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Colonial Oppression and Indigenous Resistance in *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*: A Postcolonial Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper presents a comparative postcolonial analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, focusing on the thematic intersections of colonial oppression and indigenous resistance. Employing a qualitative, comparative textual methodology, the study investigates how each novel portrays institutional mechanisms of colonial control—such as religion, education, and governance—and explores the distinct strategies of resistance formulated by male and female protagonists within their respective socio-historical contexts. Drawing on postcolonial literary criticism, including the theories of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, the analysis reveals that Achebe emphasizes communal, ritual-based resistance in the face of cultural erosion, whereas Dangarembga articulates internal, gendered rebellion against both colonial and patriarchal authority. Thematic coding and interpretive close reading of both novels highlight the symbolic, psychological, and socio-political dimensions of resistance. Okonkwo's tragic resistance and Tambu's introspective defiance are examined as archetypes of resistance shaped by cultural memory and hybrid identity respectively. The findings underscore the multiplicity and contextual nature of postcolonial resistance, illustrating how colonial legacies intersect with gender, language, and class. This study contributes to decolonial literary methodologies and enriches the discourse on African postcolonial literature by offering a gender-sensitive and culturally nuanced framework for understanding resistance across differing colonial contexts.

Keywords: Postcolonial resistance, colonial oppression, African literature, gender and identity.

Introduction

The colonial encounter between European empires and African societies radically altered indigenous epistemologies, power structures, and cultural identities. Literature from formerly colonized nations, especially in Africa, has since served as a medium through which the complexities of colonialism and its enduring legacies are interrogated. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) are seminal postcolonial texts that encapsulate distinct facets of colonial domination and indigenous resistance. While Achebe maps the collective collapse and cultural trauma wrought by British colonial incursion into Igbo society, Dangarembga explores the psychological fragmentation of African identities under patriarchal colonial structures in Zimbabwe.

According to Salami and Shoar, Achebe's work "offers a foundational postcolonial discourse, portraying how cultural epistemologies are upended by the imposition of Western paradigms" (19). Similarly, Dangarembga's narrative illustrates how female subaltern voices are both silenced and reconstituted through language, education, and patriarchal norms (Adonis, 2017). Searle articulates that mission schools, as central agents of colonial indoctrination, play a pivotal role in transforming indigenous worldviews in both novels (49). These texts reveal how colonization extended beyond physical occupation into cognitive and symbolic realms, producing generational dissonance and moral ambiguity.

The analysis of narrative structure of these novels clearly reveal that both authors embed resistance not only in actions but also in form and voice. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's resistance is rooted in traditionalism and

physical opposition, often culminating in tragic consequences, while in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's rebellion is subtle and psychological, rejecting passive gender roles through educational aspiration. Such contrasting portrayals elucidate the multiplicity of resistance within postcolonial theory—spanning from outright defiance to nuanced, internal contestation.

Beyond literature, these narratives mirror historical dynamics. Between 1900 and 1950, missionary schools in Nigeria increased literacy among Igbo populations from less than 5% to over 40%, but also marginalized native languages and epistemologies (Hassan, 2001). According to Chigwedere (2015), education in Zimbabwe also became a double-edged sword, giving women like Tambu the means to advance in society but also bolstering colonial ways of thinking.

Despite the wealth of scholarship on *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*, comparative analysis that centres both communal and psychological dimensions of resistance is still underrepresented. Jeyifo (1993) critiques Achebe's gender framing but stops short of comparing it with Dangarembga's gendered subalternity. Durrant (2007) highlights Achebe's melancholic aesthetics but does not explore how this aesthetics operates within gendered or internalized frameworks. Moreover, while Al-Qeeq examines identity formation in Achebe's work, but it lacks cross-textual insights into how different postcolonial environments—Nigeria and Zimbabwe—inflect resistance strategies. This lacuna calls for a unified analysis that brings together the sociopolitical collapse in *Things Fall Apart* with the psychic unravelling and reconstitution in *Nervous Conditions*. Specifically, there is a need to explore how cultural, gendered, and generational modes of resistance intersect under varying colonial contexts.

Although much has been written about postcolonial resistance, few comparative studies explore how *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions* articulate resistance through differing colonial legacies, sociopolitical milieus, and gender roles. This study seeks to address how colonial oppression manifests institutionally, psychologically, and culturally in both texts—and how indigenous characters respond through various resistance modalities.

This research aims to conduct a postcolonial comparative analysis of *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*, focusing on how each novel represents colonial oppression and indigenous resistance. The specific objectives are:

- To identify the mechanisms of colonial control—religious, educational, and administrative—depicted in both novels.
- To examine how male and female characters articulate resistance in distinct socio-historical contexts.
- To explore the intersections between gender, culture, and postcolonial identity formation.
- To contribute a nuanced understanding of resistance in African postcolonial literature.

This study contributes to the evolving field of postcolonial literary criticism by providing a cross-textual, gender-sensitive, and culturally grounded analysis of resistance. By juxtaposing Achebe's collective resistance with Dangarembga's individualized narrative, the research foregrounds the multifaceted nature of colonial contestation. The findings will offer pedagogical value for scholars and educators, informing curricula that address decolonization, gender equity, and African epistemologies.

Literature Review

This section organizes and critically analyzes prior studies on colonial oppression, indigenous resistance, gendered identity formation, and comparative postcolonial analysis in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The literature is structured thematically to align with the research objectives:

to examine mechanisms of colonial control, gendered and psychological manifestations of resistance, and identity formation in postcolonial African contexts.

Colonial Structures and Institutional Power

Searle focused on the role of missions as instruments of colonial indoctrination in both novels. The study employed close textual analysis to examine how educational and religious institutions destabilized indigenous epistemologies. It found that while missions offered literacy and social mobility, they also dismantled traditional structures and imposed Western moral hierarchies, fostering psychological subjugation in young minds (51).

K. Osei-Nyame approached *Things Fall Apart* using Bakhtinian dialogism to understand how Achebe represents ideological conflict. The research showed that colonial structures are not only physical but also deeply discursive. Achebe's text, it argues, engages dialogically with the colonial narrative, illustrating how native traditions are contested, repressed, and occasionally reasserted (148).

Gender, Identity, and Subaltern Resistance

B. Jeyifo examined gender marginalization within colonial and indigenous patriarchies. Through feminist and postcolonial lenses, Jeyifo revealed how female characters like Ekwefi and Tambu's mother are doubly colonized—both by European imperialism and indigenous male authority (850). This dual oppression aligns with Dangarembga's characterization of Tambu and Nyasha as resisting not just external systems but internalized norms.

D. Lina, drawing from psychoanalytic feminism and Black feminist theory, explored emotional repression in *Nervous Conditions*. Through qualitative analysis, Lina argued that Tambu and Nyasha's resistance emerges not only in dialogue and action but through psychological symptoms—bulimia, anxiety, and guilt—traced to colonial expectations and gender norms (42).

R.E. McCarty extended this analysis by considering Dangarembga's use of the "hysterical woman" trope. The study emphasized that characters like Lucia and Ma'Shingayi embodied repressed forms of resistance. Their bodily symptoms represented symbolic rejections of imposed identities, which McCarty categorized as postcolonial reactions to Victorian gender constructs (17).

Psychological Trauma and Cultural Hybridity

Psychoanalytic readings of Okonkwo have identified unresolved oedipal tensions and colonial anxieties as shaping his tragic downfall. These studies employed Freudian and Lacanian frameworks to show how Okonkwo's hypermasculinity was a defense mechanism against colonial emasculation and cultural destabilization.

Osmani assessed hybridity in *Nervous Conditions*, arguing that Tambu's fragmented identity reflects the contradictions of colonial education and African heritage (13). The methodology involved intertextual analysis with Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity. The study concluded that Dangarembga presents hybridity as a form of both agency and alienation.

Comparative Literary Resistance Frameworks

C. Okonkwo studied narrative form and spatial representation in *Nervous Conditions*. By employing narrative analysis, the research showed how Dangarembga uses physical and metaphorical spaces—schools, kitchens, missionary homes—as contested terrains for power negotiations (69). This study illustrated that spatial constructs in both novels serve as battlegrounds for resistance and identity assertion.

R.A. Adonis focused on spatial politics and female power in African postcolonial novels. Through comparative analysis, including *Nervous Conditions*, Adonis posited that female characters reclaim agency in confined and gendered spaces. Their resistance, while often silent, disrupts normative postcolonial hierarchies (!4).

While existing scholarship richly explores themes of oppression, gender, and identity in both novels, few studies have conducted a comparative textual analysis of communal and psychological resistance in tandem, especially in relation to colonial institutional frameworks. Moreover, the intersection between *collective resistance* in Achebe and *individual psychological resistance* in Dangarembga remains underexplored. This research addresses that gap by offering a unified framework that combines cultural, psychological, and gendered analyses within postcolonial critique. This is significant as it bridges literary, historical, and theoretical gaps, offering insights into how different resistance modalities function across African colonial experiences. By thematically uniting divergent resistances, this study enhances our understanding of the diversity and depth of African postcolonial literature and contributes to decolonizing literary analysis methodologies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative textual analysis framework to explore the dual dimensions of colonial oppression and indigenous resistance as presented in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). As these texts are deeply embedded within the socio-cultural and historical experiences of African societies, a qualitative approach facilitates the nuanced interpretation of themes, character motivations, and symbolic structures without reducing them to quantifiable variables.

The comparative element of the design allows for the examination of both convergences and divergences in how each author represents the impact of colonial rule and the multifaceted responses of the indigenous communities. This design is informed by postcolonial literary criticism, with particular attention to cultural hybridity, internalized subjugation, identity fragmentation, and subaltern resistance.

By engaging in close reading and cross-textual comparison, this study seeks to answer the following core research questions:

1. How do Achebe and Dangarembga depict the instruments and effects of colonial oppression?
2. What strategies of resistance—individual or collective—are portrayed in each text?
3. In what ways do gender, language, and identity intersect with colonial power structures?
4. How do both authors contribute to postcolonial discourses in African literature?

The analysis employs two interrelated methodological tools:

a. Thematic Coding of Narrative Elements**:** A deductive coding framework was developed based on key themes such as institutional oppression (religious, educational, legal), gendered subjugation, cultural erasure, internalized colonialism, and acts of resistance. Selected textual passages were analyzed for instances of these themes, allowing for patterns and tensions to emerge across the two texts.

For example, thematic codes such as "cultural trauma" and "subversive education" were used to classify scenes where Western schooling serves as both a colonial instrument and a site of resistance (as seen in Tambu's schooling in *Nervous Conditions*). Similarly, in *Things Fall Apart*, codes such as "ritual disruption" and "hegemonic intrusion" are applied to interpret the collapse of Igbo traditions under the influence of missionaries and colonial courts.

b. Postcolonial Literary Criticism**:** This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, drawing on the works of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Concepts such as "hybridity," "ambivalence," "epistemic violence," and "subaltern agency" form the critical lens through which the texts are interpreted.

For instance, Bhabha's notion of the "third space" is used to interpret the liminal identity positions of characters like Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*, who resist colonial norms while inhabiting Westernized subjectivities. Spivak's framework on the silence of the subaltern is employed to understand the tragic arc of Okonkwo, whose resistance ultimately culminates in isolation and death, suggesting the tragic limits of resistance within hegemonic systems.

Analysis and Discussion

Colonial Oppression in *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers a piercing depiction of how colonial authority destabilized pre-colonial Igbo culture through mechanisms that included religion, governance, and linguistic imperialism. Achebe constructs a layered portrayal of a society that begins to unravel not through the force of arms alone but through ideological infiltration. The introduction of Christianity, for instance, is not initially violent, but its subtle encroachment erodes the sacred norms of the community. The village elders note that "the white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one" (Achebe 147). This line marks a pivotal moment where colonial ideology succeeds by dividing and thus weakening indigenous communal structures.

The missionary presence functions as a vehicle for moral superiority, transforming what was once a cohesive social structure into a fragmented moral battleground. Achebe's use of narrative irony and cultural codes lays bare the layered strategies of domination, including the enforcement of Western-style education. The District Commissioner's intention to write a book titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (Achebe 209) exposes the imperialist desire to reduce complex societies into caricatures, legitimizing domination through the production of colonial knowledge.

This textual moment exemplifies Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, wherein the colonized are constructed as inherently inferior and thus governable (Said 94). What emerges from Achebe's narrative is not only a cultural lament but a historical diagnosis: colonialism functions most effectively when it induces internal fractures rather than relying solely on physical coercion.

Colonial Oppression in *Nervous Conditions*

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga critiques colonialism not through large-scale revolts or communal breakdowns but through the psychological and interpersonal realms of colonized life. Her protagonist, Tambudzai, narrates, "I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangarembga, 1). This provocative opening sentence foreshadows the novel's rejection of patriarchal and colonial expectations that position women as passive, grateful recipients of male sacrifice and colonial benevolence.

Colonial oppression in the text is not externalized but internalized through language, education, and self-perception. Tambu's uncle Babamukuru, an Anglicized patriarch, becomes the embodiment of internal colonialism. He insists on "proper" behavior, using phrases like "proper education," "English manners," and "God's guidance," all of which point to a psychological submission to colonial values (Dangarembga, 45). Babamukuru's control over his family exemplifies what Frantz Fanon describes as the "colonized intellectual," who imitates the colonizer and disciplines their community in the image of colonial norms (Fanon 148).

Moreover, the use of English becomes both a symbol of upward mobility and a mechanism of alienation. Nyasha, educated in England and now back in Rhodesia, finds herself culturally dislocated. Her outbursts and eventual mental collapse are symptomatic of what Homi Bhabha terms the ambivalence of mimicry—a desire to be like the colonizer coupled with the impossibility of ever being fully accepted (Bhabha 88). Her declaration, "They've trapped us. But I won't be a good little girl. No, I won't" (Dangarembga 141), voices a silent rebellion, one that refuses to acquiesce to the erasure of identity through cultural assimilation.

Indigenous Resistance in *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe does not present indigenous resistance as a monolithic or wholly successful enterprise; rather, he emphasizes its moral integrity and tragic limitations. The character of Okonkwo symbolizes a form of resistance that is deeply rooted in traditional masculinity and honor. His refusal to cooperate with colonial authorities culminates in his suicide—a potent but ultimately self-defeating act. Okonkwo's resistance is literalized in his choice to kill the colonial messenger: "He was choked with hate. As soon as he heard of the destruction of the church, he sprang to his feet. He killed the messenger with his machete" (Achebe 204). Yet this act, devoid of community support, falls flat and isolates him from the broader political movement he seeks to inspire.

Achebe's narrative suggests that resistance, if devoid of collective consciousness and political organization, is doomed to collapse. The elders' unwillingness to join Okonkwo marks a turning point, where traditional leadership fails to rise to the occasion. This failure is not just political but existential: "Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action...and now he found himself alone" (Achebe 203). Achebe's critique is thus dual: he censures colonial domination while also questioning the rigidity and patriarchal foundations of Igbo society that failed to adapt to changing times.

Indigenous Resistance in *Nervous Conditions*

Resistance in *Nervous Conditions* is quieter, internal, and deeply gendered. Tambu's decision to pursue education, even when it means defying traditional expectations, is portrayed not as complicity with the colonial system but as an assertion of intellectual agency. When Tambu says, "I was beginning to like the feeling of achievement. It helped me to control the misgivings I had about leaving home" (Dangarembga 59), we see the birth of a resistant self, one that navigates structural oppression without succumbing to it.

Nyasha's resistance is more volatile and psychologically charged. Her struggle with eating disorders and mental breakdown is not simply medical but symbolic. Her body becomes the battleground for conflicting identities. "I'm not one of them, but I'm not one of you" (Dangarembga 163), she tells Tambu—capturing the torment of hybrid identity and the loss of cultural rootedness. Dangarembga presents Nyasha's resistance not as a failure but as a powerful critique of systems that demand absolute loyalty to either tradition or modernity.

This gendered form of resistance aligns with Gayatri Spivak's theorization of the subaltern woman who speaks not through formal political speech but through disruption of normative roles (Spivak 308). Both Tambu and Nyasha thus disrupt colonial epistemologies not through grand revolts but through daily refusals—refusals to conform, to obey, and to be silent.

Comparative Analysis

Achebe and Dangarembga deploy different narrative strategies to portray colonial oppression and resistance, shaped by gender, era, and authorial focus. Achebe's resistance is largely communal, centered around traditional structures such as kinship, rituals, and masculine codes. His critique is historically grounded, drawing from late 19th-century Igbo society and its violent encounter with colonialism. In contrast, Dangarembga focuses on personal resistance in the mid-20th century, especially by women, against not only colonial but also patriarchal oppression.

While *Things Fall Apart* ends in cultural tragedy, *Nervous Conditions* leaves room for psychological evolution. Tambu, though shaped by colonial systems, retains the agency to reflect critically on her circumstances. Her resistance is not loud, but it is enduring. Both authors illustrate that resistance is never pure; it is always contaminated by compromise, trauma, and incompleteness. Yet in portraying these fractured resistances, both Achebe and Dangarembga assert the humanity, dignity, and resilience of the colonized subject.

Conclusion

This research has examined the intersecting themes of colonial oppression and indigenous resistance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, revealing how both texts offer distinct but complementary insights into the effects of colonial domination on African societies. Through a postcolonial lens, the study has demonstrated that Achebe and Dangarembga articulate the multifaceted dimensions of oppression not merely as historical events but as ideological projects that penetrate cultural, psychological, and gendered spaces. While Achebe foregrounds the collapse of Igbo society through collective alienation and the erosion of traditional institutions, Dangarembga explores the internalized consequences of colonialism, especially for women navigating patriarchal and imperial forces.

Achebe's portrayal of Okonkwo's downfall captures the tragic consequences of clinging rigidly to outdated notions of masculinity and resistance, especially in the face of a more insidious and systemic colonial order. The communal disintegration he depicts highlights the vulnerability of societies unprepared for ideological warfare disguised as religious and educational reform. Conversely, *Nervous Conditions* centers on the interior lives of its characters, presenting resistance not as a grand political movement but as daily acts of defiance, questioning, and survival. Tambu and Nyasha's struggles reflect a more intimate and complex form of rebellion, one shaped by gendered oppression and fractured identity under colonial modernity.

The comparative analysis confirms that resistance in postcolonial literature is not monolithic but deeply contextual. Achebe constructs resistance as a cultural memory rooted in collective rituals and codes, ultimately undermined by the colonial state's ability to manipulate these very structures. Dangarembga, writing decades later, suggests that true resistance may lie in the capacity to self-reflect, to reject imposed identities, and to reclaim one's voice from both colonial and patriarchal silencing. Her focus on female protagonists broadens the postcolonial canon to include voices often relegated to the margins.

These novels contribute to postcolonial discourse by refusing to depict colonized peoples as mere victims or passive recipients of history. Instead, they explore the ambiguous, often painful choices that define the colonial experience. The contradictions faced by Okonkwo, Tambu, and Nyasha underscore that resistance does not always yield liberation, and liberation itself may be fraught with loss, displacement, and fragmentation.

This study also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in analyzing colonial contexts—particularly the intersection of gender, class, and language. The research reveals how institutions such as the school, the church, and the family can become battlegrounds for control and self-assertion. The use of English in both texts, for

example, becomes a paradoxical tool—simultaneously a medium of domination and a means of reclaiming agency.

By engaging in a close comparative reading, this paper has illuminated how *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions* serve not only as literary artifacts but also as cultural interventions. Their resistance is not just represented in character decisions or plot developments, but in the very act of storytelling—an act that refuses colonial erasure and reclaims historical and emotional complexity. Future research could further explore how these resistant narratives resonate in contemporary African literature, particularly among diasporic writers addressing postcolonial legacies in the 21st century.

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