



Research Article



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Exploring female friendship in African literature: From Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (2008) to Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* (2000)

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Abstract

There have been several arguments over the years that women are their own worst adversaries. The smallest quarrel among women is sometimes followed by the statement, 'women are their own enemies.' Most women have internalized this adage and established prejudiced and biased notions about women they hardly know. Despite this, African female writers have written about female friendship and how women have united, rescued, and established solidarity with one another to endure oppression and patriarchy. Using Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and other African literary texts, this article investigates the theme of friendship in African literature. Using the theory of sisterhood, the article highlights how writers have explored diverse forms of deep and honest friendship among women, women genuinely forgiving each other and coming together to achieve a common course. The discussion is achieved by focusing on the theory of sisterhood's depiction of friendship. The article concludes that women have and can form a great bond of friendship and the issue of women subjugating women is human nature and not a natural negative feminine gender reaction.

Keywords: African women, friendship, gender, sisterhood, solidarity

Public Interest Statement

This article highlights how writers have explored diverse forms of deep and honest friendship among women, women genuinely forgiving each other and coming together to achieve a common course. The discussion is achieved by focusing on the theory of sisterhood's depiction of friendship. The article concludes that women have and can form a great bond of friendship and the issue of women subjugating women is human nature and not a natural negative feminine gender reaction.

Introduction

The stereotype of women being their own enemies has been trumpeted for far too long and has in a subtle way created unnecessary tension and undue pressure amongst some women. This stereotype has turned some women who ordinarily would have been friends against one another. Some women do not bother to extend a hand of friendship to other women. They quickly conclude that since the other is female, she is a snob and would not offer a warm reception. There have been several interviews that has been conducted with respondents sharing opinions of women being enemies: Valen, K (2010) states that almost 85% of those who took part in the 50 – question survey admitted having suffered serious, life altering knocks at the hands of other women. Biri (2017) asserts that women were perpetuating oppressive patriarchal teachings and they are mostly blind to sociological and cultural realities and shifting paradigms that tend to blanket the experiences of women. Hill, A (2010), states that, “girls can be mean to each other but it is adult women who vie to destroy each other.” All of these articles seem to point in one direction – women are antagonistic towards one another and make life unbearable for themselves.

Regina Ode, in her paper, ‘Women their own enemies; A Comparative Study of Tess Onwueme’s *Go tell it to the Women* and *The Reign of Wazobia*,’ sets to prove that women are their own enemies using the aforementioned texts. She uses instances from the texts where women were against each other to buttress her point. She however adds that this decision by females to oppose their female counterparts and support the masculine gender is done not out of pure hatred but more out of the limited understanding, sheer stubbornness, or out of the undeserved trust more for the men than the women.

Sylvester Muntunda in his paper, ‘Women Subjugating Women,’ differs from Ode as he focuses on female –female relations mediated by age, generation, education, exposure and experience. He is on the opposite side of the common belief among some feminists that men are the worst enemies of women. He uses Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* and her *Scarlet Song* to explore the question of “whether women are not victimizers of other women and partially responsible for their own unhappiness.” (p.4) He goes further to quote Odundipe who says:

women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems are therefore often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where self-assertive actions are needed. (p.11)

Muntunda explains that what Odundipe is suggesting is that women are frequently victims of themselves and prisoners of their own conscience. It is easy to side with Muntunda and Odundipe because patriarchy has had a firm grip on women since time in memoriam and it would take another century and a lot of hard work to learn, relearn and unlearn how some of their actions stifle the woman who is already at the disadvantaged end of patriarchy. That notwithstanding, women have in the face of patriarchy and in

the whole world where they are constantly fighting to keep their 'head above water' as Buchi Emecheta expresses it in her memoir, *Head above waters*, fostered healthy female friendship that has stood the test of time.

Sisterhood Theory

Rodak (2020) explains the theory of sisterhood by delineating on two characteristics identified with sisterhood. She states:

the two main characteristics of sisterhood emerging from the feminist discussion are the following: i) a concern with identity, exemplified by questions such as: who is the sister? What does it mean to be a sister? This represents the basis for the construction of a collective identity. ii) An emphasis on solidarity, declined into the acts of sharing, supporting each other, cooperating. (p.120)

Rodak (2020) explains that sisterhood came about as a branch of active feminist groups coming together and finding common grounds in their shared experiences, and then bonding due to similarities in their stories.

Also, Sasa (2020) explains sisterhood as a space where: "shared memories and dreams function as a healing device and a mechanism that activates their collective consciousness and enable them to challenge pain, accomplish communal alliance, and fulfill their quest of selfhood and emancipation." (p.48) The pronouns 'their' and 'them' refer to women. Sasa (2020), just like Rodak, posits that sisterhood is born out of the consciousness of women identifying themselves in each other based on the similarities of their life experiences. The goal of sisterhood in this instance is to help women discover themselves. For instance, Ben-Daniels (2022) delineates on how Ukamaka Olisakwe's character, Ogadinma, discovers herself and breaks the shackles of a patriarchal system which had suppressed her dreams. Along the way to self-discovery, Ogadinma finds sisterhood in a friend, Ejiro, in ways that her own cousin, Ifeoma, a female, is unable to give her. Ogadinma's experience stresses on the fact that sisterhood is not based on blood relations but an affirmative bond of friendship.

Similarly, Weber (2022) posits that: "sisterhood as a feminist insurgency refers to positive, not necessarily familial, connections between women who strive to resist oppression and support each other." (p,v) Weber's definition of sisterhood equally shares in identifying similar life experiences.

The afore mentioned scholars have discussed the diversity and similarities that dovetail into each other in discussing the concept of sisterhood. Their various discussions have stressed that the focus of sisterhood is the coming together of women who identify as one based on their individual life experiences and see the need to support each other emotionally, economically, socially, and even spiritually. As such, this paper defines sisterhood from three categories—friendship, the sharing of a common experience and the similarity of dreams. The discussion proceeds to highlight how sisterhood is portrayed through friendship in *So long a letter*, *A cowrie of Hope*, and other African novels.

Friendship

Mariama Ba, in her novel, *So Long a Letter*, raises and discusses several subject matters which include; polygamy, education and feminism. There are also themes like the socio-economic living conditions of women in West Africa and the effect of religious tradition on marriage amongst others. However, the subject matter of female friendship is most notable. Mariama Ba paints an extremely beautiful picture of friendship between women as she uses two characters: Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to kick against the

stereotype that women are their own enemies.

The lives of these women are intertwined with each other as they build and share friendship that sustained them over a long period of time. Ramatoulaye in her letter to Aissatou describes their friendship as "...our long association." A further read shows that this "long association" dates as far back as their days as toddlers.

Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the stony road to the Koranic School; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before. (p.1)

This friendship continues to their days as teenagers and they attend the same school and formed a bond with other female students in the boarding house and their friendship even transcended to sisterhood. Ramatoulaye implores Aissatou to recollect events from their secondary school days.

"...Let us relive its intoxicating atmosphere at night, while the evening song, our joint prayer, rang out, full of hope.... Nothing differentiated us apart from specific racial features.... Friendships were made that have endured the test of time and distance. We were true sisters, destined for the same emancipation. (p. 16)

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are comfortable confiding in and sharing the details of their loss and divorce pains with each other. These two friends are fully aware of what goes on in each other's life. They share the intimate details devoid of judgement, full of sympathy and empathy for each other. They respect each other's choices and even provide emotional and financial support to each other. Aissatou being aware of the struggle Ramatoulaye's children faced with transportation to school, paid for a car in full to assist her friend's children make it to school in convenience. Ramatoulaye who could not conceal her joy at this act of generosity, expresses her gratitude to Aissatou: "I shall never forget your response, you, my sister, nor my joy and my surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was told to choose a car which you had paid for, in full." (p.56)

Mariama Ba believes friendship holds more power than love and this is displayed in the continuing part of Ramatoulaye's letter to Aissatou. She writes:

"Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love." (p.56).

Ramatoulaye further adds in her letter: "You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love." (p.75) Ramatoulaye's statement asserts her belief that friendship can outlive and outrun love. While love can wither with time, and obstacles take a toll on love, good friendship will stand firm like a colossal and would be as constant as the 'northern star.' Ramatoulaye and Aissatou prove that this is true as they maintain good relationship from their childhood days to adulthood. A similar form of friendship which supersedes love is evident in Ben-Daniels (2013) characters Pearl and Iman. When Ato betrays the love between him and Pearl, it is Iman's friendship that keeps Pearl going.

Furthermore, Mariama Ba uses Ramatoulaye to showcase the fact that women have the best interest of other women at heart, and want to see them climb as high up the ladder as possible; in this

case a political ladder. She questions Daouda Dieng why there are lesser number of women in Parliament and after nearly twenty years of independence, the country is yet to experience its first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of the country. (p.64) In fact, female friendship extends even to women who are strangers to each other. A typical example of this kind of friendship is evident when Daouda Dieng asks Ramatoulaye to marry him. Instead of her accepting his proposal, which would of course, offer herself and her children a stable future, she turns him down. Her reason:

My conscience is not accommodating enough to enable me to marry you, when only esteem, justified by your many qualities, pulls me towards you. I can offer you nothing else, even though you deserve everything. 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.71)

Ramatoulaye having suffered abandonment and her children living their lives without the presence of a father could not in good conscience let another woman suffer the same fate as hers. She did not want to be a party to a broken home—a woman losing her husband and children, their father. It is clear from this that a woman knows another woman's pain and can therefore empathize with her. This is proof that women can actually look out for each other, and give up a relationship for another even when they stand the chance to benefit from the association.

Another great show of friendship that has a place in some African traditions is the significance of naming one's child after a relative or a friend. The significance of the bond of friendship when one names an offspring after a friend cannot be underestimated. As such, we cannot rule out how much value Ramatoulaye and Assiatou placed on their companionship, as Ramatoulaye named one of her daughters after her friend, Aissatou. (p.78) Similarly, Neshani Andreas' novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, which also discusses the subject matter of female friendship amongst other things, also looks at the friendship between Mee Ali and Mee Kauna who share a similar strong bond and look out for each other's interest. Kauna and Mee Ali like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou lean on each other. Kauna refutes the notion that women are unkind and snobbish to women they just meet. They share intimate details of their marriage and family. Mee Ali speaks fondly of Kauna saying;

Kauna had been my neighbour and friend since I arrived in Oshaantu eleven years ago. She was one of the few people who was genuinely kind to me and who had welcomed me and taken me in...The two of us immediately connected. We became inseparable. My husband, sensing the bond of friendship between us, named our only daughter after Kauna. (p.15)

This 'grand' gesture by Mee Ali's husband goes to show that these women have a close relationship. Therefore, naming his only daughter after his wife's friend becomes his way of supporting the bond of friendship between his wife and her friend, and also solidifying that friendship through the name of their daughter.

Several other African authors also expound on female friendships. For instance, Ama Ata Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy* disagrees with the notion of women being enemies. She expels this notion through her depiction of the friendship between the protagonist, Sissie, a Ghanaian lady who is in Germany on scholarship and Marija Sommers. (p.19) A friendship that begins at a sentry post but does not end

there. A friendship that begins with Marija telling Sissie: “I like to be your friend, yes?” (p.28). Marija makes Sissie feel welcome even though she is far from home. Marija invests time and resources into her friendship with Sissie. When Marija realizes her friend likes plums, she picks “each lot about twenty-four hours ahead and kept them overnight in a polythene bag; a process that softened the plums and also rid them of their fresh tangy taste, preserving a soothing sweetness.” (p.40) She tells Sissie, “yes, work is love made visible.” (p.41) Although there is the challenge of language barrier between the two women— “Sommers does not speak English and Sissie speaks no German.” (p.44) The women are able to communicate their friendship to each other. This goes to prove that when it comes to true friendship, language is no barrier as the two friends find a way to communicate with each other how they feel about education, family, life and even their friendship. The closeness between these two friends grew far more than anyone would have expected. It grew into longing for more than just friendship. ‘Our Sister’ had thought “once or so, at the beginning of their friendship, while they walked in the park, of what a delicious love affair she and Marija would have had if one of them had been a man”. (p.61) In another instance, Marija, with tears in her eyes and her cold fingers on Sissie’s breasts making an attempt to “consummate” their friendship, “Sissie looked at the other woman and wished again that at least, she was a boy. A man.” (p.67) These two women show tenderness and deep affection for each other as they feel that they can provide a certain sense of comfort they both long for, comfort and affection that they lack from their male counterparts. It is the friendship that these two women share that makes them resonate with each other.

Some women believe that the disagreement and dislike for women begins even in the family. For instance, a Vanguard publication titled, ‘Are women really their own enemies?’ One of the interviewees shared that growing up, she always had fights about trivial issues with her sisters which was not the same with the guys. She said “sisters are so competitive and girls in general are like rivals.” Another interviewee, Simon, said: “while growing up, the way my mother treated my two female siblings was something out of the ordinary.” According to Simon, this behavior of his mother made his sisters take special liking for their father whom they preferred to tell all their secrets to, rather than their mother. (Arebi, 2017) However, Mariama Ba’s novel, again, flips these types of narrative that Arebi’s interviews seek to propagate. She succeeds in doing so through her characters, Ramatoulaye’s triplets: Arame, Yacine and Dieynaba. Their mother describes them as being “bound by their friendship and willingness to help, as well as by a multitude of similarities.” (p.80) The friendship that binds these three siblings makes it possible for them to conceal their new habit of smoking while diligently studying and gaining a reputation for hard work at school. Mariama Ba also paints a cordial picture of mother and daughter relationship in her novel as Ramatoulaye speaks so fondly of her daughter, Daba and how helpful and instrumental she has been in resolving the conflict between her brother, Mawdo Fall and his teacher. Ramatoulaye is also concerned about her daughter and is pleased about how Daba’s husband treats her but she worries that life holds surprises, however, she takes consolation in the fact that Daba is reasonable. (p.77) Again, Ramatouloye looking out for her daughter shows that they are not enemies but share a bond.

There is the assertion that adult women tear each other apart (Hill, 2010). Fortunately, Assiatou and Ramatoulaye’s relationship as adult women debunks this assertion. Similarly, in Amma Darko’s novel, *Beyond the Horizon*, she uses the relationship between Mara, a village girl who moves from the village to the city to be with her husband and an older woman, Mama Kiosk, to debunk assertions such as that of Hill, 2010. Mara points out that the first friend she makes about six (6) weeks after her arrival in the city is Mama Kiosk. (p.10) Mama Kiosk is warm and welcoming to Mara and the social class between these two is no barrier to their newly found friendship. When Mara does not see her

period for two (2) months she runs to Mama Kiosk. She had grown to trust and confide in Mama Kiosk. Mara describes the relationship that exists between her and Mama Kiosk as “a mother – daughter relationship” (p.23) and she becomes emotionally dependent on Mama Kiosk to the displeasure of her husband. She describes Mama Kiosk as ‘a true friend and a perfect substitute mother.’ (p.23)

Similarly, in Binwell Sinyangwe’s *A Cowrie of Hope*, he discusses widowhood, marriage, corruption and friendship. He uses the relationship between Nasula and Nalukwi to portray friendship where Nalukwi, despite her inadequate means of survival, makes it a point to stand by Nasula in her time of adversity. Nasula speaks ardently of Nalukwi. She describes her as “a wonderful woman who was sympathetic, helpful and given to providing timely answers to others in times of difficulty.” (p.42) She further adds, “Nalukwi was a miracle woman who was a glow of inspiration and reassurance, a poor struggling woman who turned things that were heavier than rock into adventures, each lighter than a dry leaf.” She also says, “she is as good as my sister” (p.48) ‘an oracle, a miracle.’ (p.67)

She recollects to her daughter, Sula, the role Nalukwi plays when Sula’s father died;

Nalukwi organised her own friends to stand by Nasula and represent her to the family of the deceased and answer their incessant queries and demands. Nalukwi herself spoke for her in everything. She saw to it that Nasula was not harassed into talking unnecessarily, that she spoke only to her and through her most of the time, and that no one was allowed to speak directly to Nasula except through her permission. Without her strength and tenacity, Nasula would have been harangued to her own death by the Chiswebe family over the death of Winelo Chiswebe. (p.43)

This show of friendship that Sinyangwe expresses through his female characters is a positive example of the male perspective of female friendships. It shows that friendship is understood in terms of human connections. Just as human connections among males have been known to reveal deep bonds and affections of friendship among men, the same applies to females. Moreover, Sinyangwe’s voice as a writer, narrating true friendships between women is relevant because as Ben-Daniels (2020) posits, the African writer’s duty as a historian makes him a storyteller. And writers’ stories can also be influenced by their observations and experiences of the environment in which they find themselves.

Also, returning to Neshani Andreas’ novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshanntu*, Andreas uses the character of Mukwankala, “an elderly woman well known for speaking her mind, (p.62) to stress further on the bonds of friendship among her female characters. Mukwankala disregards important aspects of local culture and defends Kauna. She confronts Shange, Kauna’s husband who is feared in the village. She humiliates him for constantly physically abusing his wife and bringing her nothing but shame since he married her. This gesture means a lot to Kauna as Mukwankala becomes Kauna’s “goddess, counsellor and confidante.” (p.73) The women of Oshaantu, made up of women who are at the various biological stages of their lives—mothers, grandmothers, aunts, come together for one course –ensuring that Kauna has a ready farm when the rains begin. They are bonded by sisterhood and love for one another. In spite of their individual disagreements and misunderstandings, they come to a common ground to achieve a common goal. They show up to help Kauna clear her farm, very much to Kauna’s surprise. Kauna’s ‘arch enemy’ who had called her barren also shows up to help her. The women work together and in one spirit. They sing songs of sorrow, songs of joy, songs of forgiveness, songs of unity and hope in harmony. Mee Ali recollects that: “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) Mee Ali concludes by saying, “a feeling of sisterhood and communal responsibility enveloped us

in a strange and cheerful sense of oneness. I felt connected to these women, these sisters, these mothers, these aunts, and grandmothers. (p.119)

When the time comes for Kauna and Mee Ali to part ways, Kauna tells her friend, Ali, who she describes as “the one and only good thing that has ever happened to me in the village” (p.171) “I will miss you, Ali. I will never forget you. You will always be a part of me, always.” (p.168) When Ali voices her concern on who will be her new companion when she wants to gossip, fetch water or wood since Kauna is moving so far away and she might never see her, Kauna replies that “*kuna mukweni ha kokule*” meaning that it is never far away where a relative resides. (p.174)

Returning to Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, when Mara is sold into prostitution in Germany, by her husband, she finds a trusted friend and confidante in Kaye, a woman who had formerly been through the same ordeal as her. Mara’s gains from her prostitution is used to finance her husband, Akobi’s lifestyle. When Mara eventually wakes from her slumber and decides to leave Pompey, it is Kaye who gives her the needed support and helps her plot her escape. Like parting between Assiatou and Ramatoulaye, Kauna and Mee Ali, Sissie and Marija, the parting between Kaye and Mara is just as difficult. Kaye proves to be a considerate friend who looks out for her friend’s interest—when Mara asks Kaye how much is Kaye’s cut from her (Mara) new job, after all, it was Kaye who made it possible. Kaye replies, “sister solidarity” (p.135).

In a similar fashion, in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*, she discusses several issues ranging from marriage, spousal rape and also discusses friendship using two women –Esi Sekyi and Opokuya Dakwa. Ama Ata Aidoo describes these two women:

No two humans could have been as different, physically and temperamentally, as Opokuya and Esi. But they also got on very well. In fact, they had been friends for so long, and they become so close, their mothers related to one another like friends and sisters too. (p.17)

These two friends like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou share details of their lives without any fear of judgment. They turn to each other for sustenance; they trust and lift each other to see strength where and when the other sees weakness. Opokuya calls Esi “a loyal friend” (p.38). When Esi and Ali’s relationship begin to brew, it is important to Ali to get approval from someone in Esi’s closest circle. He questions her about her relationship with Opokuya. Esi replies, “we’ve been friends for a very long time...since we were in school. In fact, we are really like sisters.” (p.98) When Opokuya’s husband tries to lure Esi into an illicit affair with him, she stops him. Ama A. Aidoo explains that:

She remembered that there is something called friendship. And hadn’t her friendship with Opokuya been, so far, the most constant thing in life? And that whereas mothers, fathers, grandmothers and other relations are like extra limbs we grow, a friend symbolizes a choice? And to maintain a friendship is a choice? Therefore, not to maintain a friendship – indeed, to kill a friend – is a choice? (p.183)

By refusing Opokuya’s husband, Esi makes the choice of sisterhood and friendship. She holds her bond of friendship with Opokuya in high esteem.

Also, in Buchi Emecheta’s novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, she defines a picture of women who were friends and provided help for one another. When Nnu Ego is agonized by labour pains in the middle of the night, she does not wake up her husband, but rather goes to an Owerri woman. Nnu

Ego thanks the Owerri woman after she helps her deliver her little boy, and the latter replies, “We are like sisters on a pilgrimage. Why should we not help one another?” (p.55) After Nnu Ego loses her first child, Ngozi, she mourns her four (4) weeks old baby for three months. She slips into depression; she stops tidying her room and sleeps in a separate bed from her husband. Nnu Ego only gets better after her childhood friend, Ato, comes to visit her. They share laughter and gossip and talk about Nnu Ego’s home. Ato leaves Nnu Ego in high spirits and with good counsel. (p.78)

Comparably, in Faith Ben-Daniels’ *A Quarter Past Midnight*, she defines friendship using two childhood friends, Pearl and Iman. Pearl is faced with constant spiritual midnight attacks and dreams as a result of her mother, Auntie Ama, seeking the assistance of a fetish priest to help her conceive. Iman Nurudeen stands by her best friend. Pearl acknowledges the importance of Iman in her life and introduces her to Saviour. She says ‘this is my true friend and sister, Iman Nurudeen’ (p.68). This friendship is mutual as in another instance Iman refers to Pearl as “not just her friend but also her sister.” (p.106) Iman and Pearl’s relationship equally adds to the existence of friendship and sisterhood among women.

Conclusion

There is always going to be constant disagreements and jealousy in friendships regardless of the gender. Bearing a grudge, keeping malice, or choosing to be vindictive are not traits exclusive to the female gender. As such, the long-held belief that when two women have a feud between them it shows that women are their own enemies, or a woman who is at the peak of her career and simply refuses to help a lady who is just climbing the same ladder shows same, is a fallacy that has nothing to do with women being their own enemies. Although one would expect that because women are most likely to be marginalized, women ought to stick together to fight against the patriarchal system that is oppressing them, we cannot ignore the fact that such debates lean heavily on individual choices which have nothing to do with gender. That notwithstanding, if women choose to be on the opposite side of the ring, it can be thought to be one out of many things—the woman in question is uncomfortable dealing with women or perhaps a woman is just having a bad day. But being enemies is certainly a wrong call especially since time in memoriam, men are guilty of the same offences as women but have never been called their own enemies. One of the ways women can fight this stereotype and the patriarchal society is to stand together as sisters, mothers, aunties, grandmothers, friends and support one another.

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