



Educating Women, Sustaining Societies: Gender, Inclusive Education, and Development in Mariama Ba’s So Long A Letter and Buchi Emecheta’s the Joys of Motherhood

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The study examines the intersections of gender, inclusive education, and sustainable development in Mariama Ba’s So Long a Letter and Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood. Drawing on feminist theory, African Womanism, and Intersectionality, the study comparatively explores how the two novels critique patriarchal structures that restrict women’s educational access, economic participation, emotional fulfillment, and social agency within postcolonial African societies. Using a qualitative textual and comparative methodology, the article analyzes representations of marriage, motherhood, female labour, literacy, and socio – economic inequality in both Francophone and Anglophone African contexts. The study reveals that patriarchy functions through cultural, religious, and economic structures that normalize women’s sacrifice while limiting their autonomy and opportunities for advancement. While Mariama Ba foregrounds literacy and critical consciousness as instruments of female empowerment and resistance, Buchi Emecheta emphasizes the harsh realities of poverty, domestic labour, and maternal burden confronting economically vulnerable women. The analysis further demonstrates that women remain central to family survival and social stability despite persistent marginalization and emotional neglect. The present study argues that sustainable societal transformation in postcolonial Africa is inseparable from women’s educational empowerment, socio – economic inclusion, and gender equality. By linking African feminist literary discourse with Sustainable Development Goals relating to inclusive education, reduced inequalities, and women’s empowerment, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on literature, development, and social transformation in African societies.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Womanism, Intersectionality, Inclusive Education, Sustainable Development, African Literature.

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Introduction

African women’s writing has consistently functioned as a critical intellectual space for interrogating gender inequality, cultural

oppression, social exclusion, and the developmental challenges confronting postcolonial African societies. Across Francophone and Anglophone literary traditions,



African female writers foreground the lived experiences of women within patriarchal structures that restrict educational access, economic participation, emotional fulfillment, and social recognition. Beyond exposing women's marginalization, these literary works increasingly project female education, resilience, and socio – economic inclusion as indispensable to sustainable societal transformation. Consequently, contemporary African feminist literature has become deeply interconnected with broader discourse on gender justice, inclusive development, and Sustainable Development Goals relating to education, equality, and reduced social inequalities.

Within this tradition, *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* offer profound insights into the intersections of gender, education, motherhood, labour, and social development within postcolonial African societies. Through the experiences of the Senegalese Ramatoulaye and the Nigerian Nnu Ego, Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta critically interrogate patriarchal systems that define women primarily through marriage, domesticity, and reproductive labour while limiting their intellectual and socio – economic advancement. Although the novel emerges from different linguistic and socio – cultural contexts, they converge in their critique of structures that sustain women's marginalization and dependency.

In *So Long a Letter*, Ba foregrounds literacy and intellectual consciousness as instruments of female empowerment and resistant against patriarchal silencing. Characters such as Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Daba demonstrate varying forms of intellectual agency, emotional resilience, and resistance to oppressive marital traditions. Conversely, *The Joys of Motherhood* emphasizes the material realities of poverty, domestic labour, motherhood and economic deprivation confronting women within colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. Through Nnu Ego's struggles, Emecheta reveals how the denial of educational and economic opportunities reinforces women's vulnerability, dependency, and emotional exhaustion within patriarchal society.

Existing scholarship on the two novels has largely concentrated on feminism, patriarchy, motherhood, and female oppression. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to the intersection between gender – inclusive education, sustainable development, African Womanist consciousness, and male privilege, patriarchal institutions and gender inequality perspectives within the selected texts. This study, therefore, extends existing scholarship by examining how the novels collectively position women's educational empowerment and socio – economic inclusion as essential foundations for sustainable societal transformation in postcolonial Africa.

Literature Review

African women's literature has continued to attend critical scholarly attention for its sustained engagement with patriarchy, motherhood, female agency, education, and socio – economic inequality within postcolonial African societies. Literary texts by African women writers increasingly function not only as cultural representation but also as socio – political interventions that interrogate structures limiting women's participation in social and economic development. Within this tradition, *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* remain foundational texts in African feminist literary discourse because of their exploration of gender oppression, motherhood, education, marriage, labour, and women's negotiation of patriarchal systems.

Early African feminist critics such as Helen Chukwuima argue that African women's writing foregrounds "voices and choices" as essential dimensions of female subjectivity and resistance. According to her, African women writers challenge systems that silence women while simultaneously reconstructing spaces for female agency and self – definition. This argument is particularly relevant to *So Long a Letter*, where Ramatoulaye's epistolary narration becomes both a personal reflection and an intellectual critique of patriarchal practices such as polygamy and emotional abandonment. In the same vein, Ogunديpe – Leslie maintains that

African women's literature performs a transformative social function which interrogates oppressive traditions while advocating more equitable gender relations. Her argument positions African women's texts as instrument of social criticism rather than merely domestic narratives. This perspective resonates with *The Joys of Motherhood*, where Emecheta critiques the patriarchal glorification of motherhood by exposing the emotional and economic burdens imposed on women through reproductive labour.

However, African feminist scholarship has increasingly questioned the adequacy of Western feminist paradigms for interpreting African women's realities. While liberal and radical feminist frameworks emphasize patriarchy and gender oppression, African scholars argue that African women's experiences are deeply shaped by communal obligations, cultural negotiation, and postcolonial socio – economic realities. This intellectual concern contributed to the emergence of African Womanism as a culturally grounded alternative framework. Mary Kolawole's variant of African Womanism is particularly relevant in this regard because it emphasizes negotiation, complementarity, communal continuity, cultural embeddedness, self – assertion rather than antagonistic gender confrontation (Kolawole 45 – 46). Kolawole argues that African women often negotiate resistance within communal systems instead of pursuing absolute separation from men or indigeneous traditions (Kolawole 112). Her theoretical position aligns closely with the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Nnu Ego, whose struggles occur within deeply communal societies where motherhood, marriage, and family continuity remain culturally valued despite their oppressive dimensions.

Recent scholarship has reinforced the relevance of Womanism in African literary studies. Helen Bailey's reassessment of the Womanist – Feminist continuum contends that African women's resistance frequently manifests through strategic negotiation, emotional resilience, and communal survival rather than overt rebellion (Bailey 31 – 45). Bailey's position is particularly applicable to *So Long a*

Letter, where Ramatoulaye resists patriarchal betrayal not through radical rejection of society but through literacy, reflection, and moral independence. Similarly, Rowland Amaefula argues that African feminism must be interpreted within indigeneous African socio – cultural contexts rather than through universal Western feminist assumptions (Amaefula 48). His intervention strengthens the theoretical appropriateness of Womanism for analyzing African women's experiences in the selected novels. But, some scholars contend that Womanism alone may not sufficiently explain the structural complexities shaping women's oppression in postcolonial African societies. This concern has led to the increasing application of intersectionality in African literary criticism. Originally developed by Crenshaw, intersectionality explains how overlapping systems such as gender, class, economic inequality, colonial history, and educational exclusion interact to shape women's level experiences (42 – 45). Rather than viewing patriarchy as a singular structure, intersectionality reveals how women experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization simultaneously.

Recent African – centred scholarship has significantly expanded intersectional analysis within literary and socio – cultural studies. Ouma and his colleagues argue that African social realities must be interpreted through interconnected systems of stratification involving gender economic inequality and class hierarchy. Their study demonstrates that structural inequalities affecting African women cannot be adequately understood through gender alone (240 – 242). This perspective is highly relevant to *The Joys of Motherhood*, where Nnu Ego's suffering emerges not only from patriarchy but also from poverty, colonial economic structures, and financial dependency. So also Ikapi's intersectional analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Efuru* demonstrates that colonialism, socio – economic deprivation, and patriarchal ideology collectively shape women's oppression in African societies (Ikapi 77 – 80). His argument strengthens contemporary African feminist criticism by showing that women's marginalization is multidimensional rather than

singular. This framework is particularly useful for the present study because it allows for a broader understanding of how educational exclusion, economic vulnerability, and patriarchal expectations intersect in both selected novels.

The question of education has become increasingly central within African feminist scholarship. Freire positions education as a process of liberation through which marginalized groups acquire critical consciousness and the capacity to challenge oppressive structures. This perspective illustrates the transformative role of education in Ba's representation of women such as Ramatoulaye and Aissatou Waweru, Mwangi, and Mwilua, who contend that unequal access to education remains one of the most significant mechanisms sustaining women's marginalization in African societies. Their comparative study demonstrates that literacy and formal education frequently function as instruments of empowerment and critical consciousness within African women's fiction (65 – 72). This position strongly supports interpretations of *So Long a Letter*, where Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's educational backgrounds enable them to interrogate oppressive traditions and assert forms of intellectual agency unavailable to less educated women. However, scholars differ regarding the extent to which education guarantees liberation. Elaine Unterhalter argues that educational inclusion must be connected to broader systems of social and economic justice because literacy alone cannot dismantle structural inequality. Her position complicates simplistic empowerment narratives by emphasizing the relationship between education, economic participation, and social transformation. Such tensions are reflected in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where women's sacrifices remain materially unrewarded despite their central contribution to family survival. She further argues that gender – inclusive education is fundamental to achieving social justice because it expands opportunities, enhances agency, and challenges structural inequalities that perpetuate women's marginalization. Her position is particularly relevant to this study's examination of education as a catalyst for social transformation in African

societies.

Motherhood and women's labour constitute another major concern in existing scholarship. Ogbuide – Ihama argues that *The Joys of Motherhood* exposes the contradictions of patriarchal motherhood by portraying maternal sacrifice as culturally celebrated yet economically exploitative (Ihama 77). Also, Ereke and Njoku contend that patriarchal marriage systems depend heavily on women's emotional and domestic labour while simultaneously limiting women's autonomy and recognition. These scholars collectively reinterpret motherhood not as fulfillment alone but also as a site of exhaustion, sacrifice, and socio – economic inequality (Ereke and Njoku 9 – 16). Montle and Mogoboya, however, offer a more nuanced perspective by arguing that African women's literature frequently presents motherhood ambivalently. While acknowledging patriarchal exploitation, they also recognise motherhood as culturally meaningful within African communal systems (Montle and Mogoboya 53 – 66). Their argument aligns closely with womanist perspectives that seek transformation through negotiation rather than total rejection of family structures. However, despite the richness of existing scholarship explored, several critical gaps remain. First, most studies examine the two primary texts: *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* independently rather than comparatively, thereby limiting broader insights into shared postcolonial gender realities across Francophone and Anglophone African contexts. Second, although numerous scholars (Amaefula; Crenshaw; Kolawole; Nnaemeka; Ouma et al.) discuss patriarchy, motherhood, education, and female agency, limited attention has been paid to the relationship between these concerns and sustainable development discourse.

Moreover, while recent studies increasingly engage womanism and intersectionality, few integrate their frameworks within a unified comparative analysis of gender, inclusive education, economic empowerment, and social inequality. Existing scholarship also tends to foreground oppression more heavily than the developmental implications of women's

empowerment for societal transformation. It is within these scholarly and theoretical gaps that the present study is situated. By comparatively examining *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* through the combined lenses of Mary Kolawole's African womanism, feminist theory and intersectionality, this study extends African feminist literary criticism into the domain of sustainable development discourse. Since the United Nations identifies quality education and gender equality as essential components of sustainable development and social transformation, the study argues that African women's literature functions as a developmental intervention that interrogates educational exclusion, gender inequality, economic marginalization, and structural injustice while simultaneously envisioning possibilities for social transformation. Through this approach, the study contributes to ongoing academic discourse surrounding Sustainable Development Goals 4,5,8, and 10 within African literary studies.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on feminist theory, African Womanism, particularly Mary Kolawole's variant of Womanism, and Intersectionality as complementary frameworks for examining gender, education, and social transformation in *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of motherhood*. The combined application of these theories provides a multidimensional understanding of how patriarchy operates through cultural, religious, educational, and socio – economic structures within postcolonial African societies.

Feminist theory offers the foundational framework for interrogating gender inequality, patriarchal domination, and the systematic marginalization of women within social institutions such as marriage, education, religion, and labour. The theory is particularly relevant to the selected novels because both texts expose how patriarchal societies restrict women's autonomy, normalize female sacrifice, and privilege male advancement at the expense of women's intellectual and socio – economic

development. Through feminist criticism, the study examines the unequal distribution of power, opportunities, and social recognition within the lives of the female protagonists.

However, because African women's experiences are shaped not only by gender oppression but also by communal responsibilities, cultural realities, motherhood, and survival within postcolonial conditions, the study further adopts Mary Kolawole's African Womanism unlike radical feminist positions that sometimes foreground confrontation between men and women, Kolawole's Womanism emphasizes negotiation, resilience, family continuity, community balance, and female survival within African socio – cultural contexts. The framework is therefore useful for interpreting the endurance, emotional resilience, maternal commitment, and survival strategies demonstrated by characters such as Ramatoulaye and Nnu Ego, as well as the self – assertion and autonomy represented by Aissatou. Daba, and Adaku.

The study also employs Intersectionality to explain how women's oppression in the selected novels emerges through interconnected structures of gender, class, education, religion, economic deprivation, and cultural expectations. Intersectionality enables the analysis to move beyond a singular understanding of patriarchy by demonstrating how poverty, illiteracy, motherhood, colonial influence, and socio – economic inequality collectively shape women's experiences differently within Francophone and Anglophone African societies. Through this framework, the study highlights the varying forms of privilege, vulnerability, and resistance represented in the novels.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a coherent framework for examining how the selected novels connect women's educational agency to broader questions of sustainable development and social transformation in postcolonial Africa. The theories, therefore, reinforce the study's argument that educating and empowering women remains essential to achieving equitable and sustainable societies.

Literature and Sustainable Development in Africa (SDGs)

Current African literary criticism increasingly recognizes literature as an important medium for interrogating social inequality, gender exclusion, and development challenges within postcolonial societies. Beyond aesthetic representation, African women's writing frequently engages broader socio – economic concerns relating to education, labour, poverty, and social justice. In this regard, literary texts function as critical developmental discourses capable of reflecting and challenging structures that hinder equitable societal progress. This study aligns particularly with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, 8, and 10, which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education, gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequalities. Through their portrayals of women's educational exclusion, unpaid labour, economic dependency, and social marginalization, *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* interrogate structural conditions that undermine sustainable development in African societies.

The two novels further demonstrate that women's empowerment through education, economic participation, and social recognition is fundamental to national transformation, and societal stability. Consequently, the novels under consideration extend beyond feminist protest narratives to function as literary interventions advocating gender – inclusive development and social equity in postcolonial Africa.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on textual analysis of *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. The analysis focuses on themes of patriarchy, education, motherhood, labour, female agency, and socio – economic inequality within postcolonial African societies. Primary data are drawn from the selected novels, while secondary materials include scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays relevant to African feminist literary criticism and sustainable development discourse.

The study employs feminist theory, African Womanism, and intersectionality as complementary analytical lenses for interpreting the experiences of women represented in the primary texts. Through close reading and comparative textual interpretation, the research examines how the fictional works engage issues relating to gender inequality, inclusive education, and sustainable development, particularly in relation to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, 8, and 10. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it enables an in – depth exploration of literary representation, socio – cultural realities, and ideological meanings embedded within the primary texts.

Synopsis of *So Long a Letter*

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is an epistolary novel that narrates the experiences of Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese widow reflecting on her marriage, motherhood, friendship and the challenges of patriarchy within postcolonial African society. Through a series of letters addressed to her friend Aissatou, Ramatoulaye recounts the emotional pain caused by her husband Modou Fall's decision to marry a much younger woman, Binetou, despite years of marital sacrifice and companionship. The novel explores themes of polygamy, female education, religion, betrayal and women's resilience while foregrounding literacy and intellectual consciousness as tools of female empowerment and social transformation.

Synopsis of *the Joys of Motherhood*

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* chronicles the struggles of Nnu Ego, a Nigerian woman whose life is shaped by motherhood, poverty, and patriarchal expectations within colonial and postcolonial Lagos. After the failure of her first marriage due to childlessness, Nnu Ego marries Nnaife and devotes herself entirely to raising her children under severe economic hardship and emotional neglect. Despite her sacrifices, she receives little recognition or fulfillment, as motherhood

becomes a burden marked by unpaid labour, survival struggles, and social inequality. The novel critiques patriarchal systems that exploit women's reproductive and domestic roles while denying them autonomy, education, and economic security.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Patriarchy, Education, and Female Agency

So *Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* interrogate patriarchal structures that marginalize women through marriage, religion, motherhood, and unequal educational opportunities within postcolonial African societies. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba exposes the emotional and psychological consequences of patriarchal marriage through Ramatoulaye's experience after Modou Fall abandons his family for the younger Binetou (*So Long a Letter* 52 – 55). Although Islamic principles advocate fairness within polygamous unions, Modou's conduct reveals how patriarchal privilege often overrides religious ideals. Similarly, *The Joys of Motherhood* portrays Nnu Ego's worth as largely defined by marriage and reproduction, exposing a society that measures female value through motherhood and domestic sacrifice (*The Joys of Motherhood* 186 – 188).

Both novels further demonstrate how patriarchal societies restrict women's educational and social economic advancement. In *So Long a Letter*, Ba foregrounds literacy and intellectual exposure as instruments of resistance and social mobility. Through the correspondence between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, the novel critiques the silencing of women while presenting education as a pathway to self – definition, economic independence, and emotional empowerment (*So Long a Letter* 15, 61). Aissatou's rejection of polygamous humiliation and her professional success illustrate the liberating power of education, while Daba represents a younger generation of African women questioning patriarchal traditions and unequal marital structures (*So Long a Letter* 31, 39, 71).

Conversely, *The Joys of Motherhood* reveals the vulnerability of uneducated women within patriarchal and economically deprived societies. Nnu Ego remains trapped within circles of poverty, domestic labour, and emotional neglect because of limited educational opportunities and economic dependency (*The Joys of Motherhood* 169 - 190). Emecheta further exposes gender inequality through the preferential education given to male children, while girls are prepared primarily for domestic and commercial survival. Adaku's decision to educate her daughters and reject patriarchal limitations reflects resistance against structures that perpetuate women's marginalization and dependency (*The Joys of Motherhood* 169).

Viewed collectively, the novels reveal that women's exclusion from education, economic participation, and social decision – making perpetuates poverty and inequality. Through feminist theory, African Womanism, and Intersectionality, the texts affirm that sustainable societal development depends significantly on women's educational empowerment, socio – economic inclusion, and intellectual agency.

Male Privilege, Patriarchal Institutions and Gender Inequality

Although *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* primarily foreground women's experiences, the male characters play significant roles in sustaining the patriarchal systems that shape the lives of the female protagonists. Through Modou Fall, Mawdo Ba, and Nnaife, the novelists expose how male privilege operates within marriage, family, and society to reinforce women's subordination and dependency.

In *So Long a Letter*, Modou Fall embodies patriarchal entitlement through his decision to abandon Ramatoulaye and their children for the younger Binetou. His actions reveal how social and cultural structures often permit men to pursue personal desires without considering their responsibilities to their families. Although his marriage to Binetou is socially sanctioned, the emotional and economic consequences are borne primarily by the wife and her children (*So Long*

a Letter 53). Through Modou, Ba also critiques a patriarchal system that privileges male authority while disregarding women's emotional well-being and domestic contributions. Similarly, Mawdo Ba illustrates the tension between personal conviction and patriarchal conformity. Despite his affection for Aissatou, he succumbs to family pressure and enters a second marriage in order to satisfy cultural expectations regarding social status and lineage. His inability to resist these pressures demonstrates how patriarchal traditions are often reduced not only through individual choices but also through communal and familial institutions. The consequences of his decision ultimately lead to the dissolution of his marriage and the loss of a meaningful partnership.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnaife represents another dimension of patriarchy shaped by colonial and economic realities. Although he struggles with poverty and limited opportunities, he nevertheless benefits from cultural norms that position men as heads of households and women as providers of domestic labour and childcare. Nnu Ego bears the burden of sustaining the family through relentless sacrifice, while Nnaife frequently relies on her labour and endurance. The novelist therefore demonstrates how patriarchal privilege can persist even among economically disadvantaged men.

From an intersectional perspective, these male characters are not presented simply as villains but as participants in broader social systems that normalize gender inequality. Their actions reveal the ways in which cultural traditions, social expectations, and institutional structures reinforce male authority while limiting women's opportunities for self-actualization. Collectively, Modou Fall, Mawdo Ba, and Nnaife exemplify the structural nature of patriarchy and underscore the necessity of gender-inclusive social transformation for sustainable development in postcolonial African societies.

Female Resilience, Womanist Consciousness, and Social Transformation

Despite betrayal, poverty, and emotional neglect, the female protagonists in both novels demonstrate remarkable resilience and survival instincts within oppressive patriarchal structures. Ramatoulaye remains devoted to her children's welfare and refuses to abandon her matrimonial home despite social pressure (*So Long* 72, 75), while Daba challenges patriarchal injustice through her opposition to unequal inheritance practices and oppressive marital traditions (*So Long a Letter* 10). Likewise, Aissatou rejects emotional humiliation and embraces education and professional advancement as instruments of self-retrieval and autonomy. By the same token, Nnu Ego struggles against poverty, motherhood, and emotional deprivation with remarkable endurance and maternal commitment despite limited support from her husband. Although constrained by patriarchal expectations and economic hardship, she remains determined to secure a better future for her children through sacrifice and resilience (*The Joys of Motherhood* 184 – 186).

The female characters collectively embody key principles of Mary Kolawole's African Womanism, particularly resilience, communal responsibility, family continuity, self-assertion and female survival. While Daba and Aissatou challenge patriarchal restrictions through education and intellectual confidence, Ramatoulaye and Nnu Ego reflect the womanist emphasis on endurance and communal stability. Their experiences demonstrate women's centrality to family survival and societal transformation within postcolonial African societies. In the same way, both novels also present alternative models of female agency through characters such as Aissatou and Adaku. Unlike women who remain constrained by patriarchal expectations, these characters actively pursue autonomy and economic self-sufficiency. Their experiences suggest that resistance may take different forms, ranging from educational advancement and professional achievement to entrepreneurial initiative and financial independence.

Tradition, Modernity, and Sustainable Development

Both novels explore the tensions between traditional African values and postcolonial modernity. In *So Long a Letter*, Ba critiques patriarchal traditions that normalize male privilege and female displacement, particularly through older female figures who reinforce oppressive cultural system (*So Long a Letter* 29 – 30). The novel presents differing female responses to patriarchy through Ramatoulaye, who values family continuity despite betrayal; Daba, who questions female tolerance within marriage; and Aissatou, who rejects polygamy and embraces independence. In like manner, *The Joys of Motherhood* portrays the disruptive effects of urbanization and colonial modernity on traditional family structures. Nnu Ego struggles with poverty, domestic labour, and emotional exhaustion within an urban environment that weakens communal support systems and intensifies women's vulnerability. Taken together, both novels critique oppressive tradition while cautioning uncritical imitation of Western modernity. The texts ultimately advocate inclusive social structures that recognise women's rights, reward their labour, and provide equal educational opportunities as essential foundations for sustainable development in postcolonial Africa (*The Joys of Motherhood*).

The developmental implications of the selected novels became particular evident when examined through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* predate the adoption of the SDGs, both texts engage issues that resonate strongly with contemporary global concerns regarding quality education, gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequalities. Through their portrayals of women's experiences, the novels demonstrate that sustainable development cannot be achieved where half of the population remains socially, educationally, and economically marginalized.

The significance of education, corresponding to SDG 4 (Quality Education), is especially pronounced in *So Long a Letter*. Ba presents literacy and formal education as

transformative forces that enable women to challenge oppressive structures and participate more fully in social life. Characters such as Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Daba demonstrate how education fosters critical consciousness, self – confidence, and socio – economic mobility. The novel suggests that educational empowerment expands women's opportunities beyond traditional domestic roles and equips them to contribute meaningfully to societal development. *The Joys of Motherhood*, on the other hand, illustrates the developmental consequences of unequal educational access. The limited educational opportunities available to women such as Nnu Ego and the curtailed aspirations of female children reveal how gendered inequalities in schooling restrict social mobility and perpetuate cycles of dependence and poverty.

The novels also speak directly to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) through their sustained critique of patriarchal structures that privilege male authority and constrain female autonomy. In both texts, women encounter systemic barriers within marriage, family relations, inheritance systems, and social expectations. However, the novels equally foreground female resistance and self – assertion, demonstrating the necessity of gender – inclusive social arrangements for sustainable development. Characters such as Aissatou, Adaku, and Daba challenge assumptions about women's subordinate status and illustrate the positive social outcomes associated with gender female autonomy and participation. The texts therefore suggest that development is not merely an economic process but also a question of social justice and equitable access to opportunities.

The concerns of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) are equally relevant to the experiences of women in the selected novels. Both Ba and Emecheta reveal the extents to which women's labour sustains families and communities while remaining undervalued or unrecognized. Nnu Ego's relentless domestic and commercial labour contributes significantly to her family's survival, yet she receives little economic security or social reward in return. Similarly, the responsibilities borne by women in

So Long a Letter expose the gendered distribution of labour within patriarchal societies. Through these representations, the novels challenge social systems that benefit from women's work while denying them equal access to economic resources, professional advancement, and decision – making power.

In addition, the novels illuminate the objectives of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by exposing the interconnected inequalities produced by gender, class, education, and economic status. An intersectional reading reveals that women's experiences of marginalization are shaped not only by patriarchy but also by broader structures of social and economic inequality. Nnu Ego's vulnerability, for instance, is intensified by poverty and limited educational opportunities while Aissatou's ability to reconstruct her life is facilitated by her educational background and professional competence. The texts therefore underscore the importance of addressing multiple forms of exclusion simultaneously in order to create more equitable and sustainable societies.

Ultimately, *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* advance a developmental vision that places women at the centre of social transformation. The novels demonstrate that educational empowerment, economic inclusion, and gender equality are not peripheral concerns but essential conditions for sustainable development. By foregrounding women's contributions, aspirations, and struggles, Ba and Emecheta anticipate contemporary development discourses that recognize the empowerment of women as a prerequisite for building inclusive, equitable, and prosperous societies.

Comparative Francophone and Anglophone Feminist Consciousness

So Long a Letter and *The Joys of Motherhood* reflect both convergences and divergences in Francophone and Anglophone feminist consciousness within postcolonial African literature. Mariama Ba foregrounds emotional introspection, literacy, and intellectual resistance through the reflective voice of

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, whose responses to patriarchy are shaped by education, religious negotiation, and emotional self – awareness within Senegalese Muslim society. Buchi Emecheta, on the other hand, emphasizes maternal survival, economic hardship, and the burdens of motherhood within colonial and postcolonial: Nigerian society, where women struggle against poverty, domestic labour, and social marginalization.

Despite these contextual differences, both writers' critique patriarchal structures that deny women emotional fulfillment, educational opportunities, and socio – economic recognition. While Ba's feminist consciousness is expressed through reflective negotiation and intellectual self – assertion, Emecheta's emerges through women's resilience, survival instincts, and resistance to maternal oppression. Viewed collectively, the two novels project African feminist consciousness as a struggle for dignity, inclusion, and social transformation within societies structured by gender inequality. Both novels demonstrate that sustainable African development is inseparable from women's educational empowerment, economic recognition, narrative agency, and social inclusion because women function as the emotional, economic, and cultural foundation of postcolonial African societies

Discussion of Findings

The findings of both novels demonstrate that patriarchal structures systematically limit women's emotional autonomy, educational advancement, economic participation, and social recognition despite women's central contributions to family and societal survival. The study further establishes that education functions as a transformative instrument of empowerment and social consciousness. In *So Long a Letter*, literacy and intellectual awareness enable Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to negotiate oppressive structures with gender agency and self – definition. Conversely, *The Joys of Motherhood* demonstrates that the absence of educational and economic empowerment intensifies women's dependency, vulnerability,

and socio-economic exploitation. The findings, therefore, reinforce the argument that inclusive education remains indispensable to sustainable societal development.

Another major finding is that both novels expose the exploitative realities underlying motherhood and women's unpaid labour within patriarchal societies. While motherhood is culturally idealized, the texts reveal that women bear disproportionate emotional, domestic, and economic responsibilities without corresponding recognition or empowerment. Through Nnu Ego's experiences especially, the study demonstrates how women's invisible labour sustains both family structures and broader social systems (*The Joys of Motherhood* 161 – 162). The comparative analysis also reveals important distinctions between Francophone and Anglophone feminist consciousness. Mariama Ba foregrounds reflective resistance, literacy, emotional introspection, and ideological negotiation, whereas Buchi Emecheta emphasizes maternal hardship, economic survival, and structural exploitation. Despite these differences, both writers converge in advocating women's dignity, educational inclusion, economic participation, and social recognition as prerequisites for meaningful societal transformation.

Into this end, the findings establish that the selected novels function not merely as literary representation of women's suffering but as developmental narratives advocating gender – inclusive social transformation, educational empowerment, and sustainable progress in postcolonial African societies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study has comparatively examined gender, inclusive education, and sustainable development in *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* through the combined theoretical lenses of feminist theory, Mary Kolawole's African Womanism, and Intersectionality. The study demonstrates that both novels expose the structural inequalities confronting African women within postcolonial patriarchal societies while simultaneously

emphasizing women's resilience, agency, and indispensable contribution to societal survival and development. The analysis reveals that patriarchy in both texts operates through marriage, motherhood, religion, economic dependency, and socio – cultural expectations that limit women's autonomy and opportunities. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba foregrounds emotional oppression, polygamy, and the transformative role of literacy and education in enabling women's self – awareness and resistance. Through the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, the novel presents education as a powerful instrument of empowerment, critical sensibility and social participation.

In contrast, *The Joys of Motherhood* exposes the exploitative realities underlying motherhood and women's unpaid labour within colonial and patriarchal Nigerian society. Through Nnu Ego's struggles, Buchi Emecheta critiques systems that romanticize maternal sacrifice while economically marginalizing women and denying *them* social recognition. The novel further demonstrates how poverty, colonial urbanization, and lack of educational empowerment intensify women's vulnerability and emotional suffering. The comparative analysis further establishes important distinctions between Francophone and Anglophone feminist consciousness. While Ba emphasizes reflective resistance, literacy, and ideological negotiation, Emecheta foregrounds maternal hardship, labour exploitation, and economic survival. Despite these differences, both texts converge in asserting that women remain central to family stability, social continuity, and national development even while being systematically marginalized.

Significantly, the study demonstrates that the selected novels function not merely as feminist protest narratives but as developmental discourses advocating educational inclusion, economic recognition, and social equality. The texts strongly align with Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 8, and 10 by emphasizing inclusive education, gender equality, decent work, and reduced inequalities as necessary foundations for sustainable societal

progress. In view of this, the present analysis argues that sustainable development in African societies cannot be achieved while women remain educationally excluded, economically exploited, emotionally silenced, and socially marginalized. Educating women, recognizing women's labour, amplifying women's voices, and promoting gender inclusion are, therefore, not only feminist concerns but essential conditions for sustaining equitable and progressive African societies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are vital: the study demonstrates that education enhances women's self – awareness, economic independence, leadership capacity and social participation, hence governments, educational institutions, and policy makers across Africa should prioritize inclusive and equitable education for girls. Also, the novels reveal that women sustain families and communities through unpaid labour that remains socially invisible. On that note, African societies and policy makers should recognize and economically value women's domestic, emotional and caregiving labour. Again, there is need for critical re – evaluation of socio – cultural and religious practices that reinforce gender inequality as harmful patriarchal practices such as discriminatory marital systems and structural exclusion that negate public education, legal reforms, and gender – sensitive social policies that ought to be enacted.

Moreover, literary texts such as *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood* provide important social insights capable of promoting critical awareness about gender equality, social justice, and national development that educational institutions should integrate into curricula at different levels of learning. Knowing fully well that economic empowerment reduces dependency and strengthens women's capacity to contribute meaningfully to national development, governments and development organization should implement policies that enhances women's access to employment, entrepreneurship, financial resources and

leadership opportunities.

Essentially, voice and self – articulation are forms of empowerment capable of challenging silencing and patriarchal erasure as proved by Ba's *So Long a Letter*, hence media institutions, literary platforms and cultural organization should promote women's narratives and intellectual contributions, that enhance scholastic comparative studies involving Francophone, Anglophone, and Lusophone African women's writing to deepen understanding of African feminist consciousness, gender realities, and development discourse across diverse African contexts.

Finally, this study submits that African women's literature remains a powerful medium for interrogating gender inequality, advocating social justice, and envisioning sustainable futures. Through their nuanced portrayals of women's struggles and resilience. Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta demonstrate that empowering women through education, economic inclusion, and social recognition is indispensable to the development and stability of postcolonial African societies.

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