



## AUGMENTED REALITIES: POWER, IDENTITY, AND REVOLUTION IN THE POST-COLONY

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the intersection of body augmentation, power, identity, and resistance within postcolonial contexts, focusing on African societies. It delves into how bodily modifications, from traditional practices like scarification, circumcision, and elongation to contemporary technological enhancements, serve as expressions of self-empowerment and cultural identity. The paper draws on key theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies and the work of scholars like Victoria Pitts, the study examines the symbolic and literal significance of the body as a battleground for race, identity, and power dynamics. Using Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* as a primary text, the paper investigates the role of bodily augmentation in the post-colony, particularly among people of African descent. It highlights how characters in the novel undergo various forms of physical and spiritual transformations to navigate and resist oppressive regimes. This literary analysis is juxtaposed with historical and contemporary practices of body modification, such as the use of tribal marks for identity, circumcision for cultural rites of passage, and the oppressive use of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and limb shortening during conflicts like the Liberian civil war. The paper argues that bodily augmentations in African cultures, whether for traditional, aesthetic, or oppressive purposes, reflect deeper societal values, power structures, and the ongoing impact of colonial legacies. It posits that these practices, while rooted in cultural traditions, are also sites of resistance and negotiation, challenging dominant narratives imposed by colonial powers and contributing to the discourse on postcolonial identity and agency. Through this exploration, the study aims to illuminate the complexities of body politics in postcolonial Africa and the diverse ways individuals and communities reclaim agency and assert their cultural identity.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, body augmentation, identity, power dynamics, resistance

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## 1. Introduction

Postcolonialism involves a study of the complex dynamics of reclaiming agency and reshaping narratives for those who have endured the subjugation of imperialism (Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman 2015). Ashcroft et al., (2000) add that the branch of intellectual capability that establishes spaces for subaltern people to speak for themselves, in their voices, and thus produce a cultural discourse of philosophy, language, society and economy balancing the imbalance of us-and-them power binary relationships between the colonist and the colonial subject is what is referred to as post-colonial studies (271). Within this field of academic discourse, the body emerges both as a symbolic and literal battleground, where themes of race, identity, and power are fiercely contested. The body also bears the weight of external influences and historical traumas, often manifesting in various forms of augmentation as individuals navigate their identities within a post-colonial framework. From cosmetic surgeries to technological enhancements, these augmentations serve as both expressions of self-empowerment and reminders of colonial legacies that continue to shape contemporary societies (Rankin-Rajan, Sweta 2018). In post-colonial studies, the impact of colonialism on bodies and how they are represented, experienced and transformed is a major field of study that informs this current work.

Victoria Pitt's (2003) exploration in *Bodies of Power: New Body Art Technologies* offers invaluable insights into the intersection of body modification and technology. By challenging conventional notions of embodiment and power dynamics, Pitts illuminates how bodies serve as sites of resistance, negotiation, and assertion within diverse social landscapes. Through a lens that encompasses gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability, Pitts unveils the intricate ways in which power is inscribed upon and contested through bodily practices. Her analysis prompts us to reconsider the boundaries between the public and private spheres, as well as the interconnectedness of mind and body in shaping individual and collective experiences. It is based on Pitts's ideology of the body that we examine the concept of bodily augmentation among people of African descent. To do this, our primary text is Ngugi wa Thiong'O's magnum opus, *Wizard of the Crow*. Through this epic narrative, Ngugi confronts the crisis of representation that has plagued post-colonial societies since the mid-1970s. Drawing upon elements of fantasy, Ngugi transcends traditional literary forms to critique the enduring legacy of colonialism and its impact on African identity. As we delve into the ideas, characters, and themes of *Wizard of the Crow*, we uncover layers of meaning that resonate with contemporary struggles for self-determination and cultural autonomy. Through Ngugi's visionary storytelling, we are invited to engage with the complexities of post-colonial existence and envision new possibilities for collective liberation and social transformation.

The practice of bodily augmentation has been deeply ingrained in African culture since ancient times (Elias Mpofu et al., 2011). Bodily augmentation in the form of scarification, circumcision, and elongation practices has existed in various parts of the African body and has been augmented to signify specific occasions, exemplify beauty, or differentiate between different groups. One prevalent form of bodily augmentation

among African tribes is scarification. Before we delve into the 'metaphorical' representation of bodily augmentation, we shall explore the traditional manifestation of various bodily augmentations among African people. To begin, Mpofu et al., postulate that scarification serves to strengthen the African body, with the process involving a traditional healer inserting charred herbal residues believed to prevent diseases, address underlying causes, or safeguard against malevolent spiritual influences into incisions made on the body (12). African people have, since time immemorial, used tribal marks to distinguish and mark themselves from other African people.

Another form of augmenting the body is through male circumcision. Circumcision is indeed a widespread practice across many African societies, often performed on male infants a few days after birth (Jeff Marck 1997). Beyond its health benefits, which include reduced risk of certain infections and diseases, circumcision also holds cultural and aesthetic significance. In many African cultures, circumcision symbolizes a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, marking the initiation into adulthood and the assumption of societal responsibilities (Marck 347). It serves as a visible signifier of identity, affirming one's belonging to a particular cultural group or community. Additionally, circumcision may carry religious significance in some African traditions, representing a covenant with the divine or adherence to sacred teachings.

From an aesthetic perspective, circumcision can be viewed as a means of enhancing the appearance of the male genitalia. The removal of the foreskin can result in a sleeker, more streamlined appearance, which some may perceive as aesthetically pleasing. This aesthetic aspect of circumcision may also be influenced by cultural norms and ideals of beauty within specific communities. Overall, circumcision in African societies encompasses both health-related considerations and aesthetic preferences, reflecting the complex interplay between tradition, identity, and perceptions of beauty (Karl Peltzer & Motlatso Mlambo, 2017).

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is another conventional form of augmentation that is a deeply entrenched practice in various regions of Africa, intricately woven into cultural norms and patriarchal ideologies. Ahmadi (2013), cited in Ofor and Ofole (2015), reveals that most vast areas in West Africa are engaged in this practice (116), despite being outlawed in many areas, it continues clandestinely within certain communities. FGM, practice involves the removal of external female genitalia for cultural, religious, or non-medical reasons. This practice, though often justified by tradition, religious beliefs, or misconceptions about hygiene, serves primarily to diminish a woman's sexual pleasure and control her sexuality.

The perpetuation of FGM reflects a disturbing imbalance of power, with patriarchal norms seeking to assert dominance over women's bodies and sexuality. By diminishing a woman's ability to experience pleasure, FGM aims to uphold traditional notions of femininity centered around purity, modesty, and submissiveness (Arora KS, Jacobs AJ 2016). This oppressive practice underscores the broader gender inequalities prevalent in societies where women's autonomy and agency are often sacrificed in favor of patriarchal control. Furthermore, the sustainability of FGM hinges on the validation of patriarchal authority and the perpetuation of gender-based violence

(Arora et al., 152). By subjecting women to this harmful practice, patriarchal systems reinforce their power and authority while perpetuating a cycle of gender oppression and subjugation. In the complex terrain of sexuality, FGM emerges as a stark manifestation of patriarchal exploitation, where female bodies become battlegrounds for the assertion of male dominance (Osezua, O.C., Edobor, A.E. 2021). Addressing the root causes of FGM requires challenging entrenched patriarchal norms, empowering women to reclaim control over their bodies and sexuality, and fostering inclusive and equitable societies where gender-based violence has no place.

The Mangbetu Tribe of South Sudan is yet another group of Africans actively engaged in the ancient tradition of body augmentation known as head elongation for generations (Gerszten Peter, & Gerszten Enrique 1995). This practice involves shaping the skull through binding and applying pressure, resulting in a distinctive elongated appearance deliberately modifying the shape of the head, the Mangbetu people enhance its aesthetic appeal. Elongated heads hold significant cultural and symbolic meaning within the Mangbetu community. Even though this practice is not currently in vogue, it was revered as a symbol of intelligence and beauty for years, embodying ideals of wisdom and attractiveness among the Mangbetu. Consequently, head elongation serves as a form of aesthetic augmentation, with individuals undergoing the process to achieve a desired appearance that aligns with cultural standards of beauty and status. Beyond mere physical transformation, head elongation among the Mangbetu Tribe reflects the intricate interplay between cultural traditions, perceptions of beauty, and social identity. It underscores the importance of physical appearance as a marker of individual and communal identity, while also highlighting the diverse ways in which different societies conceptualize and celebrate beauty.

Besides the above, the Suri tribe resides in the Southwestern region of Ethiopia, which is known for their distinctive practice of using lip plates. According to R.E. Lyth (1947), among the Suri, *"a large stretch [of the lips], which is achieved only after a number of years, is considered a sign of beauty, and the bride price payable is proportionately greater"* (111). Among these people, modifying one's lips and wearing the plates is a conventional expression of tribal beauty and identity. This act of stretching the lips begins in youth and is maintained throughout their lives.

In Ghana, diverse tribal communities engage in a multitude of bodily augmentation practices, each carrying unique cultural significance (Alyssa Irving 2007). Among these, the Akan are notable for their tradition of piercing the left cheeks of children, a practice that serves as a powerful marker of identity within their society. For the Akan, cheek piercing is more than just a physical adornment—it is a symbolic gesture that delineates individuals' lineage, social standing, and tribal affiliation. These distinct marks act as visual identifiers, enabling members of the community to recognize and differentiate themselves from other tribes and social groups. Furthermore, the practice of cheek piercing among the Akan reflects the deep-rooted importance of communal ties and ancestral heritage within their culture. By bearing these marks, individuals honor their familial lineage and affirm their connection to their community, thereby strengthening the bonds of kinship and solidarity among the Akan. Rattray, cited in

Irving, explains that these scars were imprinted on the bodies of slaves to identify them by their owners (7). Overall, the tradition of cheek piercing among the Akan underscores the intricate interplay between physical appearance, cultural identity, and social belonging. It serves as a tangible manifestation of the rich tapestry of Ghanaian culture, highlighting the diverse ways in which different tribes express and uphold their unique heritage through bodily augmentation practices.

The above-described forms of bodily augmentation are reflected in the literature of the African people. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958) illustrates the significance of bodily adornment in Igbo culture, particularly during the festival of the new yam and marriage ceremonies. For instance, during the festival of New Yam, we read that the women “*set about painting themselves with camwood and drawing beautiful black patterns*” on their bodies so as to look beautiful (37). Similarly, the novel depicts the cultural expectations placed upon young brides within Igbo society. This was also the case during marriage ceremonies where “*Camwood...rubbed lightly into her [brides] skin, and all over her body were black patterns drawn*” for them to look beautiful on the occasion and especially for her groom (71). These women are encouraged to adorn their bodies to enhance their attractiveness and beauty for prospective grooms. Through various forms of decoration, such as intricate patterns, beads, and body paint, young brides seek to embody ideals of femininity and allure that align with societal expectations and traditions. Both the practice of scarification among young men and the adornment of young brides underscores the importance of physical appearance and cultural identity within Igbo society, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. These customs not only reflect the aesthetic preferences of the community but also serve as tangible expressions of heritage, belonging, and social status. Based on the above background, we shall delve into a few instances of bodily augmentation in the post-colony and its manifestation in Ngugi wa Thiong’O’s *Wizard of the Crow*.

One of the major states of intersection between the body and the post-colony is agency and identity. In the post colony, there is often the desire to reclaim agency and assert cultural identity in the face of colonial legacies. Therefore, by augmenting the body, individuals and groups express their individuality and collective identity by challenging dominant narratives imposed by colonial powers. Throughout the history of slavery in the United States, the bodies of African American slaves were not only subjected to grueling labor and physical abuse but also became sites of deliberate modification and control by their masters. Slave masters frequently employed various forms of body augmentation as a means of asserting dominance, reinforcing racial hierarchies, and exerting control over the enslaved population. Alan Rice and Johanna C. Kardux (2012) assert that the slave owners “*enter the captive’s body*”, inhabit them, “*with a curious disassociation*” and develop “*the ability to harm them as well*” (248). From branding to facial mutilation, these practices were not only instruments of physical coercion but also served as potent symbols of power and ownership, reducing individuals to mere commodities to be bought, sold, and controlled at will. The use of body augmentation by slave masters highlights the brutal dehumanization inflicted upon African American slaves and underscores the pervasive nature of racialized violence and exploitation within the

institution of slavery. During the transatlantic slave trade, slave masters used various bodily markings to classify their slaves (Irving, cited already). Over time, slaves with these bodily markings attracted higher pay since they were deemed to be brave. Interestingly, over time, the bodily markings on African American slaves have now become elements of resistance and beauty.

Within the historical narrative, diverse forms of bodily augmentation have manifested in various African societies in the post-colonial era, each carrying its own distinct implications and consequences. One particularly harrowing example is found in the brutal civil conflict that engulfed Liberia during the tenure of War Lord Charles Taylor from 1989 to 1996. In a bid to cripple the capabilities of opposing forces and secure a strategic advantage, Taylor's forces resorted to gruesome mass amputations of the limbs of their adversaries. Despite the sheer brutality of this tactic, it proved devastatingly effective, enabling Taylor to consolidate power and assert himself as a dictator from 1997 to 2003. This reprehensible practice underscores the dark reality of how bodily augmentation can be weaponized in the pursuit of power and domination. Moreover, it reflects a broader pattern observed throughout history wherein the augmentation of the body becomes entangled with systems of colonialism and oppression. Scholars like Foucault and Bourdieu have elucidated on the inherently political nature of bodily modification, highlighting its role as a tool of both power and subjugation wielded by colonial agents. In essence, the case of limb shortening in Liberia serves as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences wrought by the exploitation of the human body as a battleground for political dominance.

The colonization process extends far beyond the physical subjugation of individuals; it encompasses a complex interplay between the colonization of both the body and the mind. In the initial stages of colonization, violence against the bodies of enslaved people was pervasive, exemplified by practices such as the piercing of ears for identification purposes. This violence, as articulated by Foucault, reverberates throughout history, leaving a lasting imprint on colonial societies. Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* elucidates how punishment and violence have evolved, taking on more insidious and invisible forms that target not only the body but also the psyche.

From the bodily markings endured by African American slaves to the deliberate disfigurement inflicted upon opposing forces in Liberia, traditional forms of augmentation in African societies have undergone a stark metamorphosis. Once emblematic of cultural identity and beauty, these practices have been co-opted as tools of dominance by oppressors. The legacy of colonization further perpetuated control through various manifestations of indirect rule, employing intermediaries as conduits for colonial authority. These individuals served as the eyes, ears and mouthpieces of the colonial regime. These individuals, commonly known as "African stooges," played pivotal roles in facilitating the implementation of colonial policies and maintaining control over indigenous populations. Throughout African literature, numerous examples of such characters abound, illustrating the complexities of collaboration and resistance in colonial contexts. In *Things Fall Apart*, Enoch emerges as a key figure bridging the gap between the missionaries and the people of Umuofia, embodying the role of mediator

and informant for the colonial authorities. Similarly, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1967) *A Grain of Wheat*, Karanja assumes the position of mouthpiece, ears, and eyes for the Europeans, navigating the delicate balance between loyalty to his community and servitude to the colonial regime. Likewise, in *The Old Man and the Medal* by Ferdinand Oyono (1967), Meka earns recognition and favor from the empire for his unwavering obedience and collaboration, functioning as a conduit for colonial surveillance and control among his people.

It is within this framework of collaboration and complicity that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* unfolds, offering a searing critique of the enduring legacy of colonialism and the complexities of resistance in postcolonial Africa. Through the lens of African literature, the intricate web of power, coercion, and resistance inherent in colonial relationships is vividly portrayed, inviting readers to confront the enduring ramifications of colonial rule on the African continent. In this text, body augmentation is a prominent theme that reflects the intersection of traditional beliefs, technological advancements, and societal values in a fictional African country. The novel explores the idea of body augmentation through various characters and plotlines, offering a complex commentary on power, identity, and the human condition. Key characters undergo various degrees of bodily augmentation with respect to their differing functions.

To begin, Machokali, once known as Mackus, is a member of parliament who had his eyeballs enlarged to the size of electric bulbs in London. His reason for doing that is to enable him to 'see' and spot the enemies of the ruler, no matter how far they're hiding. This impresses the president so much that he promotes him to the position of minister of foreign affairs. This is so that Machokali could be his representative eyes everywhere in whatever corner of the globe lies the Ruler's interest (13). Machokali's augmentation reflects power dynamics, identity negotiation, and the blurred line between the natural and the modified.

After him, another cabinet member, Silver Sikiokuu, had his ears enlarged to the size of a rabbit in France. This enlargement is so that he will be privy to the most private conversations, even between husband and wife. It is stated that his ears are larger than a rabbit's, and he always tries to detect danger at any time and from any direction. Due to this, he is also made minister of state in charge of spying on the citizenry and has the secret police force under him (14). Silver Sikiokuu in *Wizard* emphasizes points by tugging his earlobes. For instance, when he appears before the Ruler to answer questions about the existence of the said leaflets and plastic snakes, Sikiokuu keeps tugging at his earlobes to indicate that he is reading the Ruler's lips:

*"I swear by my two ears and before you, My Lord on Earth and Heaven, that I shall do everything within the powers you have now given me to crush the members and leaders of this so-called Movement for the Voice of the People."* (Wizard 136)

Sikiokuu's augmented hearing transforms him into a tool for political maneuvering, always positioning him as an insider privy to secrets hidden in hushed tones. His elongated ears then become a conduit for power relations. His rabbit ears also

come to symbolize both empowerment and sacrifice—the price paid for proximity to power.

In imitation of his predecessors, Ben Mambo had his tongue enlarged so that, in carrying out the ruler's instruction, his word would reach every nook and cranny in his society. This earns him the obvious position of the minister for information (15). Machokali, Sikiokuu and Mambo are representatives of three cardinal human senses: sight, sound and speech. These characters use their God-given senses to their advantage by enriching themselves and the lives of their dependents at the disadvantage of the majority.

In contrast to the characters above, Kamiti, the protagonist, also undergoes plastic surgery, yet for a different purpose. Kamiti, a young man living in a corrupt and oppressive society ruled by a dictator known as the Ruler, seeks to overthrow the regime and bring about social justice. To achieve his goals, Kamiti undergoes a series of transformations, both physical and spiritual. Throughout the novel, Kamiti's body undergoes various changes, symbolizing his evolution as a revolutionary figure. He receives mystical powers from a traditional healer, which augment his physical abilities and enable him to challenge the Ruler's authority.

These augmentations are physical and spiritual, as Kamiti gains insight and wisdom through his experiences. After receiving the mystical powers, Kamiti undergoes physical enhancements. These allow him to perform extraordinary feats and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This bodily augmentation serves as a symbolic representation of his journey from a marginalized individual to a powerful revolutionary leader. It also reflects on his transformation from a passive victim of oppression to an active agent of change who challenges the status quo. It is worth noting that Kamiti's augmented abilities empower him to resist the oppressive forces of the Ruler's regime. He transforms and becomes a symbol of hope for the oppressed masses and inspires others to join the struggle for freedom and justice.

Unlike the other characters who undergo body augmentation for privilege or surveillance, Kamiti's transformation serves a revolutionary cause. His plastic surgery is not about vanity or personal gain; it is a deliberate act to dismantle the oppressive regime. Additionally, Kamiti's physical enhancement symbolizes his evolution from passive victimhood to active agency. His augmented abilities empower him to resist the Ruler's forces. Through the mystical powers bestowed upon him, he gains insight, wisdom, and a heightened sense of purpose.

The augmentation of the body in *Wizard of the Crow*, therefore, serves as a metaphor for the transformative power of resistance and the ability of individuals to transcend their limitations in the pursuit of justice and freedom. Through the exploration of this theme, Ngugi wa Thiong'o offers a compelling critique of authoritarianism, colonialism, and the exploitation of power. By reading Ngugi's text through the lens of Victoria Pitt, we recognize that the body—whether adorned with tattoos, enlarged eyeballs, or rabbit ears, holds narratives of resistance, surveillance, and identity. Kamiti then uses his enhanced body to challenge the Ruler's authority. His augmented body then becomes a vessel for justice, pointing to the power of collective action. Both Ngugi and



Pitts draw us to question the boundaries of the flesh and the contours of power. Through this exploration, *Wizard of the Crow* resonates as a powerful commentary on the intersection of tradition, technology, and social change in contemporary African society, urging readers to reflect on the ethical implications of augmenting the body in pursuit of power or justice.

At this point, we must reiterate that the embrace of colonial legacies and technology underscores the expansive reach of globalization and the diffusion of technological advancements, prompting inquiries into issues of cultural sovereignty and the appropriation of Western norms and standards. The pervasive influence of Western ideals, particularly regarding beauty standards, has led to the proliferation of a culture emphasizing bodily aesthetics, particularly among African or Black women. The Western notion of beauty, epitomized by long flowing hair, has become idealized, prompting significant investment in wigs and hair extensions to compensate for perceived deficiencies in natural beauty. Additionally, the practice of skin bleaching further exemplifies the extent to which black people seek to conform to Western beauty ideals, highlighting complex dynamics surrounding identity and self-perception within a globalized context.

In conclusion, the exploration of body augmentation within the context of postcolonialism reveals a complex interplay of cultural, historical, and social dynamics. From traditional practices among African tribes to the brutal manipulation of enslaved bodies during colonial times, the augmentation of the body has served as a powerful tool for asserting dominance, reinforcing hierarchies, and resisting oppression. Through literary examples such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*, we see how body augmentation becomes a metaphor for the struggle for agency, identity, and justice in the face of colonial and authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the intersection of colonial legacies and technological advancements highlights the ongoing influence of Western norms and standards on perceptions of beauty and identity within postcolonial societies. The proliferation of cosmetic surgery, skin bleaching, and hair extensions reflects a complex negotiation of cultural sovereignty and the appropriation of Western ideals.

However, amidst these complexities, it is essential to recognize the agency and resilience of individuals and communities in reclaiming their bodies and identities. Body augmentation becomes a site of empowerment, self-expression, and collective action, whether through traditional practices rooted in cultural heritage or acts of resistance against oppressive regimes. As we reflect on the ethical implications of body augmentation, it is crucial to interrogate the meaning and significance of these practices within diverse cultural contexts. While some augmentations may be interpreted as resistance and empowerment, others may perpetuate harmful norms and reinforce existing power structures. Ultimately, the study of body augmentation within postcolonial contexts invites us to question assumptions about beauty, identity, and power and recognize the human experience's inherent complexities. By critically engaging with these issues, we can foster greater understanding, empathy, and solidarity across diverse communities, paving the way for a more just and equitable world.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflict of Interest.

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