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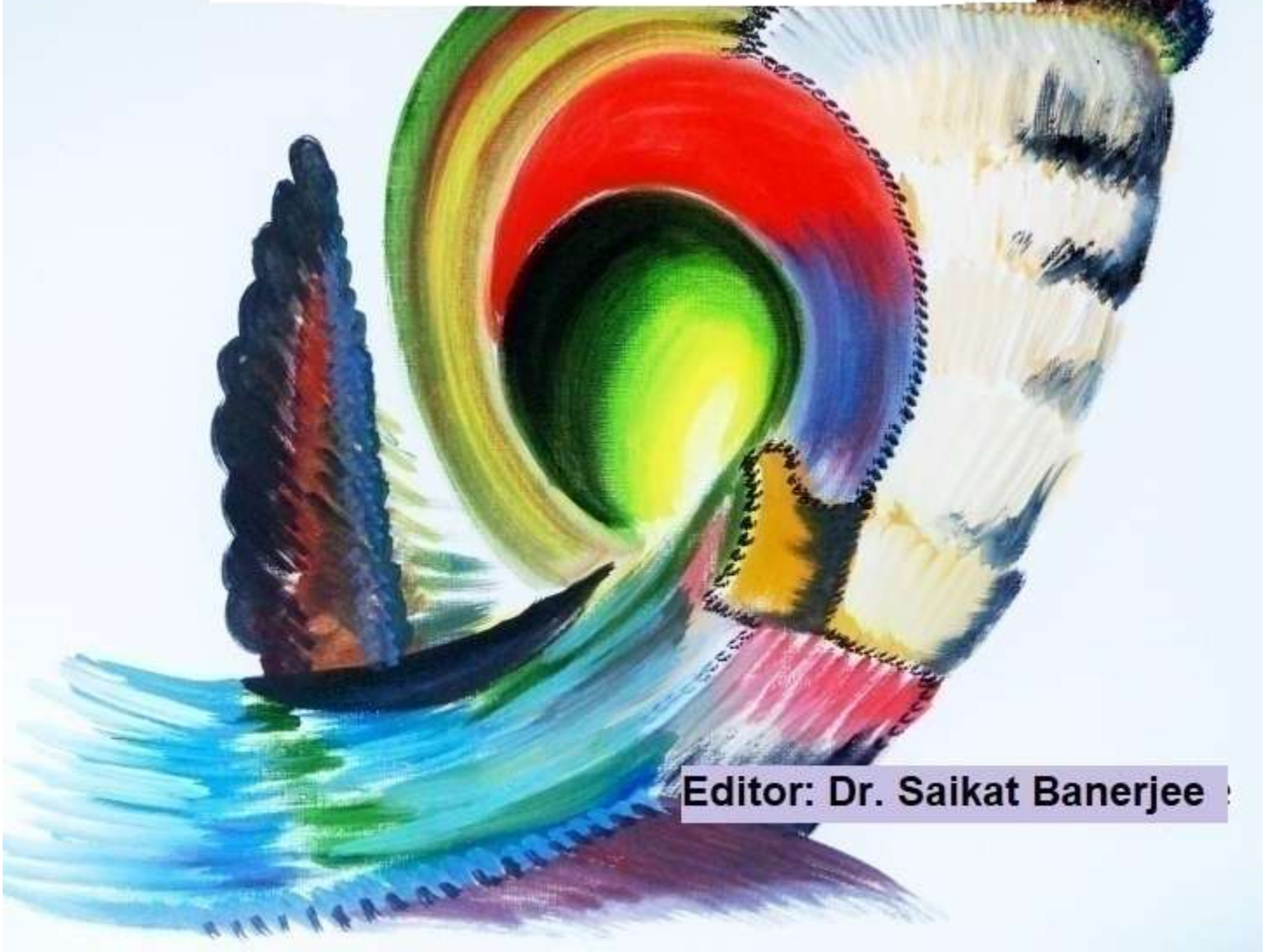

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Understanding Fragility of Identity Formation: Reading through RDO, CAE, and COST In *Things Fall Apart*, *The Yellow Wallpaper,* and *Animal Farm*

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Abstract: Identity does not always break with a crash; it often thins, bends, or slips into small habits. This study stays with such small moves. In this paper, we will conduct a deep study of three sharp scenes of pressure, domination, and oppression in identity formation in *Things Fall Apart*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and *Animal Farm*, to watch how a self holds together or comes apart. Rather than starting from a single grand theory, we move by noticing. In Achebe, fear of weakness hardens into rule and then into collapse. In Gilman, when speech is blocked, the body answers in its place. In Orwell, public chants and rewritten rules teach a crowd of common people (symbolised through farm animals) how to see and how to doubt their own recall. From these patterns, we work with three light tools, used more as lenses than laws: one that tracks fear turning into control (RDO), one that follows how silence finds other forms (CAE), and one that marks how being watched alters the "I," the "you," and the "they" inside a person (COST). The aim is modest: to name what is often missed and to keep questions open. Read this way, power is not only structure, silence is not only absence, and the gaze is not only outside. Each is lived, felt, and deeply human.

Keywords: Identity formation; Surveillance; Observation; Fear and Domination; Silence and Voice; Embodiment; Memory manipulation; Representation and Control; Subjectivity.

Introduction

In this paper, we will apply a different approach of starting with a small question: how does a person hold together when pressure stays inside his own room, in the house, and even in the backyard? We can try to understand this through scenes, such as a village meets a new rule it did not ask for, a woman is told to rest and not speak much. In places like these, the self moves, tries to control the self, and reconsiders settling the mind. It stiffens, or it finds a substitute, or it learns to act in a certain way because eyes are on it.

There are certain theories that talk about these things—postcolonial memory, gender and the body, media and surveillance, and so on. They help to understand, but at some point, they lack the exact emotion, like

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some small moments slip past: a pause before a sentence, a careful "yes" when the mind says "no," a mask that begins as protection and then feels like the face. This essay stays with those smaller moves.

Our way of working is simple. We read first, study who speaks, who stops, and how a line is repeated. Only after that do we gather patterns and give them names. We are not fixing a grand system. We are noting recurring moves across pages: a defensive hardening that turns into harm; a compensatory answer where the body stands in for blocked voice; a fold in the self that comes when being watched feels normal.

These moves do not live only in books. Personalised feeds, for example, choose what we see and, slowly, what we bring of ourselves to the screen. Reports about devices being entered without consent, some accepted, some debated, still change habits. People type less, or later, or not at all. Later in this paper, we will briefly note two widely discussed cases, Cambridge Analytica and Pegasus, only to show how representation and the feeling of being seen can shape speech and silence. The texts are chosen for this kind of attention. *Things Fall Apart* shows how protection and control can touch each other inside a community. *The Yellow Wallpaper* keeps us in one room, where the body learns to speak when the voice is taken away. *Animal Farm* turns naming, memory, and obedience into public ritual, and it shows how people start performing for an order that is still writing itself.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

When we look at stories closely, we often see moments when the self damages its own self. Sometimes this faltering self begins to work when it feels a constant pressure from the community to act, sometimes from the age-old traditions, beliefs, and disciplines the character has to face and sometimes from the way language and gaze shift around us. The way fear turns into domination within a family, or how silence shifts into embodied speech, or how observation itself bends subjectivity, these require slightly different lenses. This is where we place three concepts, Reactive Defensive Oppression (RDO), Compensatory Antithetical Embodiment (CAE), and Collapsible Observer State Theory (COST); not as replacements, but as working tools alongside earlier thought.

Take Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for consideration; the crisis of Okonkwo's character cannot be fully explained by grand structures of colonialism alone. Of course, postcolonial frameworks like Spivak's "strategic essentialism" (uniting under identity politics) and Gramsci's Hegemony, or what is called as rule by

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consent, give us powerful tools to think about community and power. But Okonkwo's choices are not just about politics; they are about fear, a fear rooted in the weakness he associates with his father. This is where RDO becomes useful. Unlike Adorno's Authoritarian Personality, which explains rigid hostility as ideology, RDO locates the oppression in a more fragile space: a defensive reaction against inner vulnerability. Okonkwo's strictness, his violence, and his hostility toward Nwoye do not simply mirror "authority"; they are a desperate attempt to hold together a self that feels on the verge of collapse. His oppression is emotional, brittle, and even irrational. In this sense, RDO helps us understand how domination can grow not from confidence but from insecurity.

Then consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Much has been written about gender and control here; Butler's notion of performativity, for instance, shows how gender is repeated into being, while Beauvoir explains how the woman becomes the Other under the male gaze. These frameworks explain a lot, but they still struggle to capture what happens when expression is blocked and something else, something opposite, takes its place. This is where CAE comes in. The narrator is told to rest, to stay quiet, to accept the role of patient. But instead of silence, another voice emerges: images of the wallpaper, gestures, creeping movements. It is not freedom, not open resistance, but a kind of antithetical embodiment, where what is denied to the voice returns through the body. Freud's "reaction formation" comes close, but he stops at pathology. CAE, instead, looks at the symbolic reversal: silence turning into an expressive distortion.

Finally, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The Frankfurt School, with its analysis of the culture industry and standardisation, or Foucault's ideas of discipline, both illuminate how collective narratives shape subjectivity. But what about the moment when the self collapses not because of ideology alone, but because of the sense of being constantly watched and corrected? This is where COST is most relevant. In *Animal Farm*, the animals learn quickly which slogans to repeat, which postures to assume, and which silences to keep. These are not merely responses to ideology, but to observation. Goffman's Presentation of Self explains much about social performance, but COST adds that this stage is not only outward, it is also inward.

RDO in *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers one of the clearest ways to see how fear can harden into violence. Okonkwo is often read as a symbol of rigid patriarchy, but if we look closer, what drives him is not just social

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power, but a private fear that keeps coming back. When the Oracle orders Ikemefuna's death, the elders warn Okonkwo not to take part. Yet he lifts his machete anyway. Achebe writes, "He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, they have killed me!' as he ran towards Okonkwo, and Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe 44). The scene makes it clear: the act is less about duty and more about the terror of being seen as soft. His violence here is not strength but defence.

That same fear appears again when he argues with Obierika about the killing. He lashes out: "You sound as if you question the authority and wisdom of the Oracle…You are a big man, but when it comes to fighting, you become a woman" (Achebe 47). What should have been a quiet reckoning becomes a performance of toughness. He needs to convince others, and himself, that he has not broken. But in truth, his repeated visits to Obierika show that he is unsettled, searching for relief he cannot admit.

Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, becomes another mirror for this fear. Achebe calls him "a sad-faced youth" (11). To Okonkwo, Nwoye's gentleness feels like a threat, a reminder of Unoka, the father he despised. "It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe 11). That fear soon twists into open hostility: "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands" (Achebe 25). Later, when Nwoye refuses to answer him, Okonkwo roars, "Answer me before I kill you!" and beats him (Achebe 111). In that moment, the pattern is complete. His insecurity doesn't just wound his son; it drives the boy away forever. The "defence" destroys what he meant to preserve.

The end begins quickly enough when he takes his own life. Here, Achebe leaves us with Obierika's bewildered grief: "Why did he do it?" (Achebe 149). It is a question without an answer, but also the most honest response lies inside the question. Suicide is not just a shame in custom; it is the final collapse of a man whose whole identity was built on keeping fear hidden. What Achebe has beautifully woven into the characters in *Things Fall Apart* is neither just the toxic traits of masculinity nor an excuse for violence; it is a fear of being seen as a weak, father-like character. Thus, this oppression had become inward first, outward later. Okonkwo kills to keep control, rules to mask fragility, and dies when all mirrors of masculinity shatter. His tragedy is that the defence he built so fiercely was also the thing that destroyed him.

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Antithetical Action in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* gives us a quieter kind of resistance. Not loud. Not a speech. More like a turn of the body when the voice is blocked. That's the spirit of compensatory antithetical embodiment: when a script says "be still," the answer comes back in its opposite form.

We can start small. The narrator tries to think for herself, but the thought stalls at the edge of John's care. "John is a physician, and perhaps… that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman 31). The sentence begins as doubt and then softens. Soon, the writing itself becomes something she must hide: "There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 34). Maybe this is where the body begins to prepare its reply. John's love arrives as rules. She notes he is "very careful and loving and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman 33). She even repeats his logic inside herself and calls her own unease "basely ungrateful" (Gilman 33). That echo matters. When speech has to pass through someone else's permission, it changes shape. What can't be said plainly will look for another route. Enter the wallpaper. What others treat as harmless décor becomes a stage for substitution. She finds "a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (Gilman 35). This is not just a pretty description; it is a projection. The trapped figure behind the pattern is a counter-self. The narrator begins to act with her and as her: "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled" (Gilman 46). For example, where the treatment asks for rest, she tears. Where the room asks for stillness, she creeps. The body answers in antithesis.

By the end, the switch is clear. "I've got out at last… in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman 48). Many call this madness. Maybe. But it can also be a role turned inside out. Not a speech at the bedside. A refusal was performed. The words she couldn't say arrive as action.

This is why the CAE idea fits *The Yellow Wallpaper*. When a life is set up so a voice cannot speak, expression doesn't die. It moves. It shows up as an image, a gesture, a small ritual, like that. She begins by accepting the care, repeats its phrases, and feels guilty for wanting more. Then, bit by bit, she finds an opposite form. Crawling and tearing aren't pretty answers. But they are answers. The body carries what the page could not.

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Monitoring Identity with *Animal Farm*

Orwell's farm shows how power does not just use force but also works through what is seen, said, and remembered. COST helps us notice the inner side of this: how they start to watch themselves, perform for safety, and split between the self they show and the self they keep inside.

The wall is one of the first lessons. "These Seven Commandments would now be written on the wall; they would form an unalterable law…" (Orwell 26). A rule on a wall becomes more than a rule. It teaches the animals to return to the same place for truth. Later, when the words change, the habit of trust stays. Even a quiet moment—"it was noticed that the milk had disappeared" (Orwell 28)—shows how power works silently, before any reason is offered. In COST's terms, the animals start to slip into a third-person mode, looking at themselves from the outside, trained to believe what the wall or the leaders show them.

Songs shape the voice the same way. "The Meeting always ended with the singing of Beasts of England" (Orwell 33). Singing proves loyalty. To join is to belong. Later, the chant changes to "Four legs good, two legs better!" (Orwell 144). The words flip, but the act remains the same. Saying the right line becomes survival. Performance becomes truth. Memory is managed through speech. Napoleon ends open debate—"from now on the Sunday-morning Meetings would come to an end" (Orwell 60)—and from then on, Squealer retells everything. The windmill is no longer Snowball's plan but Napoleon's idea: "He had seemed to oppose the windmill, simply as a manoeuvre to get rid of Snowball" (Orwell 64). Squealer even trains memory itself: "Do you not remember…?" he asks, and "it seemed to the animals that they did remember it" (Orwell 89). Repetition builds consent, and hesitation turns into silence.

Objects tell stories too. When Napoleon puts on "an old bowler hat of Mr Jones's" (Orwell 114), the look of power becomes the same as the old master's. Later, "He carried a whip in his trotter" (Orwell 142). No long speech is needed. The picture alone teaches obedience.

Fear seals the pattern. After the Battle of the Cowshed, Boxer is shaken: "Who will believe that I did not do this on purpose?" Snowball's reply is quick—"War is war" (Orwell 47). A personal doubt gives way to a hard rule. COST would say this is where the fold happens: the "I" hesitates, the "you" commands, and the imagined "they" decides what must be shown. The clearest collapse comes with Boxer's end. The van reads "'Alfred Simmonds, Horse Slaughterer… Kennels Supplied.' … 'They are taking Boxer to the knacker's!'"

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(Orwell 131). The most loyal worker is sold when he is no longer useful. His motto, "Napoleon is always right" (Orwell 63), cannot survive the letters on the cart.

So, what does COST show here? The animals do not only obey force. They start to live as if always watched, always corrected. The "I" repeats safe lines—"I will work harder" (Orwell 63). The "you" presses from others in the yard—what will they think if I resist? And the "they" hovers, an imagined gaze that shapes choices before they are even made. Masks become habits. Performance becomes life. The split becomes normal. With Orwell's simple details—the milk gone (Orwell 28), the hat (Orwell 114), the whip (Orwell 142), the wall (Orwell 145)—we can see how a public scene shapes the self both outside and inside. COST calls this the fold: the self survives by acting for the gaze, until acting is no longer separate from being.

The Triadic Structure

Each of the three frameworks—Reactive Defensive Oppression (RDO), Compensatory Antithetical Embodiment (CAE), and the Collapsible Observer-State Theory (COST)—offers a way to see those shapes.

RDO can be understood most easily as fear that becomes control. But this process is not one straight line. Self-RDO happens when fear circles back on the person who feels it. This is what we see in Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. His terror of weakness drives him to violence, even against those he loves. The act looks like power, but underneath it is a collapse of the self hidden under hardness. Passive RDO works more quietly. It shows itself in withdrawal, silence, or avoidance. But this calm surface is not peace; it is defence. Ideological RDO is louder. It clings to tradition, law, or belief. The voice insists on loyalty to codes or customs, not because they are stable, but because the self fears losing place without them.

CAE begins in a different place. It does not begin with control, but with silence, with the moment when speech is blocked. Out of that silence, resistance takes shape in three ways: through the body and imagination, through small social acts, and through rejection of wider scripts and ideas. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator begins by repeating her husband's instructions, feeling guilty for not being grateful enough; her body then takes over, crawling, tearing, and performing what she cannot say. Social-CAE appears when control arrives through relationships; instead of breaking away openly, the subject finds side doors, writing secretly,

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imagining otherwise, or shaping small acts of refusal. Ideological-CAE moves further out; here, resistance is not only against a person, but against entire scripts—patriarchy, family roles, cultural rules. But it works quietly, undoing from within rather than shouting from outside.

COST takes another route. Instead of fear or silence, it looks at perspective, how the self shifts when watched, judged, or imagined. Its triadic form is simple: first-person, second-person, and third-person states. First-person begins as volition, the "I" that speaks, but under pressure, even this "I" becomes scripted, already rehearsing how it will be received. The second-person state appears when the self bends under the weight of others. To live with others often means to echo their words, to match their tone, or to shrink under their watchful eyes. The third-person state is a deeper break. It is when the self begins to look at itself as if it has already been judged, already remembered, already turned into someone else's story.

RDO, CAE, and COST each give us a way to follow the same question: how does the self hold up, bend, or fracture under pressure? RDO maps fear turned into oppression, against the self, against others, against society. CAE maps silence turned into embodiment, resistance that arrives through inversion. COST maps perspective turned into a collapse, when being seen alters how one can exist. Read together, they are not competing models but three angles of one landscape.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The three lenses, Reactive Defensive Oppression (RDO), Compensatory Antithetical Embodiment (CAE), and the Collapsible Observer-State Theory (COST), are not fixed systems; rather, they are ways of noticing. RDO helps us see how fear hardens into oppression. CAE shows how silence can become the body's answer. COST explains how the act of being seen reshapes the self from within.

RDO reminds us that many acts of violence are born from fear. Okonkwo's story in *Things Fall Apart* is one example, but the same pattern appears in Tagore's *Home and the World*, Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Karnad's *Tughlaq*, Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. CAE begins not from force but from quiet. When a voice is blocked, resistance shifts into other shapes. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the body crawls when words are forbidden. The same happens in Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, Lahiri's *The Lowland*, or Plath's *The Bell Jar*. COST draws us toward the act of watching and being watched. It shows how selfhood can fracture into three voices: the "I" that tries to act,

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the "you" that bends under another's gaze, and the "they" that looks from outside and shapes how memory itself feels. Orwell's *Animal Farm* shows this in the commandments on the wall and the chants that reorder memory. But the same shifts appear in Forster's *The Machine Stops* and Bhattacharya's *Herbert*, where technology, public eyes, and fear create selves that no longer fully belong to themselves.

In the end, the point is simple. Power is not only written into systems and laws. Silence is not just the lack of speech. The gaze is not only what comes from outside. Each of these is also emotional, lived, and deeply human. Reading with RDO, CAE, or COST is really about paying attention to how people hold themselves together, or how they sometimes fall apart, when the world presses too hard. Where these ideas travel next, into new texts, new fields, or new questions, will depend on how we choose to carry them forward.

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