

Comparative Heritage Project  
mis-Reading Heritage Series

**Reading Africa 2025**

July 16 – Bi-Weekly Summer Discussion Group

[comparativeheritage.org/summer](http://comparativeheritage.org/summer)

SESSION SCHEDULE & THEMES

I. **July 16** — Gender, Diaspora, and Belonging

**Suggested Readings:**

- Mariama Bâ – *So Long a Letter* (1979)
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – *Americanah* (2013, Part I)

**Discussion Prompts:**

- How do women navigate patriarchy in postcolonial societies?
- What does migration reveal about race and self-perception?
- How does hair operate as a metaphor in *Americanah*?

➤ Mariama Bâ – *So Long a Letter* (1979)

Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979) is a poignant epistolary novel from Senegal that explores the life of Ramatoulaye, a woman grappling with the pain of her husband's polygamous marriage and the challenges faced by women in postcolonial West African society. Through her letters to a friend, the novel examines themes of female friendship, resilience, gender roles, and the quest for personal and social emancipation.

**Thesis**

In a patriarchal and postcolonial society, women's solidarity, resilience, and self-reflection become vital tools for confronting gender inequality, challenging traditional norms, and pursuing personal and social liberation.

**Argument**

The argument of *So Long a Letter* is that patriarchal traditions—especially polygamy—deeply harm women's emotional and social well-being, but through education, self-awareness, and female solidarity, women can resist these injustices. Mariama Bâ contends that true progress in postcolonial African societies requires reimagining gender roles and empowering women to assert their dignity, independence, and agency within and beyond the domestic sphere.

**Critical perspective:**

From a critical perspective, *So Long a Letter* is a foundational feminist text in African literature that critiques the intersection of gender, tradition, and postcolonial identity. Through the intimate form of a letter, Mariama Bâ gives voice to African women's inner lives, challenging the silence imposed by patriarchy. A feminist lens highlights the emotional and structural violence of polygamy, while a postcolonial critique underscores how colonial legacies reinforce gendered oppression. The novel advocates for education and female solidarity as means of social transformation, offering a nuanced, personal portrait of resistance and redefinition in modern African womanhood.

➤ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – *Americanah* (2013, Part I)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer whose fiction and non-fiction explore themes of identity, gender, colonial legacy, war, and migration. Her acclaimed works—such as *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*, and *We Should All Be Feminists*—center African experiences while challenging Western stereotypes. She uses accessible prose and complex characters to illuminate the personal dimensions of historical trauma and social injustice.

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### Thesis

To reclaim African narratives from colonial distortions, one must center African voices—especially those of women—and interrogate how power, gender, and global inequality shape identity and belonging

### Argument

Adichie argues that *representation matters*—that the “single story” told about Africa reduces a continent to stereotypes, stripping individuals of their complexity. She contends that literature and storytelling are political tools that can challenge structural inequality, critique postcolonial failure, and affirm the dignity of marginalized identities, especially African women. She also argues for *feminism as a necessary human rights framework*, grounded in lived African realities.

### Critical Perspective

From a critical perspective, Adichie’s work blends *feminist, postcolonial, and diasporic frameworks*. A feminist reading highlights her commitment to dismantling patriarchy within African and global contexts. Postcolonial critics focus on her deconstruction of colonial history, particularly in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which reclaims the Biafran War from erasure. Her diasporic narratives, especially in *Americanah*, explore the complexities of transnational identity, racism, and cultural displacement. Critics also debate her global prominence—some praise her clarity and accessibility; others critique her perceived accommodation of Western liberal expectations.

### AUTHORS’ BIOS

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (b. 1977) is a Nigerian novelist, essayist, and public intellectual. Renowned for works like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus*, and *Americanah*, she explores themes of identity, colonialism, migration, feminism, and race. Her TED Talk-turned-essay *We Should All Be Feminists* sparked global conversation on gender equality. Adichie’s writing blends lyrical storytelling with sharp political insight, making her a major voice in contemporary world literature.
- Mariama Bâ (1929–1981) was a Senegalese author and pioneering feminist. Best known for her acclaimed novel *So Long a Letter* (1979), she used fiction to critique gender inequality, polygamy, and the marginalization of women in postcolonial West Africa. A teacher by profession, Bâ advocated for women's education and empowerment. Her work remains a foundational text in African feminist literature, celebrated for its emotional depth and political urgency.