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Rethinking postcolonial feminism in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*: critical scaling of women's voices through digital platforms

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ABSTRACT

This paper reevaluates the application of postcolonial feminism in analyzing Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981), a key text in African women's literature. While postcolonial feminist theory effectively examines gendered oppression in post-colonial contexts, its use in interpreting Bâ's novel often reveals elitist, essentialist, and secular biases. The protagonist, Ramatoulaye—an educated, urban, Francophone Muslim woman—is frequently framed as emblematic of "African womanhood," sidelining diverse perspectives from rural, working-class, or faith-based communities. Such interpretations risk perpetuating the universalist tendencies postcolonial feminism initially aimed to critique. To address these limitations, the study integrates alternative feminist frameworks, including Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's decolonial gender theory, Ifi Amadiume's matriarchal complementarity, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism. These approaches emphasize negotiation, relational agency, and indigenous knowledge systems, offering a more inclusive lens for analyzing Bâ's work. Through close reading, the paper reinterprets *So Long a Letter* to highlight spiritual, communal, and plural feminist perspectives, moving beyond liberal, secular frameworks. The study also advocates for digital platforms—such as websites, AI-driven storytelling, multimedia archives, and reader-curated annotations—to amplify African women's voices and resist epistemic erasure. These tools can democratize feminist scholarship and foster participatory, transnational networks. By bridging literary analysis with digital feminist praxis, the paper proposes a pluriversal, decolonized approach to gender and knowledge production, emphasizing the digital archiving and reinterpretation of texts like Bâ's to preserve and revitalize African women's intellectual legacies.

KEYWORDS:

African women's literature, Decolonial gender theory, Digital platforms, Indigenous epistemologies, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Nego-feminism, Postcolonial feminism

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a critical rethinking of post-colonial feminist ideology, which emerged to counter the Eurocentric assumptions of Second-Wave feminism founded on the universalization of experiences of white, middle-class women in the Global North¹. Postcolonial feminists sought to highlight the socio-political and cultural specificities of women in formerly colonized nations like Senegal. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is often read as articulating an African feminist consciousness², exploring Senegalese women's struggles with Islamic traditions, French colonial legacies, polygamy, and patriarchal oppression. However, applying postcolonial feminist theory to this text requires scrutiny. This paper interrogates its limitations and proposes alternative feminist paradigms, scaled digitally, to amplify African women's voices. It argues for a plural, decolonized, and digitized feminist reading to avoid essentialism, elitism, and epistemic erasure. Postcolonial feminism has illuminated how African women's lives are shaped by gender, race, class, and empire³. Scholars have used it to analyze socio-cultural constraints in Bâ's novel, such as polygamy and colonial education, arguing it foregrounds an African feminist consciousness⁴.

Yet, a critical assessment highlights its tendency to reproduce essentialist narratives or to prioritize elite perspectives^{5,6}. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist, a Francophone, middle-class Muslim woman, is often framed as representative of African women, erasing diverse experiences¹. Oyěwùmí argues that Western gender categories distort African realities⁵, while faith-based feminists like Wadud and Mernissi challenge the secular bias of feminist theory in Muslim contexts^{7,8}. Bâ's text, critiquing patriarchal Islam through a secular lens, underscores the need for alternative epistemologies, including Islamic feminism and indigenous frameworks.

African feminist theorists offer culturally grounded models. Nnaemeka's nego-feminism emphasizes negotiation and communal ethics⁶. Oyěwùmí deconstructs gender as a colonial imposition⁵, and Amadiume recovers indigenous gender complementarity⁹. Mohanty's critique of Western feminism calls for situated knowledge¹. These

frameworks enable context-sensitive interpretations of Bâ's novel and can be digitally scaled to amplify African women's voices.

Despite these interventions, scholarship lacks focus on digitally disseminating these frameworks to counter the marginalization of African women's contributions. This study bridges literary analysis with digital feminist praxis to enhance global visibility. This study addresses postcolonial feminism's limitations and the need for inclusive engagement with African women's voices in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. It explored the following aims such as: How postcolonial feminist theory illuminates and obscures African women's experiences in the novel. It looked at the ideological and epistemological limitations of postcolonial feminism regarding class, religion, and indigenous gender systems. Also, the study looked at how alternative frameworks (nego-feminism, Islamic feminism, matriarchal complementarity, decolonial gender theories) offer context-sensitive interpretations and how these frameworks can be digitally scaled up to amplify African women's voices globally by integrating the suitable digital tools and strategies to showcase plural feminist narratives and resist epistemic erasure.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology, integrating literary analysis, feminist theory and digital humanities. A close reading of *So Long a Letter*² analyzes character development, narrative structure, and themes like marriage and faith through postcolonial feminism^{1,3,4}, nego-feminism⁶, decolonial gender theory⁵, and Islamic and indigenous epistemologies^{7,8,9}. The analysis highlights contradictions in dominant feminist readings and emphasizes context-specific frameworks.

Digital dissemination was explored by reviewing platforms like Jalada Africa and African Feminism (AF) for curating African women's literature, assessing tools like AI curation, podcasting, and social media storytelling for amplifying feminist voices and evaluating strategies like multilingual content and open-access repositories for democratizing knowledge. The primary text is *So Long a Letter*², supplemented by

feminist scholarship^{1,4,5,6,7,8,9}, digital archives, and African feminist platforms.

RESULTS

Contextualizing *So Long a Letter*: Feminism, Islam, and Postcolonial Senegal

Bâ's epistolary narrative captures Ramatoulaye's reflections on marital disillusionment, gender roles, and national identity². A critical evaluation can require us to praise her feminist consciousness, but her privileged positionality—French education, urban status—suggests Western liberal influences, aligning with postcolonial feminism's negotiation of tradition and modernity^{3,4}.

Re-assessing Postcolonial Feminism in *So Long a Letter*

Essentialism and the Fiction of a Unified African Female Subject

Postcolonial feminism risks essentializing African women. Ramatoulaye's middle-class, Francophone experience is often universalized, obscuring rural, non-French-educated, or faith-based perspectives¹. Mohanty warns against constructing "Third World women" as monolithic, re-inscribing neocolonial dynamics¹.

Elite Bias and Bourgeois Feminism

Ramatoulaye's resistance to polygamy reflects access to education and economic autonomy². Poorer women, like Binetou, are depicted as victims, ignoring their strategic agency¹⁰. Feminist theory must avoid romanticizing middle-class liberation¹⁰.

Over-Secularization and Neglect of Faith-Based Feminism

Bâ critiques patriarchal Islam through a secular lens, marginalizing faith-based reinterpretations^{2,7,8}. Islamic feminists like Mernissi and Wadud integrate faith with gender justice, offering alternative readings^{7,8}.

Westernization of Feminist Tools

The novel's focus on education and legal rights reflects colonial modernity². Oyěwùmí critiques the imposition of Western gender binaries, urging engagement with indigenous resistance like oral traditions⁵.

Lack of Collective Action

The novel emphasizes individual struggles, overlooking collective strategies like tontines². This liberal bias neglects community-based resistance¹⁰.

Alternative Feminist Frameworks

Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism

Nego-feminism emphasizes negotiation and communal ethics⁶. Ramatoulaye's quiet resistance and solidarity with co-wives reflect this relational approach^{2,6}.

Oyěwùmí's Decolonial Gender Theory

Oyěwùmí challenges gender as a colonial construct, questioning whether polygamy or motherhood are inherently oppressive⁵. This reframes Bâ's themes².

Mohanty's Critique

Mohanty's situated knowledge approach reconsiders Binetou's choices as rational within constraints¹, avoiding moral binaries².

Amadiume's Matriarchy

Amadiume's work on Igbo gender flexibility challenges Western patriarchal assumptions, reinterpreting tradition as empowering⁹.

Toward a Pluriversal Feminism

A pluriversal feminism embraces multiple epistemologies, recognizing tensions between Islam, class, and tradition in Bâ's novel². It engages local agency and spiritual worldviews^{5,6,7,8,9}.

Digital Dissemination and Integration

The integration of digital platforms into the reinterpretation of *So Long a Letter* emerges as a transformative strategy for amplifying marginalized African women's voices and operationalizing pluriversal feminism. While postcolonial feminist readings often remain confined to academic circles, digital tools enable participatory, transnational dissemination that counters elitism, essentialism, and secular biases. Platforms such as Jalada Africa—a Pan-African writers' collective and digital publisher—curate anthologies, translations, and multimedia content, making texts like Bâ's accessible in multilingual formats and fostering reader engagement through open-access repositories. Similarly, AfricanFeminism.com (AF), a collaborative

pan-African feminist blogging platform, aggregates diverse voices from across the continent, documenting lived experiences and alternative epistemologies in real time. These platforms align with nego-feminism's emphasis on negotiation and communal ethics by creating community-curated spaces where readers contribute annotations, personal responses, or oral histories inspired by Ramatoulaye's epistolary form. For instance, user-generated "letters of resistance" could extend Bâ's narrative, incorporating faith-based reinterpretations (drawing on Wadud and Mernissi) or decolonial perspectives (Oyèwùmí's critique of imposed gender binaries). Brittle Paper, a leading online hub for African literary culture, exemplifies this by archiving feminist writings, podcasts, and visual storytelling, highlighting marginalized narratives from rural or working-class women often sidelined in elite interpretations of the novel.

AI-driven tools further enhance scaling: natural language processing can generate multilingual translations or personalized annotations, while multimedia archives (podcasts, videos) revitalize indigenous oral traditions, echoing Amadiume's matriarchal complementarity. Open-access repositories democratize knowledge, resisting epistemic erasure by preserving plural readings—e.g., Islamic feminist lenses on polygamy or communal solidarity in tontines. Hashtags like #MyFeministLetter or virtual book clubs foster transnational networks, allowing global readers to engage with Bâ's themes contextually.

This digital praxis integrates seamlessly with the study's close reading: Ramatoulaye's individual letter-writing evolves into collective digital epistles, shifting from liberal isolation to relational agency. By evaluating platforms like Jalada and AF, the findings reveal digital dissemination not as supplementary but as essential for pluriversal feminism—bridging literary analysis with activist networks and ensuring African women's intellectual legacies endure beyond print.

Integration and Impact: From Literary Analysis to Digital Feminist Praxis

The study's interdisciplinary methodology reveals that digital scaling amplifies the alternative frameworks' inclusivity. Nego-feminism thrives in interactive forums;

decolonial theory challenges algorithmic biases through curated indigenous content; and Mohanty's situated knowledge informs reader-curated annotations. Ultimately, these tools resist the universalization critiqued in postcolonial feminism, fostering a decolonized, participatory archive that honors diverse African women's voices in *So Long a Letter* and beyond.

DISCUSSION

Digital platforms can amplify African women's voices through curated websites hosting annotated texts, multilingual versions, and multimedia content like podcasts and oral histories². These platforms resist essentialism by showcasing diverse interpretations (nego-feminist, Islamic, matriarchal)^{5,6,7,8,9}. Open-access publishing and mobile-friendly interfaces democratize access, while AI-driven tools enhance personalized discovery. Community-curated spaces allow women to share their own narratives, reclaiming feminist knowledge production. Digital archives preserve indigenous epistemologies, and pan-African networks foster solidarity through virtual events and campaigns like #MyFeministLetter.

Proposed Website Sections

Letters of Resistance: Publish responses to *So Long a Letter*.

Theory Lab: Explain nego-feminism, decolonial, and Islamic feminism^{5,6,7,8,9}.

Voices of the Margins: Highlight oral stories and co-wife solidarity.

Faith & Feminism: Archive faith-based empowerment narratives^{7,8}.

Reader-Writer Room: Enable reader contributions.

Digital Archive: Collect feminist texts and performances.

Events: Promote virtual book clubs and webinars.

The critical scaling of African women's voices through digital platforms represents a paradigm shift from elite, print-bound scholarship to participatory, transnational feminist praxis. Existing platforms demonstrate this potential: Jalada Africa, as a Pan-African writers' collective and digital publisher, has pioneered multilingual anthologies and translation projects (e.g., translating Ngūgĩwa Thiong'o's work into over 70 African

languages), enabling texts like Bâ's to reach diverse linguistic communities and counter the Francophone elitism often critiqued in postcolonial readings. Similarly, AfricanFeminism.com (AF), a collaborative pan-African blogging platform curated by feminists across the continent, aggregates lived experiences, oral histories, and faith-based narratives, embodying Nnaemeka's nego-feminism through open submissions and communal dialogue. Brittle Paper, a leading online hub for African literary culture, archives podcasts, reviews, and multimedia content, highlighting marginalized voices (e.g., queer and rural feminist perspectives) and facilitating global discussions on works like *So Long a Letter*.

These platforms can scale pluriversal feminism by resisting essentialism: user-curated annotations and reader responses can transform Ramatoulaye's solitary epistle into collective "letters of resistance," incorporating Oyèwùmí's decolonial critiques of gender binaries or Wadud's Islamic feminist reinterpretations of polygamy and spiritual agency. AI-driven tools can further enhance integration—natural language processing for multilingual translations, personalized content recommendations, or bias-detection in annotations—while multimedia (podcasts, videos) revitalize indigenous oral traditions, aligning with Amadiume's matriarchal complementarity. Hashtags like #MyFeministLetter or virtual webinars foster transnational solidarity, extending Bâ's themes of communal ethics (e.g., tontines) into digital networks. Critically, scaling involves integration at multiple levels: (1) epistemological, by prioritizing indigenous and faith-based knowledge over secular biases; (2) participatory, through open-access repositories and community curation to democratize knowledge production; and (3) structural, via mobile-friendly interfaces to bridge urban-rural divides. This counters epistemic erasure, as Mohanty's situated knowledge informs reader-contributed narratives that reframe characters like Binetou as agents within constraints.

However, critical scaling must confront persistent barriers. Digital divides—limited internet access, algorithmic biases favoring Global North content, and platform moderation policies that silence marginalized voices—risk reproducing the elitism critiqued in postcolonial feminism. In 2025, initiatives like Pollicy's

Afro-feminist data principles and Africa No Filter's AI bias-busting tools address these by promoting inclusive datasets and ethical AI for nuanced African storytelling. Proposed strategies include affirmative funding for grassroots digital literacy, community-driven AI curation to mitigate biases, and hybrid (online-offline) models blending virtual events with local oral archives. The proposed website sections—Letters of Resistance, Theory Lab, Voices of the Margins, Faith & Feminism, Reader-Writer Room, Digital Archive, and Events—operationalize this scaling. Modeled on Jalada's anthologies and AF's collaborative ethos, they integrate alternative frameworks interactively: e.g., AI-assisted annotations linking Ramatoulaye's reflections to nego-feminist negotiation or decolonial gender flexibility. By fostering pan-African networks and open-access multilingual content, such a platform honors Bâ's legacy, transforming individual struggles into collective, decolonized resistance.

Ultimately, digital dissemination can scale up women's voices not as a technological add-on but as a decolonial imperative, bridging literary analysis with activist praxis to envision a pluriversal feminism rooted in African epistemologies.

CONCLUSION

So Long a Letter highlights gendered struggles in postcolonial Africa². Postcolonial feminism reveals blind spots in elite, secular paradigms^{1,3,4}. Alternative frameworks—nego-feminism, decolonial theory, matriarchal complementarity, and Mohanty's critique—offer richer readings^{1,5,6,9}. A decolonized, pluriversal feminism, scaled through digital platforms, honours African women's voices, resisting epistemic erasure. *So Long a Letter* highlights gendered struggles in postcolonial Africa². Postcolonial feminism reveals blind spots in elite, secular paradigms^{1,3,4}. Alternative frameworks—nego-feminism, decolonial theory, matriarchal complementarity, and Mohanty's critique—offer richer, more context-sensitive readings^{1,5,6,9}. A decolonized, pluriversal feminism, scaled through digital platforms, honours African women's diverse voices, resisting epistemic erasure and fostering transnational solidarity. In the contemporary digital landscape of 2025, platforms such as Jalada Africa continue to lead with innovative multilingual

anthologies and translation projects, including their ongoing "Resistance" anthology and tributes to linguistic decolonization. AfricanFeminism.com actively combats gendered disinformation and builds feminist futures through panels at forums like FIFAfrica. Brittle Paper sustains vibrant curation of African literary culture via anthologies, prizes, and community submissions. These initiatives exemplify the critical scaling envisioned in this study: transforming Ramatoulaye's epistolary solitude into collective digital narratives that integrate nego-feminist negotiation, Islamic and faith-based reinterpretations, and decolonial gender perspectives. By leveraging AI-assisted translations, multimedia archives, community-curated annotations, and open-access repositories, such platforms democratize knowledge, bridge linguistic and geographic divides, and amplify marginalized voices—from rural co-wives to queer and working-class feminists—often obscured in traditional scholarship.

Ultimately, this pluriversal approach not only revitalizes Bâ's intellectual legacy but also contributes to broader Afro-feminist digital praxis, as seen in ongoing efforts like FEMNET's campaigns against gender-based violence and Pollicy's work toward an equitable feminist internet. By prioritizing indigenous epistemologies, relational agency, and participatory tools, digital dissemination ensures that African women's voices are not merely preserved but actively shape global feminist discourses, paving the way for inclusive, resilient, and transformative gender justice in postcolonial contexts and beyond.

These contemporary initiatives exemplify the critical scaling envisioned in this study: transforming Ramatoulaye's epistolary solitude into collective digital narratives that integrate nego-feminist negotiation, Islamic and faith-based reinterpretations, and decolonial gender perspectives. In 2025, Jalada Africa advances linguistic decolonization through its "Resistance" anthology (published in the first quarter) and multilingual translation projects, while paying tribute to literary giants like Ngũgĩwa Thiong'o. AfricanFeminism.com fosters feminist futures by addressing gendered disinformation, hosting panels on digital spaces for activism, and documenting diverse struggles across the continent. Brittle Paper sustains

vibrant curation with calls for festive and children's anthologies, spotlighting diasporic and young readers' voices in African literature. By leveraging AI-assisted translations, multimedia archives, community-curated annotations, and open-access repositories, such platforms democratize knowledge, bridge linguistic and geographic divides, and amplify marginalized voices—from rural co-wives to queer and working-class feminists—often obscured in traditional scholarship. Parallel efforts, including FEMNET's campaigns confronting tech-facilitated gender-based violence and bodily autonomy violations, alongside Pollicy's Afro-feminist data governance initiatives and 2025 Fellowship program nurturing civic tech leaders, underscore the imperative for equitable digital ecosystems rooted in feminist principles.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

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