



Journal of Frontiers in Multidisciplinary Research

Servile Subjects and Resistant Voices: Representations of Women in Postcolonial Feminist Fiction

Said Ali ^{1*}, Muhammad Rizwan ², Shahzad Mehmood ³, Kanwal Sajjad ⁴, Kinza Fatima ⁵, Ayesha Iqbal ⁶

¹ M.Phil Scholar Lahore Leads University, Pakistan

² Lecturer in English, Riphah University, Lahore, Pakistan

³ Assistant Education Officer, Pakistan

⁴ Subject Coordinator at LGS Samanabad Campus, Lahore, Pakistan

⁵ Lecturer in English at The Stem College, Toba Tek Singh, Pakistan

⁶ Upper Primary Teacher at Beaconhouse School System, Pakistan

* Corresponding Author: **Said Ali**

Article Info

E-ISSN: 3050-9726

P-ISSN: 3050-9718

Volume: 06

Issue: 01

January-June 2025

Received: 10-03-2025

Accepted: 05-04-2025

Published: 03-05-2025

Page No: 235-239

Abstract

This study investigates the representation of women as servile subjects in postcolonial feminist fiction and examines the multifaceted ways in which female characters resist patriarchal and colonial oppression. Drawing upon a qualitative thematic and narrative analysis of five novels, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Nervous Conditions*, *Purple Hibiscus*, *The God of Small Things*, and *Cracking India* the research explores how servility is constructed through domestic, economic, religious, and bodily subjugation. Framed by postcolonial feminist theory and informed by concepts of subalternity, intersectionality, and linguistic resistance, the study reveals that these works not only expose women's marginalization but also articulate pathways of resistance, often through nuanced and symbolic acts. Narrative structures, such as fragmented timelines, shifting perspectives, and minimalist prose, are employed as political tools to challenge dominant discourses and re-center female subjectivity. The findings emphasize that postcolonial feminist fiction functions as both critique and reclamation, providing critical insight into the lived experiences of women in postcolonial societies and contributing to global feminist thought grounded in cultural specificity.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJFMR.2025.6.1.235-239>

Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Female Servility, Resistance, Intersectionality, Narrative Structure, Gender, Subaltern, Colonialism, Patriarchy, Women's Agency

1. Introduction

The representation of women in postcolonial literature has emerged as a crucial site of feminist inquiry. As postcolonial societies grapple with the legacies of imperial domination, the figure of the woman often embodies a double colonization subjected not only to foreign rule but also to indigenous patriarchal structures. Postcolonial feminist fiction, written predominantly by women from formerly colonized societies, interrogates this intersection of oppression. These narratives expose how women's servility is socially constructed through economic dependency, religious morality, cultural expectations, and gendered norms.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) serve as foundational texts in this tradition. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta portrays Nnu Ego, a woman who sacrifices her identity and autonomy for the culturally constructed ideal of motherhood. Her servility is not only normalized by tradition but also exacerbated by colonial capitalist structures. Emecheta critiques this romanticization of motherhood, revealing it as a mechanism of both societal validation and personal erasure.

Similarly, in *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga explores the psychological and structural oppression of women through the protagonist Tambu and her cousin Nyasha. Tambu's journey toward education is framed as liberation, but it simultaneously reproduces the patriarchal and colonial values she seeks to escape. Nyasha, who has lived in England, offers a counterpoint her struggle with bulimia and rebellion reflects the internal violence of cultural dislocation. As Dangarembga writes, "I was not sorry when my brother died," a radical opening that disrupts familial loyalty and foreshadows her feminist awakening (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 1).

Statement of the Problem

While a substantial body of postcolonial literature critiques colonial domination, the gendered dimensions of this critique are often underexplored. Women's roles are frequently confined to servile identities wives, mothers, domestic workers without sufficient recognition of their resistance or complexity. There remains a gap in understanding how servility is depicted not as a passive condition but as a contested and evolving identity in fiction written by postcolonial women writers.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

- Examine the portrayal of women as servile subjects in selected postcolonial feminist novels.
- Analyze the thematic and narrative strategies employed by authors to critique servility.
- Explore how characters negotiate, internalize, or resist their servile positions within familial, cultural, and socio-political frameworks.

Research Questions

- How is female servility constructed and represented in postcolonial feminist fiction?
- In what ways do women characters challenge or resist their subjugation?
- What narrative and stylistic techniques do authors use to convey resistance?

Scope and Delimitation

The study focuses on five seminal postcolonial feminist novels:

- *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria)
- *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe)
- *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria)
- *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (India)
- *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa (Pakistan)

These texts are selected for their rich portrayal of women lived experiences in postcolonial societies and their contributions to feminist thought. While the study draws on broader postcolonial and feminist theories, it does not extend into Francophone or Lusophone literatures due to linguistic limitations.

Literature Review

The literature on postcolonial feminist fiction is vast and evolving. This chapter situates the present study within the broader theoretical and critical context. It surveys foundational texts in postcolonial and feminist theory, examines scholarly analyses of key novels, and identifies the

conceptual frameworks relevant to understanding the depiction of female servility and resistance. The literature review is organized around three thematic strands: (1) Postcolonial Feminist Theory, (2) Representations of Female Servility, and (3) Narrative Strategies of Resistance.

Postcolonial feminist theory

Postcolonial feminist theory critiques the ways in which both colonialism and patriarchy have historically silenced and marginalized women. A central concern of the field is the concept of "double colonization", a term used to describe the intersection of imperialism and gender oppression. Mohanty (1988) argues that Western feminist scholarship often homogenizes Third World women, portraying them as passive victims rather than agents of change. She calls for a feminist praxis that is historically and culturally situated, challenging essentialist depictions of non-Western women. Similarly, Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) ^[13] interrogates the possibility of recovering the voice of the colonized woman. Spivak emphasizes that subalternity is not merely a political category but an epistemological barrier that renders some lives unintelligible within dominant discourses. Her critique urges scholars to remain skeptical of claims to "give voice" to the oppressed, advocating instead for ethical representation. Loomba (2015) ^[7] underscores the entanglement of colonial discourse with gender hierarchies. She explores how colonial ideologies constructed native women as symbols of cultural purity or backwardness, justifying intervention and domination. Postcolonial feminist fiction, therefore, must be read as a form of counter-discourse that reclaims narrative authority.

Representations of female servility in fiction

Fiction by postcolonial women writers often dramatizes the multifaceted nature of servility. Scholars have read Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* as a critique of motherhood as a culturally mandated form of servitude. Stratton (1994) ^[14] argues that Emecheta exposes how women's reproductive labor is romanticized to sustain patriarchal and colonial economies. Nnu Ego's self-sacrificial role illustrates how servility is internalized through familial and societal expectation. In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's narrative is often interpreted as a Bildungsroman of feminist awakening. Mudhwe (2005) ^[9] asserts that Dangarembga presents servility as a learned behavior, transmitted through generational norms and reinforced by colonial education. Tambu's rejection of traditional female roles signals a rejection of this inherited servitude. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* has been analyzed for its portrayal of domestic servitude and religious patriarchy. Ogunyemi (2012) ^[12] highlights the character of Beatrice as emblematic of the silenced Nigerian wife, noting that her eventual act of rebellion represents both trauma and agency.

Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has been widely studied for its portrayal of caste and gender oppression. Roy uses Ammu's transgressive sexuality to critique the moral policing of women's bodies. Ghosh (2004) ^[5] explores how the novel's fragmented narrative structure reflects the shattered identities of its female characters.

Narrative strategies and linguistic resistance

Postcolonial feminist writers often employ narrative and linguistic experimentation to resist dominant literary

conventions. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) ^[10] has famously advocated for linguistic decolonization, arguing that language is a site of cultural power. Although he writes from a male perspective, his insights inform the ways in which feminist authors challenge English's colonial legacy. Roy's use of poetic, non-linear prose disrupts realism, creating a textual space that reflects the dislocation of her characters. As Nixon (1998) ^[11] argues, Roy's formal innovations are political gestures acts of resistance against literary conformity and cultural erasure. Dangarembga's evolving first-person narration mirrors Tambu's growing consciousness, while Emecheta's spare, direct style underscores the psychological and emotional weight of servitude. These narrative forms are not neutral; they are tools that reshape the reader's perception and offer counter-hegemonic knowledge.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This is a qualitative, interpretive study based on close textual analysis. The aim is not to generalize findings, but to understand how servility is constructed and contested in specific literary contexts. A feminist-postcolonial lens is used to evaluate the roles, representations, and resistances of women in fictional narratives. The research is thematic, textual, and contextual, focusing on both content and form.

Method of data collection

The primary data for this research comprises five novels written by postcolonial female authors from Africa and South Asia:

- The Joys of Motherhood by Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria)
- Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe)
- Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria)
- The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (India)
- Cracking India by Bapsi Sidhwa (Pakistan)

These novels were selected based on the following criteria:

- Authorship by postcolonial female writers
- Thematic focus on gender, servility, and resistance
- Recognition within postcolonial feminist literary discourse

Secondary data includes scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays on postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and the individual authors studied. These are used to support and contextualize the literary analysis.

Analytical Framework

The analysis uses two main strategies:

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis helps identify recurring motifs and patterns relating to:

- Domestic servitude
- Economic dependence
- Sexual subjugation
- Cultural and religious conformity
- Acts of resistance and rebellion

By organizing data into themes, the study explores how servility operates as a gendered construct within postcolonial societies and how it intersects with class, caste, religion, and

race.

Narrative Analysis

This approach examines how narrative structure, voice, language, and temporality influence meaning. For instance:

- Non-linear storytelling in Roy's *The God of Small Things* is read as a form of resistance.
- Emecheta's plain and direct prose is interpreted as highlighting internal servility.
- First-person narration in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is analyzed as a reflection of evolving consciousness.

Narrative choices are treated as political strategies that critique dominant literary and cultural paradigms.

Theoretical Lens

The methodology is underpinned by postcolonial feminist theory, drawing particularly on:

- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern and epistemic violence (1988) ^[6]
- Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism (1988)
- Ania Loomba's exploration of gendered colonial power structures (2015)

These frameworks help contextualize literary representations within broader discourses of power, resistance, and identity.

Limitations of the study

- The study focuses exclusively on Anglophone literature, thus excluding valuable contributions from Francophone, Lusophone, or vernacular traditions.
- The sample is limited to five texts, which may not capture the full diversity of postcolonial feminist fiction.
- Interpretations are inherently subjective and shaped by the researcher's perspective, though guided by established theory.

Discussion and Analysis

This chapter presents a critical examination of how female servility and resistance are portrayed in five postcolonial feminist novels. The analysis draws attention to the ways in which women are subjugated by patriarchal and colonial legacies, and how they respond through various forms of defiance, both subtle and overt. The discussion is organized thematically across the texts, focusing on domestic servitude, economic dependence, sexual subjugation, and narrative resistance.

Domestic Servitude and Gender Roles

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist Nnu Ego epitomizes the cultural ideal of womanhood as defined by motherhood and domestic endurance. Her life revolves entirely around serving her husband, children, and extended family. Despite her sacrifices, she gains neither respect nor security, exposing the hollowness of traditional expectations. Her servility is internalized, manifesting in her unquestioning belief in the virtue of suffering.

Similarly, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice is confined within the role of the submissive wife. Her domestic servitude is normalized by religious and societal narratives that equate silence with virtue. Her daily routine is built around sustaining the illusion of a peaceful, moral household, even

in the face of her husband's violent authoritarianism.

Ayah in *Cracking India* is another figure trapped in domesticity, though not by marriage. As a servant, she navigates multiple roles nanny, friend, sexual object each of which reinforces her subordinated status. Her emotional labor is unrecognized, and her autonomy is slowly eroded as the narrative progresses.

Economic dependence as a mechanism of control

Economic servility is a recurring motif across the texts. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's financial dependence on her husband and the broader colonial economy renders her powerless. Despite her hard work, she remains in a cycle of poverty and subjugation, revealing how colonial capitalism and traditional patriarchy collude in sustaining women's economic marginalization.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's family poverty initially prevents her education, a tool that could liberate her. Even when she gains access, it comes with ideological strings attached. The apparent opportunity for upward mobility is embedded in systems that perpetuate gendered expectations. Beatrice's lack of economic independence in *Purple Hibiscus* reinforces her inability to leave her abusive marriage. Her eventual act of rebellion is catalyzed by cumulative oppression rather than financial empowerment. The narrative underscores the material dimensions of female servility, showing how control over resources reinforces male dominance.

Religious and cultural morality as tools of subjugation

Religion and culture are portrayed as double-edged swords that preserve patriarchal order under the guise of moral instruction. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene's Catholicism sanctions his control over his family, turning religious piety into an instrument of fear. Beatrice and Kambili are taught to associate suffering with spiritual reward, suppressing any impulse toward autonomy. In *The God of Small Things*, cultural and religious values serve as mechanisms of exclusion. Ammu's illicit love affair is condemned not merely for breaking social norms but for violating caste and family honor. Her punishment is not legal but cultural ostracization, shame, and erasure. Religion becomes a moral code that maintains gendered boundaries, policing female desire and agency.

Servility and the female body

The body becomes a central site of servility in these narratives. Ayah's beauty in *Cracking India* makes her both adored and objectified. Her body is consumed emotionally and sexually, yet never seen as her own. As violence escalates, her physical vulnerability becomes symbolic of the broader exploitation of women during national crises.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's body is the site of transgression. Her decision to assert sexual autonomy is framed as rebellion, but the social consequences are devastating. Her love becomes an act of resistance, but also of social suicide.

Motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* is portrayed as physically taxing and emotionally draining. Nnu Ego's identity is inextricably tied to her reproductive function. Her body is a vessel of sacrifice, denied pleasure, choice, or rest. Even her death occurs in anonymity, symbolizing the erasure of women who give their lives in service of societal expectations.

Forms of Resistance: Subtle and Overt

Despite the systemic servility they face, the women in these novels are not passive victims. They engage in various forms of resistance some symbolic, others direct. In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's pursuit of education marks a break from generational servility. Though she confronts contradictions and compromises, her intellectual growth signifies a departure from blind conformity. Beatrice's eventual poisoning of her husband in *Purple Hibiscus* is a radical act cloaked in silence. It is not glorified, but presented as a desperate reclaiming of agency. Her resistance is a final, irreversible assertion of self-worth. Ammu's brief relationship with Velutha in *The God of Small Things* defies the layered hierarchies of caste, gender, and family. Her transgression is framed not as recklessness but as the pursuit of joy in a world that denies her humanity.

Even Ayah, after enduring violation and abduction, returns with a hardened sense of autonomy. Though she speaks little, her physical withdrawal from affection and her emotional detachment suggest a psychological resistance to re-subjugation.

Narrative structure as a political tool

The authors' use of narrative structure itself acts as a mode of resistance. Roy's fragmented storytelling, filled with poetic digressions and non-linear time, resists the constraints of realist tradition. This structure mirrors the chaotic, interrupted lives of her characters and challenges the reader to rethink conventional storytelling. Dangarembga uses first-person narration to chart Tambu's evolution from obedience to self-awareness. The language and tone mature as Tambu's perspective deepens, signaling the internal process of resistance. Emecheta's straightforward, minimalist style underscores the emotional weight of Nnu Ego's existence. The sparseness of her prose heightens the starkness of servitude, refusing to romanticize or dramatize it.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the representation of women as servile subjects in postcolonial feminist fiction and to uncover the nuanced ways in which female characters resist and redefine their roles within patriarchal and colonial frameworks. Through a qualitative thematic and narrative analysis of five seminal novels, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Nervous Conditions*, *Purple Hibiscus*, *The God of Small Things*, and *Cracking India*, the research illuminated how servility is constructed, internalized, and, ultimately, contested. The findings reveal that servility manifests through domestic confinement, economic dependence, religious obedience, and bodily control. However, these conditions are neither accepted passively nor portrayed as inescapable. Each narrative presents distinct forms of resistance, from overt rebellion to subtle acts of self-assertion, highlighting the agency of women even in constrained environments. Moreover, the study demonstrates how narrative form itself serves as a political tool with language, structure, and voice working to subvert dominant literary and ideological paradigms. The intersectional perspective adopted here further shows how servility is shaped not just by gender, but by class, caste, race, and religion.

References

1. Dangarembga T. *Nervous Conditions*. Ayebia Clarke Publishing; 2004.
2. Emecheta B. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Heinemann; 1979.
3. Dangarembga T. *Nervous Conditions*. Ayebia Clarke Publishing; 2004.
4. Emecheta B. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Heinemann; 1979.
5. Ghosh A. Postcoloniality and the politics of feminism. *Feminist Review*. 2004;78(1):123–134.
6. Jajja MH. Gendered violence and partition: A reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*. *Pakistaniaat*. 2013;5(1):19–30.
7. Loomba A. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge; 2015.
8. Mohanty CT. Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*. 1988;30:61–88.
9. Mudehwe B. Resistance and submission in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. *Zambezia*. 2005;32(2):85–98.
10. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann; 1986.
11. Nixon R. The intersections of gender and postcolonialism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Interventions*. 1998;1(1):30–44.
12. Ogunyemi CO. Domestic tyranny and resistance in *Purple Hibiscus*. *Research in African Literatures*. 2012;43(2):95–113.
13. Spivak GC. Can the subaltern speak? In: Williams P, Chrisman L, editors. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*. Columbia University Press; 1988. p. 66–111.
14. Stratton F. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Routledge; 1994.