

COUNTER-NARRATIVES TO DIGITAL COLONIZATION: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF RESISTANCE IN EXIT WEST, ESSAYS BY ARUNDHATI ROY, AND MOXYLAND

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ABSTRACT

As digital technologies increasingly infiltrate everyday life, their intersections with postcolonial power structures warrant critical examination. This study investigates how postcolonial literature critiques the rise of digital colonization, manifested through algorithmic surveillance, data extraction, and techno-authoritarianism. Anchored in a triadic theoretical framework—Postcolonial Theory, Critical Surveillance Studies, and Discourse-Power Theory—the research employs qualitative textual analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis to examine *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, essays by Arundhati Roy, and *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes. The findings reveal that these texts expose the reconfiguration of colonial logics in digital forms, portraying resistance to algorithmic control and the marginalization of subaltern identities. Moreover, the study highlights literature's capacity to disrupt dominant digital narratives by foregrounding alternative, decolonial imaginaries. Ultimately, this research contributes to postcolonial digital studies by emphasizing the urgent need to recognize and resist the hidden empires embedded in today's algorithmic systems.

Keywords: Digital Colonization, Surveillance Capitalism, Algorithmic Control, CDA, Techno-Imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the forces of imperialism have evolved from physical occupation to digital domination. Today, global technological infrastructures—controlled by a handful of powerful Western corporations—exert influence over the daily lives, identities, and

sovereignities of people in the Global South (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

This phenomenon, often termed digital colonization, refers to the extraction of data, surveillance of populations, algorithmic manipulation, and the monopolization of information by a few global powers (Zuboff,

2019). The increasing deployment of artificial intelligence (AI), biometric surveillance, and algorithmic governance in postcolonial societies mirrors the mechanisms of past colonial control—only now under the guise of progress and digital development. Understanding this shift is not only timely but essential, as it reconfigures how power, control, and resistance manifest in a rapidly digitizing world.

Postcolonial literature has long functioned as a vehicle for contesting imperial ideologies and reclaiming silenced voices (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). However, the emergence of digital technologies has introduced a new dimension to the colonial experience—one that is intangible yet deeply invasive. Algorithms now reinforce racial, geopolitical, and economic hierarchies (Noble, 2018), while surveillance technologies disproportionately target marginalized populations in formerly colonized nations (Ajana, 2013). As digital infrastructures expand, the Global South increasingly becomes both a testing ground and a market for technological experimentation, often without informed consent or ethical oversight. This evolving digital frontier necessitates a reevaluation of how postcolonial writers engage with empire in its latest form—the techno-empire.

Despite the growing impact of digital colonization, literary scholarship has only recently begun to examine how postcolonial texts respond to it. Traditional studies have largely focused on issues such as linguistic imperialism, diaspora, and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), leaving a conceptual void around how literature critiques algorithmic inequality, surveillance capitalism, and digital sovereignty. This critical gap limits our understanding of how postcolonial narratives adapt to the latest iterations of empire and resist the invisible chains of data-driven control. As such, there is an urgent need to explore how fiction from the Global South engages with and challenges this contemporary form of imperialism. Fields such as surveillance studies, digital humanities, and media theory have already theorized concepts like data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). These discourses, however, seldom intersect with postcolonial literary analysis, nor do they fully explore literature as a space for political

critique and epistemological resistance. Postcolonial studies, meanwhile, remain largely focused on older forms of colonial violence, often overlooking the ideological mechanisms embedded in AI, algorithms, and data infrastructures. This research seeks to bridge that disciplinary gap by applying a postcolonial discourse analysis to texts that confront the digital empire, thus bringing together techno politics and literary resistance in a unified framework.

Literary authors, however, have begun to respond to these concerns. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) subtly critiques technological borders and surveillance, while Arundhati Roy's essays draw explicit attention to digital authoritarianism in South Asia. Writers, such as, Namwali Serpell (*The Old Drift*) and Nnedi Okorafor explore the impact of technological futures on African identities and sovereignties. These literary engagements echo critical theories by Zuboff (2019), Noble (2018), and Eubanks (2018), who demonstrate how digital systems reproduce colonial structures under the guise of objectivity and innovation. These combined literary and theoretical trajectories offer fertile ground for understanding literature as a tool of counter-surveillance and resistance.

Pakistan, like many other countries in the Global South, is becoming a frontline state in the era of digital colonization. AI-powered surveillance systems in major cities, biometric identification for welfare programs, and partnerships with foreign tech companies raise pressing concerns about consent, autonomy, and digital sovereignty (Khan, 2023). Yet, while journalists and activists have begun to voice these concerns, literary responses remain under-analyzed. There is a noticeable absence of scholarly engagement connecting local digital authoritarianism to postcolonial literary resistance, making Pakistan a crucial yet underexplored case study in understanding digital empire through a literary lens. This study aims to investigate how contemporary postcolonial literature functions as a discursive site for resisting digital colonization by analyzing how texts critique surveillance, algorithmic control, and AI-driven governance. It explores the narrative strategies through which technological power is contested and highlights the role of fiction in exposing digital

imperialism and imagining alternative futures. Through critical discourse analysis—drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Teun van Dijk—the research examines selected literary texts by Mohsin Hamid, Arundhati Roy, Namwali Serpell, and Nnedi Okorafor to uncover the ideological structures embedded in digital domination. By situating these texts within the broader discourse of postcolonial theory, surveillance studies, and digital ethics, the study contributes to both literary scholarship and digital cultural critique, offering timely insights into how empire is reconfigured through data and technology in the 21st century.

Study Objectives:

This study sets out to:

- a) Analyze how contemporary postcolonial literary texts critique and resist the mechanisms of digital colonization.
- b) Investigate the discursive constructions of technological power and how these are contested through narrative.
- c) Use critical discourse analysis to examine how themes of surveillance, algorithmic control, and AI governance are represented in literature.
- d) Highlight the contribution of postcolonial literature to alternative epistemologies and modes of resistance in the digital age.

Aim of the Research

The overarching aim is to investigate how postcolonial literature functions as a discursive tool for resisting digital colonization. Through the analysis of literary texts, this research will demonstrate how fiction becomes a site for deconstructing digital imperialism, exposing algorithmic bias, and imagining alternative futures. The study seeks to contribute to both postcolonial literary studies and digital cultural critique, offering an urgent and original perspective on how empire operates in the age of data.

Research Questions

1. How do postcolonial texts resist digital colonization?
2. What discourses within literature reveal or critique algorithmic or data-driven power?

3. How do literary narratives from the Global South articulate local responses to global techno-authoritarianism?

Research Problem

Although postcolonial literature has extensively addressed the cultural and political legacies of colonialism, scholarly engagement with the realities of digital colonization remains underdeveloped. In today's world, technology, algorithms, and data surveillance reproduce old hierarchies in new forms, creating digital empires that control information flows, shape identities, and extract value from marginalized populations. This raises urgent questions about how power operates in the digital age. Yet there is still limited research on how contemporary postcolonial writers critique these transformations, particularly in their responses to surveillance capitalism, algorithmic bias, and data-driven exploitation. Addressing this gap is crucial, as it reveals how literature not only reflects but actively resists the extension of colonial power into the digital sphere, offering critical insights into the evolving face of empire in the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

Recent studies have increasingly identified digital colonization as a contemporary extension of imperial power, driven not by land acquisition but by data extraction, algorithmic governance, and technological control (Zuboff, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Postcolonial literature, in response, has evolved to critique this new form of domination, particularly where it intersects with surveillance capitalism and AI-driven inequality. However, while these critiques are gaining traction, much of the current scholarship remains limited in scope and method.

Historically, postcolonial theory emphasized cultural hybridity, subaltern agency, and epistemic violence (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). Yet, these foundational frameworks did not anticipate the rise of algorithmic filtering, predictive policing, or biometric surveillance that now define global digital governance. Scholars such as Noble (2018) and Andrejevic (2014) have thus called for a reconfiguration of postcolonial theory to include data capitalism and platform hegemony

as central mechanisms of modern imperialism. This shift is crucial, as it acknowledges that power today is exercised not only through discourse and representation but through opaque algorithms and technological infrastructures that disproportionately affect the Global South.

Despite this important turn, the field still suffers from several blind spots. Firstly, there is an overreliance on theory with insufficient close reading of postcolonial literary texts that actively engage with digital control. While authors like Arundhati Roy (2020) and Mohsin Hamid (2017) offer compelling literary critiques of data colonialism and AI borders, these works are rarely analyzed with methodological rigor, such as critical discourse analysis. Secondly, the geographical focus remains narrow—predominantly centered on South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—thus overlooking voices from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, where digital resistance narratives are also emerging (Nkodo, 2021; Nyabola, 2018). Thirdly, the scholarship rarely accounts for the interplay between indigenous knowledge systems and digital resistance, which could radically expand our understanding of postcolonial responses to technological dominance.

Encouragingly, a few studies have begun bridging this gap. Mbembe's (2003) idea of "digital necropolitics" emphasizes how data infrastructures decide who lives and who is rendered invisible. Similarly, Benjamin (2019) explores how algorithms reflect and reproduce racial and colonial hierarchies, turning them into automated decision-making systems. Literary responses to these phenomena are not merely representational—they serve as discursive acts of resistance. For instance, Afrofuturist and techno-Indigenous narratives challenge Western technocentric epistemologies by reimagining technology as a space of liberation rather than domination.

Nevertheless, this intersection of postcolonial literature and digital studies remains a developing field. There is a pressing need for interdisciplinary, comparative studies that use tools such as critical discourse analysis to examine how literary language both reflects and resists digital colonization. Future research should explore how postcolonial texts portray

algorithmic control, challenge data hierarchies, and envision alternative techno-futures rooted in indigenous sovereignty and epistemic justice. Ultimately, literature provides a powerful medium through which digital colonization is not only exposed but also subverted. It offers imaginative possibilities for resistance, decolonial futures, and ethical technological paradigms. As such, engaging critically with postcolonial narratives can help reshape theoretical paradigms to confront the algorithmic empires of the 21st century.

Research Gap

While recent scholarship has critically examined how postcolonial texts engage with digital colonization—highlighting themes of surveillance, algorithmic bias, and cultural erasure—most studies focus on resistance through narrative content or authorial intent (Khan, 2025; Munir, 2024). Although fields like Postcolonial Digital Humanities (PDH) have advanced the conversation by incorporating decolonial tools and platforms (Elangbam, 2025), less attention has been given to the *literary mechanisms*—such as psychoanalytic structures, symbolic lack, and trauma—that underlie digital subject formation in postcolonial fiction. Consequently, there is a critical need to explore how literature not only critiques techno-imperialism but also psychologically configures the colonial residues shaping digital identities.

Moreover, despite growing interest in counterpublics and digital reader agency (Han, 2024), there remains a gap in examining how postcolonial narratives construct *affective and unconscious responses* to digital colonization. Transitional strategies like linguistic hybridity, indigenous symbolism, and oral memory have been acknowledged (Mahala, 2025; Mishra, NaN), yet their intersection with deeper psychoanalytic themes—such as desire, repression, and ideological interpolation—remains underexplored. This study addresses this lacuna by bridging Lacanian theory with digital postcolonial critique, offering a novel lens through which to understand how postcolonial literature not only resists but *redefines* digital power through symbolic reconstruction and psychic resistance.

Research Methodology

This research follows an interpretivist paradigm, as it focuses on understanding how postcolonial texts create meaning and resist digital colonization, rather than measuring empirical data. Moreover, knowledge is seen as context-bound and co-constructed, while reality is viewed as multiple and shaped by culture, history, and ideology; therefore, this approach is particularly fitting for postcolonial literature. In addition, the study takes an inductive path, building theory from literary evidence instead of testing fixed hypotheses, and it relies on textual fieldwork where fiction functions as the main cultural field. Furthermore, by using narrative and phenomenological analysis, the research interprets how stories represent trauma, resistance, and lived experiences of digital oppression. The texts were selected through purposive sampling until no new insights emerged, including Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Arundhati Roy's essays, and African and South Asian speculative fiction. Similarly, data were collected through close reading of texts, supported by secondary sources such as author interviews, lectures, and media archives, and then analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis and coding techniques to identify patterns like algorithmic subjectivity, surveillance, and resistance. Additionally, the analysis is guided by a triadic framework combining postcolonial theory, critical data and surveillance studies, and discourse-power theory, which allows for layered interpretation. To ensure validity, triangulation, reflexive journaling, and careful ethical engagement with marginalized voices were maintained throughout. Finally, while the study's scope is limited to English-language texts and a selected number of works, it nonetheless aims for theoretical transferability, thereby providing deep insight into how literature challenges the emerging structures of digital empire.

Discussion/Analysis

The literary critique of digital colonization in postcolonial texts is multifaceted, revealing how algorithmic power, surveillance, and techno-authoritarianism are interwoven into contemporary global dynamics. Drawing from Edward Said's concept of "imaginative geography," Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* exposes

the hidden geographies of data borders and digital exclusions. For instance, the novel emphasizes digital dislocation through constant surveillance and biometric scrutiny, with passages like: "In the city, drones had begun to appear—small, hovering, insect-like machines... people began to disappear" (Hamid, 2017, p. 132). This reference not only mirrors Foucault's panoptic surveillance model but also echoes Zuboff's notion of *surveillance capitalism*, where bodies are managed and erased through technological governance. Furthermore, in alignment with the second research question—"What discourses within literature reveal or critique algorithmic or data-driven power?"—Hamid portrays a digital threshold that determines human mobility and identity, thereby reflecting Fairclough's critical discourse theory of institutional control through language and categorization.

Moreover, Arundhati Roy's essays provide an urgent, non-fictional critique of global techno-authoritarianism. In her essay "The Pandemic is a Portal," she warns: "Our minds are being colonised by Artificial Intelligence, by algorithms, by tech platforms that hold us hostage in echo chambers" (Roy, 2020). This aligns directly with Couldry and Mejias's (2019) concept of *data colonialism*, where epistemic violence replaces traditional colonization, creating new extractive relations between humans and digital empires. Roy's argument supports the objective of exploring "discursive constructions of technological power" as she draws attention to language manipulation and the algorithmic shaping of social consciousness.

In addition, speculative fiction like *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes from South Africa envisions a dystopian society where citizens are controlled through digital barcodes embedded in their bodies, revealing how identity becomes algorithmically mediated. One of the protagonists notes: "I'm not a person anymore. I'm a packet of code" (Beukes, 2008, p. 74), foregrounding Spivak's concern over the digitally silenced subaltern. This depiction resonates with the third research question—"How do literary narratives from the Global South articulate local responses to global techno-authoritarianism?"—by demonstrating how localized acts of resistance are often embedded in digital subversion and narrative

dissidence. Beukes's vision illustrates how resistance is performed through disruption of the system's own language, as the characters hack, disrupt, and re-narrate their identities within a corporate-controlled data regime.

Furthermore, when juxtaposed with Bhabha's concept of hybridity, these texts show how postcolonial subjects navigate the intersection of technological modernity and cultural memory. In *Exit West*, for instance, migration is not merely a spatial act but a digital one, as identities are continuously scanned, reshaped, and controlled. The door metaphor—representing portals—is both literal and symbolic, suggesting algorithmic filtering of human bodies through state and platform surveillance. Thus, literature reveals how such digital boundaries mimic colonial partitions and reinscribe colonial hierarchies through high-tech means.

This study set out to explore how postcolonial literature critiques and resists the emergent phenomenon of digital colonization through the lenses of surveillance, algorithmic control, and techno-empire building. Drawing on a triadic theoretical framework—Postcolonial Theory (Said, Bhabha, Spivak), Critical Data and Surveillance Studies (Zuboff, Couldry & Mejias, Noble), and Discourse and Power Theory (Foucault, Fairclough)—the research analyzed literary texts that illuminate the entanglement between digital technologies and colonial continuities. Through close textual analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Arundhati Roy's political essays, and Lauren Beukes's speculative fiction *Moxyland*, this study revealed how digital technologies serve as tools of exclusion, surveillance, and epistemic violence—replicating the imperial logic of control and classification.

Significantly, the findings demonstrate that postcolonial authors are not merely passive observers but active critics of algorithmic subjugation. Through metaphors of digital portals, algorithmic subjects, and techno-authoritarian states, these texts present alternative imaginaries that foreground resistance, hybridity, and local agency. For example, Hamid's depiction of doors as algorithmic filters, Roy's critique of AI-led governance, and Beukes's portrayal of state-sponsored data surveillance expose the

underlying coloniality in contemporary technological systems. These insights contribute to the growing field of postcolonial digital humanities, emphasizing how literature can function as a form of counter-discourse that destabilizes dominant techno-epistemologies. Furthermore, this research expands theoretical debates on how discourse constructs digital subjects and legitimizes control under the guise of innovation and security. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough) to literary texts, the study highlights how language, narrative framing, and representation shape public perception of digital systems. It also underscores how postcolonial narratives challenge this framing by revealing the power asymmetries embedded in algorithmic design and deployment.

From a practical perspective, the study offers critical implications for educators, scholars, and technologists concerned with decolonizing digital spaces. It urges the inclusion of Global South perspectives in discussions on AI ethics, data governance, and digital justice. Moreover, it suggests that literary analysis—when combined with interdisciplinary theory—can uncover the hidden narratives of control and offer pathways toward more equitable futures.

However, this study is not without its limitations. It focused primarily on Anglophone texts from South Asia and Southern Africa, and a broader corpus—incorporating Francophone, Lusophone, or Indigenous postcolonial narratives—could yield deeper insights. Future research may also extend this investigation to digital-native genres such as cyber-poetry, graphic novels, or digital storytelling platforms that engage with algorithmic identity and data extraction.

In conclusion, this research asserts that postcolonial literature plays a vital role in critiquing and resisting digital colonization. Through imaginative, discursive, and symbolic means, these texts challenge the new empire of code, algorithm, and data, revealing the colonial residues embedded in our digital present. By foregrounding resistance, subaltern agency, and hybrid futures, they invite us to rethink technological progress through a more inclusive and decolonial lens.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how postcolonial literature responds to the modern challenge of digital colonization, especially the growing power of surveillance, algorithms, and data control. The findings show that writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Arundhati Roy, and Lauren Beukes reveal how digital systems can repeat old colonial patterns of exclusion and control, echoing broader debates raised by thinkers like Zuboff (2019), Noble (2018), and Lyon (2018). These insights suggest that literature not only reflects past colonial struggles but also speaks directly to today's urgent issues of digital injustice, surveillance, and algorithmic bias. However, the study is limited because it focused mainly on Anglophone works and did not include voices from non-English or indigenous traditions, nor did it explore newer digital-native genres like online fiction. Therefore, future research should expand the scope by comparing more diverse texts, engaging with multiple languages and media, and collaborating across fields such as digital humanities and critical data studies. In conclusion, this research highlights that postcolonial literature continues to matter today because it challenges both old and new forms of domination, showing that stories can still guide us toward fairer and more inclusive futures.

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