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POWER, VOICE, AND POLIS: REREADING LEADERSHIP THROUGH CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article rereads leadership in contemporary African postcolonial literature through the interconnected concepts of power, voice, and the polis. It argues that African writers deploy literature as a socio-political archive to interrogate authoritarian governance, corruption, militarism, gender exclusion, and the betrayal of nationalist ideals in post-independence societies. Grounded in postcolonial theory, the study analyses selected texts by Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo, Helon Habila, Wole Soyinka, and Mandla Langa. The analysis identifies three critical interventions. First, power is consistently represented as authoritarian, personalized, and neo-colonial, yet literary texts expose its specific technologies of control and imagine modalities of counter-governmentality. Second, voice functions as a primary mode of resistance, with writers reclaiming indigenous languages and marginalized narratives to restore civic audibility and collective agency. Third, the polis is depicted as unstable due to ethnic tension, economic inequality, and patriarchal exclusion, but is simultaneously reconfigured as a recoverable civic space founded on inclusiveness, gender equity, and accountability. The study concludes that contemporary African postcolonial literature exceeds mere reflection. It preserves civic memory, challenges structures of domination, and projects alternative ethical futures for leadership centered on responsibility, inclusiveness, and participatory citizenship.

Keywords: power, voice, polis, postcolonial leadership, African literature, governance, resistance

Introduction

The relationship between literature and leadership has been central to African postcolonial discourse since independence. African writers have consistently used literary expression to interrogate contradictions of post-independence governance, exposing gaps between nationalist ideals and political practice. As Esu Tadele (2026) observes, literature remains our most potent political laboratory because fiction is not escapism but an intellectual forge where proposed political arrangements are tested on invented lives before they are inflicted on real ones. Contemporary African postcolonial literature registers ongoing anxieties about dictatorship, corruption, economic exploitation, ethnic division, and democratic fragility. Within this framework, literature functions less as detached aesthetic production and more as civic intervention in the political life of the polis. Tadele further frames Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo as offering architectural blueprints for the African future: Achebe's pragmatic reformism versus Ngũgĩ's Marxist revolutionary overhaul, thereby positioning literary texts as sites where competing models of postcolonial governance are imagined, tested, and critiqued before they materialize in political reality.

The polis, from classical political philosophy, denotes the organized civic community where citizens engage in governance and public life. In contemporary African literature, the polis is depicted as a fractured space marked by unequal power relations and contested identities. Writers return to this civic arena to question who wields power, whose voices gain audibility, and how leadership can be reimagined in postcolonial societies. Scholarship affirms that the crisis of leadership remains a defining challenge for the continent, and that literature provides a critical platform for exposing governance failures and the abuse of political authority. Through strategies such as satire, allegory, realism, and testimonial narration, writers convert fiction into political commentary that interrogates both the architecture of the state and the ethical responsibilities of citizenship. Recent research further emphasizes that inclusive governance that engages all members of society—including often marginalized groups such as women and youth—is essential for achieving sustainable peace and growth, yet societies around the world, including those in Africa, continue to grapple with significant challenges in this area, a tension that African postcolonial literature persistently dramatises.

The postcolonial literary project of Black writers is characterized by dismantling colonial myths and constructing counter-histories that restore agency to marginalized subjects. This project draws on theoretical frameworks that foreground the psychological and epistemic violence of colonial discourse [Fanon, 1961; Said, 1978]. Achebe's critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and his reconstruction of an autonomous Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* exemplify this decolonial impulse. Likewise, Morrison's *Beloved* reclaims erased African American histories by reasserting narrative agency. Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind* [1986] contends that language operates as a primary instrument of colonial control, making linguistic decolonization a cultural imperative. Recent scholarship reaffirms Ngũgĩ's intervention as a radical challenge to postcolonial literary establishments, especially in foregrounding African languages and epistemologies [Amoko, 2023]. Tebogo Daniel (2024) reinforces this position by observing that African literature has long served as a powerful medium for confronting colonial legacies, challenging stereotypes, and asserting the cultural identities of its people, and that Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's literary activism and insistence on writing in native languages... epitomize the rejection of cultural erasure imposed by colonialism.

This article therefore investigates how contemporary African postcolonial literature rereads leadership through the interconnected concepts of power, voice, and polis. It contends that African writers not only critique failed leadership but also foreground the agency of ordinary citizens whose voices contest oppressive structures. By analyzing selected texts, the study shows that literature functions as a site of resistance, democratic engagement, and ethical reconstruction. Drawing on recent scholarship, the paper argues that African writers deploy literature as a socio-political archive that preserves civic memory while simultaneously projecting alternative ethical futures for governance.

Conceptual Clarifications

Power

In postcolonial African literature, power refers to the capacity of political elites, institutions, and social actors to influence governance, control resources, and shape public discourse. Yet power is rarely represented positively. It is consistently linked to authoritarianism, militarism, exploitation, and corruption. Writers portray political power as alienating leaders from citizens and transforming the postcolonial state into an instrument of oppression. Recent scholarship on *Anthills of the Savannah* identifies specific technologies of postcolonial dictatorial governance such as the criminalization of dissent, rhetorical authoritarianism, and the instrumentalization of education for elite formation [Taylor, 2023]. This critique is extended by journalist Stephanie Shaakaa (2024), who contends that when independence came in 1960, we did not dismantle this machine; we just changed the color of the hands on the levers. The new elite stepped into the old offices... and inherited the same extractive privileges. Shaakaa further argues that oil turned Nigeria into a rentier state, transforming government from an engine of public service into a monthly scramble to divide a central pot of cash, thereby revealing the material and structural continuity of neo-colonial extraction after independence. Literature further reveals the continuity of neo-colonial structures after independence, whereby leaders who opposed colonialism often reproduce exclusionary violence. The literary representation of power thus exposes not only individual authoritarianism but also the institutional logics inherited from colonial bureaucracy that continue to structure postcolonial governance.

Voice

Voice refers to the capacity of individuals and communities to articulate realities, contest oppression, and participate in civic discourse. In African literature, voice operates as an instrument of resistance against silencing and political marginalization. Recovering indigenous voices is crucial within postcolonial theory because colonialism systematically suppressed African histories, languages, and identities. Scholars stress that writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe emphasized reclaiming African voices from colonial domination. Ngũgĩ's advocacy for writing in Gikuyu exemplifies linguistic decolonization as a political act aimed at restoring African consciousness and democratic participation. As Daniel (2024) argues, African literature functions as a powerful medium for confronting colonial legacies, challenging stereotypes, and asserting the cultural identities of its people, with Ngũgĩ's practice epitomizing the rejection of cultural erasure imposed by colonialism. Literature thus becomes a medium through which suppressed voices confront cultural and political erasure. A 2024 study in *Comparative Literature: East & West* further demonstrates that contemporary literature operates as both an aesthetic form and a mode of social advocacy, transforming narrative innovation into a critical intervention in global discourses on justice, race, and humanity, particularly through narrative strategies such as first-person linear narrative within young adult fiction to foreground lived experience and youth resistance. This finding resonates with African postcolonial texts where narrative form itself becomes a political act of voicing marginalized experience.

Polis

The polis signifies the civic community and political environment within which leadership and citizenship operate. In African postcolonial literature, the polis is often portrayed as unstable due to ethnic tensions, state violence, economic inequality, and weak democratic institutions. Despite these crises, literature imagines the polis as a recoverable space where ethical governance and civic participation remain possible. Current scholarship on gender and the polis further argues that reconfiguring civic space requires expanding participation beyond elite male dominance [Asuzu, 2021; Lawal, 2020]. This imperative is underscored by recent research emphasizing that inclusive governance that engages all members of society—including often marginalized groups such as women and youth—is essential for achieving

sustainable peace and growth, yet societies around the world, including those in Africa, continue to grapple with significant challenges in this area. A recent Springer volume, *Women and Leadership in Africa*, documents the paradox that women continue to achieve remarkable educational successes while confronting enduring obstacles to the authentic acknowledgment of their leadership within the spheres of power. The polis in African literature therefore emerges as a contested terrain where patriarchal exclusion, ethnic division, and economic inequality fracture civic life, but where writers also imagine new models of participatory citizenship and accountability. The literary polis is thus both a diagnosis of democratic failure and a projection of civic possibility.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts postcolonial theory as its analytical framework. Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, political, and economic consequences of colonialism and how formerly colonized societies negotiate identity and power after independence. Thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offer critical insights into structures of domination that persist beyond formal colonial rule. The framework is relevant because contemporary African literature frequently critiques neo-colonial governance, elite betrayal, and institutional corruption. It also emphasizes resistance, identity reconstruction, and the recovery of marginalized voices. Through postcolonial analysis, literary texts are read as political interventions that expose contradictions within African nationhood and leadership. Recent scholarship on epistemologies of power in Africa further demonstrates that formerly primitivized cultural formations that evaluate political leadership in cosmological terms gain new momentum as genuinely alternative definitions of legitimate power, suggesting that postcolonial literature must also engage indigenous conceptualizations of authority beyond Western secular models of the state.

Leadership and the Crisis of the Postcolonial State

A recurring theme in African postcolonial literature is the collapse of nationalist ideals after independence. Many leaders who emerged as liberators became authoritarian rulers detached from citizen needs. Writers depict post-independence governments as corrupt systems sustained by violence, propaganda, and patronage. In *A Man of the People* [1966], Achebe satirizes political leadership through Chief Nanga, a corrupt politician who manipulates public resources for personal gain. The novel reveals how political office becomes a means of wealth accumulation rather than public service, showing that postcolonial leadership often reproduces colonial patterns of exploitation. This literary diagnosis is corroborated by empirical research: Njangang, Asongu, and Mouchili (2024) demonstrate that countries with higher levels of executive, legislative, and judicial corruption are associated with a higher level of hunger. Executive corruption is the most disastrous for hunger in Africa, followed by legislative corruption. Their findings reveal the material consequences of the leadership crisis dramatized in Achebe's fiction, where corruption is not merely moral failure but a structural mechanism that reproduces poverty and disenfranchisement.

Similarly, *Anthills of the Savannah* [1987] presents a military regime that suppresses dissent and centralizes power. Through characters such as Ikem and Beatrice, Achebe argues that meaningful national transformation requires inclusive leadership and the recognition of marginalized voices, particularly women. Recent scholarship on gender and leadership confirms that Beatrice functions as a model of democratic leadership whose inclusion of excluded voices offers an alternative to authoritarian governance [Asuzu, 2021; Lawal, 2020]. African dramatic literature also interrogates leadership failures. Studies on Nigerian drama show that playwrights consistently expose corruption, greed, and abuse of power in postcolonial governance. In *Rotimis Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* [1977], leadership is represented as theatrical performance characterized by manipulation and incompetence. Together, these texts demonstrate that the postcolonial state in African literature is consistently represented as a space where the ideals of

independence are betrayed by personalized power, and where literature functions as civic memory that documents this betrayal for future generations.

Voice as Resistance and Democratic Agency

Contemporary African literature foregrounds the voices of ordinary citizens who resist oppression and challenge authoritarian systems. Writers use narration, oral traditions, satire, and testimony to reclaim public discourse from political elites. Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo remains a central advocate for decolonizing African voices through language. His insistence on writing in Gikuyu constitutes a rejection of cultural imperialism and linguistic domination, with recent scholarship affirming that his proposals posed a radical challenge to postcolonial literary establishments [Amoko, 2023]. For Ngũgĩ, reclaiming indigenous language is essential for restoring African consciousness and democratic participation. As Daniel (2024) notes, Ngũgĩ's literary activism and insistence on writing in native languages... epitomize the rejection of cultural erasure imposed by colonialism, thereby positioning language choice as a direct act of political resistance.

In *Petals of Blood* [1977], the betrayal of independence by political elites is exposed through the suffering of ordinary villagers. The novel presents voice as collective resistance against exploitation and capitalist oppression. Contemporary writers such as Helon Habila also explore the relationship between voice and political resistance. In *Waiting for an Angel* [2002], journalism becomes a tool for confronting military dictatorship and exposing state violence. The text illustrates how storytelling functions as political defiance. Comparative scholarship notes that contemporary writers increasingly focus on marginalized citizens whose voices contest postcolonial power structures, positioning literature as a democratic space for reclaiming agency. The 2024 Comparative Literature study further argues that narrative strategies such as first-person linear narrative within young adult fiction... foreground lived experience and youth resistance, a technique that parallels Habilas and Ngũgĩ's use of testimonial and communal narration to amplify silenced voices. Voice in African postcolonial literature thus operates both as content and form: it articulates dissent while simultaneously enacting democratic participation through the act of storytelling itself.

Gender, Leadership, and the Reconfiguration of the Polis

Another critical dimension is the interrogation of patriarchal leadership structures. African writers increasingly challenge the exclusion of women from political participation and leadership discourse. Scholarship emphasizes that many texts expose the masculinist nature of the postcolonial state, where women are marginalized within male-dominated political systems. Yet contemporary literature also imagines alternative models of inclusive leadership. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice emerges as a symbolic figure of moral leadership and civic responsibility. Recent analysis argues that Beatrice's democratic orientation creates space for voices typically excluded in the novel's government, and that her negotiation of change and tradition forms an inclusive response to the leadership problem [Asuzu, 2021]. Achebe suggests that reconstruction of the polis requires the inclusion of female perspectives and participatory governance.

This literary imagination aligns with recent scholarship documenting the paradox that women continue to achieve remarkable educational successes while confronting enduring obstacles to the authentic acknowledgment of their leadership within the spheres of power. The Springer volume *Women and Leadership in Africa* is praised for according theoretical and analytical respect and dignity to the people and places included in this study and for disrupting previously held theories of women's leadership. Similarly, writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tsitsi Dangarembga foreground women's experiences

within oppressive political systems, revealing how gender inequality intersects with broader crises of leadership and citizenship. The reconfiguration of the polis therefore involves expanding civic participation beyond elite male dominance, imagining societies where leadership is ethical, inclusive, and responsive to collective needs. As recent policy research emphasizes, inclusive governance that engages all members of society—including often marginalized groups such as women and youth—is essential for achieving sustainable peace and growth, a vision that African postcolonial literature continues to project through its representation of female leadership.

Literature as Civic Memory and Political Intervention

African postcolonial literature also functions as civic memory. Writers preserve histories of dictatorship, colonial violence, military repression, and popular resistance. Through storytelling, literature resists historical amnesia and sustains public consciousness. Research on Nigerian literature notes that military rule became a dominant subject due to widespread experiences of political repression and economic hardship. Authors documented the effects of authoritarian governance on everyday life and transformed literature into political testimony. Esu Tadele (2026) frames this function explicitly, arguing that literature serves as an intellectual forge where proposed political arrangements are tested on invented lives before they are inflicted on real ones. In this sense, literature performs a dual function: it critiques existing systems while imagining alternative futures. African writers continually return to the question of leadership because the fate of the polis depends on ethical governance and civic accountability. The literary archive thus becomes a repository of civic memory that documents both the failures of postcolonial governance and the enduring possibilities of resistance and renewal.

Conclusion

Contemporary African postcolonial literature remains deeply engaged with the crises and possibilities of leadership within the African polis. Through the interconnected concepts of power, voice, and civic participation, writers interrogate authoritarianism, corruption, militarism, patriarchy, and democratic failure. Literature exposes the betrayal of nationalist ideals while amplifying the voices of marginalized citizens who resist oppression. The study demonstrates that African postcolonial literature is not merely reflective but transformative. Writers challenge structures of domination, preserve civic memory, and imagine ethical alternatives for governance and public life. The polis in African literature is therefore both a site of crisis and a space of possibility.

Ultimately, rereading leadership through contemporary African postcolonial literature reveals that meaningful governance cannot exist without accountability, inclusiveness, and active civic participation. As recent scholarship emphasizes, inclusive governance that engages all members of society—including often marginalized groups such as women and youth—is essential for achieving sustainable peace and growth, a principle that African writers continue to remind society is central to ethical leadership. African writers continue to remind society that leadership is not simply the exercise of power but the ethical responsibility to serve the collective good.

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