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Collapsible Observer State Theory: Narrating the Identity Collapse in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

The question of how identity is shaped, fractured, or undone under the pressure of observation has long preoccupied philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory. From Freud's model of repression and the superego's internal gaze, through Lacan's mirror stage, Sartre's phenomenology of "the Look," and Foucault's analysis of panoptic surveillance, the act of being seen has emerged as central to the constitution of the self. Later interventions in gender theory by Butler, de Beauvoir, Mulvey, Hooks, postcolonial thought by Fanon, Said, Bhabha, Spivak, and trauma studies by Caruth and LaCapra further demonstrate that observation, whether intimate, social or institutional, can distort the subject's performance, lead to alienation, mimicry, or fragmentation. Yet across these influential accounts, a structural link remains untheorized: a unified account of how perspective itself precipitates collapse.

This paper examines that missing link in what it terms the Collapsible Observer-State (COST), a critical-literary device and theoretical framework that organizes identity modulation into three perspectival states: first-person, second-person, and third-person. Through close readings of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the analysis demonstrates how Firdaus and Okonkwo are fractured by the pressures of gendered surveillance

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and colonial authority. By naming and applying this device, this paper tries to provide a new critical vocabulary for tracing identity collapse under observation, offering a comparative model that both extends existing theoretical traditions and clarifies the mechanics of subjectivity in human beings as well as literature.

Keywords: Philosophy, psychoanalysis, cultural theory, repression, identity modulation, gendered surveillance, internal gaze

Introduction

To be seen is never quite simple. The moment another person's eyes fall on us, something shifts. We straighten our back, alter a gesture or weigh a word differently. Even when no one is present, the thought of being watched by neighbours, by society or by unseen digital audiences, changes how the self appears. Recent media like Jeff Orlowski -Yang's *The Social Dilemma* remind us how easily people now bend their identities under the quiet pressures of screens, algorithms, and constant visibility. But long before the age of social media, writers were already alert to this truth. Literature often carries the traces of characters whose lives are bent and broken by the gaze of others, whether through silence, repression, or acts of defiance.

The question of how observation shapes the self has troubled many fields of thought. Freud wrote of repression and the inner gaze of the superego. Lacan pointed to the mirror stage, where one learns to see oneself through another's eyes. Sartre spoke of the shame of being caught by "the Look." Foucault traced the panopticon and how surveillance produces docile bodies. Butler showed how gender only becomes legible through repeated performance before social norms. Each of these thinkers touches on the problem with force, yet their insights remain scattered. What is still missing is a clear structure that explains how identity collapses in different ways when subjected to various forms of observation.

It is here that literature can guide us further. This paper turns to two novels from different worlds: Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Firdaus, in Saadawi's work, lives under the constant weight of patriarchal eyes. In school, in marriage, and even in court, she is forced to act out roles that others write for her. Achebe's Okonkwo, on the other hand, fights against the fear of being seen as weak. His community watches him, and later, the colonial presence reshapes the terms of strength and honour. In both stories, a person's sense of self is not free but folded under the gaze of others. Though one text arises from Egypt and the other from Nigeria, though one speaks of gender and the other

of colonialism, together they reveal how observation can wound, dramatise, and sometimes destroy identity.

This line of enquiry is not without a past. Many thinkers have wrestled with the way the self bends under the eye of another. Freud spoke of repression and the inner gaze of conscience; Lacan of the mirror stage and the Big Other; Sartre of the sudden shame of being caught by "the Look." Others added their own notes: Merleau-Ponty saw the body itself entangled in perception, Heidegger described the sway of das Man, and Nagel puzzled over the tension between our inner life and the view from nowhere. More recent thinkers widened the map. Goffman imagined everyday life as theatre, Foucault traced the panopticon, Butler wrote of gender as performance, and Fanon, Said, Bhabha, and Spivak laid bare the colonial gaze and the silencing of voices. Feminist critics such as de Beauvoir, Mulvey, and hooks revealed how women live under male scrutiny, while trauma theorists like Caruth and LaCapra spoke of memories that fracture the self. Together they form a powerful tradition. Yet they remain a tradition of fragments, not of a structure. They show us collapse in pieces, but not the frame that holds those pieces together.

It is this absence that the present paper seeks to address. What follows begins with a closer look at the thinkers who have shaped the conversation, not to dismiss them but to show the space they leave open. From there, a framework will be drawn and given a name, one that helps us think more clearly about how perspective itself can undo identity. This framework will then be tested through the lives of Firdaus and Okonkwo; each read on their own terms and then placed side by side. The closing section will reflect on what their stories reveal in common, what divides them, and what this might mean for the study of literature more widely. The argument ends by glancing outward again, towards our own time, where observation is ever more constant and the collapse of selfhood is no longer confined to novels, but visible in everyday life.

The way this study proceeds is straightforward. It reads the two novels closely and sets them side by side, allowing echoes and contrasts to emerge. The intention is not to treat them as identical, but to notice how each story, in its own setting, reveals the strain of living under a constant gaze. Firdaus and Okonkwo belong to different languages, different cultural traditions, and different historical pressures. Yet when read together, their struggles show a pattern that moves beyond local detail. Of course, no comparison is without limits. Translations soften or sharpen tones, cultural nuances may resist an outsider's grasp, and one context cannot simply

be laid upon another. Still, bringing these texts into conversation allows us to notice rhythms of collapse that a single text might conceal.

Literature Review: Understanding the Critical Gap

When we talk about understanding the psychological upheaval of an individual, we must introduce ourselves to the early theorists of psychoanalysis, cognitive and behavioural sciences, like Freud, Bhabha, Lacan, Sartre. Sigmund Freud first laid out his model of the divided psyche in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and later refined it in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). Across these works, he argued that identity is never transparent to itself because desire is constantly censored and displaced. The mechanism of repression pushes unacceptable wishes into the unconscious, where they persist in disguised forms. Alongside this, Freud introduced the tripartite structure of the id, ego, and superego. The superego, internalised from parental and social authority, watches over the ego like a relentless moral eye, subjecting the individual to guilt and self-surveillance. Yet the framework remains tied to the dynamics of desire, guilt, and repression within the individual psyche. What Freud did not provide is a taxonomy of how collapse differs when observation comes from multiple positions, whether one's own "I," the intimate address of a "you," or the wider gaze of a "they." Nor did he extend his model into social, cultural, or colonial contexts where observation is entangled with power. Freud charted the psychic drama of repression, but not the perspectival mechanics of collapse.

Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud for the twentieth century, shifting attention from instinct to language and the gaze of the Other. His famous lecture "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function" (1949), later collected in *Ecrits* (1966), described the child's first encounter with its reflection. The infant, still physically uncoordinated, recognises the image in the mirror as "me." This moment produces both jubilation and alienation: the child finds a sense of unity in the image but also submits to an external point of view. For Lacan, identity is always mediated through such mirrors, whether literal reflections, the language of others, or cultural images. The self becomes what it sees reflected back. Lacan deepened this idea with his notion of the "Big Other," the symbolic order that structures recognition. We never exist purely for ourselves; our speech, our desires, even our unconscious are framed in anticipation of how they will be received. This makes identity perpetually unstable, dependent on an unseen audience. He described the alienation of seeing oneself as an image, but not how collapse differed between the inner voice, the intimate "you,"

and the imagined "they." Nor did he extend his framework into historical or political terrains where power enforces observation, such as gender hierarchies or colonial encounters. Lacan gave us the architecture of alienation but not its perspectival taxonomy.

Jean-Paul Sartre brought the problem of observation into existential philosophy. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he introduced the concept of "the Look" (le regard), describing how the freedom of the self collapses when it becomes the object of another's gaze. A familiar example is shame: one might peek through a keyhole, imagining oneself as pure subject, until suddenly another person appears. At once, the voyeur becomes aware of being seen, no longer free but reduced to an object in the world. For Sartre, this transformation is not superficial but ontological: the very structure of consciousness shifts when another consciousness fixes upon it. Identity becomes unstable, since "I recognize that I am as the Other sees me" (Sartre 339). Identity is no longer lived as a free project but as a spectacle for the Other. Sartre's theory on observation was not merely social but existential; yet his account focused primarily on the dyadic relation between self and Other. He did not map how collapse might differ when triggered by one's own inner scrutiny, by the intimate address of a "you," or by the diffuse gaze of society. Nor did he show how historical contexts, such as gendered or colonial regimes, complicate "the Look." Sartre revealed the violence of objectification, but he stopped short of offering a taxonomy of collapses across perspectives and powers.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), placed embodiment at the centre of philosophy. For him, the body is not an object one owns but the very medium through which the world is lived; as he writes, "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'" (Merleau-Ponty 273). To be perceived by others is therefore to feel one's own body differently: gestures stiffen, posture changes, and the lived body becomes a visible thing. This insight shows that collapse is not only psychological but corporeal; being seen alters how one inhabits flesh itself. His analysis remains general, describing the condition of embodiment rather than the particular fractures of selfhood under pressure. He does not distinguish between forms of being seen, by oneself, by an intimate other, or by society at large, nor does he explore how social power (gendered or colonial) intensifies bodily collapse.

Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1927), described how the individual self (Dasein) is shaped by the impersonal force of das Man— "the They." In everyday

life, we adopt the conventions, judgements, and expectations of this anonymous social gaze. What one wears, how one speaks, even what one desires are dictated by "they," producing conformity and averageness; as Heidegger puts it, "everyone is the other, and no one is himself" (Heidegger 164). The freedom of authentic existence is threatened by this ever-present but faceless observer. Heidegger's insight reveals how identity collapses under collective norms, even without a specific watcher. Still, his account stays abstract, focused on the ontological condition of being rather than the specific mechanisms of collapse. He does not show how "the They" operates differently from the inner eye of conscience, the intimate address of a loved one, or the projected anticipation of society's gaze. Heidegger named the weight of conformity but not its perspectival forms.

Thomas Nagel, in *The View from Nowhere* (1986), described the tension between the subjective perspective of the first person and the detached objectivity of the third person. Consciousness, he argued, can shift between these standpoints, but the more one strives for objectivity, the more alienated one becomes from lived experience. As Nagel explains, "to acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object" (Nagel 4). This produces a dissonance in self-understanding: the "I" feels estranged under its own impersonal scrutiny. Nagel sharpened the problem of perspectival tension, yet he did not explore its collapse. His concern remained epistemological, how knowledge changes with a standpoint, rather than psychological or literary. He showed the conflict of perspectives, but not how observation itself fractures identity.

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) reframed social interaction as theatre. People perform roles "front stage" for audiences, while reserving a "back stage" for private selves. Identity is thus not fixed but managed, shifting with context and audience. Goffman's metaphor shows how everyday life is a performance shaped by observation; as he states, "the crucial sociological consideration, for this report, at least, is merely that impressions fostered in everyday performances are subject to disruption" (Goffman 43). Yet dramaturgy remains limited to external encounters. Goffman does not consider how performance collapses when the self anticipates its own gaze, or when observation becomes internalised as conscience or projected as social imagination. Nor does he provide a structure for different kinds of observation—whether intimate, impersonal, or future-oriented.

He revealed identity as performance but not the mechanics of its perspectival collapse.

Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), analysed how modern societies control individuals not simply through force but through surveillance. His image of the Panopticon, an architectural design where prisoners never know when they are being watched, illustrates how power works by internalising observation. People regulate themselves, adjusting speech, movement, even thought, because they believe they might be under scrutiny; as Foucault notes, "The scarcely sustainable visibility of the monarch is turned into the unavoidable visibility of the subjects" (Foucault 189). Foucault argued that this shift produced "docile bodies": individuals who police themselves without the need for constant external control. Foucault's focus lies in disciplinary institutions, prisons, schools, and hospitals, rather than the more subtle, perspectival variations of being seen. He did not differentiate how collapse unfolds when one is observed by one's own conscience, by an intimate other, or by a faceless society. Nor did he attend to the anticipatory gaze, where the fear of how one might be judged in the future alters present action. Foucault uncovered the machinery of surveillance but left unexamined the inner and perspectival nuances of collapse that extend beyond institutional power.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and later *Bodies That Matter* (1993), argued that gender identity is not innate but constructed through repeated performance. The subject becomes intelligible only by citing established norms, gestures, and speech patterns that align with cultural expectations. For Butler, the body is never entirely one's own; it appears within a framework of rules that are enforced by the gaze of society. Performativity shows how the self is compelled into scripted acts in order to exist at all. Butler's account is vital for showing how the gaze does not merely regulate behaviour but constitutes identity itself. Her focus remains on the performative loop of gender and sexuality. She did not fully distinguish how identity collapses across different perspectives of observation, or how non-gendered contexts, colonial domination, trauma, or anticipatory self-surveillance, produce different fractures of selfhood. Butler gave us the repetitive script of identity but did not map the taxonomy of collapse that occurs when observation shifts between first-person, second-person, and third-person states.

Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), analysed how colonialism inscribes itself onto the psyche. He described the "epidermal schema," where the Black subject is made hyper-aware of his skin under the white gaze. In moments of

encounter, the self collapses into visibility, reduced to stereotype, spoken for, and stripped of agency; as Fanon writes, "then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema" (Fanon 112). Fanon linked this psychic fracture to both racism and colonial violence, showing that the colonised subject lives permanently under the eyes of the coloniser. Fanon's insight is indispensable because it demonstrates that collapse is not only individual or existential but racialised and historical. Yet while he describes how the gaze wounds, he does not provide a systematic taxonomy of collapse across perspectives. The self under colonial gaze is reduced, but Fanon did not explore how this differs from the internal superego gaze or the anticipatory third-person gaze of society.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) revealed how Western discourse constructs the "Orient" as exotic, inferior, and knowable only through colonial categories. Here, representation itself becomes a form of surveillance: the East is fixed under the West's gaze as an object of study; as Said writes, "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). The colonised subject is spoken for, written into systems of knowledge that deny self-definition, for "the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action" (Said 3). Said's analysis brilliantly shows how observation is institutionalised through scholarship, literature, and media, since "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" (Said 3). But he focuses more on representation than on lived psychic collapse. He did not distinguish between how individuals fracture under personal versus collective gazes, nor did he map the perspectival shifts of observation. Orientalism reveals domination, but not the structural mechanics of collapse.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988), questioned whether marginalised voices can ever be heard outside dominant structures. For her, the subaltern woman is doubly silenced—by colonial discourse and patriarchal authority. Observation here is bound to erasure: the subaltern is seen, spoken for, yet never allowed self-representation. Spivak's intervention makes visible the violence of speaking about others. Yet she did not detail the structural mechanics of collapse under observation. The focus remains on epistemic violence and representational silencing, rather than on how perspectival modes of being seen fracture subjectivity. Spivak powerfully diagnosed muteness but did not give us a model of collapse.

Jacques Derrida unsettled the very notion of fixed identity through concepts like différance and iterability, developed in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and Dissemination

(1972). For Derrida, meaning never stabilises; it is endlessly deferred through chains of signifiers. As he insists, "a meditation upon the trace should undoubtedly teach us that there is no origin, that is to say simple origin" (Derrida 74). Identity, like language, is constituted through repetition—gestures, words, and acts that cite earlier forms but never fully coincide with them. This logic of repetition is clarified through the notion of the supplement, which "adds itself" not as completion but as excess, "a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude" (Derrida 144). Observation deepens this instability, for the self appears only through signs that can be re-read, re-cited, and misinterpreted by others. The subject is thus always already fractured by the structures of language and repetition. Derrida's account is vital because it shows that collapse is not an accident but a condition of signification itself. Yet his analysis remains largely textual and philosophical, concerned with the instability of meaning rather than the lived dynamics of observation. He did not map how collapse unfolds differently when the "I" performs for itself, when the "you" imposes intimacy, or when the "they" governs from afar. Nor did he extend différance into the psychological and social mechanics of collapse across contexts such as gendered or colonial gazes. Derrida revealed the impossibility of stable presence but leaves unexplored the taxonomy of perspectival fractures under observation.

Taken together, these thinkers sketch a rich but fragmented picture of identity under observation. Freud mapped repression and the superego's inner gaze; Lacan showed alienation in the mirror stage; Sartre revealed the violence of "the Look"; Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger grounded collapse in embodiment and social conformity; Nagel pointed to perspectival tension; Goffman framed life as performance; Foucault traced surveillance and docility; Butler showed how identity is scripted through repetition; feminist critics de Beauvoir, Mulvey, and hooks exposed gendered gazes; Fanon, Said, Bhabha, and Spivak theorised colonial and postcolonial surveillance; Caruth and LaCapra explained trauma's temporal fractures; Derrida revealed différance as structural instability; and Schrödinger lent a metaphor for collapse itself.

Each provides invaluable insight, yet all stop short of offering a coherent structure for how collapse unfolds across perspectives. None distinguishes clearly between the collapse of the first-person voice under self-scrutiny, the collapse of the second-person self under relational domination, and the collapse of the third-person self under social or anticipatory gaze. This absence is not minor. It leaves us without a framework capable of tracing how the same mechanism, observation, fractures identity in different ways across gender, colonial, and traumatic contexts. Literature,

however, constantly stages this collapse: characters speak, fall silent, or imagine futures under observation. What follows in this paper is an attempt to draw these fragments together, naming the missing link as the Collapsible Observer-State.

Now that we have discussed the drawbacks and the lack of a standalone theory that can fully describe identity formation, we must turn to recent theorists whose work moves in a convergent direction. Csaba Pleh's "Narrative Identity in Its Crises in Modern Literature" demonstrates that the disintegration of narrative form mirrors the dissolution of coherent selfhood, particularly in modern literature where identity is no longer grounded in a stable essence. As Pleh explicitly states, "narrative metatheory assumes that the coherence of our internal world is provided by storytelling" (Pleh 12). This position supports COST's assumption that observation and narration are interdependent modes of self-construction, since identity coherence emerges not as a given substance but as an effect of narratively organised perspectives that remain vulnerable to fracture. Another theorist who strengthens this framework is Couze Venn, whose work situates subjectivity within processes of temporal refiguration and ethical reflection. In "Narrative Identity, Subject Formation, and the Transfiguration of Subjects," Venn argues that identity is never fixed but continually reshaped through narrative engagement with past, present, and anticipated futures. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's threefold mimesis, he conceptualises the subject as undergoing "transfiguration" through narrative reworking rather than remaining a stable, self-identical entity. As Venn explains, "the narrative character of identity, because of its relation to the fictional modality of emplotment, already harbors the yearning for an inaccessible ideal" (Venn 56). This emphasis on temporality and anticipation resonates closely with COST's notion of third-person anticipatory collapse, where identity is reconstituted through reflective distance and projected self-understanding. Venn's account thus provides a philosophical lineage that anchors COST's taxonomy within a broader temporal and ethical tradition.

The model of COST depends on the triadic structure of first-, second-, and third-person perspectives in narration and identity formation, and Denise Wong's "Gazing Beyond the Fourth Wall: Shame and Second-Person Narration in Fleabag" provides a crucial narratological precedent for this structure. Wong reinterprets second-person address in Fleabag as a visualised gaze that dissolves the boundary between performer and audience; as she observes, "this gaze reproduces the ontological hesitation which characterises Herman's notion of the doubly deictic you" (Wong 2). This formulation anticipates COST's concept of second-person collapse, where the subject fractures under an address that is simultaneously intimate and external, neither fully inside nor

outside the self. Olga Andreeva and Arthur Eldarion gradually extend this concern into the digital culture, arguing that this type of modern identity formation is deliberately constructed "for the Other" through visual self-narrative discourses.

Emergent Model: The Collapsible Observer-State

Looking back at the thinkers we have traced, one notices how much they have already told us about the self under pressure. Freud spoke of repression, Sartre of the Look, Foucault of surveillance, Butler of performativity, and Fanon of colonial visibility. These ideas are powerful, but they arrive as fragments. They circle around the same question: what happens to the self when it is seen? Yet none pauses to lay out a simple structure for how collapse unfolds across different vantage points. This is where I want to place what I call the Collapsible Observer-State Theory (COST). It does not dismiss what has come before; rather, it tries to give those fragments a framework that holds them together. And literature, with its shifts of voice and sudden hesitations, gives us a way to see this more clearly than abstract philosophy often can.

Defining COST

COST begins with a straightforward claim: the self is not stable. It changes shape when it is looked at, judged, or even imagined as visible. This act of observation is not only external. It may be the conscience within, the intimate voice of a partner or parent, or the wider, faceless pressure of society. Each type of observation tilts the self differently. To make sense of this, I organise collapse into three states:

1. First-person collapse, when the "I" falters under its own or others' scrutiny
2. Second-person collapse, when the self bends under the presence of a direct "you"
3. Third-person collapse, when identity splinters under the collective or anticipated "they."

This taxonomy does not cancel earlier theories but offers a way to gather them into a more coherent map, one that can travel across psychology, philosophy, and literature.

First-Person Collapse: The Conscious Performer

The first-person collapse appears when the "I" starts to feel heavy, no longer free but self-conscious. The voice that should feel most direct becomes a kind of

performance. This can happen on a stage, in a diary, or even in the solitude of one's own thoughts. A student rehearsing lines before a mirror, a writer editing her words with imagined readers in mind, a speaker suddenly gripped by shame—all are signs of the first-person trembling under its own gaze.

Fiction shows this with particular force. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator writes to heal herself, yet her "I" wavers as she senses her husband's authority hanging over every line. Her self-expression is no longer hers alone. In Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dolly begins to narrate her life but grows hesitant, as if each sentence exposes her too much. The act of speaking folds into silence. In Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, the narrator finds that even her private writing is not private; her husband's shadow makes her "I" cautious, rehearsed, no longer natural. These examples show that the first-person collapse is not just about performance, as Goffman suggested, or guilt, as Freud imagined. It is about a narrowing of possibilities. The "I" loses its ease and begins to anticipate judgement before it even arrives. COST makes this collapse visible as a structure, one that threads through different texts and lives.

Second-Person Collapse: The Relational Self

The second-person collapse takes place when the self falters under the pressure of an immediate "you." Unlike the first-person voice, which struggles with its own visibility, the second-person collapse is shaped by direct relation. It happens in conversation, in command, in intimacy. The "you" does not just observe—it addresses, instructs, judges, and in doing so, bends the self.

Literature often dramatizes this collapse through dialogue, where identity shifts under the presence of another's voice. In Tagore's *The Home and the World*, Bimala finds herself torn between two "yous." Nikhil's calm and patient address constantly reminds her of her moral responsibility, while Sandip's fiery words seduce her into nationalist passion. Both voices pull at her until her own sense of self begins to splinter. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus experiences this collapse most violently. Her uncle's approving gaze, her husband's commands, and later her pimp's control all reshape her identity, leaving her "I" trembling under the force of a "you" that does not allow room for selfhood. Even George Orwell captures this structure in *Animal Farm*, where Boxer repeats, "Napoleon is always right." His collapse is not in silence but in submission: his selfhood is swallowed by the second-person authority that defines his every move.

The second-person collapse matters because it shows how fragile identity becomes in relation. The self does not disintegrate in isolation but through the presence of another whose words weigh too heavily. COST gives us a way of naming this fracture. It lets us see how the "you" in literature is never neutral; it is always a potential point where the self bends, collapses, or disappears altogether.

Third-Person Collapse: The Projected Self

The third-person collapse is subtler but perhaps the most haunting of all. It occurs when the self is fractured not by its own voice, nor by the address of an intimate other, but by the weight of a collective or imagined "they." This is the collapse of anticipation, of being judged before the judgement has even taken place. The gaze here may not belong to any single figure; it is dispersed across society, history, or the community one fears.

Forster's *The Machine Stops* imagines such a world. Vashti, entirely dependent on the Machine, measures every word and action through the fear of how it will be judged by the system. She does not need to be told what to do—the invisible "they" of society has already colonised her imagination. A similar fracture drives Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. His dread of being seen as weak, like his father, governs every choice. Even when alone, he carries the eyes of the clan within him. His collapse is not in direct confrontation but in the unbearable anticipation of how the community might see him. In Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Baa worries that her neighbours will notice the red mark on her cheek. Her pain is not only physical but also interpretive—she inhabits a gaze that does not yet exist but already shapes her sense of self.

The third-person collapse shows how the self can be undone by imagined futures. It explains why people avoid risks, why silence is chosen over speech, and why shame is felt even before exposure. COST marks this space as a distinct form of collapse, where the collective "they" is powerful enough to fracture identity even in solitude.

Why Literature Matters

What makes these collapses more than abstract categories is the way literature stages them. A theory can tell us about repression, performance, or surveillance, but only a novel or play lets us hear the hesitations of a voice, see the silences between dialogues, or feel the tremor of anticipation in a character's mind. Literature does not simply describe collapse; it performs it for us. A diary entry that trails off, a

monologue that contradicts itself, a sudden switch from "I" to "we", these are not stylistic accidents but signs of a self-buckling under observation.

Because of this, literature becomes a natural ground for COST. It gives us the raw material: voices that collapse under their own weight, selves that bend in relation to others, and characters who live in fear of the gaze that may come tomorrow. Each text offers not just illustration but proof that observation, whether internal or external, alters identity at its core.

Having outlined the structure of COST, the next task is to see how it works in detail within specific narratives. Firdaus, the protagonist of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, lives her life under the second-person collapse, repeatedly bent and reshaped by the intimate voices of men who claim to love, protect, or control her. Okonkwo, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, embodies the third-person collapse, driven by the anticipated judgement of his clan and the broader shadow of colonial intrusion. By tracing their stories through the lens of COST, we can see how different perspectives of observation lead to different fractures of selfhood, and how these fractures are narrated through voice, silence, and anticipation.

Case Study I: *Woman at Point Zero*

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* is one of the clearest demonstrations of how identity collapses under observation. Firdaus, speaking from her prison cell on the eve of her execution, narrates her life as a sequence of encounters where the self falters under different pressures: the conscious performance of the "I," the domination of the intimate "you," and the suffocating anticipation of the collective "they." Reading her testimony through COST allows us to see not only the violence that shapes her story but also the structural pattern of collapse that gives her voice its distinctive force.

From the very opening, Firdaus situates her narration in relation to observation. "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me… They are coming to take me at six o'clock this evening" (El Saadawi 11). The first-person appears bold and declarative, yet it is immediately framed by the state's gaze and by the temporal horizon of her execution. The "I" that insists on speaking is sharpened because it is being watched and timed. COST identifies this as a first-person collapse: the self does not merely narrate; it performs under pressure, its volition narrowing into a script rehearsed against the inevitability of judgement. The voice hardens, not because it is free, but because it anticipates its reception and answers it in advance.

This sense of the "I" as conscious performer reappears in her memories of public spectacle. "All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride… Each time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man… I would spit on it" (Saadawi 11). The gesture of spitting is directed outward, but it also shows how her sense of self is constantly positioned against official images of authority. The first-person here becomes a stance carved out by confrontation with the gaze of power. The "I" is declarative, but only because it has collapsed into a posture defined by being seen.

The extremity of this collapse is clearest in her refusal to appeal for clemency. "I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free… 'There's hope for your release if you send an appeal…'. 'But I don't want to be released… what you call my crime was no crime'" (Saadawi 101). What might seem like radical freedom is in fact a narrowing of voice. The first-person, compressed by the terminal gaze of the law, chooses only one register: finality. Volition disappears in the insistence that no alternative is possible. This is COST's definition of collapse—not silence but a contraction of identity into a single script dictated by observation.

If the first-person collapse defines Firdaus's prison monologue, the second-person collapse marks the trajectory of her life. From the beginning, relational voices mould her sense of self. "My galabeya often slipped up my thighs… I would glimpse my uncle's hand… to touch my leg… with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement… his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence" (Saadawi 14). Here the "you" is not verbal but physical, yet it produces the same effect: Firdaus's subjectivity is shaped by the relational pressure of an uncle who imposes his desire. She recalls feeling that "a part of me… was gone and would never return." COST clarifies this as the collapse of the relational self—the "I" is no longer acting but reacting, diminished by the invasive presence of another.

This collapse intensifies in marriage. Her husband's address is both verbal and physical: "After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not… One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears" (Saadawi 44). He questions her directly, "Why do you turn your face away… Am I ugly?" (Saadawi 45), and the relational self breaks down under the weight of this "you." She recalls: "I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively… as though life had been drained out of it" (Saadawi 45). The presence of the other silences her volition; she does not choose compliance, but collapses into it, drained of possibility.

The violence of the relational "you" is also institutional. "My uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives… The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman… duty was perfect obedience" (Saadawi 44). The "you" here is diffuse, spoken through family, law, and religion, all instructing her into passivity. COST stresses that this is still a second-person collapse, because the pressure is always relational. It is not a solitary self-disintegrating, nor an anonymous society watching, but a chorus of intimate voices that fold her into obedience. Firdaus's life is repeatedly defined by these relational collapses, where the self is bent by direct address, by command, by the weight of a "you" that does not allow freedom.

Yet Firdaus also experiences a third mode of collapse, the third-person perspective, where the self fractures under collective and anticipated judgement. This collapse is most vivid in her anticipation of execution: "Now I am waiting for them… Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here… This journey to an unknown destination… fills me with pride" (Saadawi 101). Her voice slips into a detached narration, as if she were already observing her own disappearance. The self becomes both actor and spectator, narrating its end from a distance. COST interprets this as a collapse into dissociation: the present "I" vanishes into the projected voice of one who tells her own story as if it were already over.

The same dissociation appears when she recognises the structures of exploitation around her. "I realized I was not nearly as free as I had… I was nothing but a body machine… so that a number of men… could become immensely rich… I was no longer even mistress of the house…" (Saadawi 94). This is not the voice of one living her life but of one stepping outside it, mapping it with clinical distance. COST shows how the third-person perspective can grant lucidity but also drain agency. The more Firdaus names the system, the more she sees herself as part of an inevitable script, no longer mistress even of her own narrative.

Perhaps the most dramatic oscillation between first- and third-person collapse occurs in her murder of Marzouk, the pimp. "I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck… plunged it deep into his belly… I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved… Why… had I never stabbed a man before? I realized that I had been afraid…" (Saadawi 95). Here, for a moment, the "I" reclaims direct action. But almost immediately, the voice cools into distance, reflecting on fear as if analysing a case. The collapse is visible in the transition: the first-person erupts, then the third-person recaptures it, narrating from the outside. The final description is detached, almost spectatorial: "My body was as light as a feather… with the pride of having

destroyed all masks… the footsteps of a woman who believed in herself" (Saadawi 96). COST calls this the rhythm of collapse: an "I" that briefly acts, only to fold back into the distance of the imagined observer.

Her refusal to appeal repeats this pattern. "'There's hope for your release if you send an appeal…'. 'But I don't want to be released… If I go out… I will never stop killing'" (Saadawi 101). Once again, the third-person gaze fixes the horizon. Firdaus imagines a future where she cannot stop the cycle of violence, and in this anticipatory view, she collapses volition into a single course: death. The self is frozen not by an actual observer but by the gaze of an imagined future.

Taken together, Firdaus's story demonstrates the full structure of COST. In the prison cell, the first-person voice contracts under the watch of the state, becoming a hardened script rather than a field of free expression. In her relationships, the second-person presence, uncle, husband, pimp, family, and religion shape her into compliance and strip away her volition. In her recognition of society and anticipation of execution, the third-person gaze makes her narrate herself from outside, freezing her future into inevitability. Firdaus lives each mode of collapse, and in narrating them, she gives us a testimony of identity fractured by observation.

What makes *Woman at Point Zero* so powerful in the context of COST is not only its content but its form. The novel is framed as a testimony addressed to a listener. Firdaus's "I" is always speaking to a "you," under the knowledge of a collective "they." Her narrative is already structured by collapse; it cannot exist outside observation. This is why her voice strikes with such clarity and finality. It is not the clarity of freedom, but the clarity of a self that has narrowed under the gaze of others, until it can say only one thing: "I do not want to live."

Case Study II: *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* tells the story of a community in transition and, more intimately, the story of men and women negotiating their identities under constant scrutiny. The novel is written in the third person, yet the characters often reveal themselves through voices that falter, hesitate, or harden in response to observation. COST gives us a way of tracing these fragile moments, showing how identity collapses in different registers: in the first-person weight of performance, in the second-person demands of intimate relation, and in the third-person horizon of collective judgement.

Okonkwo, whose life dominates the narrative, is introduced not as a voice but as a reputation. From the opening pages, we are told that he "…was well known

throughout the nine villages and even beyond." (Achebe 3), a man celebrated for his wrestling victory and for his barns filled with yams. His selfhood is already a performance before an audience. What seems like strength is in fact a heavy first-person collapse. His "I" is never relaxed but always driven by the terror of resembling his father, Unoka, remembered for his debts and his music rather than for his masculinity. Achebe notes clearly, "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe 13). COST reads this as the first-person voice narrowed into overcompensation: the "I" is constructed not from free volition but from dread of being seen as another Unoka.

This collapse is most dramatically staged in the killing of Ikemefuna. Achebe writes that as the boy cried out, "My father, they have killed me!" (Achebe 61). Okonkwo struck him down with a machete, "afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe 61). The voice of the "I" here is drowned by the pressure of anticipated judgement. COST allows us to see that this was not an act of volition but of collapse: a narrowing of possibility, a violent performance triggered by the weight of being observed. Afterwards, Okonkwo withdraws into silence and drink. He cannot eat, he cannot rest, and "the more he tried not to think about Ikemefuna, the more he thought about him" (Achebe 63). The fracture is clear. The first person who appeared decisive in public reveals himself as broken in solitude, unable to reconcile the mask of hardness with the memory of betrayal.

Other characters reveal similar fractures in quieter ways. Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, feels his selfhood give way when Ikemefuna is killed. Achebe notes that "something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a bow" (Achebe 61). His first-person collapse is different from his father's; it does not harden into performance but withers into silence. Earlier, Achebe hints at this pressure when he writes, "Okonkwo wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man… but there was too much of his mother in him, too much of the woman" (Achebe 52). Here, the boy's "I" is already under surveillance, defined as deficient masculinity. COST helps us see that Nwoye's collapse is not sudden but accumulative, his selfhood shrunk by the father's gaze until Ikemefuna's death seals the fracture. Even Unoka, though marginal, embodies another register of collapse. He avoids war, avoids responsibility, and becomes a figure of communal ridicule. His first-person voice collapses not in action but in avoidance, living under the awareness of scorn. These figures show that Achebe's narrative is less about a single hero's downfall than about the fragility of selfhood in a society defined by its gaze. The "I" in *Things Fall Apart* is always

heavy, shaped by fear, expectation, or ridicule. COST makes visible how the first-person is not a stable centre but a performer's role that can crack at any moment under the pressure of observation.

If the first-person collapse is marked by Okonkwo's need to perform before himself and the clan, the second-person collapse emerges most sharply in his intimate relationships. The presence of a direct "you" becomes a point of pressure that bends and reshapes the self. COST reminds us that collapse here does not occur in isolation but in the dynamic of address, when one identity falters because another voice is too forceful. Okonkwo's wives live much of their lives in this second-person space, their voices subdued under his commands. In one chilling scene, when he feels slighted, "Okonkwo's second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food… argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping" (Achebe 38). The violence is not only physical but relational; her "you" in that moment is erased by his demand for obedience. The collapse is hers, silenced into submission, but it is also his, for he cannot sustain authority without tipping into brutality.

Nwoye suffers a similar collapse, though in quieter tones. The boy's gentleness brings him into constant conflict with his father's expectations. He learns to stifle his own instincts until the death of Ikemefuna breaks him entirely. The second-person weight of his father's authority turns into a fracture that pushes him towards the new language of the missionaries, who offer him a different kind of address. Even the arrival of the colonial presence enters the novel in a second-person mode. The missionaries speak directly, naming the villagers as brothers: "there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers" (Achebe 156). Such words sound intimate, but COST shows how this "you" collapses the relational ground of the clan. For Nwoye, it feels like recognition; for others, it becomes an intrusion.

The second-person perspective in *Things Fall Apart* reveals how identity is shaped not only by the gaze of the many but by the voices of the few who stand close enough to command, rebuke, or seduce. In each case, the self bends, breaks, or transforms under the weight of being addressed. The most haunting form of collapse in Achebe's novel is the third-person perspective, where the self breaks under the imagined weight of collective judgement. For Okonkwo, this collapse takes the form of anticipation, of fearing how others will see him. His life is haunted not only by his father's memory but also by the possibility of public disgrace. From

the beginning, he is driven by the dread of being called weak. Achebe frames it clearly: "his whole life was dominated by fear" (Achebe 13), and this dread governs each decision. Every action, from beating his wives during the "Week of Peace" to striking down Ikemefuna, is shaped by an invisible audience whose judgement he cannot escape. The pressure of this collective gaze grows heavier with the arrival of colonial power. Okonkwo feels his world shifting as the clan begins to divide, some turning towards the missionaries while others resist. He senses that the community is no longer united in the same rituals of strength and authority. The "they" against which he had defined himself becomes unstable. COST shows how this is a third-person collapse: the horizon of recognition that gave his life meaning begins to dissolve, and with it, his identity unravels.

Achebe prepares us for his end long before the final pages. After killing a messenger in a moment of rage, Okonkwo realises that the clan will not follow him. "Okonkwo knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape" (Achebe 205). The silence of the crowd reveals that the gaze which once affirmed him has vanished. The collapse is complete. His selfhood had always been bound to the imagined gaze of the many, and now that gaze no longer affirms him. The third-person presence, which once gave him strength, turns to absence, leaving him with no ground to stand on.

The conclusion is tragic but inevitable. Okonkwo takes his own life, an act condemned by the very traditions he had defended. His suicide is the final collapse into the third-person horizon: he has become an object of communal judgement, the kind of shame he had spent his whole life trying to avoid. Achebe's narrative closes not with Okonkwo's voice but with the District Commissioner's detached thought: "The story of this man who had killed himself could make an interesting chapter, perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, in his book, The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger" (Achebe 209). The self disappears entirely into another's narrative, his "I" absorbed into the cold gaze of colonial authority. COST reads this as the most devastating collapse of all: the transformation of a living voice into a paragraph in someone else's book.

Comparative Analysis of *Woman At Point Zero* & *Things Fall Apart*

Reading *Woman at Point Zero* beside *Things Fall Apart* brings out an unexpected intimacy between two very different stories. One unfolds in a Cairo prison cell, the other in an Igbo village under colonial pressure. Yet Firdaus and Okonkwo, though separated by culture, gender, and history, both reveal how fragile the self becomes

when shaped by the eyes of others. What links them is not their circumstances but the way their voices falter and identities collapse under observation, and COST allows us to follow these fractures in a shared language.

For both characters, the "I" is never secure. Firdaus learns to perform docility as a girl, lowering her eyes, keeping to her books, never speaking out of turn. Okonkwo performs oppositely, building his self on displays of masculinity, yams, wives, and titles. Her "I" bends into obedience, his into hardness, but each reveals the same strain: a first-person self-rehearsed for an audience. The one collapses into silence, the other into aggression. In both, the "I" is less a voice than a mask worn to survive the weight of expectation. The pressure is sharper when the self is addressed directly. Firdaus's life is filled with the heavy "you" of men who speak for her: her uncle who arranges her marriage, her husband who beats her, her pimp who controls her body. Each second-person command diminishes her until she finally rebels by killing the one who seeks to own her most completely. Okonkwo, in contrast, inhabits the other side of this dynamic. His wives and son live under the authority of his commands, their "I"s bent beneath his voice. Yet even here the collapse is double: his authority feeds on repetition, and his need to rebuke and dominate shows how brittle his own self has become. When the missionaries arrive and declare to the clan, "We are all brothers," they, too, speak in the mode of address, offering a different "you" that feels like recognition to some, intrusion to others. The second-person space in both novels is where intimacy becomes suffocating, where the voice of one overwhelms the self of another.

It is in the third-person horizon, however, that the parallels become most haunting. Firdaus, telling her story to the female psychiatrist, speaks almost as if her life were already a record, a case history. She imagines how society will view her, how she will be judged, and collapses into the role of the condemned long before her execution. Okonkwo, too, is undone by the gaze of the collective. All his strength rests on the assumption that his clan will affirm him, yet when they refuse to rise after he kills the colonial messenger, he realises that the audience he lived for has disappeared. His final act of suicide is not a rebellion but a collapse into absence, a voice silenced and replaced by the Commissioner's cold line about including him only as a paragraph in a colonial text. Firdaus's "I" fades in the prison cell, Okonkwo's in the colonial archive, but both are reduced to objects seen from outside.

The differences remain sharp. Firdaus's collapse is gendered, the story of a woman forced to fight for her body and voice against the structures of patriarchy. Okonkwo's collapse is communal and historical, the story of a man who embodies

patriarchy only to find himself displaced by colonial power. Firdaus speaks in her own voice; Okonkwo ends by being spoken about. She dies in solitude, he in the judgement of his community. Yet their stories converge in the way they show the fragility of identity under observation. COST helps us see that whether it is a woman in prison or a man in a disintegrating clan, the self can fracture in remarkably similar ways.

Conclusion and Implications

The journeys of Firdaus and Okonkwo remind us that identity is never a fixed possession but a fragile performance that bends under the gaze of others. Firdaus speaks her story from a prison cell, already rehearsing how the world will condemn her. Okonkwo dies at the edge of his clan's silence, his voice swallowed into the pages of a colonial record. Both show that the self collapses not in isolation but in relation, when a presence, a voice, or an imagined audience presses too heavily upon it.

COST helps us read these moments as part of a larger pattern. Firdaus embodies how the self fractures in a patriarchal world where women are seen before they can speak. Okonkwo embodies how authority can crumble when the gaze of the community and the power of the coloniser no longer affirm it. One is silenced by gendered violence, the other by history's rupture, yet both reveal the same structure of collapse. Their fates suggest that the condition of being watched, whether by family, society, or empire, can alter, distort, or even destroy the self. This is where COST contributes to critical thought. Freud traced repression to the superego's inner gaze, Foucault described discipline under surveillance, and Butler argued that identity is performed under norms. Each insight remains vital, yet none accounts for how observation operates across perspectives: the "I" performing for itself, the "you" bending under another's command, the "they" haunting with collective judgement. COST draws these threads together, not as abstract theory alone but as a way of tracing lived fractures in literature and culture.

Beyond these two texts, the implications widen. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator collapses under her husband's gaze, her voice spiralling into fragments. In Tagore's *The Home and the World*, Bimala falters between the voices of her husband and her lover, a second-person collapse written across nationalist politics. In contemporary culture, films like *The Social Dilemma* reveal how social media produces a constant third-person horizon, where one lives not only for today's audience but for an imagined archive of tomorrow. Even mythology recalls this

tension: Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahabharata* shows the unbearable collapse of identity under a court's collective gaze.

COST, then, is not only a method for close reading but also a lens for cultural life. It explains why a woman's silence, a man's rage, or a society's fracture can all be traced back to the pressure of being observed. Firdaus and Okonkwo stand at opposite poles of history, yet their collapses reveal a shared truth: that the human self, whether in Cairo, Umuofia, or our digitally mediated present, can never fully escape the eyes that watch it.

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