



The Construction of Fragile Identities: African Women's Narratives of Post-colonial Trauma in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

The paper explores how post-colonial trauma is depicted in African women's literature. It examines the close connection between historical colonial trauma and the identities of African women in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga. The two authors act as literary historians addressing traumatic histories to rewrite and reframe the portrayal of African women in a global context. The paper examines how colonial and postcolonial traumas influence the identities of female characters in these texts. However, the female characters will be examined not in isolation but through their relationships with indigenous males who impose fractured identities on their women and children. By highlighting the connections between recalling traumatic events and promoting community healing, the paper underscores the significance of a specific post-colonial feminist trauma theory in understanding these texts. It further proposes that this approach helps reveal how women's fiction articulates and creates pathways for collective healing from traumas unique to the experiences of African women in post-colonial settings.

Introduction

Post-colonial literature in Africa emerged as a powerful tool for reclaiming identity, narrating indigenous experiences, and critiquing the political, cultural, and social legacies of colonialism. Following the independence movements of the mid-20th Century, African writers began to challenge Eurocentric narratives and portray the complexities of African societies from their own perspectives. Key themes in post-colonial African literature include cultural hybridity, resistance to oppression, the search for identity, and the struggle between tradition and modernity (Ashcroft et al., 1989).

Trauma studies emerged in the 1990s, drawing from psychology, literature, history, and cultural studies. It investigates how traumatic experiences, ranging from personal to collective violence, are represented, processed, and remembered in cultural texts. Influenced by psychoanalytic theories, especially the work of Freud, as well as the Holocaust studies, scholars like Caruth and LaCapra



argued that trauma is often unassimilated, returning in fragmented, delayed, or repressed forms (LaCapra, 1994). Literature and art became crucial media through which individuals and societies express and confront traumatic events. Trauma studies have since expanded to include post-colonial contexts, and address histories of colonisation, genocide, slavery, and forced displacement, recognising that trauma can be both individual and collective, and that its transmission may span generations.

In African literature, trauma studies closely intersect with post-colonial discourse. Post-colonial African trauma narratives often depict the psychological and cultural effects of colonial violence, civil wars, genocide, apartheid, and social upheaval. These narratives examine how individuals and communities survive, remember, and try to heal from historical injustices and structural violence (Kopano, 2006). Therefore, post-colonial trauma becomes an area where trauma is explored beyond the Western framework. It questions whether the wounds caused by colonialism can be explained using trauma studies concepts (Yusin, 2017). This paper thus aims to explore a non-Western experience of trauma.

In this paper, therefore, post-colonial trauma refers to the psychological, emotional, and social consequences experienced by individuals and communities as a result of post-colonial subjugation and its aftermath. (Ashcroft et al., 1989). This trauma is rooted in the historical injustices, violence, and dehumanisation inflicted upon African people during the colonial period and the subsequent struggles for independence and nation-building.

The concept of fragile identities here refers to the unstable and conflicted sense of self that emerges when individuals or communities are subjected to prolonged systems of domination, displacement, and cultural dislocation. In post-colonial African settings, such fragility is deeply rooted in the legacies of colonialism, which disrupted indigenous values, imposed foreign epistemologies, and fractured family and community structures. This paper explores how these dynamics are represented in African women's narratives, focusing particularly on the psychological and gendered struggles of female characters who bear the brunt of both patriarchal oppression and colonial residues.

Literature Review

Post-colonial Trauma in African Literature and African Women's Trauma Narratives

African nations have a complex history shaped by centuries of colonial rule, which has left indelible marks on their societies, cultures, and psyches. African authors explore themes of cultural identity, memory, loss, resistance, and resilience, offering profound insights into the lasting impacts of post-colonial trauma. Literary engagements with the traumatic legacies of colonialism are evident in the works of many writers of African descent who have become central figures in Post-colonial literature. They include: Frantz Fanon, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. These writers explore traumatic experiences such as physical dislocation and racism not sufficiently explored in Western trauma studies. For example, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is based on a comment in Fanon (1963) that describes the conditions of colonial subjects. The struggle to form or maintain identity during colonisation under what Fanon (1967) called "the crushing objecthood of the white man's gaze" is also evident in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which recounts the fame and tragic fall of the renowned wrestler Okonkwo and that of traditional Igbo culture following the arrival of colonialists.



Post-colonial African women's trauma narratives are literary expressions that centre African women's experiences of pain, survival, and identity construction and reconstruction in the aftermath of colonialism, civil conflicts, and systemic gender oppression. These narratives explore how African women embody physical, emotional and historical trauma while simultaneously challenging the silencing often imposed by patriarchal and colonial discourses. Through storytelling, memory, and intimate detailing of bodily and psychological wounds, authors such as Adichie, Dangarembga, Mariama Ba, Nawaal, and Forna offer a powerful depiction of the inner worlds of women navigating fractured realities.

African women occupy spaces of intersectional vulnerability in post-colonial literature. They endure the compounded traumas of patriarchy, war, displacement, poverty, and the lingering psychological wounds of colonisation. Writers such as Dangarembga (*Nervous Conditions*) and Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*) depict women grappling with fragmented selves as they attempt to navigate spaces dominated by both colonial legacies and patriarchal structures (Shaw, 2022). In these narratives, trauma is not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping identity, memory, and agency. Post-colonial trauma often impedes the formation of stable selfhood. African women oscillate between silence and voice, tradition and modernity, resistance and conformity. The psychological scars of sexual violence and historical disempowerment are central to how these women perceive themselves (Ncube, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses womanism (a sub-strand of post-colonial feminist trauma theory) as its theoretical lens to analyse Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004). Initially introduced by Walker (1983) and expanded upon by Ogunyemi (1985) and Hudson-Weems (1993), womanism provides a culturally specific and inclusive framework for understanding the experiences of African women. Unlike certain strands of Western feminism that focus on gender conflict, womanism stresses reconciliation, community survival, and the interconnectedness of men and women, placing African women's struggles at the intersections of race, culture, colonialism, and patriarchy.

Contemporary scholars have further developed and contextualised womanism to address the challenges of the 21st century. Diof et al. (2023) combines womanism with Ubuntu philosophy and healing justice frameworks, focusing on collective recovery and restorative practices within African contexts. Similarly, Kobo (2022) advances womanist theology, asserting that Black women must create their own paths to emancipation through decolonised spiritual and community practices. Chapagae (2025) revisits Walker's core ideas, highlighting the spiritual and anti-patriarchal aspects of womanism while broadening its relevance in global feminist discussions.

Womanism shifts the analysis from individual pathology to broader systems of power that fracture African families and identities. At the same time, it foregrounds resilience and agency, recognising the roles of women such as Ma'Shingayi and Beatrice while interrogating their silences and complicities. By embracing both critique and cultural affirmation, womanism foregrounds the potential for healing, solidarity, and re-education. Ultimately, it frames African women not simply as victims of post-colonial trauma but as central agents of restoration and liberation within fractured communities.

Methodology

This paper employs a critical research design that incorporates elements of qualitative research, aiming to understand social structures, power dynamics, and the lived experiences of individuals.



This approach is based on the fact that the paper involves an in-depth interactive engagement with selected texts and analytical interpretation of how these texts depict their characters' experiences, which then shape the researchers' opinions. Meanings from the texts were read and interpreted through the critical perspectives of post-colonial feminist trauma theory. The crucial design approach was appropriate for this study, as it allowed the researcher to identify patterns within the detailed descriptions of the subject matter (Kim, 2024). The paper explores the construction of fragile identities in post-colonial African women's narratives, exemplified by Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. In this study, post-colonial feminist trauma theory, operationalised through womanism, was used as the analytical tool for both data collection and analysis. Texts underwent close textual reading and thematic analysis, with womanism guiding the identification of key themes, including patriarchal violence, colonial conditioning, silence, resilience, and communal healing. The framework supported the analysis by ensuring that patterns of trauma and resistance were interpreted within their cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts rather than in isolation. Womanism further influenced the interpretive process, where characters' coping strategies and acts of solidarity were viewed as collective, culturally rooted forms of survival and emancipation. This methodological approach enabled the analysis to be both critical and culturally sensitive, emphasising the voices of African women and their central role in post-colonial healing.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this paper indicate that the construction of fragile identities in post-colonial African women's narratives is inextricably linked to the legacies of both colonialism and patriarchy. In *Nervous Conditions* and *Purple Hibiscus*, these forces intersect to fracture subjectivities, with colonialism not only positioning the indigenous male as inferior within the imperial order but also reshaping gender relations in ways that deepened patriarchal dominance within African households. This dynamic facilitated the emergence of "oriental" women, figures cast as submissive, exotic, and culturally silenced, thus reinforcing the marginalisation of the female voice. The recurrence of gendered violence, both physical and psychological, further complicates identity formation, leaving women negotiating a fractured sense of self within oppressive systems.

However, within these narratives, a counter-discourse of resistance and rearticulation also emerges. Women characters navigate spaces of trauma and silence to assert agency, redefine the "self as female," and cultivate resilience through solidarity and intellectual awakening. Strategies of hybridity—where tradition and modernity are negotiated rather than rejected outright—become central to this struggle, enabling characters to challenge entrenched structures while reconstructing identity. Ultimately, the texts reveal that the trajectory from oppression to self-actualisation is neither linear nor solitary; it is a process that requires both individual endurance and collective defiance.

Colonisation and creation of 'inferior' indigenous male

Dangarembga (1988) highlights the question of indigenous identity, resistance, and trauma in the context of the colonial era, illuminating the strategies through which a subjugated identity is formed and constructed during the process of colonisation. Through many characters in the novel, Dangarembga depicts the construction of subjugated, silenced subaltern identity in the colonial context. The novel begins by depicting the colonial influence on a native male character, Nhamo, who suffers from a nervous condition as a result of the tension between local and foreign cultures, thus feeling irritated and humiliated by the local culture. He tries to adopt the foreign superior culture of the coloniser completely and starts looking down upon his people, his culture, language, and way of life.



Tambu recounts: "Thus Nhamo was forced once a year to return to his squalid homestead, where he washed in cold water in an enamel basin or flowing river, not in a bathtub with taps gushing hot water and cold; ate sadza regularly with his fingers and meat hardly at all, never with a knife and fork;" (Dangaremba, 1988, pp. 4-7).

In this text, the struggle between the powerful (coloniser) and the powerless (colonised) is highlighted, as the native is imprisoned in the strong snare of a foreign-dominated culture, which affects their identity devastatingly. The assumption of colonial culture as superior is infused so strongly in Nhamo's mind that even simple acts like eating *sadza* with a hand are considered a sin. The culture of using a fork and knife is preferred over the native culture of eating *sadza* with one's fingers.

Other characters in the text whose identities were discursively constructed by the dominant colonial culture are Babamukuru and Jeremiah. Tambu recounts, "From my grandmother's history lessons, I knew that my father (Jeremiah) and brother (Nhamo) suffered painfully under the evil wizard's spell. Babamukuru, I knew, was different. He had not cringed under the weight of his poverty. Boldly, Babamukuru had defied it. Through hard work and determination, he had broken the evil wizard's spell." (Dangaremba, 1988, p. 50).

Tambu's recollection of her grandmother's history lessons situates Babamukuru within the colonial production of identity, where African subjectivity is constructed in relation to an oppressive "evil wizard's spell" that symbolises colonial domination.

Silenced Voices: Patriarchy and Repression of Female Identity

In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa Eugene, the father of the protagonist Kambili, uses his religious speeches and sermons to control his family and community. His public displays of piety and strict adherence to religion serve as spiritual guidance and a means to maintain authority and dominance within his household and beyond. This method of asserting power leads the members of his household to choose silence to conform to his authority.

The principle of connection between silence and violence or abuse lies in a figurative loss of voice of victims during the period of abuse. The obvious victims here are Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice. In several, if not all, areas of their lives, Eugene establishes a straightforward rule that regulates the lives and even the interests of his children and wife. The Silence in the Achike's house causes a palpable tension sustained by fear of the patriarch.

Adichie portrays Beatrice as a woman whose identity is fractured by violence that enforces silence and submission. On the surface, she appears passive and compliant, but her silence is the result of sustained repression within a patriarchal household. When Eugene scalds Kambili with boiling water, Beatrice responds by quietly tending the wounds, "She mixed salt with cold water and gently plastered the gritty mixture onto my feet" (Adichie, 2004, p. 195). This maternal act underscores how violence not only subdues her resistance but also perpetuates a cycle of muted suffering, eroding her agency and voice.

Eugene's irrational bouts of violence against Beatrice leave physical and emotional scars, symbolised in her repeated miscarriages and the bruised purple skin around her eyes. Such brutality underscores the gender-based violence that silences women and fractures their identities. Within a patriarchal culture that normalizes the subjugation of wives under the guise of discipline, Beatrice's suffering exemplifies how domestic violence becomes both a tool of



control and a mechanism of silence in many African homes, a reality powerfully depicted in *Purple Hibiscus*.

The concept of 'self' as female

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* comments on female identity in African fiction. The title also conveys a similar complexity, with multiple layers of meaning, as it examines different female characters. Kambili, the novel's protagonist, is seen as having evolved from a young, naïve, and fearful girl to a mature, assertive woman, especially after staying with her aunt, Ifeoma. Other characters are portrayed as submissive, such as Beatrice (Mama), and are trapped in abusive marriages, and also independent women who are defiant to the patriarchal structures, like Aunt Ifeoma. Kambili is a character conditioned to an imposed cultural identity where she is made to believe that women are not supposed to know anything at all. Throughout the narrative, Kambili is a blank slate, as she appears to be mostly devoid of personal opinions about the events unfolding in her home. Unlike Amaka, her paternal cousin of almost the same age, who argues constructively about her opinion on issues, an example is the case of choosing a Eurocentric name for her confirmation, Kambili is engrossed in a world of "because he has said it and his word is true," she narrates, "I would sit with my knees pressed together next to Jaja, trying to keep my face blank, to keep the pride from showing because Papa said modesty was essential" (Adichie, 2004, p. 12).

Countering Patriarchal Discourse to Hybridity

Hutnyk (2005) explains that the term 'hybridity' has been used in various aspects and contexts, leading to a point where it has come to mean all sorts of things related to mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange. In this paper, hybridity is a powerful lens for examining how patriarchal oppression shapes emerging hybrid identities in Nyasha, Tambudzai, and Lucia.

Education is seen as a key factor on the path to freedom and success in *Nervous Conditions*. Tambu views education as her escape from the patriarchal system that has controlled her since birth. Her brother can continue the family name and support the family because of his education, while Tambu's prospects are limited by her potential marriage. In the novel, her father, Jeremiah, explains why Tambu's self-education is unnecessary when speaking to the school principal about her studies: "Have you ever heard of a woman that remains in her father's house? ... She will meet a young man and I will have lost everything" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 30). Tambu may succeed through education and improve her economic situation, but this is overshadowed by the fact that it will benefit her future husband and his family.

Nyasha's identity reflects the fractured state of hybridity caused by her exposure to both colonial and indigenous patriarchal systems. Having spent her formative years in England, she internalises ideals of individual freedom and gender equality that sharply contrast with the rigid expectations imposed on her when she returns to Rhodesia. Her refusal to conform to Babamukuru's authoritarian control or to the submissive role assigned to women unsettles her position within the family. Yet her resistance leaves her caught between two cultural frameworks, belonging fully to neither. This dislocation results in a psychological crisis, with her eating disorder symbolising the damaging effects of navigating identities in a world where both colonial modernity and African patriarchy deny women coherent spaces for agency. Nyasha's hybridity, therefore, acts as both a form of resistance and a source of trauma, exposing the profound ambivalence of post-colonial identity formation (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 285).

Tambu, by contrast, navigates hybridity through a more strategic adaptation to patriarchal and colonial structures. Denied education because of her gender, she asserts her resolve by growing her



own maize to pay for school, signalling her refusal to accept domestic confinement. When Nhamo's death presents an opportunity for her to attend school, she seizes it, aware that education is both a colonial tool and a possible path to empowerment. Her narrative voice shows a growing awareness of the contradictions she faces, especially when she admits, "I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangaremba, 1988, p. 1).

Taken together, Nyasha and Tambu illustrate how attempts to counter patriarchal oppression under colonial rule produce hybrid identities that cannot be reduced to either submission or rebellion. Their trajectories exemplify Bhabha's notion of hybridity as an ambivalent space, one that destabilises colonial and patriarchal authority but also exposes the psychological and ethical costs of negotiating identity in such a contested terrain.

Fighting Oppression to Self-Actualisation

Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* dramatises how colonial and patriarchal ideologies converge to marginalise African women, while also showing the varied ways they negotiate resistance. Tambu's pursuit of education, Maiguru's contested position within her marriage, and Lucia's fearless audacity illustrate different strategies through which women resist subordination and move toward self-actualisation.

Tambu's struggle foregrounds the ambivalence of education as both a colonial instrument of assimilation and a potential space of empowerment. Her entry into the Sacred Heart school makes her aware that education is "a long painful process" that simultaneously restricts and indoctrinates (Dangaremba, 1988, p. 204). Nevertheless, it also remains one of the few viable avenues through which she can resist confinement to domesticity.

Lucia embodies a more direct form of resistance. Unlike Mainini and Maiguru, whose voices are muted by social expectations, Lucia openly confronts patriarchal authority, fearlessly challenging Babamukuru and repudiating Takesure's accusations of witchcraft (Dangaremba, 1988, p. 144). Her defiance unsettles male authority and inspires the women around her, creating moments of sisterly solidarity that allow them, however briefly, to ridicule patriarchal norms. Lucia's audacity aligns with Ogunyemi's womanism, demonstrating that bold speech and refusal to conform can be practical tools of emancipation. In her ability to redefine her place outside male control, Lucia provides Tambu with a model of courage and agency that her mother cannot.

Notably, the text suggests that women's empowerment is catalysed not only through individual acts but also through the solidarity and inspiration they draw from one another. Dangaremba's narrative thus underscores that women's voices, whether through education, confrontation, or refusal to remain silent, are central to the possibility of self-actualisation in a colonial and patriarchal society.

In *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie, 2004), Adichie emphasises the importance of women being proactive in devising strategies to overcome patriarchal constraints. Through Amaka, Adichie constructs a character who provokes Kambili by asserting her own identity, as seen in her preference for listening to music, wearing lipstick, and disregarding public opinion (Adichie, 2004, p. 118). Her refusal to conform to imposed expectations reflects a growing awareness among young women determined to challenge gendered boundaries. Similarly, Auntie Philipa, an accomplished botanist, and Auntie Ifeoma, a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, disrupt the stereotype of women being confined to domestic spaces (Adichie, 2004, p. 155). Amouzou (2006) affirms that Adichie's female characters reject stereotypical portrayals, instead presenting themselves as "new women"



with progressive identities. Such depictions align with Kivai's (2010) assertion that Adichie emphasises women's solidarity as a means to resist patriarchy, exemplified in Ifeoma's role as a mentor who broadens Kambili and Jaja's worldview.

Mama Beatrice's eventual poisoning of Eugene further reflects how, when excluded from protective structures of power, women resort to extreme measures to end trauma inflicted by patriarchy (Adichie, 2004, p. 290). As Emery (2015) observes, violence becomes Beatrice's only possible avenue of revolt. This contrasts with Auntie Ifeoma's alternative strategy of migration, relocating to America to escape systemic oppression (Kivai, 2010). Across these varied responses, women demonstrate agency in resisting domination, whether through education, cultural authenticity, economic independence, or defiance.

Conclusion

The paper examined the colonial discourses that constructed an "inferior" identity in the colonised male. It interrogated how colonisation created neurosis in the native male characters of the two selected texts, which later imposed their bruised images onto their female counterparts. Then it scrutinised how this inferior identity construction led to the male characters coming up with their patriarchal discourses to subjugate the female characters in their lives.

In both texts, women's shared struggles promote collective resilience, helping them to reimagine themselves beyond victimhood and carve out spaces of autonomy within oppressive social orders.

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