



Postcolonial literature and the open access: A critical analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at the questioning of the processes through which knowledge is produced, controlled, and disseminated via postcolonial discourse in the context of literature. This topic is relevant to the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) because of the current discussions about the dichotomy between open access (OA) and paid access to journals. While OA is considered more democratic, it is nevertheless built on previous systems of epistemic control.

Drawing on novels such as 'Nervous Conditions' by Tsitsi Dangarembga, 'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe, 'Purple Hibiscus' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and 'Weep Not, Child' by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the study explores how access to knowledge is portrayed as a contested and politicized space. These texts reveal layered hierarchies formed through colonial authority, internal social stratifications, and acts of resistance.

The analysis is carried out against the backdrop of the history of academic publishing starting from colonial missions' presses through the emergence of print capitalism to the development of OA. Despite calls for full-text accessibility through initiatives such as the Budapest Open Access Initiative (2002), OA systems, including the gold model, usually require payment from authors for handling their texts.

The analysis highlights connections between portrayals of knowledge access in literary works and modern limitations, such as paywalls and license systems. It suggests a number of alternatives that would be more equitable, namely diamond OA, bibliodiversity, and repositories by Global South countries. In essence, the article seeks to rethink scholarly communication.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, Open access, Scholarly communication, Knowledge gatekeeping, Bibliodiversity, Diamond open access, Neocolonialism

Introduction

The problem of access to knowledge resources has always been a constant theme in postcolonial literature, where knowledge, education, literacy, books, and information have always been viewed as a source of liberation as well as a tool of oppression through the use of the colonisers' language and curriculum. However, while discussing the use of knowledge to oppress, besides the power structures that exclude access according to gender, social status, and ethnicity, the discourse on knowledge also shows that the problem is still relevant even after political liberation because it maintains inequality in society. However, one thing has changed dramatically: the development of the Open Access movement that provides free access to information that used to be available only via expensive subscriptions from the monopolies.

This article addresses the core research question: How have postcolonial literary texts historically interrogated and been affected by open-access versus subscription-based scholarly communication models? It pursues three interconnected objectives: (i) to examine representations of knowledge access, gatekeeping, and resistance in postcolonial novels; (ii) to integrate LIS open-access theory with literary critique, revealing structural analogies between fictional and real-world barriers; and (iii) to propose decolonial publishing pathways

that move beyond both traditional subscription models and flawed OA implementations. By combining close textual analysis of an expanded corpus of four canonical works with a historical review of publishing policies, the study demonstrates that literary depictions of knowledge gatekeeping do not merely reflect historical conditions but actively prefigure and illuminate ongoing tensions in scholarly communication.

The selected novels cover various national experiences (Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Kenya) and periods of time (before and after independence). Hence, there are opportunities to compare works and reveal the continuities and changes in the political discourse on the topic under discussion. The interdisciplinary approach adopted in this work helps to fill an obvious gap. While there has been extensive analysis of epistemic violence and the decolonisation of the mind in postcolonial studies, and criticism of OA policies in information literacy studies, the interaction between these fields in the analysis of the issue at hand remains insufficient. At the same time, such an intersection is particularly relevant, given that the literature challenging the idea of knowledge gatekeeping is also available only through expensive APCs and subscription payments. ^[1, 2, 3, 7]

In conclusion, it should be stated that the politics of knowledge access has been a key concern throughout the history of

colonisation and postcolonisation. Moving from a print-based system of dissemination to a digital model, from a pay-for-access policy to OA practices, does not mean that there will be an end to discrimination and exclusivity. Unless the existing systems are analysed, any attempt to create a new one will result in the replication of the existing mechanisms in a slightly modified form. Therefore, postcolonial literature provides a unique framework for the critical evaluation and rethinking of such models.

Materials and Methods

The methodology rests on two complementary pillars: close textual analysis of four postcolonial novels and a supporting historical review of scholarly publishing policies. The novels Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) were selected for their explicit and sustained engagement with themes of knowledge access, colonial education systems, literacy as both opportunity and alienation, and clashes between indigenous oral epistemologies and imposed written/colonial knowledge structures. These texts represent diverse African geographies, authorial perspectives (including gender diversity), and chronological coverage from the late colonial period to the early post-independence era, enabling a historically layered analysis.

Inductive close reading was undertaken, inspired by a postcolonial theory approach derived from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *theories of linguistic and epistemic decolonisation*. Some of the recurring themes in this research were gatekeepers (missionaries, uncles, fathers, colonial administrators), conditional access, epistemic violence, resistance within alternative knowledge spaces, and the contrast between oral and communal versus textual and elite knowledge. Each novel was reread several times, with annotations focused on sections illustrating obstacles to books, education, critical thinking, or memory.

This literary analysis is grounded and contextualised by a historical review of publishing policies. Primary sources include the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI, 2002) declaration itself, while secondary materials cover the serials crisis, the consolidation of commercial academic publishing, and the evolution of OA models (subscription, green, gold, diamond). Materials were deliberately sourced from both subscription and open repositories to enact the access politics under examination. Analysis proceeded through constant comparison: literary representations of gatekeeping were chronologically and structurally mapped onto key milestones in scholarly communication history (colonial missionary printing, post-1970s commercialisation, 2002 BOAI, and post-2010 APC dominance). This inductive mapping revealed analogies between fictional and material barriers without imposing anachronistic interpretations. [3, 7, 10]

Results/ findings

The close reading of *Nervous Conditions* has shown that the process of knowledge acquisition was highly gated by

intersectional identities (gender, race, colonialism, and class). In the opening scene, Tambu says, "I was not sorry when my brother died". It means that education is the only available tool for escaping from poverty and patriarchal oppression. Here we can see how Babamukuru serves both as the local patriarch and colonial agent who exerts his authority through gatekeeping. It is interesting how much the process described in the novel resembles subscription gatekeeping since access to education is controlled through affiliation and approval in a structure very similar to the institutional one. Knowledge is not freely accessible; on the contrary, it is subject to conditions and rules imposed on potential recipients. Epistemic violence is especially painful for female characters, who experience the internal contradiction when books and ideas offered by colonial culture erase their indigenous epistemologies. Dangaremba shows how books and education can be both a source of liberation and a source of oppression as Tambu gradually understands her situation. [1]

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe stages a stark contrast between Igbo oral knowledge systems proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling that embody open, participatory access and the written word introduced by missionaries and colonial administrators. Colonial schools and churches quickly monopolise "modern" knowledge, drawing characters like Nwoye toward literacy while marginalising indigenous epistemologies. The community's rich oral traditions represent a pre-colonial ideal of barrier-free knowledge circulation, violently disrupted by new gatekeepers. These depictions prefigure the commodification inherent in subscription models, in which knowledge is packaged, priced, and restricted to those willing (or able) to pay, through cultural and economic assimilation. [2]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* extends the critique into a neocolonial, post-independence setting. Protagonist Kambili endures her father Eugene's tyrannical control, where access to books, critical thought, laughter, and even secular newspapers is policed through a rigid, colonial-inflected Catholicism. Eugene, a wealthy elite who ironically funds a newspaper while suppressing dissent at home, embodies the internalisation of neocolonial gatekeeping. Kambili's intellectual and emotional awakening occurs only when she escapes to her Aunt Ifeoma's university household in Nsukka—an alternative space of open discussion, laughter, and intellectual freedom demonstrating how democratised knowledge environments can nurture resistance and self-reclamation. [11]

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Chil* portrays colonial education as a seductive yet ultimately alienating force. Young Njoroge invests his hopes for personal and national liberation in schooling, viewing literacy as the key to reclaiming land and dignity. The mission school, however, demands mimicry of European values and language, severing him from Kikuyu culture and collective memory. Ngũgĩ exposes how colonial gatekeepers weaponise education to control rather than liberate indigenous epistemologies, prefiguring the conditional "access" later offered by subscription-dominated scholarly systems. [12]

It is important to note that both the colonial missionaries' printing press and the post-colonial series published by Western publishers (such as Heinemann's African Writers Series) engaged in strict gatekeeping regarding authorship and dissemination. The following period of the serials crisis led to extremely high subscription prices, and it became necessary to develop the OA publishing model. The BOAI 2002 defined OA as unrestricted and free access to publications. However, its implementation is divided into two streams ("gold" OA associated with APCs that discriminate against Southern scholars and readers and subscription gatekeeping). Postcolonial literary studies also helped create zero-budget OA journals, such as *Postcolonial Text*.^[3, 5, 8]

The alternative models have demonstrated the viability of more equitable systems. Initiatives such as *Postcolonial Text*, which operates on a zero-budget OA model, challenge the assumption that high-quality scholarly publishing requires significant financial investment^[5]. Similarly, platforms like African Journals Online (AJOL) and SciELO emphasise regional control, multilingualism, and accessibility, aligning more closely with the principles of bibliodiversity and epistemic justice^[6].

Taken together, the literary and historical analyses reveal a striking continuity: whether in colonial classrooms, postcolonial households, or digital publishing platforms, access to knowledge remains structured by power. The novels examined here do not merely reflect historical conditions but offer critical insights into the persistent mechanisms of gatekeeping that shape both literary and scholarly worlds. By foregrounding the conditional nature of access and the possibility of alternative epistemic spaces, these texts anticipate and illuminate the ongoing challenges of achieving truly equitable knowledge circulation.

Discussion

The expanded textual analyses fulfil objective (i) by demonstrating that knowledge access in these postcolonial novels functions as a rich microcosm of broader gatekeeping mechanisms operating across colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial contexts. In each work, education and literacy are depicted not as neutral pathways to enlightenment but as contested terrains where power is exercised through selective inclusion and exclusion. Colonial education systems, familial or religious authority, and elite control parallel the restrictive logic of subscription paywalls in scholarly communication: each promises mobility, empowerment, and access to "superior" knowledge while simultaneously enforcing entrenched hierarchies of race, gender, class, culture, and geography. These systems extract a heavy psychological and cultural toll manifested as Tambu's and Nyasha's "nervous conditions," Kambili's silenced voice and religious terror, Njoroge's disillusionment and alienation, and the Igbo community's fragmentation highlighting the epistemic violence inherent in conditional access.

Conversely, the novels foreground alternative knowledge spaces that anticipate the liberatory potential of truly open,

barrier-free circulation. In *'Things Fall Apart'*, Achebe celebrates Igbo oral traditions, proverbs, folktales, and communal storytelling as inherently participatory and democratic forms of knowledge sharing, unmediated by financial or institutional gatekeepers. Aunt Ifeoma's lively, intellectually vibrant household in *'Purple Hibiscus'* serves as a counter-space to Eugene's authoritarian control, where critical dialogue, laughter, and access to diverse ideas flourish despite material constraints. Tambu's tentative acts of resistance and quiet intellectual growth in *'Nervous Conditions'*, alongside Njoroge's initial idealistic faith in education in *'Weep Not, Child'*, further illustrate the persistent human drive toward ungated knowledge, even under duress. These literary alternatives resonate strongly with calls in LIS scholarship for equitable scholarly communication that transcends both subscription barriers and flawed OA implementations.

Objective (ii) is realised through the sustained integration of LIS open-access theory with literary critique. Peter Suber's influential definition frames open access as barrier-free access for both readers and authors removing not only price barriers (*gratis* OA) but ideally also permission barriers (*libre* OA) to enable full reuse, distribution, and engagement with scholarly content. This theoretical lens illuminates how the conditional access navigated by protagonists such as Tambu, Kambili, and Njoroge directly mirrors the structural disadvantages faced by contemporary Global South scholars. Article Processing Charges (APCs) in "gold" OA models, while ostensibly democratising readership, frequently replicate "academic colonialism" by creating new financial hurdles at the point of publication. Northern publishers continue to dominate prestige ecosystems, marginalising Southern voices and reinforcing testimonial injustice, whereby research from the Global South is systematically undervalued or excluded on economic rather than intellectual grounds.

Subscription models, dominant for decades, have historically entrenched Northern control over global knowledge flows, exacerbating the serials crisis and limiting institutional access in under-resourced regions. While the OA movement catalysed by the Budapest Open Access Initiative promised radical equity, its implementation has been undermined by hybrid journals and APC-driven variants that continue to favour well-funded Northern institutions. This creates a neocolonial dynamic wherein Southern scholars may gain readership but often at prohibitive personal or institutional cost, or are pushed toward lower-visibility venues.

In contrast, Diamond OA models no author-facing APCs, supported instead by community, institutional, or public funding emerge as far more aligned with decolonial principles. These models prioritise bibliodiversity: the sustainable coexistence of diverse linguistic, cultural, and regional publishing ecosystems that reject the homogenising dominance of English-language, Northern-centric journals. Initiatives such as SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) in Latin America and AJOL (African Journals Online) exemplify this approach, fostering local control, multilingualism, and South-

South knowledge exchange while maintaining rigorous standards without commodifying authorship. Such frameworks echo the communal, participatory knowledge systems valorised in the analysed novels and offer a practical pathway toward epistemic justice.

The literary works thus function as prophetic critiques, exposing how both subscription-based and inadequately implemented OA models risk perpetuating epistemic alienation unless fundamentally restructured along decolonial lines. The inclusion of Adichie and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o strengthens the comparative dimension of the study, tracing clear continuities from colonial-era missionary control and print-based gatekeeping to postcolonial internal hierarchies and contemporary digital barriers. By mapping fictional representations onto real-world publishing histories, this analysis reveals that the politics of open access are inseparable from broader struggles over cultural sovereignty, linguistic rights, and the decolonisation of knowledge production.

In essence, the analysis demonstrates that decolonizing scholarly communications necessitates not just technical changes to OA but also the adoption of bibliodiversity, community self-governance, and an emphasis on Global South agency principles that have been brilliantly explored in postcolonial literature.

Conclusion

Postcolonial novels have traditionally questioned the gatekeeping practices regarding knowledge, which resonates strongly with current discussions on OA versus subscription systems. They reveal a strong continuity from the control imposed by colonial missionaries to today's paywalls and neocolonialist internal hierarchy. Through combining literary analysis and LIS theory with regard to a wider set of texts, this paper will highlight the need for change. Decolonial publishing pathways prioritising diamond OA, Global South-led platforms, multilingual and community-driven repositories, and genuine bibliodiversity offer a viable and ethically grounded way forward. These pathways would honour the resistance and alternative knowledge visions depicted in *'Nervous Conditions'*, *'Purple Hibiscus'*, *'Things Fall Apart'* and *'Weep Not, Child'*, ensuring that knowledge production and dissemination serve postcolonial justice rather than perpetuate neocolonial hierarchies. Future research should further expand the textual corpus to include more diverse postcolonial traditions and empirically evaluate the impact of OA models on literary scholarship originating from the Global South.

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