

Violence and Narrative Representation of Women's Experiences in Sefi Atta's *Swallow* and MariamaBâ's *So Long a Letter*

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Abstract

Violence of diverse forms is often metaphorised in some African literatures as semblances of culture, and religion. Sefi Atta's *Swallow* and MariamaBâ's *So Long a Letter (SLaL)* among other African literatures experiment themes of betrayal, generational conflict, exploitation, hardship and death. Themes of violence are epitomised in marriage, *religio*-cultural values, sexual harassment, transnational mobility and divorce in both texts. Through the use of psychoanalytic theory in overviews, and character and thematic depiction, the study reveals that both texts go beyond physical and psychological violence to represent metaphorical and/or fictional discursive aspects of the female movement to self-actualisation. The representation of women's experiences of violence in both texts has not only physical but psychological dimensions portrayed in the narrative. In *Swallow*, three kinds of women are identified: the resilient, the brittle, and the reviled. The text is set in a *stenchy*-hustling Lagos, symbolising moral decadence and an insurrection of the unlikely, female breadwinning, respectively. MariamaBâ's *SLaL* portrays abandonment and vulnerability of brilliant and aspiring women. The estrangement of Ramatoulaye from her

husband, despite her love and loyalty, and her subsequent subjugation to the Islamic mourning obligations after Modou's death, speaks volume about the subtle violence women endure.

Keywords: Women's vulnerability, Subversion, Male-on-female violence, Transnational mobility, Sex and marriage.

Introduction

African literature, like all other literatures of the world, embodies conflict; violence of different shades to be precise. As an entrenched, multifaceted or nuanced aspect of the narratives in African literature, violence is depicted as a human attribute and an act that gains support from culture and religion. Different themes such as female vulnerability, subversion, aggression, emotional and/or psychological violence in marriage, sex, gender differentiation (inequality and inequity), and power struggle may be underscored in African literature as demonstrations of conflict. These thematic preoccupations are common in virtually all societies where people exist and where hierarchy is upheld. Everyone in society feels indebted or entitled to and demands to be heard, seen and recognised. This only makes it difficult for all to be on the same plinth. Violence, as a key term in this study, is a sub-theme in conflict, ubiquitously represented in most African narratives; subtly practiced as a social phenomenon; coated as semblances of culture and religion, and so cannot be queried or interrogated by the people who are subjected to enduring it. Tradition has been used to blackmail people to believing culture and religion cannot be questioned.

The representation of violence in literature comes as an art/act: actual or verbal. Carroll sees this as “the inner core of human nature”. In her explication of the unavailability of violence in literary works, she remonstrates that violence emerges from the core of all human interests, perpetually set in conflict with the interests of others (p.1). Despite the permeating nature of violence as a human element, it is a slippery concept that is difficult to define and interrogate (see Knight). As a concept, violence sounds so ordinary that its complex manifestations are sometimes elusive to the uncritical mind. This fact illustrates why defining such a concept is quite herculean. Suffice it, at this juncture,

therefore, to describe violence, in its generality, as any act, physical, gestural or verbal capable of inflicting pain.

Women's experiences of violence in West Africa are relatively similar. This may take various forms such as physical, epistemic, cultural and psychological. These forms have been explored using different sorts of literary resources including complicated literary style, choices of characters and themes. But despite the ampler of space devoted to gender violence, the amount of attention given to the study of narrative representation of women's experiences of violence by critics especially in sub-Saharan Africa is far from being adequate. It is against this backdrop that this present study is germane as it examines the forms of violence in narrative representation of women experiences in two female texts from two different regions in Africa: Nigeria's Sefi Atta's *Swallow* and the Senegal's Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter (SLaL, hereafter)*.

Conceptualising Violence

Violence exposes any foregrounded structure of human motives and passions, be it in literary works or in real life. Its evolution, according to Carroll (p. 1), could be traced to anthropological fact that:

All human interests are set in conflict with the interests of others. Even among the closest kin, fitness interests partially overlap and partially conflicting. Between parents and children, siblings, spouses, coalitional partners, and members of one's own tribe, shared fitness interests prompting love or friendship clash with individual interests prompting suspicion, envy, resentment, anger, and sometimes hatred. Violence is the flash point at which the tensions aroused by conflicting interests reach critical mass.

Literary appreciation of the theme of violence entails adequate understanding of the term. While early writings of Chinua Achebe, Peter Abraham, Ngugiwa' Thiongo, among others may be interested in questioning eurocentrism, colonisation and white power or imperialism, the emerging female voices in writing of African cultures is focused on exploring the female lots in African male hegemonic societies. As part of

the baggage females carry, violence takes the centre stage.

To interrogate violence in literary texts, it requires the indulgence in to the underlining human actions and intentions, harm and non-consent (see Walby et al, p.36). This is even more important in deciphering the extent to which non-complete actions such as threats, aiding and abetting, collaboration, conspiracy and incitement constitute forms of violence in them. It is also from this angle that gender inequality and inequity in general which are visible in contemporary African writings than before, can be cited and examined as part of violence. Further assessment of perspectives like these also implicates such acts as stalking, harassment and verbal abuse to also be counted as constituting violence. From these angles, therefore, one could appreciate the adequacy of World Health Organisation's (WHO's) definition of violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation” (in Krug et al., p.5).

The merit of the above definition obviously lies in the accommodation of many forms of violence such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child maltreatment, bullying, suicide acts and neglect. Violence can also take place among people living together or among neighbours. Hence, a definition such as WHO's provides an optic for comprehending violence since its narrative representation can be complex. But, while its definition and broad conceptualisation are good for identifying and classifying violence, in multiple literary works, violence is often metaphorised and depicted as an established behaviour. It is these metaphoric narrations of violence that this work extracted and analysed to underscore how women experiences of violence are represented in the selected works.

The theorisation of violence in some African literature is usually in form of male-on-female violence. The conflicts in the literary pieces are portrayed between the two prominent genders: male and female; where the female writing is in contestation with male egoism and hegemony.

This explains how the flame of violence is easily ignited in such themes as courtship, dowry and marriage and why such themes are subtly coated in passive aggression, a kind of violence not easily noticeable until it has exploded. Such potency for conflict can be deciphered from Rose's (p. 11) proclamation on the refusal of Sanwo to pay Tolani's dowry thus:

He is blocking your way and he's not delivering, so he can forget about any lovey-dovey treatment. No woman can afford to be nice in this place. It's a war between men and us. A war, you hear me? So face the bobo squarely, make sure your demands are met. If not you a fine chick, you'll find someone else, pure and simple (*Swallow*, p.11)

Apart from the two texts sampled for this study, references have been drawn from other texts to show how the characters portrayed in female writings suffer in the hands of their male counterparts, as in the case of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, who suffers dehumanisation in the hands of Mr. Albert whom she refers to as Mr. A. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Mr. Eugene metes injustices on his wife whom Kambili simply identify as Mama. Mama's often ventilates her anger in moulding pots and destroying same. The Misters in these texts have inflicted pain on the female characters; for the female writers, it is a replica of the society in general.

Textual Reviews

To understand the texts, it is appropriate to briefly examine the two female writers and their preoccupations which may be the spurs to their fictional susceptibilities.

1. Sefi Atta and her work - the Swallow

Sefi Atta, like most African female writers, can be described as a contemporary MariamaBâ. Even though their writings are different in form and style, their concerns and thematic designs can be likened and equated. Atta, who was born in Nigeria but lives in the United States with her husband and daughter, is a budding voice in African literature that should not be ignored. Her unique, spell-bound novel, *Swallow* though written in 2008, but set in the 1980s describes the Lagosian life of two

young girls, whose backgrounds prominently feature in their decisions to make a living, tempted by all means possible to succumb to the forces of “hustle”, Tolani Ajoa's and Rose's lives take divergent turns.

The experiences of women in Sefi Atta's *Swallow* are diverse yet point to the same theme of violence, as she leads the reader into the lives of two Nigerian women re-counting their daily struggle to survive the hard life in the city of Lagos. The story in the text is sustained in the female's survival/coping strategy and/or technique depicted in cohabitation, their work trajectory in the heartland of Lagos and female-female friendship. Through the narrative, the readers could penetrate into the daily experiences of the two main female characters and the pains they endure. These female-shared-existential conflicts become both a vocation and a task to be vanquished.

In the novel, Atta's portrayal of the women characters is such that they are not idlers who wait for men to wholly depend on, but are represented as 'fighters', if you like, hustlers in the Nigerian parlance, working in an environment highly dominated by men. This can be gleaned by what the novel reveals about the happenings in their offices and their choices of men. The narrative in the work continues to the point where Rose loses her job after she slaps her boss though an admirer and one who aspires to have her as his girlfriend, a sentiment that she finds very awkward. So, Rose will not tolerate it when he inappropriately touches her. Rose, who had worked several years for Salako, her boss, has made a resolution of intolerance towards being harassed by him in the work place. Rose is not averse to the idea of marriage. In fact, she wanted it. Her sole problem is that “working for a man who wants her romantically puts her in a bad light with her co-workers who treat Rose with distrust”. She therefore summons the strength to stand against sexual harassment even though it is an accepted practice in their company and most Nigerian males hardly frown at it. Rose becomes “ruthless with men' yes all men. She didn't discriminate and that was the problem with her. As she started imagining the war between women and men, since her experiences (*Swallow*, p. 16).

Amidst the barrage of challenges Rose is facing, including the

nonpayment of her rent, couple with the fact that she knows her boss has no high moral standing, she would have exercised some restraint; but for her intolerance which earned her a sack. Can one blame a woman who has clearly seen it all: harassment, forced love and attention from her boss? A woman who has declared war for men? A woman who claims there is no justice for people like her (women). That only the wicked and the corrupt like Salako and Umar have immunity and so cannot face justice? (p. 22).

Tolani is also bothered about marriage. She has dated Sanwo for two years, but Sanwo is financially handicap to afford the bride price. For Rose, this is unmanly and that such men should be dumped; a risk which Tolani who has had eight boyfriends without marriage is unwilling to take. It is not that Rose is charmed with the idea of bride price; she believes that the tradition of bride price belongs to the past and serves as a means of extortion and diminishes the value of a woman but also believes that booking down a woman in the name of long courtship is also unfair to the woman. In fact, Rose is so averse to the idea of dowry that she described it as a foolish tradition that is unfair to women and wondered why people still follow it (*Swallow*, p. 13).

Tolani's relationship with Sanwo was more of battling her own weakness. Tolani being one who has no discretion when it comes to relationship with men and has even been threatened when she turns down a previous boyfriend who attempts to pour acid on her, her hope is that she will settle down if Sanwo can tie the knot.

Rose is also depicted as a character with a complicated psychology. She has an uneasy relationship with her mother, Sisi and her sister, Violet; though Violet too has no regards for persons and cares about money. And as for Rose's mother, she is always on Violet's side in any argument or physical fight with Rose.

Rose and Tolani run into an old friend accompanied by an American friend in the market arena. OC (the Andrew), confesses his love for Rose and desires to be engaged to her. Mrs. Durojaiye, a mean unsmiling woman is introduced into the complicated narrative by Sefi Atta, perhaps

to enable the reader understand the unsettled life of Tolani and her affair with Sanwo who starts coming by the flat and staying over the nights. Since it is abnormal for couples who are not legally married to cohabit, Tolani tries to keep her neighbours out of her affairs, a scheme that will not work well with Mrs. Durojaiye – the land lady.

Mrs. Durojaiye works for doctors and attends union meetings in support of their action. The thought of struggling for a better wage as a nurse in an upcoming strike brings her excitement. Rose's gradual financial dependence on OC is beginning to worry Tolani. Surprisingly to her, Rose hadn't bothered to look for a job after she was laid off. All that Tolani sees Rose doing is idling away and drinking alcoholic beverages and watching television. Sefi Atta returns Salako into the narrative facing investigation following the report of Tolani with the assistance of Mrs. Durojaiye. Both women have agreed to stop or curtail the excesses of wealthy bosses. Sanwo's regular stay with Tolani and his character depiction, Rose excuses to collect OC's money though she was not comfortable with the source of his income at first, and Tolani's scheme to keep Sanwo close as his six months ultimatum to propose is drawing nearer as well as the drowning of Mrs. Durojaiye's ten years old son are all parts of Sefi Atta's creative strategy to take the reader deeper into the intricacies of the narration on issues of discretion, judgement, discipline, trust, morality and the right to grief as one deems fit. It also reveals how the unexpected of founding what one thought is lost can break the hardness of the hearts.

Resilience is enacted in the characters of IyaAlaro and Arike. IyaAlaro is portrayed as a leader and convener of women to fight for their rights. This is recounted in Arike's story to Tolani about her great aunt, IyaAlaro:

I never saw, because I was confined to my father's compound after the family meeting, but the story told is that my aunt IyaAlaro gathered the women of Makoku. She reminded them of the women of Aba who had revolted against the colonials, of the women of Abeokuta who caused commotion for their Alake and his chiefs. Those who were reluctant to

participate in a similar protest, she assured them that the new Oba would feel free to raise taxes as high as he wanted if they allowed him to behave as he pleased with women (*Swallow*, p.87).

The protest is to redress a problem in the way the new Oba is treating the people and the women particularly, whom he takes for wives without their consents. In order to persuade the women, she tells them of the worst situation that may arise, the increase in taxes; also alludes to the Aba women's riot of 1929 and the Abeokuta women uprising against an inhumane Alake and his chiefs. These reminders are to serve as propellers and stimulants to their own fight for emancipation. IyaAlaro therefore, represents a true feminist and a liberator. Arike, Tolani's mother, has also shown these traits as she rides a bike, an act which was seen at the time to be a man's role. She damns all criticisms of her behaviour and buys a bike for herself and takes the challenge of learning how to ride it.

There are some aspects of the narratives that are difficult to understand on the surface but are additional revelations of the psychology of the characters. For instance, the promise of Tolani to invest in Sanwo's business only for her to learn that it is about buying and selling of dogs. Tolani saw this line of business as absurd even if it will bring returns. Tolani's thought of investing in Sanwo's business also raises the issues of love and trust which are areas of perpetual source of conflict and anger.

Sefi Atta also pursues the narrative of the widening gap between Tolani and Rose after the two men are allowed into their lives. The arrival of the two men also introduces conflict into the intimacy between the two friends. While Rose sees Tolani as one who is fooling herself and hoping that Sanwo marries her, Tolani believes that Rose is nothing more than an opportunist. At the end, Rose's conversation with her mother opens her eyes to what love and marriage are, and Tolani dumps Sanwo after she realises that she deserves better.

2. *Mariama Ba and her work - So Long a Letter*

MariamaBâ who is an older author with experience in writing is placed

side by side with Sefi Atta in this study to see the trajectories in female writings of African descent. Bâ was born in 1929, in Dakar, Senegal, coincidentally, the period of the Aba women's riot in Nigeria which was led by Margret Ekpo. The period of her birth may have also contributed to her creative impulse as even though the text is not an outright revolutionary text, it subtly encourages freedom from oppression, peace in *intragender* relations and in letter writing. These acts are considered by Bâ as ways of purging emotional cum psychological violence caused by betrayal and male's insensitivity to love and honour. Bâ was brought up by her Muslim maternal grandparents; this automatically makes her a Muslim devotee. She attended the French School (now the Berthe Maubert School) in Dakar and the École Normale in Rufisque. During school holidays, she studied the Qur'an under the tutelage of an Imam. She had experience in teaching at the primary school level and had also engaged in some feminist activities in Senegal. The award-winning text, *So Long a Letter*, is her first novel. Again, *SLaL*, like *Swallow* represents two female characters: Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Their friendship ameliorates a lot, and in contrast to *Swallow*, *SLaL* portrays the strength and gains of friendship while Rose in *Swallow* chooses her path not minding what her friend, Tolani thinks.

So Long a Letter tells a story about a Senegalese woman living in Dakar named Ramatoulaye. The narrative centres on the decision of this woman to write an epistolary diary to her childhood friend, Aissatou, who lives in America. This letter is necessitated by the unexpected demise of Modou, Ramatoulaye's estranged husband. This diary becomes a means of learning about the long Islamic funeral proceedings following the death of her husband, Modou. In accordance with Muslim customs, Ramatoulaye must observe mourning ritual for a forty-day period in isolation. This ritual also demands exceptional hospitality to all the mourners and well-wishers by hosting and nourishing them. These obligatory customs strike Ramatoulaye as a grave injustice, as Modou, in his final years, completely estranged himself from her and their children. That the customs also give access to the mourners to virtually sack the house of a mourning woman is also irritating to Ramatoulaye. The gifts, mostly bank notes, which the mourners brought would have compensated for the spoils, but ends up mostly in the hands of Modou's

second wife, Binetou, and her greedy mother (Lady Mother-in-Law). The way and manner Ramatoulaye narrates the marriage relationship between Aissatou (a daughter of a goldsmith) and Mawdo (a prince) clearly shows a mismatch seen only by the family members. In that narrative, however, there is an epiphany of unpleasantness and pain. The same manifestation goes with her representation of her own relationship with Modou since her mother sees and describes Modou as a man too perfect to be honest; a gapped-teeth man, seen as a signpost for infidelity (*SLaL*, p. 37). In all this, Ramatoulaye in her blind love sees the relationship as sweet and hopeful amidst the opposition of Ramatoulaye's family who views Modou as an incompatible partner; someone the family describes as a loaf of bread. In her diary, Ramatoulaye comes to realise that her family was right, and wonders why, despite her education, she chooses Modou over a more sensible option – Daouda Dieng, an older and more established, financially stable man. Ramatoulaye goes on to reflect on her marriage to Modou. She cannot understand what led Modou to lose interest in her. MariamaBâ constantly draws the attention of the reader to the fact that love and marriage are supposed to bring people together, to make people inseparable but for vested interests arising from social-cultural patterns and family factors, the reverse is the case. This threat is ubiquitous in the voice of the family.

In the main, Ramatoulaye has other marital misfortunes to contend with, the friend to her daughter, Daba called Binetou who speaks constantly of a 'sugar daddy', an older man who lavishes her with gifts. Not quite long, the family of Binetou begins to push her to marry the man for money at the expense of her education. Binetou finally gives in. Little does Ramatoulaye know that the purported 'sugar daddy' is Modou, who is her husband and the father of her children. She only knows this when Mawdo, Tamsir, Modou's brother and a local Imam arrive at her house to announce to her that Binetou will soon be her co-wife. Ramatoulaye is left devastated and callously abandoned as Modou begins a new marital life with Binetou. Unlike Aissatou, Ramatoulaye chooses to remain married to Modou, as part of her destiny. Her children protest against that, but she remains resolute as if it was a duty on her part to fulfill.

Finally, Modou dies, and Ramatoulaye manoeuvres the odd situation of being coerced to mourn a man that left her for another woman. As if this was not enough, Tamsir rudely approaches her for marriage as her *mirasse* (40 days of mourning) draws to a close. Ramatoulaye is deeply offended by his crass proposal, and tells him off in front of Mawdo and the Imam; revenge she calls it, for what Tamsir did to her when the trio: Tamsir himself, Mawdo and the Imam came to inform her of Modou's marriage with Binetou. Suddenly, Ramatoulaye transforms from that naïve, patient and hushed woman like Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (*TCP*), and Ada in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (*SCC*) to become a strong-willed, out-spoken and resilient character who could find courage to drive a car given to her by her friend, Aissatou. Like Celie and Shug in *TCP*, friendship with another female brings Ramatoulaye love more than what marriage with a man could offer her. Daouda Dieng, her first suitor later proposes to her in a more matured way but Ramatoulaye rejects him as well. She resolves to focus her energy in bringing up her children. This might just be precipitated on her experience in marriage that inflicted so much pain to her.

The novel talks of other emerging challenges as a result of the prevailing influence of modernity, Ramatoulaye's children now adolescent, are exposed to a host of new dangers that they ought to be protected from. A wayward motorcycle knocks down and injures two of Ramatoulaye's sons while playing baseball on the street. Three of her daughters have taken to smoking. Her daughter she named after Aissatou gets pregnant out of wedlock. Ramatoulaye's reactions to all of these crises could be described as a show of strength, equanimity and poise. Ramatoulaye concludes her long epistolary diary with an anticipation of Aissatou's return to Senegal. She is hopeful that her friend's return will bring her more happiness and strengthen their friendship despite the physical changes they have experienced.

In trying to make sense of this story, it must be borne in mind that Ramatoulaye belongs to the generation that grew up under the French colonial regime and came of age just as Senegal was achieving its independence. Accordingly, she is very politically engaged, and reflects often on the future of her country, the role of tradition in modern life, and

the prospect of women's liberation. She is fundamentally a feminist, though she holds certain beliefs that some feminists might find unfamiliar or perhaps even disagree with. For one, she is a devout Muslim, and follows the dictates of her faith even when they seem to advocate the unequal treatment of women. Though she is a teacher and has a professional life of her own, she is also a devoted mother. What Ramatoulaye experiences could be termed passive aggression and a subtle form of violence; a type of violence that one could describe as slow poison. Her faith and her patience are tested when her husband, Modou, decides to take a young second wife (perfectly acceptable in Senegalese-Muslim culture) and proceeds to abandon Ramatoulaye and her twelve children. Despite Modou's infidelity, though, she chooses to remain married to him.

Theoretical Orientation of the Study

Different sociological and literary theories can adequately fit in, in the exploration of violence. In this study, it becomes imperative to narrow down the search to which theory is more suitable and can appropriately stand-in as the framework for all that the study is set out to investigate. As a kind of human behaviour, violence which is perpetrated by humans on another human, in this case, male-on-female may be seen as originating from the human mind, and as a result, something other than the ordinary may be responsible for this behaviour. What could this be? To answer this salient question, the study explores the psychoanalytic theory which was initiated from Sigmund Freud's works. Freud's contribution to analysing behaviour proposes the idea that the unconscious mind has a strong grip in shaping human behaviour and actions. The importance of this theory to the study is that the theory helps to unravel causes of psychological problems in the recesses of troubled patients' minds (Anderson & Taylor p.96). These troubled patients, in the instance of this study, would be the female characters whose experiences are recounted and represented by the two-female writers of *Swallow* and *SLaL*.

The Freudian theory describes the human psyche in three parts: the id, the superego and the ego. These three play different roles in the human mind. For instance, the id, Freud posits, consists of deep drives and impulses which he considers as a forceful occupier of the unconscious mind. The

superego is the aspect of self that represents standards in society. It holds values and norms as the enforcer of society's collective expectations. Superego represses wild impulses that the id generates, in a saner and organised society. Thus, it is seen as the inherent repressiveness of society by Freud. These two components of the psyche are always in conflict with each other. To control this conflict between social expectations (the superego) and their impulses (the id), according to Freud, people tend to develop defense mechanism, repression, avoidance or denial (Freud in Anderson & Taylor, pp. 78 & 79). Where someone has strong urge for a wrong thing or someone, and refuses to admit it (repression) and/or acknowledge the impulse, s/he might even go to the extent of avoiding the temptation (avoidance) or may just give in to the temptation by indulging but believing it is not misconduct (denial). Thus, to cope with the tension between the id and the superego, people are inclined to developing the third component, the ego which is described by Anderson and Taylor, (p.79) as the seat of reason and common sense. The ego balances the role of impulse (the id) with that of social expectations (the superego).

For this theory, dreams and occasional slips provide a glimpse of the unconscious mind. Slips, such as the Freudian slip, have the penchant to reveal underlying state of the mind. Anderson and Taylor give the example of someone who intends to say, "There were **six** people at the party", but rather says, "There were **sex** people at the party". This divulges the state of the speaker's (*sayer's*) mind at the time of speaking. It depicts that there is a sexual thought lurking in the mind of the speaker, either prompted by his/her admiration of his/her interlocutor or the happenings at the party or his/her last experiences that may still linger in his/her memory to have been called up, unconsciously. Freud asserts that, unconscious desires are forever present and vying for preeminence.

These three parts (the id, superego and ego), identified as the components of the psyche are vital to this paper. The reason is that the study explores women experiences, especially how violence which is perpetrated by male characters is initiated from the authors' minds and narrated to the readers' understanding of the characters and their experiences. To understand violence and the experiences of women in

the narratives, its perpetuation and the perpetrators have to be interrogated. Thus, this underscores the reason for adopting the psychoanalytic theory.

Sources and Method of Data Analysis

Data is derived from Sefi Atta's *Swallow* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Excerpts are extracted, discussed and analysed based on the themes that relate to the topic of this paper. This study is a qualitative study, and has no intention of quantifying its data. Therefore, the data which is basically derived from two African female literary texts: Nigerian and Senegalese, is not subjected to any statistical but only observatory and representational studies. Guided by a psychoanalytical theory, analysis is thematically sectionalised to allow for objective presentation of verifiable facts/data from the texts. Two books from two African countries are not enough pieces of evidence to explore women's experiences and definitely not quite a representation of all forms of violence in African writings, but for the purpose and scope of this paper, data from the two seemingly divergent regional texts is relatively adequate to theorise violence in African female literature. In the section that follows, one will look at the narrative representation of women's experiences of violence in the selected African literature.

Findings and Discussion

Violence and its Representation in Women's Experiences in the works of Sefi Atta and Mariama Ba can be discussed using five fundamental themes namely friendship, marriage, interaction, the symbolism of stench and transnational mobility. Conflict emanating from these themes often arises in attempt to meet three crucial aspects of human needs including companionship and procreation, support and mutual interactions for personal or interpersonal benefits.

Friendship

In the works of the two authors, one of the key areas that emerge as points of conflict and violence is in the areas companionship and procreation. In relation to these, the sub-themes of friendship and marriage have often exuded inter-gender frictions. There is no doubt that there appears to be a cordial *intragender* experience among female characters. This was quite

obvious in *SLaL* where Ramatoulaye's survival derived from the memory of her friendship with Aissatou. It is a fact that runs through the narration that their long-standing friendship is treasured in spite of differences in locations and distance. This *intragendered* friendship became a magic wand to their survival. It takes them a long journey from adolescence to maturity. Ramatoulaye recounts:

I conjure you up. The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions. I close my eyes. Ebb and tide of feelings: heat and dazzlement, the wood fire, the sharp green mango, bitten into in turns, a delicacy in our greedy mouths. I close my eyes. Ebb and tide of images: drops of sweat beading your mother's ochre-coloured face as she emerges from the kitchen, the procession of young wet girls chattering on their way back from the springs....(p.1).

This friendship is so appreciated that Ramatoulaye believes it is of a common destiny. She asserts that “We walked the same path from adolescence to maturity where the past begets the present”. Right from the beginning of the story, she affirms “My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times. Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am widowed” (*SLaL*, p.1).

Unlike the sweet feeling of the *intragender* friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Modou and Mawdo's friendship does not improve suffering nor lead to evasion of death. While DrMawdoBâ's friendship with Modou Fall does not save Modou from dying, Ramatoulaye's experiences with Modou do not leave her with a pleasant reminiscence. Yet, unlike Modou, Ramatoulaye, amidst her pain was faithful even in death. The following expression illustrates this:

I look intently at Mawdo. He seems to be taller than usual in his white overall.... His reddened eyes express forty years of friendship. I admire his noble hands, ..., supple hands used to tracking (sic) down illness. Those hands, moved by friendship and rigorous science, could not save his friend (*SLaL*, p. 3).

The intrigue in Aissatou's marriage is particularly deep in that Mawdo's family, particularly his mother, Aunty Nabou, not only objects to the union but subverted the marriage. Aunty Nabou goes to her brother and convinces him to release one of his daughters, Aunty Nabou's namesake, to her care. Aunty Nabou proceeds to bring the young Nabou up until she is ripe for marriage. Then, Aunty Nabou implores Mawdo to have young Nabou as his second wife. Mawdo, afraid that his mother would become unhappy and distressed if he rejects, agrees to her patiently hatched plan. Despite his assurance to Aissatou that he is not in love with young Nabou, Mawdo goes ahead to have children with her; a Freudian act of denial that makes his id (impulse) in control of his general behaviour. He leaves in denial that his relationship with young Nabou is loveless, yet the sex produces its fruits in children-bearing. If Mawdo does not love young Nabou, and he goes on to marry and have sex with her, then, there is every reason to believe that it is infatuation that creates the atmosphere for the sex and children-bearing. By implication, young Nabou may not be a fulfilled wife; as she is only a sex tool to Mawdo. But if love is enough, how then is Mawdo married to another woman when his love for Aissatou was incomparable? Again, if love is enough, how can Modou fix his eyes on a girl as young as his daughter whose marriage with her makes him abandon his family? For Aissatou, she refuses to stomach humiliation of competing with another woman in Mawdo's life, and she divorces him. She concentrates on her education, obtains a degree in diplomacy, and moves away; travels to America to work in the Senegalese embassy.

Writing letters to Aissatou becomes a means of purging her emotions and allying her pains, betrayal, abandonment and widowhood.

... A taxi quickly hailed! Fast! Fast! Faster still! **My throat is dry.** There is a **rigid lump in my chest.** Fast: faster still. At last the hospital: the **mixed smell of suppurations and ether.** The hospital – distorted faces, a **train of tearful people,** known and unknown, witnesses to this **awful tragedy.** ...the world of the living by a white sheet in which he is completely enveloped (*SLaL*, p.2; all bold fonts are researchers' emphases).

The words in bold suggest Ramatoulaye's experiences of pain (violence) in the narrative. Dryness of throat, lump in the chest, faces of despair and agony, a man who abandons her while alive, claims her back in death, “the world of living by the white sheet in which he is completely enveloped”. These are her lots.

Although, female-female friendship, like Binetou's friendship to Daba has also brought hurt to another, Daba's mother, Ramatoulaye, in the text, a major turn around and strength is still found within its ambience. Ramatoulaye does not give up on female friendship, though she has suffered pains as a result of it, she rather blames it on male's insatiable love quest; the reason she refuses to marry DaoudaDieng, her first suitor who still finds her appealing and lovable, after many years of being apart and married to others. Daouda is described as a good man who loves his family and wife. His proposal to marry Ramatoulaye is not intent to punish his wife, but he sees it as fate rearranging and reordering their steps; as he has always loved Ramatoulaye. By Islamic customs, he is entitled to marry as many wives as four. Unlike Modou, Daouda's proposal is with a genuine intent to bring back his lost love; and not a quest for the young to daunt the old as in the case with Modou and Binetou or Mawdo and Nabou.

In another instance, although Modou finds Binetou's lovable and as a friend, who is much more than that, this friendship rather hurts others: Ramatoulaye and her children, especially Daba who finds it difficult to understand and forgive Binetou and her mother, Lady Mother-in-Law, and even her father Modou (p.3).

With regards to *Swallow*, though Rose's and Tolani's friendship may not be the same as Aissatou's and Ramatoulye's, yet their friendship has remained a source of survival throughout their hustling days. Rose and Tolani may not often be seen to agree on things, but Rose's friendship has made Tolani able to navigate life and make frantic decisions to dump Sanwo and move on with her life; even though she decides to resign to fate by going back to the village; a decision that makes her strong-willed and to reject Sanwo's marriage proposal when he came to her to announce of his new job at a consultancy firm doing spreadsheets

(p.251). Rose's decision to join OC's cocaine business can be likened to Aissatou leaving her marriage on principle to survive. Though it ends well for Aissatou, since her divorce decision is not illegal, she rather develops herself-worth by going to school and acquiring more certificates to be able to work and cater for herself and children. Rose, on the other hand, takes a bad decision to export drugs and later dies in the process. Her engagement with men like OC destroys and renders her incapacitated, like Ramatoulaye's marriage to Modou.

Marriage

The characters of Modou and Mawdo are crucial in the narrative as they symbolise the perpetrators of psychological/emotional violence metaphorised in the way they both treat their wives, who were once the love of their lives. Modou is a union organiser and, like Ramatoulaye, engages in his country's politics. At first, the two are very deeply in love, and they marry despite the protestations of Ramatoulaye's parents; especially Ramatoulaye's mother who thinks Modou is too perfect a man to be honest (p.37). Thus, their love fades as they grow older. Modou takes secret interest in his daughter's (Daba's) young friend, Binetou. He lavishes her with gifts and money, and eventually decides to marry her without telling Ramatoulaye. Ramatoulaye does not only feel rejected, she also suffers dejection as she is humiliated when Modou condescends to marry her daughter's friend. She has had to go through a lot of torture: emotionally and psychologically; as revealed in Modou's absences, all day long. "He had simply said: "Don't expect me for lunch" (p.38). Ramatoulaye describes this humiliation thus:

Binetou, a child the same age as my daughter Daba promoted to the rank of my co-wife, whom I must face up to. Shy Binetou! The old man who bought her the new off-the-peg dresses to replace the old faded ones was none other than Modou. She had innocently confided her secrets to her rival's daughter because she thought that this dream, sprung from a brain growing old, would never become reality.... She thought she was stronger than the man she was dealing with (p.39).

Ramatoulaye's constant statement of "I was surviving" (p.51, para. 1), "I

survived” (p.51, para. 5), “I survived” (p.52, para. 1), “I survived” (p.53, para. 7) confirms that she is not only feeling the pain of rejection, she is also telling herself to be resolute and resilient in the face of the betrayal and abandonment. She has to endure this while she undergoes emotional torment, hence the proclamation. Ramatoulaye tries to console herself by living in denial of her experiences, and says:

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 vague smell of
milk (p.39).

Aissatou's husband, Mawdo is a doctor, an upstanding citizen, and a member of Senegal's class of nobles. He and Aissatou fall in love despite the class difference between their two families. This upsets Mawdo's mother, who eventually tricks him into taking on his young cousin, Nabou as a second wife. He does so somewhat reluctantly, but then proceeds to have children with Nabou, claiming all the while that he only loves Aissatou. Aissatou cannot accept this and leaves him. Even after Aissatou's departure, however, Mawdo remains a good friend to Ramatoulaye.

Modou's second wife and a friend of Daba, is only 17 when she reluctantly marries Modou. She does so at the urgings of her family, who are after Modou's money; especially Binetou's mother, Lady Mother-in-Law who flaunts Modou's riches as a won lottery. Binetou survives her marriage to Modou by making fun of him, ordering him around, and making him buy her things; expensive things, while Ramatoulaye suffers with her children:

... I was not divorced... I was abandoned: ...

I survived. I experienced the inadequacy of public transport. My children laughed at themselves in making this harsh discovery. One day, I heard Daba advise them: 'Above all, don't make mum know that it is stifling in those buses during the rush hours'.

I she tears of joy and sadness together: joy in being loved by my children, the sadness of a mother who does not have the means to change the course of

events.

I told you then, without any ulterior motive, of this painful aspect of our life, while Modou's car drove Lady Mother-in-Law to the four corners of town and while Binetou streaked along the roads in an Alfa Romeo, sometimes white, sometimes red (p. 53, all bold fonts researchers' emphasis).

Even in death, Ramatoulaye has to prove to her family-in-law that she is a faithful wife to Modou. She un-does her hair while she and her co-wife are “put inside a rough and ready tent made of wrapper pulled taut above [their] heads and set for the occasion” (p.4). The Senegalese woman sacrifices a lot to the family-in-law during the period of mourning. She does not only give up her possession, she also does her personality, her dignity by becoming a thing in the service of the man who had married her (p.4). As if suffering abandonment and betrayal is not enough punishment, she still suffers in Modou's death:

With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future with taking our existence into account (SLaL, p. 9)

Ramatoulaye has been betrayed in her marriage as her husband Modou marries their daughter's friend, Binetou. Aissatou is also in pain on seeing Mawdo condescend to marrying young Nabou. She divorces Mawdo as she is unable to stand such humiliation; her way of allaying the pain. Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, stays in the marriage, though abandoned, to take care of the children she is unable to control, as her daughter Aissatou gets pregnant and she only hears it from Farmata, the *griot* woman of the cowries (SLaL, p.80). To allay her pains, Ramatoulaye finds peace in confiding in and writing her friend Aissatou, from the beginning of the letter, as she writes:

... Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pains.

Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. ...

As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the

same 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 (*SLaL*, p. 1).

From the excerpt above, it is clear that, Ramatoulaye survival technique is founded on finding a good friend like Aissatou to confide in. Distance does not pose a challenge at all, as she finds solace in writing her friend to relay all she has been through, even reminding Aissatou of hers. For their many ill-fated experiences, especially violent ones, the beginning of the Sefi Atta's text, *Swallow* depicts this violence in the lexical choices she adopts:

On the day that Rose was sacked she and I could easily have been killed and that wouldn't have been our first brush with death on our way to work (*Swallow*, p.1, all bold fonts are researchers' emphases).

The lexical items in bold font in the excerpt above suggest that the struggle for survival in the text is real; pains of being laid off from one's job, being involved in what may have killed you, working to survive even with nothing to show for it among others. Rose's death rather brings a threat to Tolani's life as OC Okonkwo threatens to waste her life if she does not run away:

... Your friend is dead. She died yesterday. Now, you must get out of this place. You understand? Disappear. I don't care where you go, just don't come back. I'm not joking. Do I sound like I'm joking to you? ... Good. No shouting, no screaming, otherwise I will waste you (*Swallow*, p.226).

Jacqueline's illness is a product of an emotional pain inflicted by marriage. The doctors have done all the tests and the results prove that she is not sick in her body, but that the illness may be emotional. Marriage inflicts pains and emotional torture in her: "...often, the pains you are told of have their roots in moral torment. Vexations suffered and constant frustration: these are what accumulate somewhere in the body and choke it" (*SLaL*, p. 44). "The X-rays have shown nothing, and

neither have blood tests. The problem is that you are depressed, that is... not happy” (p. 45).

Support

As if this betrayal is not enough, Modou essentially abandons Ramatoulaye and their twelve children to look after his second wife and her family who consistently pride themselves in Modou's wealth; Lady Mother-in-Law for instance (p.9). In regret, Ramatoulaye recounts how the house which Modou mortgages for a loan to meet the demands of Binetou's family – Lady Mother-in-Law is nonetheless a common property acquired by their joint savings (p.10).

Rose's death is not much of the problem to OC Okonkwo who introduces her into concealing and importing cocaine in Sefi Atta's novel. She dies after the product explodes in her belly. She usually swallows the drugs to avoid being detected by the agency. OC threatens Tolani and influences her decision to move away. While Rose is dead, OC is rather worried about his investment, and Rose who is a daughter, sister, and friend to others is not his utmost loss. For him, Rose is just a collateral damage; a means to an end (Swallow, p.226). At the beginning of the text, Sefi Atta shows how two friends: Rose Tolani, support each other, though they both had divergent destinies to fulfill. Mariama Ba also depicts this support based on friendship with others; friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Ramatoulaye and Daouda, among others.

Interaction

When men and women interrelate, it is expected to be on the basis of mutual respect. The narrative representation of interactions involving men and women characters in the two texts is hardly devoid of violence. Yala (p. 102) alludes to this by stating that one of the dilemmas that the female characters in the stories reviewed faces is “how to develop relationship with men based on equality, love and mutual respect”. In the daily interaction between the male and female characters, be it in marriage, business or work place, fighting, sexual harassment and molestation become salient themes in both texts. In *Swallow*, Rose is sacked for slapping Mr. Salako who sexually harassed her. “Rose had complained about him many times before, how he'd passed comments

about her body, grabbed her hands and tickled her palms. A few times, he had tried to hug her and she pushed him away” (p.17). Tolani, Rose's friend is not spared in this act as Mr. Salako makes attempt on her when she goes to his office to inform him of a particular caller on the phone who insists on speaking with him. She speaks:

I hurried to Mr. Salako's office. Mr. Salako grabbed his phone as soon as I told him who was on the line. He flattered the man, asked after his wives and children, laughed and rocked in his chair. I stood in his office with my head down as he gestured that I should remain.... “Yes,” he said, ending his conversation. “We will certainly take care of that. Good bye, sir, eh Engineer...” “I eh,” he said. “I wanted you to eh, get my file in the cabinet”. ... Mr. Salako was rubbing his pelvis against me. I pushed him back so hard his desk moved (*Swallow*, pp. 77-78).

On narrating the event to Sanwo, Tolani swears that if a man touches her in that way, she would slap his face and Sanwo praises her for reserving herself for him alone (p. 79). This may not directly be the case with Modou and Binetou in Bâ's *SLaL*. Modou makes advances at Binetou, buys her gifts, even though she does not like him, she collects the gifts that eventually changed her life from the haggard looking young girl to a charm. Her displeasure is evident in Binetou telling Daba of this sugar-daddy's pot-belly, whose name she withholds. Unknown to Daba, it is her daddy to whom Binetou refers to in that despicable manner. She may not have been harassed to sexually attend to Modou, but that she is forced to marry him in order for her family to benefit from Modou's affluence is enough emotional damage and stress. One this study could see as daunting. She suffers a loveless marriage and becomes widowed in an early age. Everything is taken from her, her possession, personality, pride and image.

Stench

Symbolism is an aspect of these texts that should not be ignored. From the opening of *Swallow*, Atta describes the passengers and the environment with such words that portray its eccentricity:

Our bus stopped for more passengers. For a while I did not speak as the shuffled in. they looked exhausted and vexed; some were in uniform. Those in traditional wear were mostly traders. There was no space left to stand in the aisle. The air was full of exhaust fumes and body odours. The bus smelled as bad as manure (p.12).

The hustle for survival that characterises the text (*Swallow*) is portrayed in the exhaust fume and the body odours. People and machines are overused and vexed to emit such offensive scents. While the machines in the form of cars release stress in the way the exhaust fumes, human workers release body odours to also depict body negligence and abandonment. Live at this point becomes survival of the fittest. Lagos a microcosm of the Nigerian enclave (macrocosm) depicts this decadence in the text, both moral and social decadence in the way passengers smell, and the pollution in the environment. At the hospital, Ramatoulaye smells different stuff while processing to take away Modou's dead body: "At last the hospital: the mixed smell of suppurations and ether..." (*SLaL*, p.2).

Transnational Mobility

Transnational mobility is another theme that reveals the metaphor of violence in the two works. Transnational mobility in this case becomes a self-inflicting crisis. Ramatoulaye calls it an internal commotion. In *SLaL*, MariamaBâ reveals how Aissatou leaves her marriage and travels overseas for a better life. She is able to gain a better employment that helps her friendship with Ramatoulaye. Ramatoulaye benefits from this mobility to self-discovery, as Aissatou buys her a car, and she uses the distance to write to her friend. In the process of recounting her experiences to her friend Aissatou, Ramatoulaye changes her posture to life:

...I reflect. My new turn of mind is hardly surprising to you. I cannot help unburdening myself to you. I might as well sum up now.

I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world. This

commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities.

My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism resists. Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religion or unjust legislation have sealed. *SLaL*, p.88).

This corroborates Ramatoulaye's argument when she tells DaoudaDieng that women have been marginalised in the House, where he serves as a lawmaker. Rose, on the other hand, in *Swallow*, is represented by Sefi Atta as a daring and uncompromising woman who sees death stare on her face and yet takes the bull by the horn to survive, even though this ends her life. She markets cocaine to other countries, an illegal business that leads to her destruction. In comparison, while MariamaBâ's Aissatou's mobility saves her life, allays her pain, and that of her friend, Ramatoulaye, Rose's mobility endangers her life and that of her friend, Tolani in Atta's *Swallow*.

Conclusion

Lagos, a microcosm (city) of a macrocosm (Nigeria) is portrayed as a failing municipality depicted in women's struggle for survival, experiences of sexual harassment and molestation as they are forced out of their jobs in Atta's *Swallow*. Though the text expresses dissatisfaction on the female vulnerability to male's overindulgences, it ridicules masculinity of Mr. Salako (the oppressor) and Sanwo (the weak man). As indicated by Kowaleski, fictional violence is "a printed representation of real violence and the two are clearly related." Sefi Atta's *Swallow* and MariamaBâ's *SLaL* are two literary works situated in the West African environment, one in Anglophone Nigeria and the other in French speaking Senegal. Though the conceptualisation of diverse forms of violence is ubiquitous in these literary writings, the two works are unique. *Swallow*, true to its own environment, rendered a narrative representation of women's experience of violence in a way that

understanding of it is not impeded. In *SLaL* however, it is quite clear, contrary to the narrative pattern in *Swallow*, MariamaBâ's narration of violence and nonviolence around the story of the disintegration of marriages and the chain consequences of choice that partners make is built on creative originality. MariamaBâ x-rays the brutality of bad choices in finding a partner and its consequences. The core of her narrative is not polygamy because as a Muslim, she knows her husband is bound to take another wife; neither is it about the Islamic tradition of mourning. The reader could assess the information based on socio-religious contexts. The narrative representation of her experience of violence lies in the brutality of the choice of men. How partners chose to break into pieces the love, the sacrifices and the memories that bound two people in a love-relationship. This is what on several occasions MariamaBâ has narrated as a subtle but agonising feeling.

In one aspect, the violence is physical and in another, it is emotional but at the figurative level, it is a story of violence and the adoption of nonviolence approach in handling the violence. The adoption of nonviolence approach to the eradication of violence is a mission that is critical to many African female writers and plays a significant role in their literary creativity (cf. Chantal, p. 2). These writers have, therefore, tried to shed light on how historical and contemporary forms of violence affect the female gender. It is a subject that is of particular interest to African women writers not only to create awareness of the conditions of women but to remove the padlock of silence the society places on women. These two literary works present to their readers therefore, perspectives on violence that is unique to their environment; perspectives that may not be appreciated if the narrative metaphors are not well understood. It is with same understanding that readers may appreciate their proffered solutions of nonviolence.

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