

Chapter 9

The Overlooked Narratives of Women in Rural India and Africa, as Depicted in Contemporary Literature

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ABSTRACT

This comparative study of Mariama Bâ's "Une Si Longue Lettre" and Ashapurna Devi's "Pratham Pratishruti (The First Promise)" explores the feminist consciousness of these two pioneering authors. Despite being from different continents, eras, and cultures, their novels highlight similar struggles of women within patriarchal societies. During times when global focus was on wars and colonization, these authors brought attention to the overlooked domestic struggles of women. The study demonstrates how Bâ and Devi's protagonists break free from the confines of patriarchy, finding their paths to freedom. The research aims to uncover the overlooked narratives of women in rural India and Africa, emphasizing the domestic realms depicted in these contemporary literary works.

INTRODUCTION

Once Swami Vivekananda said that the best thermometer of a nation's progress is the treatment it reserves for its women and that there is no chance for the welfare of the world if the condition of women is not improved. Therefore, the place of women

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in society is a critical factor in judging the success of any civilization. All around the world, various social norms, in one form or another, deprive women of their right to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation. Literary writers and filmmakers, through their works, have attempted to demonstrate the roles and identities of women in the family and society.

Literature is prudently a periphery where human beings have the freedom to express their misery, exultation, protests, moans, and laughter without distinction of race, gender, and religion. Simply put, through literature, every individual gains the power to express their own point of view. Literature gives voice to the oppressed and the defeated. Therefore, it is very important for women to have access to the world of literature where they can express their opinions with the help of ink. If one looks through the windows of history, one encounters many women writers who have used their pens as weapons to fight against domination.

The narratives of women in rural India and Africa have often been overshadowed by broader socio-political discourses, leaving their everyday struggles and resilience largely unexplored. Contemporary literature has sought to illuminate these hidden stories, with writers like Mariama Bâ and Ashapura Devi playing pivotal roles in this endeavor. Through their novels “So Long a Letter” (Bâ, 1981) and “Pratham Pratishruti” (Devi, 1964), they delve into the intricacies of domestic realms and offer profound insights into the lives of women in their societies.

This paper, based on the comparative study of two novels from different eras and continents, pays tribute to two pioneers of modern feminism, Mariama Bâ and Ashapura Devi, and shows how their feminist consciousnesses intertwine across time, culture, and language. Both feminists illustrate how writing is often a means to escape distress, and how, despite personal sufferings, one can still succeed in saying something meaningful about life and society.

Mariama Bâ, winner of the Noma Prize in 1981, uses the epistolary format in “So Long a Letter” to depict a society where patriarchy prevails to such an extent that a fifty-year-old Muslim woman who bore a man twelve children could be abandoned at the age of fifty-three for her eldest daughter’s beautiful friend (Bâ, 1981). After the sudden death of her husband Modou, Ramatoulaye writes a letter to her friend Aissatou in America about her life, which becomes a scathing critique of a patriarchal society that consciously neglects the oppression of women. Through this novel, Ramatoulaye circumvents the forty-day silence mandate imposed by Islam on a widow, making the letter a powerful symbol of a woman seizing the pen.

Ashapura Devi, despite having no formal education, has made significant contributions to feminism through her numerous novels and short stories, shedding light on the condition of Bengali women (Devi, 1964). Devi’s writings, particularly her trilogy comprising “Pratham Pratishruti” [The First Promise] (1964), “Subarnalata” (1967), and “Bakulkatha” [The Story of Bakul] (1974), articulate the struggles of

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