

**Comparing Colonialisms: A Transnational Study of Resistance in Mahasweta Devi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.**

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<https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.21203/rs.3.rs-52569469/v2/I2/GNTKS>**Review: 08/07/2025****Acceptance:20/07/2025****Publication:14/08/2025****ABSTRACT**

The colonial experience and its afterlives have shaped the literatures of the Global South in profound ways. Writers like **Mahasweta Devi** from India and **Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o** from Kenya have emerged as critical voices in articulating the struggles of marginalized communities under colonial and neo-colonial regimes. Despite their different geographical and cultural contexts, both authors converge in their commitment to foregrounding subaltern resistance, critiquing the failures of post-independence states, and reclaiming indigenous cultural epistemologies. This research seeks to conduct a comparative, transnational analysis of their works to explore how literature becomes a site of resistance against structures of domination—both colonial and internal.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Neo-colonialism, Subaltern Resistance, Marginalisation, folk and oral traditions etc.

**Introduction**

Colonial rule continued after India's 1947 Union Jack drop and Kenya's 1963 flag rise. The post-independence nation-state, global capital, and domestic hierarchies of caste, class, ethnicity, and gender reshaped imperial violence. Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) from eastern India and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-2025) from Kenya are pioneers in literary advocacy against these regimes. Both authors use fiction, folklore, and orature to show how external colonialism almost seamlessly enters the “pitfalls of national consciousness” as pointed out by Franz Fanon, where local elites inherit and intensify dispossession structures.

The Global South's literary traditions have been significantly influenced by colonialism and its aftermath. The sufferings of oppressed communities under colonial and neo-colonial regimes have been articulated by writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o from Kenya and Mahasweta Devi from India. Both writers are dedicated to highlighting subaltern resistance, criticizing the shortcomings of post-independence regimes, and recovering indigenous cultural epistemologies, despite their disparate geographic and cultural backgrounds. To investigate how literature might serve as a site of resistance against colonial and internal institutions of domination, this study aims to provide a comparative, transnational analysis of their works.

This paper undertakes a comparative literary study of Mahasweta Devi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—two towering figures of postcolonial literature and activism—who have written with unflinching clarity about the violence of both colonial and postcolonial regimes. Although writing from vastly different geopolitical and cultural contexts—India and Kenya—their works are united by a common political imperative: to recover subaltern agency, to resist the erasures of colonial modernity, and to critique the failures of nationalist liberation.

By analyzing selected works—such as Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Aranyer Adhikar*, and Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*—this study explores how each author crafts counter-narratives by folklore, oral traditions, gendered resistance, and indigenous epistemologies. Particular attention is paid to how both authors subvert colonial languages and reclaim cultural expression: Devi through her rootedness in tribal idioms and Bengali, and Ngũgĩ through his radical shift to writing in Gikuyu.

Postcolonial criticism has traditionally framed resistance within national boundaries, yet recent “world-systems” and Global-South comparative approaches insist on reading anti-imperial texts across regions (Friedman 2010). Mahasweta Devi's scholarship has focused on tribal insurgency and gendered resistance (Spivak 1981; Menon 2004), while Ngũgĩ studies foreground language politics and the betrayal of Mau Mau ideals (Gikandi 2000). Very few full-lengths works, however, place these writers in dialogue to illuminate convergent strategies of dissent. By synthesizing Subaltern Studies' insights on internal colonialism (Chatterjee 1993) with Barbara Harlow's notion of resistance literature as an intervention in historical struggle (Harlow 1987), this study bridges that gap, reading Devi's *Draupadi*, *The Hunt* and *Aranyer Adhikar* alongside Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*.

Devi uses the persistent eviction of Adivasi people as a lens through which to view the brutality of the British and Indian governments. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, colonial timber policies reverberate in the post-1947 expropriation of tribal territory for mining, turning the forest into a juridic-economic battlefield. Birsa Munda is imprisoned by the British, and his successors are imprisoned by the Indian Forest Department. The bloodshed is ongoing, but the flag has changed. An analogous arc is depicted in Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood*, when

African bourgeoisie replace European colonizers by razing communal lands to make way for tourist hotels. Therefore, both authors reject triumphalist liberation narratives, revealing nationalism as a relay in the machinery of empire rather than a rupture.

Devi critiques not only historical colonialism but also internal colonization under the post-independence Indian state—particularly in its dealings with tribal communities. In “Draupadi” (Dopdi Mejhen) the state (through the army) acts as a colonial force, using sexual violence as a tool of control. Dopdi becomes a symbol of embodied resistance, refusing to be shamed by her nudity. In “Aranyer Adhikar” British colonialism is exposed through the life of **Birsa Munda**, but Devi also critiques the state's betrayal of Adivasiautonomy after independence. Devi expands the definition of colonial violence to include postcolonial state actions that replicate exploitative colonial patterns.

Ngũgĩ begins with critiques of British colonialism and shifts to attacking Kenya's neocolonial elite, who continue the oppression of the masses under new form. In the “Petals of Blood” he Exposes how newly independent Kenya betrays its liberation ideals and how Neo-colonial elites mimic colonial exploiters by enriching themselves while the poor remain oppressed. While the “Devil on the Cross” is a grotesque satire of Kenya's bourgeoisie who sell their nation's soul to international capitalism. Global imperialism is now mediated through local comprador classes. Ngũgĩ moves from anti-colonial realism to radical allegory, exposing the violence of capitalism and political betrayal in postcolonial Kenya.

Ngũgĩ creates characters who navigate the pressures of ethnicity, class exploitation, and colonial hangovers, with varying levels of resistance and complicity. Wanja (in “Petals of Blood”) A woman who is sexually and economically exploited, but later chooses to murder a corrupt capitalist, symbolizing radical personal-political resistance. Jacinta (in “Devil on the Cross”) Represents working-class struggle; she becomes a voice of revolutionary critique against Kenya's comprador elite. Mugo (in “A Grain of Wheat”) a complex figure who betrays the freedom movement; symbolizes moral ambiguity and the difficulty of ethical resistance in colonial conditions. Ngũgĩ's characters offer a spectrum—from betrayal to radicalization—showing that resistance is both an internal and social struggle.

Imperialism's most enduring weapon, Fanon argues, is epistemic: it “turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (170). Devi and Ngũgĩ answer by re-centring indigenous oral forms inside the Euro-derived novel. *Aranyer Adhikar* opens with a Munda creation myth that reinscribes the forest as sacred commons, not commodity. Throughout the text Devi inserts songs—often untranslated—forcing the Anglophone reader into an encounter with linguistic otherness (Devi, *Aranyer* 12-13).

Ngũgĩ goes further, dismantling the novel's bourgeois interiority by structuring Devil on the Cross as a Gikuyu *gĩcaandĩ* (oral storytelling session). The narrator repeatedly addresses “my friends and enemies,” soliciting communal judgment (Ngũgĩ, *Devil* 3). This orature rescues agency from the solitary author and relocates it with a collective audience, echoing Ngũgĩ's own turn to Gikuyu theater and the Kamĩrĩĩthũ community plays that led to his imprisonment. Form thus becomes praxis: the text performs the decolonizing gesture it advocates.

Both Mahasweta Devi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o use distinct literary tools—such as symbolism, folklore, oral traditions, and character construction—to centre subaltern resistance and dismantle hegemonic narratives. The Naked Body (in *Draupadi*):

Dopdi's refusal to clothe herself after rape transforms her body into a symbol of resistance—subverting the expected shame imposed by patriarchal violence. “What more can you do to me?” becomes a symbolic rupture of state control. The Arrow (in *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*) is both a mythic object and historical weapon, symbolizing tribal identity, continuity, and survival across time and oppression. The Devil's Banquet (in *Devil on the Cross*) a grotesque parody where elites boast of exploiting their people—symbolizing the absurdity and brutality of neocolonial capitalism. The Cross: Represents the burden of neo-colonial betrayal and internalized suffering, linking personal and national struggle. Both use symbolism not as decorative devices but as radical interventions—imbuing resistance with moral, mythic, and political urgency.

Draws from tribal myths, oral tales, and belief systems, Devi often integrating them seamlessly into her narratives. By subverting the mythological Draupadi from The Mahabharata, she crafts Dopdi as a symbol of defiance and resistance. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Birsa Munda is not just a historical figure but is mythologized—becoming a folk hero of resistance. In The Hunt story she has subverting the ritual of Hunting Festival of tribals into the act of revenge. *Chotti Munda* blends time loops and legends, showing how memory and folklore sustain identity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o uses Gikuyu oral traditions, proverbs, fables, and folk storytelling to reclaim cultural agency. *Devil on the Cross* is structured like a traditional oral tale—with audience interruptions, repetitions, and participatory narration. Reclaims pre-colonial African storytelling as a decolonial act. Both writers use folklore to elevate the subaltern from object to narrator—making oral traditions a form of historiography.

Mahasweta Devi mimics oral speech patterns of tribal communities. Often incorporates songs, chants, lamentations, or repetitive phrases, keeping the rhythm of the oral tradition alive. In *Rudali*, the professional mourners' wailing becomes a performative protest,

turning caste-imposed grief into economic and emotional agency. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o uses oral forms such as call-and-response, riddles, community judgment scenes, and performance structure. In *Petals of Blood*, the communal storytelling acts as collective memory against elitenarratives. Encourages "orature" (oral literature) as a weapon to decolonize knowledge and reclaim African epistemologies. Orality becomes a weapon of memory, resistance, and counter-history in both traditions.

Devi's characters often represent the "unseen" India—Adivasis, Dalits, landless women—yet are deeply personal and humanized, never romanticized. Characters like Dopdi, Sanichari, and Chotti Munda are constructed through layers of historical trauma, caste, and gender, yet they assert agency. Devi's protagonists rarely achieve legal victory, yet they seize moral terrain. She uses symbolic resistance rather than heroic triumph—most of her protagonists endure rather than win. In *'Draupadi'* Dopdi weaponizes her wounded body; Sanichari (in "Rudali") Transforms her caste-imposed role of mourning into economic independence, subtly inverting patriarchal expectations. Chotti Munda mythologizes survival itself. Devi's decision to leave Dopdi alive but defiant frustrates the reader's desire for resolution, underscoring the ongoing nature of struggle (Spivak 104-05).

Ngũgĩ's Characters like Wanjia (*Petals of Blood*) and Jacinta (*Devil on the Cross*) shift from suffering to active rebellion—often dramatizing the political awakening of the subaltern. Ngũgĩ frequently uses collective protagonists, showing that resistance must be social, not individual. He moves beyond survival to active insurrection, assassinating a capitalist exploiter in a climactic rejection of respectability politics. The divergence is instructive: Devi dramatizes resilience in a caste-stratified democracy where open revolt is routinely crushed, whereas Ngũgĩ, haunted by Mau Mau's incomplete revolution, scripts characters who cross the Rubicon into armed resistance. Both, however, insist that subalterns are historical agents, not ethnographic objects.

Ngũgĩ's characters, shaped by the unfinished Mau Mau revolt, often move from disillusion to militant action. Wanjia in *Petals of Blood* begins as a barmaid navigating patriarchal economies; she ends by orchestrating the burning of a neo-colonial factory, an act that collapses gendered exploitation into class war (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 365-70). Karega, once a passive schoolteacher, embraces labour organizing, echoing Ngũgĩ's own advocacy of proletarian internationalism. Agency here is collective and future-oriented, signalled by the novel's ambiguous closing question "Who, then, is the enemy?"—that implicates reader and nation alike (372). Devi's characters resist through moral courage and survival; Ngũgĩ's through political radicalization and class solidarity.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Mahasweta Devi agree on one point: literature is both a witness and a weapon in the fight for decolonization, which is still an unfinished affair. In addition to providing visual models for resistance, they reveal the connections between colonial and post-colonial violence through radical symbolism, recovered orature, and unyielding depictions of subaltern protagonists. In addition to expanding the geography of postcolonial studies, reading them together creates a map of an ethics of solidarity throughout the Global South, where songs sung in Gikuyu coincide with arrows fired in Jharkhand and where the fight for land, language, and dignity defies all the lures of border empires

Placed side by side, Devi and Ngũgĩ reveal convergent structures of oppression—land theft, patriarchal militarism, comprador elites—upheld by the legal and linguistic residues of empire. Yet their divergences matter. India's caste hierarchy adds a sedimented layer of exclusion absent in Kenya, shaping Devi's emphasis on social death and survival. Kenya's explicit alignment with Cold-War capitalism produces Ngũgĩ's sharper focus on global finance and class antagonism. Language politics, too, diverge: Devi writes in Bengali but allows English translation to circulate her texts transnationally, a strategic cosmopolitanism; Ngũgĩ abandons English altogether, arguing that "African literature can only be written in African languages" (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising* 26). These differences illuminate how local histories inflect a shared neo-colonial condition, reminding us that decolonization must be context-specific even as it forges global solidarities.

### **Conclusion**

Mahasweta Devi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o expose the fiction of post-colonial arrival. Through stark realism and satiric allegory, through the recuperation of myth and the reinvention of narrative voice, they reveal how sovereignty in the South often extends rather than ends empire. Yet their texts also model resistance: the naked body that refuses shame, the carnival that mocks capital, the oral tale that resurrects communal authority, and the character who chooses insurgency over accommodation. Reading them together enlarges postcolonial critique beyond territorial borders, mapping a circuit of struggle that stretches from the forests of Jharkhand to the highlands of Kenya. Their literature insists that decolonization is not a date on a calendar but a practice—a continuous labor of exposing power, reclaiming memory, and imagining alternative futures.



Both authors expose continuities between colonial and postcolonial violence and show how subaltern characters resist, adapt, or collapse under systems of oppression. While Devi emphasizes the moral resilience of tribal and Dalit communities, Ngũgĩ underscores collective revolutionary action against global and local capital.

Mahasweta Devi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o do not just write about resistance—they embody it in their literary forms. By using symbolism, folklore, oral tradition, and radical character construction, they disrupt elite literary norms **and** foreground subaltern voices as agents of history, not victims of it. Their work illustrates how form itself can be a method of decolonization. Ultimately, the paper seeks to position Devi and Ngũgĩ as architects of a transnational decolonial praxis, whose writings invite a reimagining of solidarity and struggle across the Global South.

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