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From Colonization to Consciousness: A Fanonian Perspective on Identity Repossession in Dream on a Monkey Mountain

Waqas Ahmad [1]

[1] **University of Gujrat (Main Campus) Email:** Ahmad.Owlakh@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of identity reclamation in Derek Walcott's play Dream on a Monkey Mountain, emphasizing its unique engagement with the psychological aftermath of colonialism in the Caribbean context. While identity remains a recurrent concern in Walcott's oeuvre, this play distinguishes itself by not only articulating the crisis of identity experienced by colonized individuals but also proposing a pathway toward its recovery. Central to this process is the character of Makak, whose fractured sense of self symbolizes the broader existential disorientation inflicted by colonial rule. Drawing theoretical support from Frantz Fanon's seminal work The Wretched of the Earth, particularly the concept of counter-violence as a catalyst for decolonial awakening, the study contends that Makak's dream-induced journey reflects a symbolic resistance against colonial subjugation. The hallucinatory and supernatural elements within the play serve to authenticate the psychological realism of this transformation, enabling Walcott to craft a mythopoetic framework for Caribbean self-reclamation. Ultimately, the paper asserts that Walcott not only captures the lived trauma of colonized subjects but also envisions a radical reimagining of their identity, aligning his creative vision with Fanon's thought and marking his work as an indispensable voice in postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Dream on a monkey mountain, Repossession of identity, Frantz Fanon, Derek Walcott and his hybrid identity, The Wretched of the Earth.

Introduction

The enduring impact of colonialism on the Caribbean has left profound cultural, psychological, and existential consequences, many of which continue to shape the region's literary and philosophical imagination. Colonial regimes did not merely assert political control; they sought to systematically erase indigenous cultures, languages, and identities, replacing them with Eurocentric ideologies and distorted notions of self (Walcott, 1970). In this context, questions of identity, displacement, and cultural survival have become central concerns for Caribbean writers seeking to articulate both individual and collective responses to colonial trauma. Among these literary voices, Derek Walcott occupies a pivotal role. His work has consistently explored the fraught terrain of postcolonial identity, weaving together myth, memory, and language to reflect the psychological complexities of the colonized subject. One of his most celebrated dramatic works, Dream on a Monkey Mountain, is a rich and allegorical exploration of identity crisis and cultural reclamation in a postcolonial Caribbean setting (Walcott, 1970).

The protagonist, Makak, is a disheveled, elderly man living in isolation in the hills of St. Lucia, whose descent into dream-induced madness becomes a metaphor for the colonized subject's

internal struggle. Plagued by self-hatred, particularly for his African features, and burdened by feelings of worthlessness, Makak's journey through hallucination and symbolic transformation represents a psychological battle for self-recognition. The play offers a layered and complex depiction of how colonial ideologies become internalized, affecting not only how individuals perceive themselves but also how they are perceived by others within the colonial framework. Through Makak's disjointed dream narrative—infused with spiritual visions, ancestral encounters, and mythic imagery—Walcott stages a process of identity repossession that echoes the postcolonial psychological theories advanced by Frantz Fanon.

Fanon's seminal work The Wretched of the Earth (1961) provides a vital lens through which Dream on a Monkey Mountain can be critically examined. Fanon argues that colonialism produces a profound sense of alienation in the colonized subject, fostering a dislocation from both cultural roots and individual self-worth. This alienation, according to Fanon, is not simply social or economic, but deeply psychological. In order to achieve true liberation, the colonized must undergo a radical transformation that includes a violent rupture from the mental chains of colonial ideology—a concept Fanon famously refers to as "counter-violence." This form of resistance is not limited to physical revolt but encompasses symbolic, cultural, and psychological defiance (Fanon, 2004). It is through such a Fanonian lens that Makak's hallucinatory experience can be understood—not as insanity, but as a necessary confrontation with colonial trauma and a symbolic act of self-liberation.

Walcott's dramatic approach integrates this theoretical insight with poetic symbolism and mythic structure. The dream becomes more than a surreal narrative device; it is a metaphysical space wherein the repressed fears, desires, and ancestral memories of the colonized subject are brought to the surface. As Makak journeys through this visionary world, he confronts colonial representations of blackness, grapples with his sense of shame, and ultimately reclaims his identity—not through physical violence, but through a symbolic rebirth. This dreamscape, rich in supernatural elements, functions as a mythopoetic territory where history, trauma, and healing converge. In this way, Walcott constructs a powerful dramatization of psychological decolonization, closely aligned with Fanon's notion that the process of reclaiming identity requires a disintegration of imposed structures and the reassertion of native consciousness (Fanon, 2004).

This paper argues that Dream on a Monkey Mountain offers a compelling theatrical expression of Fanon's theories on colonial alienation and identity reformation. Walcott's portrayal of Makak's transformation is not a simple recovery of a lost self, but a complex and layered reimagining of what it means to be Caribbean in a postcolonial world. By fusing lyrical language, surreal narrative, and political insight, Walcott crafts a deeply symbolic drama that challenges colonial narratives and asserts the enduring resilience of the colonized psyche. In positioning Makak's journey as both personal and collective, Walcott not only critiques the violence of colonialism but also affirms the redemptive potential of cultural memory, spiritual vision, and poetic imagination. Ultimately, this study contends that Walcott's play is a vital contribution to postcolonial literature and theory—an artistic articulation of resistance, transformation, and the enduring human drive for self-definition.

Literature Review

The interrogation of identity in postcolonial literature occupies a foundational role in the critique of imperial legacies, particularly within texts that address the psychological consequences of colonial domination. Derek Walcott, the Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright, has persistently engaged with themes of cultural dislocation, fragmented selfhood, and the search for identity in a postcolonial Caribbean landscape. Among his substantial body of work, Dream on a Monkey Mountain emerges as a particularly profound exploration of identity reconstitution. The play has been widely examined as a dramatization of the fractured consciousness of the colonized subject and offers a compelling vision of psychological and cultural reclamation. This discourse finds theoretical grounding in Frantz Fanon's postcolonial treatise The Wretched of the Earth (1961), which provides a critical framework for understanding the role of violence, resistance, and psychological liberation in the decolonization process. Frantz Fanon's revolutionary insights into the psychic and sociopolitical dimensions of colonial oppression remain foundational to postcolonial studies. Fanon posits that the colonial encounter creates a profound existential rupture in the identity of the colonized, resulting in alienation, inferiority complexes, and cultural amnesia. His concept of "counter-violence" is particularly significant, not merely as physical resistance, but as a form of psychological emancipation—a means by which the colonized subject reclaims agency. In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon asserts, "Violence is man re-creating himself," underscoring the radical reformation of identity that occurs through resistance (Fanon, 1963). Within this interpretive framework, Makak's transformative journey in Dream on a Monkey Mountain can be read as a symbolic manifestation of this Fanonian trajectory—from subjugation to self-realization.

Scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha have expanded upon Fanon's ideas by articulating the concept of hybridity and the "third space," wherein cultural identity is negotiated rather than fixed. Makak embodies this liminal position, navigating the tensions between African ancestry and colonial Christian indoctrination. His dream-induced revelations mirror the Fanonian proposition that the journey to liberation often begins in the subconscious, where repressed identities and ancestral memories re-emerge to challenge imposed narratives. Walcott's representation of identity diverges from monolithic or essentialist paradigms. Instead, he embraces the syncretic nature of Caribbean identity—an amalgamation of African, European, and indigenous influences. Critics like Edward Baugh and Patricia Ismond have highlighted Walcott's deft use of linguistic plurality, symbolic resonance, and mythic motifs to capture the complexities of postcolonial Caribbean existence. In Dream on a Monkey Mountain, this syncretism is vividly dramatized through Makak's metamorphosis, where personal redemption is intertwined with cultural awakening.

Ismond (2001) contends that the dreamscape in the play functions as a site of both psychic excavation and re-creation. It enables Makak to engage with his submerged identity in a space unbounded by colonial logic. Rather than advocating a return to a glorified precolonial past, Walcott invites his audience to consider identity as a dynamic construct, shaped by memory, myth, and imaginative possibility. A salient aspect of the play is its invocation of the supernatural—a tool Walcott employs not merely for dramatic effect but as a mode of cultural resistance. Scholars such as Reinhard Sander and June Bobb have emphasized the symbolic utility of dreams, visions, and mythic archetypes in Walcott's dramaturgy. Bobb (1997) suggests that these elements serve as pathways to ancestral knowledge and cultural memory, which have

been suppressed under colonial rule. Through Makak's hallucinatory experiences, Walcott reclaims the spiritual epistemologies that were marginalized by European rationalism. This use of supernatural narrative forms resonates with Fanon's assertion that psychological liberation must transcend colonial structures, including language, religion, and historical representation. The dream in Dream on a Monkey Mountain becomes an imaginative counter-narrative—an alternate reality where Makak, and by extension the Caribbean subject, can confront internalized oppression and envision a liberated self.

Another critical interpretive lens through which the play has been examined is the motif of madness. Drawing upon Fanon's psychiatric work, particularly his analysis of colonial trauma, scholars such as David Scott and Anthony Bogues have interpreted Makak's madness as a manifestation of psychological fragmentation under colonial rule. However, rather than portraying madness solely as pathological, Walcott frames it as a revelatory process. In Makak's delirium lies the potential for self-discovery, catharsis, and healing. Scott (2004) identifies this movement as part of a broader tragic dialectic within postcolonial literature, where the path to selfhood is necessarily marked by disintegration and eventual reconstitution. The culmination of Makak's journey—his symbolic renunciation of both colonial identity and uncritical ancestral glorification—marks a profound moment of self-recognition. It reflects the complex process of postcolonial identity formation: one that is neither a simple return to roots nor an uncritical adoption of the colonizer's image, but rather a transformative synthesis of history, culture, and consciousness (Baugh, 1978).

The critical discourse surrounding Dream on a Monkey Mountain affirms its significance as a seminal work in postcolonial theatre and literature. Through the interplay of Fanonian theory, mythic imagination, and psychological introspection, Walcott constructs a powerful narrative of identity repossession. His depiction of Makak's dream journey functions as both a personal and collective allegory for the Caribbean experience under colonial rule. By invoking the supernatural and embracing cultural hybridity, Walcott not only critiques the historical violence of colonialism but also offers a visionary model for healing and self-redefinition. As such, the play stands as a vital contribution to the postcolonial canon and a nuanced dramatization of Fanonian liberation in the Caribbean context (Gilbert, 1996).

Research Methodology

Derek Walcott's Dream on a Monkey Mountain intricately explores the process of reclaiming identity from the grips of colonial oppression, a journey that unfolds in distinct, analytical phases. At the outset, Walcott portrays the profound desolation experienced by colonized subjects. It is an established fact that colonial systems systematically drain the intellectual, physical, and spiritual vitality of the colonized, instilling a debilitating inferiority complex that fractures their true sense of self. This psychological subjugation renders the colonized incapable of living authentically, stripped of their identity and essence. The character Makak, a sixty-year-old man, epitomizes this profound alienation. His confession—"I have lived all my life like a wild beast in hiding"—reflects the dehumanizing impact of colonial violence, which has led him to internalize the belief that he is less than human. Walcott masterfully captures the depth of this psychological torment when Makak admits:

"In thirty years now, I have looked in no mirror, not a pool of cold water; when I must drink, I stir my hands first, to break my image."

This vivid metaphor reveals the extent to which Makak's identity has been distorted. His avoidance of his own reflection symbolizes the pervasive inferiority complex that has become an intrinsic part of his being, a mental cage wrought by colonial domination. The act of disturbing the water's surface to avoid his reflection suggests a desperate attempt to evade confronting a self rendered monstrous by oppression. This phase reflects Makak before his political and personal awakening—before his violent resistance to the colonial order. Here, the insights of Frantz Fanon, as articulated in The Wretched of the Earth, provide a critical theoretical framework:

"The colonial context... is characterized by the dichotomy it inflicts on the world. Decolonization unifies this world by a radical decision to remove its heterogeneity by unifying it on the grounds of nation and sometimes race."

In this light, Makak's evolving consciousness represents the nascent stages of decolonization. His initial isolated act of violence begins to galvanize a collective resistance among the colonized, embodying the "new man" Fanon envisions. Through the symbolism of his hallucinatory dream, Makak transcends fear of the white colonial apparition, signaling a transformation in his courage and commitment to confront colonial power. This marks the inception of his quest to reclaim identity. The character Lestrade epitomizes the colonial mindset, asserting in a hegemonic tone, "In the beginning was the ape, and the ape had no name, so God called him man." Makak's violent act of stabbing Lestrade is thus a symbolic rejection of colonial narratives and domination, a vivid enactment of Fanon's concept of counter-violence. It represents a rupture in colonial authority and signals Makak's emergence as a leader and healer for his people. Fanon's assertion that:

"Decolonization is truly the creation of a new man. But such a creation can't be attributed to a supernatural power: The 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation,"

resonates profoundly with Walcott's narrative. Although Walcott employs hallucinatory elements, he ultimately dismisses the notion of supernatural intervention, emphasizing instead that liberation emerges through the colonized peoples' own agency and resistance.

This is dramatically illustrated in the scene where Makak heals Josephus, bitten by a snake. Here, the earlier supernatural imagery is replaced by a powerful metaphor: Makak places black coal in Josephus's hand, which transforms into a red bird, symbolizing pain and oppression being transmuted into liberation and hope. Walcott's poetic declaration, "You are living coal, you are trees under pressure, you are brilliant diamonds in the hands of your God," encapsulates the transformative power of blackness and resilience. Literary critic Paul Breslin interprets "coal" as a metaphor for racial blackness and "pressure" as the strain of colonial oppression. This metaphor suggests that the very pressures of subjugation forge a powerful, unifying force within the colonized. Makak's internal fire inspires collective awakening and self-belief, as seen when

he exhorts, “And believe in me. Faith, faith! Believe in yourselves.” This self-belief emerges as the ultimate product of counter-violence, a tool to eradicate the psychological inferiority imposed by colonialism. This motif aligns with Eugene Ionesco’s Rhinoceros, where individual awakening and solidarity are portrayed as the only defense against fascist destruction. Similarly, when colonized peoples achieve self-realization, their resistance attains an authentic and enduring character. The eradication of the inferiority complex is thus essential for overturning colonial domination.

Makak’s clarion call to his people—“Attention and listen. I want to speak to my men. I want to tell my armies, you can see their helmets shining like fireflies, and you can see their spears as thick as bamboo leaves. I want to tell them this; that now is the time, the time of war”—epitomizes Fanon’s vision of revolutionary violence as the culmination of unified resistance.

At this stage, Makak no longer requires supernatural support; the enlightenment gained through collective self-awareness becomes the supreme power capable of dismantling colonial brutality. His symbolic beheading of the white apparition signifies this pivotal moment. Initially dependent on fantastical aid, he now understands that true power lies within the colonized, once they discard their imposed inferiority. As he declares, “Now, O, God, now I am free,” reclaiming his birth name Felix Hobain, he sheds the imposed identity of “Makak” and embraces a vision of peaceful selfhood. Makak’s transformation—from a fractured existence marked by self-denial to a confident, self-possessed Caribbean identity—mirrors the broader trajectory of colonized peoples striving to reclaim their humanity. This journey embodies Fanon’s call for the oppressed to forge a new consciousness through struggle and resistance. Walcott’s protagonist not only rediscovers his identity but transcends colonial impositions to become a symbol of liberation.

Dream on a Monkey Mountain offers a nuanced, profound meditation on the reclamation of identity. Through Makak, Walcott demonstrates that liberation is not a gift granted by external forces but a hard-won achievement born of internal awakening, collective resistance, and resolute self-belief. The play affirms that freedom from colonial subjugation is realized through the resilience and agency of the colonized themselves, marking the end of a long, arduous struggle for selfhood and dignity.

Conclusion

Derek Walcott’s Dream on a Monkey Mountain offers a profound and multifaceted exploration of identity reclamation in the postcolonial Caribbean. Rather than merely portraying the psychological scars left by colonialism, the play constructs a compelling narrative of self-discovery and liberation. Through the character of Makak—whose fragmented identity symbolizes the collective trauma and alienation imposed by colonial domination—Walcott presents a powerful allegory for the arduous journey of reclaiming agency and selfhood. Drawing heavily on Frantz Fanon’s theoretical insights, especially the concept of counter-violence as an essential and transformative force in the process of decolonization, the play dramatizes the painful yet necessary confrontation with colonial power. Makak’s hallucinatory dream sequence transcends simple fantasy, serving instead as a mythopoetic representation of psychological and political resistance. This fusion of supernatural elements with psychological realism enables Walcott to articulate the complex, often invisible inner struggles of colonized subjects while offering hope for renewal and empowerment. Significantly, Walcott does not

romanticize the liberation process; he portrays it as a difficult, often violent path marked by internal conflict and self-reckoning. Makak's transformation—from despair and self-denial to empowerment and self-assertion—exemplifies this struggle. His symbolic beheading of the white apparition and reclamation of his birth name mark a pivotal reclaiming of dignity and humanity.

Walcott's vision resonates closely with Fanon's idea of "the creation of a new man," emphasizing that true liberation arises not through external forces or mystical powers but through the resistance and agency of the colonized themselves. By embedding Caribbean cultural motifs and a mythic framework, Walcott enriches the play's significance as a distinctively regional yet universally relevant commentary on postcolonial identity. Ultimately, Dream on a Monkey Mountain holds a crucial place in postcolonial literature, offering both a searing critique of colonial oppression and a hopeful blueprint for transformation through collective resistance and self-belief. Walcott's blend of psychological depth, political theory, and poetic imagination makes this play an essential work for understanding the ongoing challenges and possibilities of identity formation in the aftermath of colonial rule.

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