Anya Watson

Professor Chrisman

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European Colonialism Doubly Exploits Indigenous Women Through the Institution of Patriarchy

In the late 18th century, San Domingo was a French colony. The Haitian Revolution, led by Toussaint Louverture, was able to overthrow French colonial rule, but the practice of colonialism persisted. By the late 19th century, British settlers expanded their empire by occupying Zimbabwe. In this paper, I will argue that European colonialism uses the institution of patriarchy to doubly exploit indigenous women by not only taking over their land and overriding their culture with that of the hegemonic European culture, but also by mapping Western ideologies of gender conventions relating to women’s roles in society onto indigenous women. By doing this, colonizers take away the power and agency of these women. This loss of agency is uniquely experienced by indigenous women, whereas indigenous men are minimally directly affected by the institution of patriarchy. I will specifically explore the loss of agency of African women due to European colonists. I will do this through exploring the female protagonists in two literary works about the British colonization of Zimbabwe in the late 19th century, the novel *Nehanda* by Yvonne Vera, and the play *The Convert*, by Danai Gurira. I will then compare the characters of Nehanda and Jekesai to the Haitian Revolution leader, Toussaint Louverture, as portrayed in C.L.R. James’s play, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*.

It is important to establish that for colonists to effectively take control of a land and of the indigenous people living there, the colonizers must implement patriarchal values into the indigenous culture. By doing this, it assists in setting up the colonizers as the dominant force. In the case of Europeans colonizing African territories, the Europeans made a targeted effort to subordinate the indigenous women by mapping Western gender conventions onto them, such as beliefs concerning how a proper woman should act. For the colonizers, being a respectable woman included exhibiting qualities such as passiveness, submissiveness, and dependency.[[1]](#footnote-1) In her paper, “Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism, Power Dynamics, and Social Agency Materialized in Colonial Institutions,” Suzanne Spencer-Wood gives a further explanation of this phenomenon, which she calls “patriarchal colonialism.” She writes,

“Ungendered post-colonial theories of both external and internal colonialism ignore the fact that the social institution of patriarchy was intrinsic to all aspects of European colonialism . . . the term “patriarchal colonialism” focuses on analyzing European policies and laws for creating institutional gender segregation of colonized bodies, to conform to the hegemonic Western gender ideology of subordinate domestic women dominated by superior, public men.” (Spencer-Wood).

In other words, the combination of colonialism and patriarchy were critical in helping colonizers to accomplish their goal of taking control over a territory and its people. In the process, colonizers doubly exploited women, as employing gender roles was something that affected the experiences of indigenous men to a much lesser extent.

This paper will focus on the colonialization of the African country of Zimbabwe by the British and will also briefly examine the colonization of Haiti, a country on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, by the French. Because of the focus on Zimbabwe, it is crucial to consider the way in which African women in particular were viewed in their cultures before the Europeans implemented patriarchal values. Diedre Bádéjọ outlines this in her paper, “African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent.” Bádéjọ writes, “African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical” (Bádéjọ 94). African cultures typically viewed women as possessing great inner strength, a belief that stemmed from ancient African cosmology, which “recognizes that through the womb of women all humanity passes” (Bádéjọ 95). Whether it was the British in Zimbabwe or the French in Haiti, European colonists attempted to get rid of this notion of the empowered female by pushing sexist ideals of how they thought women should act onto African and indigenous women in order to oppress them. Not only did the Europeans subjugate women through taking their land and replacing their culture and religion with that of the Europeans, they also forced women to conform to social norms in opposition to African ideas of empowering women. Bádéjọ writes,

“Western male sexism . . . confounded women's power by restricting ‘real’ women to weak, juvenile roles where their rights existed within the context of dominating male systems. Consequently, in both enslavement and colonialism, through the lens of Western patriarchy, African women's agency and images . . . became distorted and ridiculed. Africa's asymmetrical, complementary, parallel gender relationships are disfigured by enslavement and colonialism” (Bádéjọ 101).

Colonizers thus required African women to adapt to their Western attitude of women as weak, helpless beings. This can be seen in the novel *Nehanda*, by Yvonne Vera, and the play *The* *Convert*, by Danai Gurira. Both stories feature Shona female protagonists, the spirit medium Nehanda and the young Catholic convert, Jekesai, respectively. These characters act in such a way that highlights their lack of power and agency as a result of the colonists imposing patriarchy. The authors of these works, who are both Zimbabwean American women, are thus critiquing this harmful phenomenon. In her essay, “‘Survival is in the mouth’: *Yvonne Vera’s* Nehanda,” Annalisa Oboe puts it, “through written narrative, Vera disempowers (western) men with means Nehanda never had” (Oboe 135). By telling this story, Vera points out to the reader the awful effects that the sexist values the colonists brought had on Shona women. Men of the indigenous population, on the other hand, did not have to face the consequences of patriarchy as implemented through colonialism in the same way that women did. This can be seen through exploring the character of the Haitian Revolution leader, Toussaint Louverture, and his struggle against French colonialist rule in C.L.R. James’s play, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*.

This subjugation of African women as a result of colonialism can be seen in the novel *Nehanda*, by Yvonne Vera, through the character Nehanda, who is based on a real historical figure. A Shona spirit medium and the protagonist of the story, Nehanda lacks power and agency. This is evident through the fact that she does not have her own voice. Speaking up and being heard is one way in which people assert themselves. When women fail to do this, they accept the sexist idea that a respectable woman should be silent and passive. The character of Nehanda is born about forty years before the British come to colonize Zimbabwe, so her lack of voice during her lifetime corresponds with the arrival of the colonizers. When she is born, she does not make a sound. “The child came silently into the darkness and warmth of the hut. After she had been born she did not cry for a day. Mother worried about this silent child whom she had brought into the world, and wondered if her daughter had the power to assert her own presence on the earth” (Vera 12). The fact that Nehanda does not cry at birth is a cause of concern to her mother, who worries about whether Nehanda will be able to establish herself as a strong and independent being.

As Nehanda grows older, she becomes a vessel who relays the messages of the spirits, or the departed, who speak through her. In multiple rituals, the Shona people ask her to tell them what the ancestors advise. “They cup their hands together and clap in unison. ‘Tell us . . . you who have been sent from beyond . . . you who have seen the secrets of the departed. Help us find ourselves” (Vera 58). Nehanda gives the people guidance according to the will of the departed, but she is not able to speak for herself. She never asserts her own ideas or opinions. Annalisa Oboe expands on this in her paper, writing,

“Given the historical context, Nehanda’s agency cannot be mistaken for progressive feminism, nor does it suggest autonomy . . . the figure of the possessed woman can only exercise a paradoxical authority (‘instrumental agency’), born of radical receptivity: her power derives from the community’s assessment that she no longer exists as an autonomous agent, having become an instrument of the overpowering will of an ancestor or spirit” (Oboe 135).

Essentially, Nehanda’s only ability to exercise agency comes through the spirits exercising it for her. In this way, she does not really have her own identity. The fact that Nehanda lacks her own voice shows her lack of independence. This lack of having any sort of agency contrasts with the typical African view of women as empowered and resilient. Nehanda, therefore, is more in line with Western patriarchal values which associate proper women with silence and whose voices are seen as less valuable than those of men. By portraying Nehanda in this manner, Vera shines a critical light on the practice of subjugating women through patriarchy. She illustrates its devastating effects on the main character in the novel, who ends up dying as a result of the British colonists forcing their way onto Shona land and implementing British culture through religion, education, social norms and other ideological apparatuses.

In the play *The Convert*, by Danai Gurira, the main protagonist, Jekesai, also lacks her own voice. However, unlike Nehanda, this is not something she is born with, it is a loss that she experiences when she is forced to transition from speaking her native language of Shona to speaking English. This switch in languages happens along with the British colonists imposing Catholicism onto the Shona people. Described as “a girl in her late teens,” Jekesai starts out speaking Shona, but is corrected by her aunt, Mai Tamba. As a housekeeper for Chilford Ndlovu, the only African catechist for the Catholic Church in the Mashonaland region, Mai Tamba is careful to present to Chilford only what he wants to hear, which means addressing him only in English. When Jekesai speaks Shona in his presence, Mai Tamba butts in, saying, “(*In Shona*.) Mastahavadi Shona. **[Now whatever you cannot say in English just don’t say it – he doesn’t want any Shona spoken around him okay?]**” (Gurira 6). By the end of the play, Jekesai (or Ester, as Chilford dubs her), is speaking English almost perfectly. The fact that Jekesai must abandon her native language represents a loss of her own voice. As a result of not being able to speak her own language, Jekesai also loses her agency. This loss of agency is all due to the arrival of the British colonizers and implementation of Roman Catholicism, the British religion. As the loss of her voice corresponds with the arrival of the British missionaries and their stalwart, Chilford Ndlovu, it is clear that their British values are what symbolically stole Jekesai’s voice. By speaking in English and thus taking on the ways of the British, Jekesai gives up her identity. She becomes the submissive woman that the Europeans prefer.

In addition, the ways in which the female characters of Nehanda and Jekesai choose to use violence is significant to understanding how they are subjugated through gender conventions due to colonialism. In *Nehanda*, Nehanda never acts violently. Rather than fight against the colonizers with the rest of the Shona people, she flees to the hills to avoid the British colonists. “Nehanda hides away in the hills, which are alien to her pursuers. Sometimes the searchers pass her as she sleeps at the entrance to a hidden cave. How could a woman survive this forest?” (Vera 89). Even the narrative voice of this passage shows the inherent sexism of Nehanda’s European pursuers. They cannot believe that a woman, who is supposed to be weak and frail, could live this long by herself out in the wilderness. It is true that Nehanda gives the Shona people permission to use violence. She tells them, “Do not take anything that belongs to the stranger . . . Take only the guns . . . Take only the things that will also protect you, not the things that will destroy you” (Vera 77). Although she allows the Shona use of the colonizer’s guns, she makes an important distinction that these guns are to be used for protection. They are a necessary evil which are only to be used because the colonizers would completely overwhelm them and wipe out their people if they did not use the guns. In addition, Nehanda herself does not use any of the guns or exhibit any kind of violent behavior whatsoever in the novel. This refusal to be aggressive demonstrates that Nehanda in a way has given into the European’s patriarchal ideals of women as submissive and passive. Although the other Shona people fight back, Nehanda herself does not, she only runs and hides in an effort to avoid the colonizers. This demonstrates the result that “patriarchal colonialism” has on her. Her inability to confront the British shows how she no longer exhibits traits that the typical African view of women subscribes to, but rather has taken on the traits of a proper women in the eyes of the Europeans.

Jekesai, on the other hand, does use violence at the very end of the play. After seeing her cousin Tamba murdered in front of her very eyes by the Native Commissioner, she kills Mr. and Mrs. Coltern, who are white, in cold blood. However, before she witnesses Tamba’s death, she is quite peaceful. It is her idea in the first place to go to the Native Commissioner to plead for Tamba to be absolved for the crimes he has been accused of. She pleads Chilford,

“Master, you know I can speak well, you talk of what a marvel I am, of how many people I have brought to the Lord, I can speak for him . . . The courts are following the laws of the Lord . . . of seeking peace and loving one another . . . We take him, we petition for him, he will be acquitted” (Gurira 79).

It is clear that at this point in the play, Jekesai still holds the idea of peace in high regard. She is idealistic to the point of being unrealistic, she thinks that people have everyone else’s best interests in mind. However, this all changes after she sees Tamba get murdered and realizes that this British rule does not actually practice everything it preaches. In this moment, she partially escapes colonialist ideologies. She is able to reclaim some of her agency by retaliating against the colonial rule through her violent actions. It is only after she breaks free of the shackles of colonialist philosophies that she also can break free of the patriarchy imposed by the British. She finally manages to use violence once she embraces her own power. However, her meek acceptance of the consequences of her actions bring her back to patriarchal colonialist ideals of how a woman should act.

In addition to their approaches to violence, another way in which Nehanda and Jekesai are shown to be subjugated into the patriarchy is through their wholehearted acceptance of their deaths. By letting the colonists kill them, they are giving up any power or agency they have. Through the patriarchy, the colonizers have conditioned them to passively allow themselves to be killed. In Nehanda’s case, she eventually gives herself up the British, knowing she will be killed if she does not convert to Catholicism. However, she accepts her death with open arms. Vera writes, “She welcomes her departed, and the world of her ancestors. The whiteness around her eyes has turned to a redness that is also death. The chasm between the living and the dead is broken . . . The wind covers the earth with joyful celebration” (Vera 116). By giving into her death and viewing it as something that is wonderful to the point that it warrants celebration, this demonstrates how deeply patriarchal values have become instilled in her. She could save herself by pretending to convert to Catholicism, but instead she gives up her life, dying at the hands of the British colonizers. Her decision is almost akin to suicide due to the fact that she has other options of continuing her life, but instead gives into death.

In *The Convert*, Jekesai also accepts her death. She feels that it is a necessary punishment for the violence she committed against Mr. and Mrs. Coltern. When Chilford urges her to run and escape her inevitable execution, she replies, “Master there is nowhere to be running. I am already making my peace on this one. This I was doing for my blood, but I am knowing there is a price I must be paying. I am ready to be paying it. Don’t be fearing for me Master, the Lord he is with me” (Gurira 86). She is not afraid of her fate; she faces it almost willingly. This acceptance of death is in line with the patriarchal values of the colonists. Even though she was able to defy these values when she took it upon herself to commit violence in an act meant to avenge her cousin Tamba’s murder, she ultimately accepts the patriarchal ideals when she tamely accepts her death. The patriarchy as implemented by the colonists was engrained enough that Jekesai reverts back to the European view of a woman. She accepts the consequences of her actions without putting up a fight or trying to avoid facing them. Although she does not die in the play, it is implied that her fate will be execution. Like the circumstances surrounding Nehanda’s death, Jekesai’s agreement with the decision of the colonists to kill her could almost be considered suicide. She has the option to try to escape death, but she chooses not to run or hide, showing her inability to even attempt to defy patriarchal colonialism.

The female characters of Nehanda and Jekesai can be contrasted to the character of Toussaint in C.L.R. James’s play, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*. Toussaint, like Nehanda and Jekesai, is a member of an indigenous group who is being colonized by Europeans. However, his story takes place in Haiti in the late 18th century instead of Zimbabwe in the late 19th century, and he helps to lead a group of slaves to overthrow French Colonialist rule instead of fighting British rule as the Shona did. Therefore, the circumstances surrounding his character are indeed different from the circumstances around the characters of Nehanda and Jekesai. Nevertheless, the actions he takes can be compared to those of Nehanda and Jekesai due to the fact that they are all part of the existing indigenous population in an area that experienced European colonial rule.

Toussaint acts very differently from Nehanda in Jekesai. For one thing, he does not lack his own voice. Whereas Nehanda speaks for the spirits of the deceased ancestors, Toussaint only has to speak for himself and his own ideas. Whereas Jekesai is forced to stop speaking her native language and adopt the language of the British, Toussaint likely grew up speaking the same language as the colonizers who already occupied Haiti, then called San Domingo. He never gave up his native language like Jekesai did. He demonstrates his ability to use his voice by freely negotiating with the colonialist leaders on multiple occasions. For example, in Act I, Scene 4, Toussaint converses with British army officer, General Maitland. When Maitland explains how the British have not yet abolished slavery but still want to have relations with Toussaint and the other revolutionaries, Toussaint replies, “I cannot. My army, my officers, all are fighting for freedom, not only for themselves but for all” (James 73). As a man, Toussaint is not affected by patriarchal colonialist values. He boldly asserts himself, in contrast to the characters of Nehanda and Jekesai. Toussaint also uses violence against the colonizers. In Act III, Scene 2, he is seen in the midst of a battle, cannons ablaze around him. He consistently is at the frontlines of battle, leading the other revolutionaries. He does not run and hide from the Europeans like Nehanda does, nor does he wait for the colonists to murder someone he personally knows before taking action, like Jekesai. He is able to unabashedly use violence against the colonizers who in occupying Haiti, are committing violence themselves. When Toussaint is finally captured and taken captive, unlike Nehanda and Jekesai, he does not happily welcome death. Even though the Haitian Revolution, which he played such an integral part in, has succeeded, Toussaint still longs for life. He desperately yearns for news of his wife and sons. When he finally dies, it is rather fitfully. He did not let go of life easily; he fought for the privilege of living. The patriarchal colonialism of the French has clearly not forced him into following any Western social conventions, as he is a man and thus less directly affected by the implementation of the institution of patriarchy.

Through examining the characters in these three stories and exploring the implications of their actions by viewing these actions through the lenses of various theorists, it is apparent that European colonialism indeed exploits indigenous women doubly through imposing patriarchal values onto them and their cultures. Women are exploited in a deeper way than men are through colonialism, as they not only have to give up their land and cultural practices, they must subject themselves to gender norms that promote the idea of women as passive and weak as well. The phenomenon of indigenous women being exploited through the mapping of Western gender conventions onto them is not something unique to the past; it still happens today. By forcing all women to abide to the ways of the hegemonic culture, the unique cultures of the colonized peoples and the insights of indigenous women fade from history and are erased over time. This erasure makes the world less culturally diverse. With a reduction in cultural diversity comes a reduction in fresh and complex ideas and opinions, declining open mindedness and compassion for others, and fewer ways to learn from unique people who can teach insights which are helpful for introspection. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to recognize patriarchal colonialism and understand its harmful effects on individual women and on the world as a whole.

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1. Imposing patriarchy was only one of the ways in which colonists indoctrinated indigenous peoples into Western culture. I would argue that in a broader sense, colonists used what Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser called Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs, for this purpose. For Althusser, ISAs are the way that the State reproduces the means of production (the means of production being human laborers) to keep the system of capitalism going. They contrast with Repressive State apparatuses, or RSAs, which function through violence, as opposed to through ideology. ISAs include education, religion, politics, etc. (Althusser 143). In Marxist theory, ISAs are what the State uses to indoctrinate people into a capitalist system, but I argue that ISAs are powerful tools which colonizers use to indoctrinate colonized subjects as well. Patriarchy could be seen as an institution which assists the family ISA in that it keeps women passive and submissive. This ensures that the colonizers can maintain complete control over their subjects, and indigenous men still get to have the illusion of control due to having power over the women. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)