



Domestic Neocolonialism through Narrative Structure: A Comparative Analysis of Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* and Jose Eduardo Agualusa's *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers*

Juliana Ndubi Ouma¹, Lencer Ndede¹ & Maureen Amimo²

¹Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

²Maasai Mara University, Kenya

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Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* and José Eduardo Agualusa's, *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers*, examining how domestic neocolonialism is represented through narrative form. Informed by Frantz Fanon's theory of Decolonisation and Achille Mbembe's concept of Necropolitics, the study investigates how fragmented structures, temporal disjunctions, and layered perspectives convey the persistence of colonial domination within post-independence Mozambique and Angola. Couto employs a frame narrative and embedded texts to evoke the collapse of order and identity in a war-torn society, while Agualusa blends metafiction and shifting viewpoints to critique the internalisation of neocolonial power. Both authors reject linear realism in favour of disrupted and hybrid storytelling, transforming narrative architecture into a political act that resists imposed epistemologies and affirms African modes of meaning-making. Ultimately, the analysis argues that these formal strategies both expose the realities of domestic neocolonialism and function as decolonial interventions, positioning the novels as critical engagements with the instability and contested sovereignty of postcolonial African states.

Introduction

This article analyses how Mia Couto's *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) and José Eduardo Agualusa's *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017) deploy narrative structure to illuminate Domestic Neocolonialism in Mozambique and Angola. Central to the study is Achille Mbembe's notion of necro politics (2003), which foregrounds how power operates through the regulation of death, abandonment, and disposability. In both novels, fragmented and non-linear storytelling represents lives subjected to necropolitical control, where war, state repression, and elite corruption determine who may live and who is consigned to social or literal death. Linking Mbembe to Fanon's decolonisation theory (1961), as reinterpreted by Gibson (2011), the article shows that narrative strategies are not merely aesthetic choices but political interventions: they expose hidden forms of domination, recover suppressed histories, and imagine futures beyond internalised systems of violence. The fractured narratives critique state violence, elite betrayal, and cultural alienation while resisting domestic neocolonial regimes.



The Narrative Structure

Narrative structure—the arrangement of chronology, perspective, and fragmentation—is central to meaning and ideological expression in African postcolonial novels. Authors often employ non-linear timelines, multiple narrators, and embedded stories to reflect postcolonial disruptions and complexities (Ikonné, 1994). Drawing on African storytelling traditions such as repetition, proverbs, and circular narratives, writers assert their own voices and resist colonial literary forms (Irele, 2001).

Fragmented and dual narratives function as tools of decolonisation. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, disrupted structures mirror societal dislocations caused by colonisation while reconstructing meaning and hope. In *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) and *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017), fractured timelines, shifting perspectives, and memory sequences depict the effects of war, oppression, and domestic neocolonialism, while foregrounding resilience and resistance. These strategies resonate with Fanon’s call for decolonisation to transform cultural expression alongside political and economic systems (1961), extended by Gibson (2011), who highlights how post-independence elites can reproduce domination and alienation. By framing narrative disruption as a challenge to both colonial residues and internalised postcolonial authority, form itself becomes a site of ideological struggle. In dialogue with Mbembe’s *Necropolitics* (2003), the break from linear storytelling contests the state’s power to determine whose lives and memories matter, positioning literature as a space to resist both colonial and contemporary necropolitical violence.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in Fanon’s decolonisation theory (1961), narrative structure is not merely a stylistic choice but a political tool reflecting domestic neocolonial tensions. Gibson (2011) extends Fanon’s argument by suggesting that decolonisation is an ongoing process, as post-independence elites often perpetuate domination and exclusion. From this perspective, the fragmented and multi-layered structures of *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) and *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017) function as aesthetic enactments of resistance: by disrupting linear storytelling and integrating multiple perspectives, they challenge colonial logics of order, rationality, and historical determinism while critiquing the failures of national liberation. Narrative fragmentation, intertextuality, and nonlinear temporality destabilise dominant historical narratives and expose how domestic neocolonial regimes perpetuate fractures, positioning literature itself as a site of resistance and imaginative reclamation.

Methodology

A qualitative textual analysis is employed to examine how fragmented and dual narrative structures reveal the dynamics of Domestic Neocolonialism. *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) and *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017) were selected for their focus on post-independence societies in Mozambique and Angola (Francophone), where internalised colonial power shapes social, political, and cultural life. Fanon’s decolonisation theory (1961) guided the choice by emphasising the need to challenge colonial epistemologies in both artistic and psychological realms. Gibson (2011) extends this by showing that post-independence elites can reproduce patterns of domination, highlighting texts that critique both colonial legacies and contemporary power structures. Mbembe’s (2003) *Necropolitics* informed the analysis of narratives depicting how state and elite power determine whose lives are valued or marginalised. Examining disrupted timelines, shifting perspectives, and parallel storylines reveals how narrative form enacts critique and functions as a site of resistance against domestic neocolonial control.



Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that both *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) and *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017) employ fragmented, dual, and nonlinear narratives to represent domestic neocolonialism in Mozambique and Angola. These structures reveal fractured identities, cyclical violence, and the persistence of colonial power within post-independence states. While Couto uses embedded and frame narratives to link memory, trauma, and survival, Agualusa employs fragmentation and dream sequences to expose disorientation under authoritarian rule. Together, the novels show that independence did not eradicate oppression but transformed it, as narrative form itself becomes a site of resistance, reclamation, and decolonial critique.

The Dual Narrative Structure in *Sleepwalking Land*

Kehinde (2005) notes that many African writers use dual or fragmented narratives to reflect the conflicts, fractured identities, and ideological struggles of postcolonial life. These structures often present parallel or contrasting storylines across characters, timelines, or perspectives, portraying disillusionment, political decay, and resistance. Shen (2022) defines dual narrative as “two parallel or contrasting storylines within a single text.” In *Sleepwalking Land* (1992), Tuahir and Muidinga’s journeys, alongside Kindzu’s notebooks, depict both the external war and the internal search for memory and identity, reflecting the societal fragmentation of Mozambique. Couto critiques domestic neocolonialism by showing how colonial power persists internally, using a frame narrative with intertwined layers following Muidinga and Tuahir through war-torn Mozambique as it appears below:

An old man and a boy make their way along the road. They walk with a swaying gait, as if journeying has been their only occupation since birth. Their destination is the other side of nowhere, their arrival, a non-departure awaiting what lies ahead. They are fleeing the war, the war that has contaminated their whole country. They advance under the illusion that somewhere beyond there lies a quiet haven. They walk barefoot, their clothes the same colour as the road. The old man’s name is Tuahir. He is skinny and seems to have lost all his substance. The boy is called Muidinga. (Couto, 1992, pp.1-2)

This is the outer frame, situated in the present post-civil war, where the violence and trauma of the nation are still palpable. The embedded narrative is presented through the diary of Kindzu, a man who is dead by the time Muidinga begins reading his account, as follows:

The moon seems to have been summoned by Muidinga’s voice. The night is gradually flooded by moonlight. Bathed in silver, the road listens to the story as it unfolds from the books. “I want to place time...” My name is Kindzu, it’s the same name given to the skinny little palms that bend and sway along the beach. (Couto, 1992, pp.1-2)

Kindzu’s diary above is a written record of his own experiences. It illuminates the past—specifically the period of Mozambique’s colonial struggle and its subsequent independence, which reveals the betrayals and ruptures that shaped the present.

The frame narrative (Couto 1992), representing the present-time storyline, offers a powerful depiction of domestic neocolonialism through the lens of Necro politics and Decolonisation. This narrative unfolds through the experiences of Muidinga and Tuahir, two characters navigating a post-civil war Mozambique where the impact of colonialism is still heavily felt, even after independence, as illustrated below.



At last, the old man agrees. He cleans the ground where he is going to sit, to indicate that it will take some time, and he tells his story: he was in a refugee camp, having come from his distant village. One night, he was asked to help bury six children who had just died. Their bodies were in a hut under an old sheet of canvas. No one knew who they were, where they had come from, or what families they belonged to. They were naked, their clothes stolen the moment they lost the strength to defend themselves; he was surprised at their absence of weight. He looked at their bent arms like bony, skeletal branches when he noticed with a start the finger of one of the children digging into the ground. (Couto, 1992, p.48)

In this sense, the present-time narrative illustrates how neocolonial structures persist, shaping the survival struggles of individuals amid violence, poverty, and uncertainty. As Mbembe (2003) theorises, power controls life and death. In Couto (1992), colonialism and civil war endure through violence and state neglect, creating a necropolitical reality. Muidinga and Tuahir navigate a war-torn land, struggling against a society still dominated by remnants of colonial power, where the marginalised remain at the mercy of a new elite, as reflected through Skellington.

“My name is Skelling ton.” Then he begins his story. While he speaks, he continues to shake the tin as if accompanying a song. Everybody had left that place because of terror. Gangs pillaged, killed and burned. The village became deserted, and everyone left, one by one. His family had summoned his thoughts: “Come with us, they’ve all gone now!” That is how they begged him as they prepared to leave. He answered: “I am like a tree, I just pretend to die.” (Couto, 1992, p.63)

In this text, the persistence of violence in the present time narrative speaks to the idea that the wounds of colonialism are never fully healed but are continually reopened by neocolonial structures that maintain control over life and death through economic disenfranchisement, militarised violence, and systemic indifference.

The frame narrative in *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) highlights the failure of decolonisation in Mozambique, where independence from Portuguese rule did not bring true freedom. The present-time story gestures toward imagining a future, yet it remains trapped in cycles of violence, poverty, and disenfranchisement established by colonial forces and reproduced by domestic elites. Fanon (1961) reminds us that liberation must confront both external domination and internalised forms of oppression, a point reinforced by Gibson (2011), who argues that post-independence elites often perpetuate colonial structures of exclusion. Muidinga and Tuahir’s journey through a war-torn landscape symbolises the ongoing struggle for autonomy, as the land itself reflects the persistence of neocolonial power. The novel shows how domestic neocolonialism operates through necropolitical mechanisms that control the lives and deaths of marginalised people, demonstrating how structural inequalities inherited from both colonialism and failed independence continue to thwart genuine decolonisation.

The second narrative emerges within the notebooks that Muidinga reads. The diaries belong to Kindzu, a young man seeking to escape the horrors of war and find purpose. His fragmented and surreal stories, blending realism with magical elements, explore love, loss, political oppression, and the devastating impact of the civil war on individuals and communities. In one instance, the notebook recounts: “On the nights that followed, my father no longer told any stories. The only news that reached our home was tales of bullets, cutlasses and fire” (Couto, 1992, p. 11). This embedded narrative situates memory as both testimony and trauma, linking personal histories with national disintegration.



Couto's use of the embedded narrative depicts domestic neocolonialism as operating not only through political and economic structures but also through memory, identity, and history. By binding Muidinga's reading to Kindzu's fragmented testimony, the novel exposes how past and present oppressions intersect. Read through Mbembe's (2003) *Necropolitics*, and the text illustrates how political power governs life and death, relegating populations to a state of social death. The embedded narrative underscores the ongoing subjugation of individuals and the nation, revealing how structural inequalities and elite betrayal sustain the failures of decolonisation in postcolonial Mozambique.

Time was ambling along at a leisurely pace when war broke out. My father said it was some confusion that had come from abroad, brought by those who had lost their privileges. At first, all we heard were vague bits of news about incidents far away. Later, the exchange of fire got nearer, and our fears were filled with blood. War is a snake that bites us with our own teeth. Its poison flowed through all the rivers of our soul. We no longer dreamed. Dreams are the eyes of life, and we were blind. (Couto, 1992, p.9)

In *Sleepwalking Land* (1992), Kindzu's posthumous voice, preserved in his diary, represents both personal and collective erasure under colonial and neocolonial powers. His voice speaks from beyond death—literally, since he is dead when Muidinga reads his account, and metaphorically, as someone whose attempts to confront colonial violence were suppressed. The symbolic death of Kindzu reflects the marginalisation of resistance histories and parallels post-independence Mozambique, where lives are sacrificed to a state that wields control through violence and the destruction of memory. The dual narrative, alternating between Muidinga's present and Kindzu's past, illustrates the consequences of necropolitical structures, where the dead continue to speak, and the living remain trapped in cycles of violence and memory.

From a decolonisation perspective, the embedded narrative is an act of reclaiming historical memory and identity from neocolonial forces. As Muidinga reads Kindzu's diary, he uncovers untold truths about Mozambique's colonial and postcolonial betrayals, highlighting the difficulty of recovering repressed histories. The act of reading becomes a form of resistance and a way to reclaim agency in a society where official histories have been silenced.

Muidinga's journey reflects both discovery and reclamation, emphasising that decolonisation requires not only political change but also cultural and psychological transformation. The novel critiques how neocolonial forces perpetuate the suppression and distortion of memory, thereby complicating people's understanding of their own history. The intertwined narratives of Muidinga and Kindzu reveal that domestic neocolonialism persists in post-independence Mozambique, where local elites exploit inherited colonial structures. The dual narratives highlight the cyclical nature of violence and social death, demonstrating that independence did not end oppression but allowed internalised colonial mechanisms to persist, shaping the lives of ordinary people and constraining their ability to reclaim history, identity, and freedom.

The embedded narrative structure in *Sleepwalking Land* (1992) serves as a critical strategy that reflects the dynamics of domestic neocolonialism and necropolitics within post-independence Mozambique. By weaving Muidinga's present journey with Kindzu's past, Mia Couto comments on the continuity of colonial legacies, sustained through violence, erasure of memory, and manipulation of identity. The novel's structure challenges traditional historical narratives, inviting readers to engage with history as a fragmented and contested phenomenon. Through this, Couto critiques the cycle of neocolonial



oppression and suggests that decolonisation requires re-engagement with the past, reclamation of memory, and transformation of both material and cultural realities.

Through the juxtaposition of these narratives, Couto critiques how post-colonial power structures replicate colonial hierarchies. The ruling class and military factions, portrayed as distant and uncaring, maintain systems of control that marginalise the rural poor. This internal oppression reflects domestic neocolonialism, where local elites oppress their own people under the guise of progress or stability. The barren landscape and recurring motifs of death, decay, and wandering emphasise the stagnation and cyclical nature of oppression. Just as colonial powers stripped resources and autonomy, the war's leaders exploit and devastate, leaving the population in perpetual limbo—symbolised by the 'sleepwalking' existence of its characters.

The frame narrative contains the embedded narrative because the past and present are inseparable in the novel's depiction of domestic neocolonialism. The frame—Muidinga and Tuahir's journey through a war-torn Mozambique—encloses the embedded narrative—Kindzu's diary—because it is through reading the past that the present gains meaning. The structure reveals that historical memory shapes and haunts the present, demonstrating that suffering in the post-independence period is a continuation of colonial structures under different rulers. The diary, though a record of a past life, becomes alive in Muidinga's hands, showing how the ghosts of colonialism persist through neocolonial governance, violence, and societal collapse.

The parallel events in Muidinga's present, Kindzu's past, and Mozambique's broader history suggest that oppression, exploitation, and displacement are cyclical rather than linear. Both Kindzu and Muidinga endure war, instability, and the struggle for identity in a fragmented nation, showing that conditions from early post-independence remain in Muidinga's time. The diary serves as both a historical record and a prophetic mirror, revealing that war and power struggles have not brought about true liberation but have instead perpetuated internal domination.

Merging past and present through a dual narrative denies the illusion of progress often associated with independence. Mozambique has not escaped colonial systems of control; instead, new regimes have inherited and reinforced them. The dual structure emphasises that history continues to unfold within Muidinga and the nation, illustrating that decolonisation remains incomplete.

By intertwining these narratives, Couto (1992) critiques Domestic Neocolonialism and highlights the enduring psychological and structural effects of colonialism. The dual narrative enriches the exploration of fragmented identities, systemic inequality, and the challenges of building a just society post-independence. It shows that domestic neocolonialism is not merely a legacy of colonialism, but an ongoing reality shaping lives, memory, and the possibility of genuine liberation.

The Fragmented Narrative Structure in *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers*

In *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017), Agualusa employs a fragmented narrative that shifts across time frames, perspectives, and events, rather than following a linear structure. Spiridon (2019) defines fragmentation as a deliberate disruption of chronology or the use of multiple viewpoints to create discontinuity. While initially disjointed, the fragments cohere, compelling readers to actively reconstruct the story and draw their own connections. This technique highlights ambiguity, subjective experience, and themes of memory, truth, and perception, which are particularly significant in literature that engages with trauma and fractured histories.

Agualusa's disjointed structure mirrors the chaotic reality of post-colonial Angola, where colonial power dynamics are internalised within political and social systems. The story moves between the



present, dreams, memories, and imagined futures, reflecting the psychological and social disorientation of individuals living under domestic neocolonial conditions. Historical trauma—from colonisation and subsequent authoritarian rule—continues to distort the present, shaping identities and social relations.

By disrupting linear time and perspective, the fragmented narrative compels readers to engage critically with the text, reconstruct meaning, and confront the lingering effects of oppression. The fractured structure becomes both a literary strategy and a thematic lens, revealing how Domestic Neocolonialism perpetuates inequality, disorientation, and the internalisation of colonial hierarchies in post-independence Angola. This technique is evident in Daniel's life as shown in the following passage.

I woke up in a place where the rivers don't flow—they remain totally still. There in that place, nobody grows old. My grandmother was with me, and she was laughing. I don't know how long I was dead. Then I was hit by a second lightning bolt, and I woke up. I came back to life.' Hossi threw me a furious look. He stood up and took off his shirt. He turned around and, on his back, I saw a similar scar. (Agualusa, 2017, pp.37-38)

This passage captures how time is fluid in the novel, with Daniel experiencing the past not as a distant memory but as an active force that intrudes into his present. The novel constantly shifts between Daniel's past, his dreams, and his current reality, reinforcing a nonlinear narrative structure that mirrors the uncertainty of postcolonial identity and history. This technique is also evident in the passage where Karinguiri's arrest is juxtaposed with reflections on her past relationship with her father, Daniel Benchimol.

Karinguiri, who was studying History in Lisbon, but who came to Luanda whenever she could, had got involved with a group of young people who defined themselves as revolutionaries, or 'revos' and who filled social media networks with videos of protests against the dictatorship. She used to criticise me for what she called my bourgeois complacency. 'The difference between you and Mama is that she at least has a clear position—she supports the dictatorship. You pretend to be a democrat, but in practice, you play along with the regime. The dictatorship is growing in the shade of your silent complicity.' I got annoyed, because it was true, and we argued. (Agualusa, 2017, pp.117-118)

Karinguiri, a fervent activist, is detained for protesting governmental oppression. Amid this turmoil, the narrative shifts to Daniel's memories of her childhood, highlighting her early signs of resilience and commitment to justice. This transition underscores how Karinguiri's past has shaped her present actions and convictions. By weaving past and present together, Agualusa (2017) highlights how colonial ideologies persist in Angola's governance and societal hierarchies. The disjointed timeline suggests that the country cannot escape its colonial past, as its present leaders replicate the exploitative practices of foreign rulers.

The interplay between fragmented timelines and dream sequences highlights the tension between oppressive reality and the potential for alternative futures. While dreams represent hope and collective imagination, the fractured narrative reflects the suppression of these possibilities by a regime that prioritises control and conformity.

Agualusa critiques the mechanisms through which the post-colonial Angolan state perpetuates neocolonial oppression. The political elites, often depicted as disconnected from the populace, mimic colonial rulers by exploiting resources, stifling dissent, and maintaining hierarchical power structures.



The fragmented timeline reinforces the cyclical nature of these abuses, suggesting that the nation's trajectory remains trapped in a loop of exploitation. This exploitation is portrayed in the following passage.

Lucrecia was enrolled on an interior decorating course in London. Work didn't take up much of her time. Her father, Homero Diaz da Cruz, had got rich mysteriously in the later years of the one-party system and the centralised economy, when expressions such as 'proletarian internationalism' and 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship' were still popular, and nobody talked about 'primitive accumulation of capital' as a euphemism for corruption. (Agualusa, 2017, p.3)

This passage critiques the post-colonial Angolan elite as exploitative and self-serving, perpetuating inequality and stifling dissent. Leaders who once symbolised liberation now occupy roles like colonial powers, exploiting resources and maintaining hierarchical structures that marginalise the majority. The characters' struggles with identity and autonomy reflect broader cultural alienation, stemming from the internalisation of colonial values. Daniel Benchimol's reflection – "I look in the mirror and see a stranger – a face shaped by others' desires; a mind filled with borrowed dreams. Who am I, if not the sum of these imposed illusions?" (Agualusa, 2017, p.102) – illustrates how individuals grapple with these imposed values, leaving them disconnected from their authentic selves.

The novel's fragmented narrative mirrors the fractured state of Angolan society, where hopes for unity and progress are undermined by systemic inequality and political betrayal. This disjointed storytelling suggests that resolving the present requires confronting the fragmented pieces of the past, an act suppressed by ruling powers. Through its non-linear timeline, *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (2017) captures Domestic Neocolonialism as a condition marked by disorientation, cyclical oppression, and the re-inscription of colonial hierarchies.

Agualusa's narrative structure engages readers with the complexities of postcolonial identity, revealing both the enduring scars of colonialism and avenues for resistance through imagination and collective dreaming. By disrupting linear time, the novel mirrors the instability of a nation still trapped in colonial-era power dynamics under local rule. Its disjointed storytelling reflects Angola's fractured reality, where the promise of independence is replaced by internal oppression, censorship, and authoritarian control, highlighting the persistent influence of domestic neocolonialism in post-independence society.

One key significance of this structure is its ability to collapse past and present, showing how the mechanisms of colonial domination – surveillance, political repression, and economic exploitation – persist under the rule of the post-independence elite. The protagonist, Daniel Benchimol, moves between dreams, memories, and present-day events, underscoring how the past refuses to be forgotten. Nonlinear storytelling forces the reader to experience the disorientation that citizens feel when faced with a government that claims to champion freedom while maintaining colonial-style oppression.

Furthermore, the fragmented narrative voices multiple perspectives, particularly those of resistance figures like Karinguiri, the young activist imprisoned for speaking out. By weaving together different temporal moments and personal experiences, Agualusa (2017) highlights the continuity of state violence against those who challenge power. This fragmented style not only deepens the reader's understanding of domestic neocolonialism but also suggests that true decolonisation requires breaking free from these cyclical structures of control. Through its disruption of conventional



storytelling, the novel reveals that neocolonialism is not just a historical event, but an ongoing reality deeply embedded in the nation's political and social fabric.

Conclusion

This study builds on Fanon's (1961) call for cultural transformation, Gibson's (2011) insistence on the unfinished nature of decolonisation, and Mbembe's (2003) theorisation of necropolitics to argue that narrative form itself functions as resistance. While existing scholarships often treat political violence or cultural alienation thematically, this analysis demonstrates how Couto and Agualusa embed critique within the very structure of their novels. Dual, embedded, and fragmented narratives enact the instability of postcolonial realities, exposing the failures of liberation movements and the persistence of neocolonial domination. What distinguishes the present analysis is its emphasis on form as a site of ideological struggle, demonstrating that reclaiming identity and agency necessitates not only political change but also ongoing cultural and psychological resistance.

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