a community leader, who eulogizes Lungile, one of her former students. Mrs Mazwi relates her sorrow that both Lungile and his twin brother, Lunga have died from AIDS

and calls for the community to wake up to the problem before them and advises responsible sexual behaviour.

After the funeral, Cordelia raises the concern of whether the twin brothers, Lunga and Lungile, had used protection with their girlfriends. Moses and Thandi's response to Cordelia's concern is only "disparaging laughs" (p. 69). Further, Moses notes that: "The brothers say using a condom is like eating sweets with the wrapper on" (p. 70). The text therefore suggests that it is rare to find an African man who is sexually responsible and who takes the necessary precautions to ensure their sexual health and that of their partners. Gruber (2014, p. 57) contends:

> In the context of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, research suggests that condoms not only interfere with the image of a normative heterosexual hegemonic masculinity, but also with traditional African values and belief systems and are therefore rejected.

Therefore, even though these men are aware of the risk of having unprotected sex, they still choose not to use condoms, because traditional values do not recommend them. More so, it seems men are not concerned with the dangers that promiscuous sexual activity cause. The FFF heatedly address male indifference as shown by Cordelia's fervent response: "African mothers, faithfully married women, are killed by men who will not stop sleeping around!" (p. 70). She does not stop there. She continues to accuse men of using their manhood as an instrument for death: "I hate my black brothers, you say? You are damn right I do! Only a fool goes to bed with the enemy – an armed enemy, at that. What do you think the black men's penis is? I'll tell you what it is. It is a

deadly weapon!" (p. 71). Cordelia's accusation shows the extent of her anger and frustration, revealing the vigorous resistance the FFF display against the patriarchal prescriptions that endorse irresponsible sexual behavior. Their chorus of voices reveals their sincere concern for their own wellbeing and that of other African women.

The actions presented by these female characters clearly portray that text like *Beauty's Gift* open avenues of revelation and resistance to women oppression. Therefore, according to Hove (2014, p. 534), "The patriarchal binaries of femininity and masculinity which privileged power and subordination, including exclusionary projects and practices are currently problematized in liberatory poetics and the search for equity." Thus contemporary novels express the concern with patriarchal and traditional systems that jeopardize health and safety.

Moreover, Magona examines how these traditional patriarchal systems affect people's lives by further revealing the death and destruction that masculine stubbornness cause as seen in Zakes' death from a hit and run car accident whilst he is drunk. Shober (2011: 106) blames Zakes' death on his drunken behavior which begins after the confrontation with his wife, Amanda, regarding the illegitimate children he has fathered without her knowledge: "Before Zakes death it was Amanda that utilized the tool of de-tonguing her husband by refusing to allow him to speak to her about forgiveness and reconciliation." Although Zakes' shame and guilt drive him to resort to alcohol, the traditional elders blame Zakes' death on Amanda's lack of forgiveness and her unwillingness to take him back despite his infidelity. However, Amanda refuses to listen to these accusations, and instead she voices her frustration and literally walks out of the room.

In the same way that patriarchal attitudes and ideologies promote male dominance and subordinate women in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Neshani Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*; religious values and norms are used as catalysts to further oppress and relegate women. It is interesting to note how religion is used in the novel as a tool for enabling men's infidelity. Although Amanda's husband, Zakes, is not a religious man he tries to persuade his wife by using the Christian values she follows: "Amanda you go to church every Sunday. You must have forgiveness in your heart!" (p. 146). Zakes is trying to use the value of forgiveness to cover his unfaithfulness to his wife and to require her acquiesce to take him back. Yet Amanda resists this religious dogma and refuses to forgive her husband's adultery or forget his marital misdeeds.

The narrator begins the novel by asserting that:

> God knew the African woman was going to have a very, very hard life. That is why He gave her skin as tough as Mother Earth herself. He gave her that tough, timeless skin so that her woes would not be written all over her face, so that her face would not be a map of her torn and tattered heart (p. 1).

By making reference to God here, Magona is trying to sensitize the reader to the fact that God knows how precious and sensitive the African woman is and yet how much she will suffer. Thus, she explains, he makes the woman's skin tough because he is preparing her to resist any harsh conditions that she will experience. She suggests that God knows how fragile the African woman is within so He gives the African woman her timeless skin that can resist all the pain, suffering and anguish to which they will be exposed. Magona is asserting that whatever the challenges these female characters

face, God has already prepared them to endure. Thus, Magona projects that an African woman is stronger than men can imagine.

According to Hove, Magona portrays Amanda as a "spokesperson for generational sufferers from such abusive relationships and boldly denies Zakes any satiation without protection or, at best, a reassuring negative AIDS test" (2014, p. 534). She vocalizes the concerns of other African women who are going through sexually abusive and unfaithful relationships. On top of Zakes' infidelity, Amanda learns that her husband has two children outside their marriage (p. 126). This further infuriates her that not only is he unfaithful, but already he has fathered two illegitimate children she did not know about while married to him. This knowledge strengthens her reason for refusing to sleep with him.

In the novel, Amanda is one of the most outspoken and insistent of Beauty's Five Firm Friends (FFF's) and she is the strongest of them all. She fearlessly addresses Zakes' infidelity and forcefully explains the reason why she will not have sex with him: "That thing dangling between your legs, if or when you poke it into any hole that lets you in, may come out of there wearing death, spitting disease…Disease that could kill me like a thief in the night" (p. 148). Her dramatic and forthright statement reveals how fearless and assertive she is on this issue and how she refuses to surrender until she succeeds. However, despite all her efforts, Zakes in the end simply ignores her. He resorts to alcohol, drowning himself in guilt. He is ashamed of his wife's rejection and his irresponsible behavior gets him killed.

It is not only patriarchal ideologies and religious norms that thwart women's emancipation. In *Beauty's Gift*, Magona also portrays how cultural norms subordinate women. African society consists of cultural practices that oppress women and many tend to condone the customs. This is apparent in the novel when Amanda finds out that Zakes has fathered other children outside of their marriage. Amanda refuses to remain married to an unfaithful husband and tries to explain her decision to her own and Zakes' family. Her three sisters-in-law cannot understand the meaning of the separation:

> All three looked at her and nodded in unison. Marriage is enduring, their eyes said, a woman sticks it out the best she knows how, that is what we do. That is what our mothers, and their mothers before them, did. Stick it out. That is tradition (p. 151).

Amanda realizes that African tradition is a tool that both men and women rely on to keep their relationships together. Divorce or separation is unheard of in African tradition, so this explains why Amanda's sisters-in-law cannot comprehend Amanda's decision to seek a marital separation. These women had been trained to remain in a marriage regardless of ill-treatment by unfaithful and financially irresponsible husbands.

Magona presents a female character Mrs Mazwi as a voice that speaks out on the need to inform the youth about sexual responsibility, a discussion that African culture regards as taboo. Mrs Mazwi takes the occasion of an AIDS-related funeral to educate the community about the HIV/AIDS virus, affirming:

> Let me remind you maAfrika amahle; let us talk to the children about sex… [We] have abandoned shepherding our children through puberty. My people wake up!

> Vukani! Let us not abandon all the things that make us who we are. There may be a very good reason our Ancestors put those things in place (p. 88).

Mrs Mazwi is reminding the listeners that traditionally, promiscuity is forbidden. Thus, her speech in trying to awaken people to the destructive nature of infidelity she, "engages in a strategy that displaces her constituency's overt marginalization in postcolonial South African society" (Hove, 2014, p. 534). Further, Hove asserts the authority Mrs Mazwi assumes, stating that "her words and identity experience a slippage from those of a woman: she spoke like a man" (2014, p. 534). Mrs Mazwi argues that gone are the days when tradition endorsed the exclusion of women from discussing important issues, especially if it had to do with their welfare. As a community leader who "was very involved in the affairs of the community and was greatly respected for it" (p. 84), Mrs Mazwi addresses the need to utilize the healthy aspects of African tradition which allows women to speak freely about life-threatening situations by openly addressing the socio-cultural dimension of the epidemic.

Like Bâ and Andreas, Magona tackles the issue of polygamy within African culture. Tradition demands that women in Amanda's situation stay married to their unfaithful husbands. This is noted when Amanda's family defends Zakes' behavior, yet she does not agree to their demands:

> Amanda looked away. She was stunned. It was obvious to her that they expected her, like them, to endure, to suffer, to remain married to Zakes. That was the respectable thing to do. She looked again at the three women, and saw pity in their eyes. With a sinking heart, she saw that they were blind to their own

> suffering, blind to the fact that they were living lives devoid of appreciation and respect (p. 151).

According to them, Amanda is expected to preserve her tradition and the solidarity of her family by staying married to her cheating husband. Amanda's uncle offers a traditional solution to this problem as he advises that there is a better way to punish Zakes: "Tradition says, molokazana, you go home, back to your house...We will see how best to punish our son Zakes" (p. 155). For them, it is not the wife's place to decide what happens to her husband or her marriage.

Magona acknowledges that African tradition endorses polygamy within the marriage and accepts that men should be allowed to have multiple sexual partners. By sanctioning Zakes' unfaithfulness, the family consents to him enjoying extramarital affairs and fathering children outside of marriage. Thus, it appears that within African traditional practices, monogamy is viewed as unwarranted, and infidelity is assumed as normal.

The novel addresses another difficulty facing women in unfaithful relationships namely; how to leave. When Amanda questions why some women do not leave their unfaithful husbands who repeatedly cheat on them, her friends elucidate that, for women, it is not easy to leave, explaining:

> More often than not, these men are the women's sole source of food and rent, not to mention clothes and school fees for their children. And the identity of many a woman is so tied up with her husband's, she wouldn't know who she was without him (p. 115).

This dependency syndrome which ensnares many African women challenges their ability to pursue emancipation, not only from adulterous men, but also the sexual, physical, psychosocial and emotional abuse that they cause. However, most women remain married despite the physical cost of their relationships because they lack the financial and emotional support from both their families and the community.

That is what makes Amanda's resistance so important. In contrast to her sister-in-law, Sihle who accepts her husband's infidelity in impregnating other women, Amanda cannot tolerate Zakes disloyalty and unfaithfulness, contending: "I am starting a new tradition...I have forgiven Zakes, but living with him is something I cannot do. We will go our separate ways from now" (p. 155). This statement in front of the elders and Zakes' relatives shows how clearly Amanda defies the traditional norms that relegate women to the inferior, subservient position. However, when she is trying to explain her decision to her and Zakes' family her three sisters-in-law cannot understand it. According to Shober (2014, p. 5):

> Magona creates a fully transformed African woman, not one cowering before the striking arms of a husband enraged by a delayed meal or denied sex, or one who stands on the fringes in fear of the elder´s pronouncements. This woman is recovering her body and freeing herself from the death threat of an unfaithful husband. She values her intelligence, her friendships and herself and thus secures a safe passage to her future and that of her children and her nation.

In addition, when Amanda is confronted with the marital problems of her sister-in-law Sihle, whose husband has again impregnated another woman, she reflects on her mother's attitude towards marriage:

> In her mother's eyes, women simply endured the vagaries of married life – and did so with their mouths shut and smiles painted on their faces. Men were men and would do what men had always done, since the beginning of time. Mama was beyond changing (p. 124-25).

Women like Amanda's mother are immersed in African traditional values and customs that stipulate that a woman must endure her marriage regardless of the suffering it creates. She also believes that it is in men's nature to be promiscuous, and thus, they cannot help themselves. This is the excuse her mother contrives to explain Zakes' infidelity and fathering of children through adulterous affairs. The family had failed to disclose this information to Amanda although everyone in her close family knew but her. It is from this situation that the reader learns of some women's complicity in female oppression. Magona presents Amanda's mother, who not only keeps the secret of Zakes' other children from her daughter, but also defends her son-in-law's infidelity. Moreover, she even encourages Amanda to accept her husband's treacherous masculinity. She counsels: "Your husband is a good man. He has made a mistake ... you're not going to throw everything you have away just because a few common bitches" (p. 127). Zakes' secret is hidden not only by Amanda's mother, but also her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. The fact that the women know about it and never reveal it to Amanda presents them as some of the women in African society who condone men's disloyalty.

Yet Magona's novel *Beauty's Gift*'s applauds women who resist traditional forms of behavior which can prove deadly. As noted by Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), the female characters in *Beauty's Gift* are seen to "refuse and contest the exploitation of their bodies as reproductive receptacles or as instruments of sexual pleasure for men" (p. 151). As soon as Beauty warns them of the risk involved for having unprotected sex; they promise to change their marital relationships. Beauty's four friends start by demanding an HIV/AIDS test with their spouse. They also vow to use ~~of~~ condoms and to refrain from any irresponsible sexual behavior that could cost them their lives. Thus, they contest masculine practices which use them as sexual objects and which may endanger their sexual wellbeing.

Magona presents a strong bond between the Five Firm Friends (FFF's). These female characters show the strength of female friendships in the midst of life's challenges. This follows after Beauty's final message to them just before her death: "Don't die a stupid death like me...Ukhule". This message shows the depth of Beauty's love for her friends even though she is seriously ill. Such love and commitment to their friendship followed by Beauty's death sparks these women's determination to challenge and subvert the patriarchal practices that could result in their contracting a fatal disease.

Moreover, Magona examines how her female characters react to oppression, how they attempt to resist and subvert the existing cultural and patriarchal ideologies that abuse them (sexually, psychosocially and emotionally). She explores how women emancipate themselves from the religious, traditional, gendered norms that silence and subjugate them. The changes begin with their refusal to have sex with their partners, demanding

the use of condoms and getting tested. This gives them power to act against the socio-cultural gender constructs that oppress them. Thus, according to Shober (2014, p. 5):

> Magona overrides the dominating discourse of cultural and patriarchal hegemony. *Beauty´s Gift* transforms the silent, subjugated African woman into a self-governed and self-assured being, ascendant in her ability to freely locate herself in an environment of her own creation.

This is evident through the female character Amanda, Beauty's best friend, who completely transforms to the extent that she wants to separate from her husband. By creating such an autonomous female character, Magona is educating black African women, presenting them with gender possibilities of emancipation. Thus, Magona's female characters portray what can happen in real life situations and how it is possible for women to achieve freedom from cultural, religious, gender, and patriarchal norms that oppress and subjugate women. The responses of these four friends subvert oppressive ideologies.

Amanda is a female character that Magona creates to act as the pioneer of an emancipated group of women. Just like, Mariama Bâ's female character, Aissatou, Amanda frees herself from the oppressive forms of her gender and culture by leaving her husband. Thus, when her husband is killed in an accident: "[She] had sadness in her heart…but she was not grieving. She didn't sit with the rest of the family on the dais, but with the FFF sisters. Neither did she cover her face with the shawl" (p. 165).

Amanda boldly defies traditional mourning customs requiring her, as the widow, to sit on the family dais and grieve openly. Amanda's actions clearly portray her defiance and

anger at his disloyalty: “she could not honor his memory or the memory of what they had, which he had betrayed” (p. 166). This is similar to Andreas’ protagonist, Kauna’s defiance at the funeral of her husband. Kauna refuses to mourn her husband (p. 48) or give the obligatory widow’s speech (p. 139).

Magona also creates Edith as a female character who experiences a personal transformation. She not only manages to overcome Luvo’s sexual advances, but also changes her way of dressing. From the traditional skirts and dresses she always wears, Edith dresses in long trousers; a liberating habit she seems to have acquired from the FFF’s. Interestingly, Edith wears the trousers knowing very well it is against her Xhosa husband’s dictates. Her open defiance illustrates that she, a black African woman, has become conscious of her strength and her freedom.

When Luvo inquires about the source of such an alteration, he is threatened with Edith’s vehemence at his sexual assault: “don’t ever do that to me again” (p. 172). Edith refers to the rape her husband perpetrated against her the previous night when she attempted to refuse his sexual advances because he had not yet gotten tested. She continues her independent behavior by refusing to remain in the marital bed, choosing instead to sleep in a sleeping bag on the floor of their bedroom, suggesting the transitory and undecided nature of their relationship, a fact further expressed when, the next day, she joins her friends in making vacation arrangements with a travelling consultant.

In conclusion, Magona’s novel portrays husbands in particular and African men in general who are determined to exert their sexual independence and right to polygamy. Hamilton, Beauty’s husband is promiscuous and infects her with the deadly HIV virus

which eventually kills her. Luvo, Edith's husband, rapes his own wife after she denies him sex without protection. Vuyo, Cordelia's husband is openly adulterous and physically abuses his wife when she suggests they use a condom. Selby, Doris' fiancée, cheats on her, too and only agrees to the HIV test in order to fulfill the requirements for home loan approval. Lastly, Zakes, Amanda's husband has two illegitimate children and becomes a drunkard which causes his death. Magona, in fact, exposes these men who expect their wives to remain faithful to them whilst they themselves engage in polygamous relationships as typical and their attitude and behavior as normal in patriarchal African society.

Beauty's Gift centers on the issue of HIV/AIDS; the novel shows how African women suffer from patriarchal and culturally-enforced sexual restrictions. Magona portrays women as the disadvantaged, vulnerable group in African society. They are victims of men's infidelity which may cause them to contract the deadly AIDS virus. The novel gives women a voice to break their silence and speak against gendered oppression which is perpetuated by religion, culture, patriarchal hegemony as well as other compliant females. Furthermore, the novel acts as a form of women's consciousness to acknowledge and enforce their sexual rights. Beauty's four firm friends are presented as female characters that reject or refuse any form of sexual abuse and genderized oppression in their marital relationships. It is Beauty's final words and her untimely death that acts as a wake-up call to these women, compelling them to make a vow to refrain from any sexual encounters with their partners until they know their status or agree to use condoms. The women's decision is met with rejection by their partners as the men feel entitled to their conjugal rights. Thus, the men try by every means to

silence these four women through manipulation and even violence. Nevertheless, the women persist. Although *Beauty's Gift* exposes patriarchal powers that subordinate women, at the end of the novel, Amanda, Cordelia, Edith and Doris are portrayed as women who achieve a certain amount of self-empowerment within the confines of their traditional society.

Besides patriarchal oppression, Magona also examines women-to-women oppression in an African context as illustrated by the fateful secret that Amanda's mother, mother-in-law and sister-in-law, keep from her about Zakes' illegitimate children. Their complicity in the life of Zakes' marital fidelity and their defense of his unfaithfulness infuriate Amanda. Her mother-in-law's counsel to endure Zakes' treacherous masculinity forces her to leave him and to reject the patriarchal subordination demanded of African women.

Therefore, this chapter has demonstrated that Sindiwe Magona succeeds as an African woman writer, like her literary contemporaries Mariama Bâ and Neshani Andreas, to explore the forms of oppression that women encounter and their predicaments in a patriarchal African society. Yet through her female characters she has also succeeded in giving hope to women by revealing some of the gender possibilities for liberation available to her fellow African women. These include: knowing their rights as women, especially where issues of health and welfare are concerned; breaking free from the silence enforced on them by restrictive patriarchal and cultural ideologies; and endorsing strong relationships with like-minded women who will strengthen and restore one other. These are all illustrated by the actions and attitudes of Beauty's four friends who remain steadfast in their quest for freedom throughout the novel.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzed three novels: *So Long a Letter* (1981) by Mariama Bâ, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (2001) by Neshani Andreas and *Beauty's Gift* (2008) by Sindiwe Magona, casting light on the situation facing women in diverse parts of Africa. This study provides a comparison between three postcolonial African societies: Senegal, Namibia and South Africa, depicting the ways in which women are oppressed as a result of gender subjugation exacerbated by patriarchal, cultural and religious practices. A thorough, text-based literary study of these particular works has been conducted which explores the characters and gender-based themes created by the authors, and examines how these relationships reflect gender differences. Thus, the research method applied in the interrogation of the texts is the literary theory of Gender studies, African Feminism and Cultural studies.

This study investigates the extent to which African women are able to liberate themselves within the limitations to empowerment they face at the hands of post-colonial patriarchal societies. In order for these limitations to be explored, this project critically analysed literary representations of female empowerment, hegemonic masculinity, female oppression and subjugation by traditional, cultural and religious practices expressed in the texts and representative of the societies under study. This assisted in illustrating how Bâ, Andreas and Magona's literary approach serves to highlight limitations enforced on women by virtue of their gender and their efforts to seek emancipation.

This research focuses on the genre of literature which exposes gender inequality in Africa. Women's literature has remarkably influenced the shaping of African society and the lives of women. With this said, in order to examine gender differences and issues, Gender studies theory was applied to the analysis of the selected texts. As indicated in chapter two, gender theory provides a theoretical structure for the examination of how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. The theory focuses on gendered oppression and the way societies are organized based on gender differences. The core principle of the gender theory is the notion of the social construction of gender. Here the emphasis is on the fact that gender is seen as a dynamic and changing process, which results in the formation of diversified femininities or masculinities.

Furthermore, gender theory highlights the manner in which novels or texts incorporate the performativity and projection of male and female roles. However, these gender roles differ depending on social and cultural norms, as these norms play a significant role in the prescription and adaptation of behaviours according to gender. Therefore, doing gender or rather performing one's gender is to act knowing that one will be evaluated according to the normative standards applied to one's sex category (West and Zimmerman, 2009). The female protagonists in the selected texts represent women who face severe limitations based entirely on their gender.

Additionally, African feminism as a theory is also used in the investigation of Bâ, Andreas and Magona's texts. African feminism explores the distinct ways in which African women have been stereotyped. Consequently, the theory argues that gender

ideology and hegemonic patriarchal beliefs play crucial roles in promoting women's oppression. According to Goredema (2010, p. 34), African feminism:

> is a justice that aims to create a discernible difference between women who were colonized and those who were deemed the colonizers, and a social movement that aims to raise global consciousness which sympathizes with African women's histories, present realities and future expectations.

African feminists argue that women play central, but socially subordinate roles in African society. Their subordination is apparent in the examined texts as many of the female characters play docile, submissive roles to their husbands or other men, and those seeking emancipation are few.

Another theoretical perspective used in this dissertation to examine the three texts: *So Long a Letter*, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and *Beauty's Gift* is Cultural studies. To appropriately apply Cultural studies an established definition of the term 'culture' is necessary. Within this paradigm, "the way people behave while eating, talking with each other, becoming sexual partners, interacting at work, engaging in ritualized sexual behavior such as family gatherings, and the like constitute a culture" (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998, p. 1233). In simple terms culture is social. Therefore, culture is the daily functioning of a human being.

Since culture is acquired within the structure of established social practices, it creates cultural bias which provides the foundation for inequality as it promotes domination of one social class or group by another. Hence, African cultures that are patriarchal in nature place the group of males at the apex of the cultural hierarchy. This allows intra-

group conflicts to arise between males and females due to patriarchal structures which enable oppressive treatment of women. The male group label themselves as dominant, placing the female as submissive subjects. This is evident in the texts investigated where the female characters are often in conflict with their male counterparts for the subservient positions in which they have been placed and the ill treatment they receive.

In all three texts, despite the different contexts within which they are set, oppressive traditional customs are used to condone and perpetuate patriarchal oppression. The most striking traditional norm used in Africa is that of polygamy. The female characters in each text suffer from and are humiliated by the culturally ascribed act of polygamy, and the resultant cultural and religious practices associated with it. For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, Modou takes a second wife without even informing his senior wife, Ramatoulaye. In Andreas' *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Shange, Kauna's husband openly engages in an extramarital affair with another woman in the village while at the same time inflicting vicious beatings on his wife. In *Beauty's Gift*, all the Five Firm Friends: Beauty, Amanda, Cordelia, Edith and Doris have partners who are unfaithful to them with multiple partners yet refuse to be tested for HIV/AIDS, leading to the possibility of a fatal infection.

In addition to polygamy, the men in the texts display other oppressive patriarchal behaviors. Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, abandons his wife emotionally and economically in order to lavish gifts on his new younger wife. Shange, Kauna's husband in *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* physically, emotionally and financially abuses his wife, all the while aggressively controlling every aspect of her life. In *Beauty's Gift*, Cordelia is beaten by her husband Vuyo after she proposes they get tested and or use condoms.

These instances reveal that in African traditional societies men are allowed to behave in accordance with their selfish opinions and desires whilst women endure suffering on many personal and social levels.

It is significant to note the influence that women have on each other in these texts. Because they are subjugated and relegated to inferior positions to a great extent, they internalize their own oppression and believe it is mandatory to impose these oppressive norms and practices on other women. For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, Binetou's mother encourages her daughter to be married to a man twice her age as a way out of their poverty. In *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Kauna's mother uses religious values to force her daughter to endure her abusive marital relationship. In *Beauty's Gift*, Amanda's mother advises her daughter to remain with her unfaithful husband Zakes even after she discovers that he has fathered two children with other women.

Furthermore, women are silenced in the primary texts and made to feel as if they are devoid of independent selfhood, existing only in relation to the men around them, as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. This silencing is also indicative of the way women have repressed themselves by suppressing their own feelings and desires. Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* draws attention to this, describing how she only manages to find her own voice after thirty years, determining her independent pathway and establishing her single self-hood.

The possibilities of empowerment in the three primary texts are also compared and contrasted in light of how the female characters endured and overcame different forms of oppression. This study significantly exposes how sisterhood is important to an African

woman's survival. In Bâ's *So Long a Letter,* Ramatoulaye uses the epistolary form to grieve the death of her husband and to share with her friend Aissatou her experiences prior to and after the calamity. In *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* Andreas portrays Ali comforting her friend Kauna after the brutality of her husband. In Magona's *Beauty's Gift* the Five Firm Friends console each other regarding their problematic relationships and Beauty's final gift to them is to encourage them to get tested or use a condom to avoid contracting AIDS from their unfaithful husbands. All this portrays how some African women help each other resist the hegemonic constrictions of patriarchy, religion and culture. Hence, the novels reveal how women draw strength from one another in order to sustain each other in difficult times. Conversely, women's inability to attain empowerment can be related, to a certain extent, to the lack of such friendships. For instance Jacqueline, an Ivorian woman who goes mentally insane in *So Long a Letter* when her husband is unfaithful lacks social support and this sense of isolation results in the depression which almost kills her.

Despite the oppression that the female characters endure, all the three texts examined in this study offer us a vision of hope. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye embarks successfully on her journey towards individual fulfillment. Kauna's last words in *The Purple Violent of Oshaantu* portrays her determination to start a new chapter in her life away from all the humiliation she suffered from her in-laws, her abusive marriage and the oppressive social rules. She proves to Mee Ali that she is a strong woman who will rise again just like the *mahangu* millet (p. 174). Further, in *Beauty's Gift*, Beauty's four remaining friends make holiday reservations showing that despite the oppressive

patriarchal ideologies they were subjected to, they still strive to encourage and support one another into greater levels of freedom.

In conclusion, the three texts in this study offer us different insights into the lives of African women as they focus on both the forms of oppression they experience and the possibilities for empowerment available to them. Thus, the texts have the potential to contribute to the wider empowerment of African women. The emergence of renowned female African writers like Bâ, Andreas and Magona together with the emancipation of African countries from colonial hegemony has opened spaces for women to compensate and correct the stereotypical female images in African literature and post-colonial societies. Bâ, commenting on suffering and hope for women, states in an 1980 interview: “There is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world a woman’s cry is being uttered. The cry may be different but there is still a certain unity” (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi: 1997, p. 8-9). Thus, it will not be an overstatement to say these three female writers seek to empower African women with a fresh outlook of possibilities. Although contemporary society may address gender equality as a political and social agenda, these writers indicate that at a grassroots level these changes are not yet part of women’s lived realities. Thus, the texts and theories discussed in this study still remain significant and inspirational today.

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