

Scrutinizing Violence and Identity in Makoha's poem *At Gunpoint*: A Fanonian Reading

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This paper analyses Nick Makoha's poem "At Gunpoint". This paper aims to study the human body as a site of violence and revolt, this paper also aims to uncover how violence is inevitable in order to proclaim identity. The research uses Frantz Fanon's concepts of colonialism and violence. This study finds that this poem shows that the violence due to colonialism affects the body, it portrays the broken sense of self caused by colonialism (including betrayal within the oppressed). Additionally, this study explores the way this poem deals with the complicated idea of revolutionary violence as a path to freedom. This poem finds that the violence is inevitable in the quest for identity. By connecting the poem to Frantz Fanon's concept of Colonial violence and also interpreting the poem in the historical context of *Idi Amin's* controversial regime in Uganda. The study exposes that there is a lasting psychological impact upon the colonized who experience the wrath of violence. The lost of identity and psychological dilemma is also an outcome of this research. This study concludes that the political impact of colonialism is present in both, the postcolonial societies and literature produced in the societies once colonized, whether by some external power or the natives.

Keywords: Fanonism, Violence, Colonialism, Uganda, Postcolonialism**Introduction**

Colonialism is when a foreign power takes over another land and its people, setting itself up as the ruler. This really started to spread after the middle Ages, especially in Western Europe. European explorers travelled around the world, found new lands, and claimed them for their countries. The main goal of colonization was to take control of these places and the people who lived there. Running a colony wasn't just about taking land—it needed planning, military force, and control over how people lived and thought. To stay in power, colonizers brought in their own customs, laws, schools, languages, books, and most importantly, their religions. They often looked down on the native people, seeing them as less developed. This attitude led to things like slavery in many colonized areas.

Colonialism started to break down around 1945, during World War II. But it wasn't until the 1970s that the push for independence, or decolonization, really picked up speed. Before looking at postcolonial poetry, it helps to understand two key ideas: **Orientalism** and **Deconstruction**.

Orientalism originally meant the study of Eastern cultures, languages, and history. But the word took on a deeper meaning because of a writer and thinker named **Edward Said**. In 1978, he wrote a book called *Orientalism*, which changed how people thought about the way

the West, saw the East. Said says that what we often think of as "knowledge" about the East was actually shaped by Western ideas—and used to justify power and control.

Said explained Orientalism in three ways:

- First, anyone who writes about or studies the East—like historians, anthropologists, or language experts—can be called an Orientalist. What they do is called Orientalism.
- Second, Orientalism is a way of thinking that creates a sharp line between the East (the Orient) and the West (the Occident). It's a mindset that helped shape how the West viewed the East.
- Third, Orientalism became a system used by the West to control the East. Starting in the late 1700s, it wasn't just about writing or studying—it was about creating ideas, teaching certain things, and using those ideas to rule over Eastern lands

Edward Said's ideas in *Orientalism* have faced a lot of criticism, but he defended his argument by pointing out that Orientalism isn't just about how the East is portrayed. It's a huge part of modern Western politics and thought, revealing more about Western culture than it does about the East itself.

The scars of colonialism still run deep in postcolonial societies. Just like novels can capture the everyday life of a place by getting into the details, poetry does something similar through vivid imagery and metaphors. Before we dive further into postcolonial theory, it's important to remember that colonialism didn't just change political structures—it transformed society itself, including how poetry was written and felt. When the colonizers left, a "new world" began to form, and the language spoken in this world had to be rebuilt. It started from the remnants of colonial influence and was reshaped to express the experiences and struggles of a postcolonial society.

That being said, there isn't a huge body of work that focuses specifically on postcolonial poetry. What we do have often carries a strong sense of nationalism, reflecting on the history, politics, and social changes left by colonizers. The first postcolonial poets often had little choice but to write in English—the language that was imposed on them by colonial powers. Over time, though, these poets began to adapt English, making it their own and using it to express their unique experiences and viewpoints.

For postcolonial poets, the challenge is clear: they have to grapple with their colonial past while facing the effects of neocolonialism. Many feel torn between a sense of not fully belonging to their native culture and also feeling disconnected from the globalized world around them. It's a tough position, being stuck in the middle—between the culture of the colonizers and their own heritage. This complex struggle has led to some powerful voices in poetry, like Pablo Neruda, Derek Walcott, and David Malouf, who give a voice to the messy, layered realities of life in a postcolonial world.

Literature Review

Postcolonialism is a wide theory which has been applied to many contemporary works of poetry, a range of cultures and geographies. Its application is particularly on those works which are affected by colonialism and its aftermath. The previous researched articles have explored the issues of identity, displacement, hybridity, language and cultural memory.

Derek Walcott's (1990) work Omeros is seen through postcolonial theory with a focus on hybridity, language, and identity. The scholar found the blend of Greco-Roman epic with the Caribbean oral traditions and the language as a colonial legacy and a creative tool.

The Beloved Witness and The Country without a Post Office by Agha Shahid Ali (1997) is explored through the diaspora, mourning and memory and hybridity. The researcher looked at the trauma of exile and diaspora, rooted in Kashmiri identity and Indo-Muslim culture. He explored the pain of eradication of cultural memory.

Race and gender's perspective is explored in Grace Nicholas's The Fat Black Woman's Poems (1984). The racism of black females is seen in poetry and how there were different standards for black female bodies and colonial beauty.

Imtiaz Dharker's poem I Speak for the devil (2001) and Over the Moon (2014) were explored from the lens of gender and postcolonial feminism. It negotiates identity between East and west and observes the clash between religion and culture, such as Islam and modernity.

Research Questions

1. How does Nick Makoha's poem "At Gunpoint" depict the human body as a central locus of colonial control, surveillance, and violence?
2. How "The Gunpoint" does show the split psyche in terms of fragmented identity and internalisation of oppression?
3. How does the poem engage with the theme of revolutionary violence as theorized by Fanon?

Research Objectives:

1. To examine how the human body is represented as a site of colonial surveillance and violence.
2. To analyse the psychological fragmentation and impact of colonial oppression on identity formation and internalised subjugation.
3. To explore the poem's engagement with the theme of revolutionary violence and its alignment with Fanon's argument that violence is an inevitable means of reclaiming identity.

Research Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature. The study doesn't follow rigid methodology, rather it is open for multiplicity of meaning, critical inquiry and scepticism. The research design is

explorative and interpretive. The data is collected from primary text (At Gunpoint) and secondary sources are articles and journals, historical context and previous interpretations.

Theoretical Framework

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) experienced a life marked by hardship and internal conflicts, yet he became a powerful symbol for the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) during Algeria's intense fight for independence from French colonial rule. Even while terminally ill and near death at the young age of 36, he expressed a fervent desire to return to the Algerian battlefields to combat the dehumanization inflicted by the enemy, despite his failing health (Gordon, 1995, p. 1). Although he was specialised in medicine and psychology, Fanon dedicated himself to understanding the major ideas of modernity from influential European thinkers like Hegel, Marx, Freud, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. His aim was to apply their theories to address the dehumanizing conditions created by modern racism and colonialism (Gibson, 2003, p. 6). Fanon and his intellectual followers frequently pointed out that the simplification of local populations and the creation of an "us versus them" mentality were often accepted without question. They also argued that this way of thinking could obscure the complex power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized (Smith, 2001, p. 26). Fanon believed in striving for a universal humanity grounded in humanist principles. He sought to connect the ideals of human rights and a shared human experience with the practical ability of people to shape their own history, knowledge, and social structures (Smith, 2001, p. 26). As a key figure in post-colonial theory, Fanon was deeply committed to this pursuit. Drawing on Sartrean existentialism, he hoped to discover new ways for people to achieve national liberation and succeed in their struggle against imperialism. This analysis of Fanon's short life, deeply influenced by humanism, psychoanalytic theory, and existentialism, aims to explore the intellectual background that informed his efforts to help people achieve national liberation and overcome a powerful imperial force, ultimately seeking to offer a fresh perspective and direction for thought.

Frantz Fanon concentrated on the suffering of people living under colonial rule and their fight for freedom from colonial powers. He passed away in 1961. His writings gained significant attention posthumously, particularly in war-torn regions of the developing world and among European academics studying colonialism and its impacts.

Here's an explanation of the four key aspects of "Fanonism":

1. **Fanonism** refers to the collection of Fanon's ideas and the body of work and thought that has been inspired by him. This includes examining:

The internal conflict of identity experienced by those who collaborate with colonizers (referred to as the comprador) and the colonized population. The function and significance of violence in revolutionary struggles. The challenges and transformations of native identity in the period following the end of colonialism.

2. **Immanuel Wallerstein**, a sociologist, was the first to coin the term Fanonism. He thoroughly studied Fanon's writings, particularly in his book *The Capitalist World-Economy*. Wallerstein emphasized Fanon's focus on:

His encouragement of revolution in the Third World. His demonstration of how colonized people were subjected to oppression and dehumanization. In "*The Wretched of the Earth*" Fanon asserts that colonizers dehumanises the colonized reducing them to mere corporeal entities. This enforced visibility and constant scrutiny strips them of autonomy thus making them objects of control and sites of perpetual control. He proposed a new way of understanding of "humanism." Fanon envisioned a different way of defining what it means to be human—one that was not based on European standards or colonial ideologies, but rather on the principles of freedom, dignity, and the distinct identity of colonized people.

3. Fanon also explored "Black aesthetics." He gave deep consideration to the meaning of beauty, art, and culture within a post-colonial or Black context—specifically, how colonized people could reclaim their creative expression and their voices. Fanon utilized the concepts of humanism and existentialism, with a particular focus on how colonialism impacts the psychological well-being and sense of self of individuals. Just as the Sarte has endeavoured to find out the meaning of identity and existence. He was in constant struggle of finding answers to big questions like *Who am I? Do I really exist?*

4. Fanon argued that violence was not limited to physical conflict or warfare. Under colonial rule, everyday life itself contained a more subtle, psychological form of violence. Also in *The Wretched of the Earth* he warns of the cyclic nature of violence and potential of newly developed nations to replicate colonial structures under new elites. He says that violence is necessary instrument for decolonisation. Even in the absence of open warfare, the daily experiences of humiliation, racism, and control imposed by colonialism constituted a type of violence.

5. Fanon firmly believed that to effectively resist colonialism, people needed to reassert their humanity—to fully become human again after being treated as inferior by the colonizers.

6. In his *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon explores psychological fragmentation caused by the colonialization. The colonized subjects suffer from the distorted sense of self. The colonial subjects are internalised leading to complicity, alienation, division, mythologizing of colonial authorities. Fanon emphasised that how colonial domination is sustained not only through force but also through co-optation the oppressed.

Data Analysis:

"At Gunpoint" a horrific phenomenon it seems. This is the title of Nick Makoha's poem which encapsulates dreadful imagery, lamentation over the violence and several other themes. Nick Makoha himself belongs to Uganda, which was under the control of a dictator Edhi Amin for several years and during his reign he shone Uganda with complete military

rule and strict militarisation. Thus, the poem of Nick Makoha is impressed by the impactful background of his life in his country. A few of the points of Fanonism shall be used as fulcrum to accentuate the direction of the data analysis to validate it.

The poem is narrated from a first-person POV, a “corpse” that is an extended metaphor for the whole population under the constant gaze of the military. In colonialism the whole oppressed section is reduced merely to “bodies” the objects who are destined to either act as per the orders of the colonizers or die. In Joseph Conrad’s novel “The Heart of Darkness”, has several instances where the colonizer narrator refers to the native people as “dark objects”. Therefore, here the poet is recalling the phenomenon where the value of a human being is reduced merely to a “body”. In the second part of the line one finds that the illegitimate colonizer’s military is continuously surveilling the body; at large the whole population. “My body is the protagonist watched by soldiers / in patrol cars.”

An echo of Fanon’s idea that colonialism implements its rule through the fear of surveillance and keeping a strict eye on the colonized population. Here one finds that Fenon’s idea of “control and visibility”(ref) can be extracted. In George Orwell’s novel “1984”, there is an immense focus on surveillance to ensure the subjugation to minimize the expectancy of a coup. Therefore, surveillance is a colonial tactic, as Fenon himself believes.

The first point of Fanonism to be discussed is, the internal conflict of identity. As in poem, we find an instance where the poet says *I have heard men say we will save you* this line illustrates the prevailing condition of the people of that colonized region, that they are ready to serve the oppressors because they aren’t certain whether they belong to the oppressors or the oppressed. “Comprador” is the term which refers to such a condition where the people actually collaborate with the colonizers and they in fact belong to the local public, thus the poet is addressing that specific instance where people are even ready to participate in the bloodshed of their own fellows because of the inner conflict.

The Body as a Site of Colonial Surveillance and Violence

Fanon's theoretical outline suggests that colonialism objectifies the colonized willingly and reduces them to mere bodies. This formulation is clearly portrayed in the opening lines of the poem

"My body is the protagonist watched by soldiers/ in patrol cars."

In this line, the body depicted is noticeable which is subjected to ruthless behavior of colonial powers. This imagery corresponds with the claim of Fanon's in The Wretched of the Earth that colonial domination is maintained through the mechanism of policing and imposed conspicuousness. There the colonized body is deprived of the freedom and transformed into continuous inspection.

Moreover, the pointing towards *"people being forced to volunteer to avoid / being a body hiding in the toilet"* or a dead body folded on a table highlights the savage dichotomy forced by colonial and oppressive systems. The marginalized people are confronted with disrespectful demands that either they have to submit to the requirements of oppressors or face the destruction. This harsh choice shows the systemic brutality inherent in colonial structures. In such colonial structures the authority gets replaced by force and survival of individuals depend on conformity.

The imagery of a corpse—discarded and lifeless illustrates the uncertainty of existence under such structures, where resistance is met with deadly consequences, and the body itself becomes evidence to colonial savagery.

In this way, the poem communicates the double function of the marginalized people under oppression: as both a target of monitoring and a vessel of violent dominance, encompassing Fanon's critique of colonialism's dehumanizing logic.

The Psychological Trauma of Betrayal and Internalized Oppression

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* explores the deep psychological wounds caused by colonialism—how it tears people apart from their true selves and making them feel inferior and alienated. This sense of disconnection is echoed in the poem's lines:

"I have heard men say we will serve you. / others will say he saved them, / and yet others will flee..."

These lines reveal how the colonized respond in different, often painful ways to their oppression. Some submit to their oppressors others run, trying to escape and some go so far as to believe the colonizer has saved them. It shows just how damaging colonial rule is—not just at the political level, but to the shared sense of identity and unity among the oppressed. Fanon writes about this too: how colonialism doesn't just divide people physically, but breaks them apart mentally and emotionally.

The next line—"The sharpest cut is betrayal. Lips are their usual servants."—gets at something even more personal. The worst pain doesn't always come from the enemy's weapons, but from betrayal by your own. When someone from your community acts on behalf of the oppressor—whether through silence, flattery, or lies—it penetrates deep into the heart.. Fanon saw this as one of the most harmful effects of colonization: how it turns people against each other, using their words and actions to keep the system going. The image of "lips" being "servants" speaks to how speech itself can be turned into a weapon—how a word of loyalty to the colonizer or a lie told under pressure can shake one's sense of trust.

What emerges from this is a powerful picture of colonial domination—not just as something enforced from the outside, but something that can also arises from inside, out of the people's minds. It disrupts relationships and makes lasting wounds that can't be healed by independence alone. The poem, like Fanon's work, lays bare how colonialism poisons not just nations, but the very way people see themselves and each other.

The "Cracked Republic" and Postcolonial Disillusionment

Fanon's theory highlights the cycle of violence that often have strong control in postcolonial societies, where newly independent nations find themselves repeating the oppressive structures of their colonizers, now under the control of a self-serving elite. This idea is powerfully captured in the poem's imagery:

"In this cracked republic / I have made a film of my life and played myself."

Here, the "cracked republic" represents a fractured nation that hasn't been able to fill the gulf left by its colonial past. The speaker's act of "filming and playing themselves" shows the deep sense of alienation, where their identity is reduced to a performance—a scripted version of who they are rather than a true expression of self. This mirrors Fanon's argument in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he warns that postcolonial leaders often end up imitating the same oppressive tactics as the colonizers

The next line, "A man can't but look into his own imagination / to solve the conflict of himself," reflects the internal struggle of the suppressed entity. In a world shaped by colonial violence, the person is pushed inward, searching for a sense of self amidst the confusion of a fractured identity. This moment of introspection points to Fanon's belief that decolonization isn't just about political freedom—it's about reshaping one's sense of self, breaking free from

the internalized structures of the colonial system. The "conflict of himself" becomes a metaphor for the challenge faced by postcolonial societies: reconciling the pain of the past with the difficult task of creating something new.

In this way, the poem speaks to the paradox of postcolonial freedom—a freedom that, despite its promises, remains incomplete, still haunted by the trauma of the past and the failures of the present. The "cracked republic" captures the struggle of nations trying to live up to the ideals of independence while caught up in the legacies of colonial violence.

Revolutionary Violence and the Inevitability of Conflict

Frantz Fanon firmly believed in the violence as a tool for revolution and freedom, Fanon believed that violence is inevitable for the revolution; this notion is presented by the poet in the following lines of the poem:

"All soldiers must die – some by bullet, some by knife; / ... / I do not want to know the whistle of a bullet in the air / or how it seeks blood to release the weight of the soul"

The narrator recognizes the unignorable reason for armed resistance ("All soldiers must die") while simultaneously dealing with its humongous human toll. The dreadful imagery of bullets and bloodshed undertakes the brutal outcome of liberation. The notion is that colonial violence can only be answered through counter-violence. This shows Fanon's philosophical view of decolonization: though he recognizes the psychological and moral burden of revolutionary struggle, he maintains that the structural violence of colonialism—a system based on dehumanization and force must be encountered with equal force and power.

The speaker's deliberate ignorance ("I do not want to know...") vividly captures the trauma present in this process. The bullet's "whistle" and its killer path symbolize the militarization, the cruelty of colonial oppression, and the weak agency of resistance. For Fanon, such violence, even if tragic, is not catastrophic; rather, it is an act that "*releases the weight of the soul*"—a necessary dissolution of the disrespected freedom imposed by colonialism. The poem thus envisages Fanon's paradox: Liberation is born of conflict, yet this conflict causes irreparable damage to the collective psychology of the population.

By undertaking Fanon's idea of violence as an inevitable factor in the way of getting freedom, these lines of the poem give a bitter glimpse of the other side of violence as well. It recreates the identities, creates new subjectivities, and, ultimately, recaptures humanity from the hands of rule. The conflict that is present in the poem, the conflict whether it is violence which one should choose or it is slavery which one should choose. This conflict is a reflection of Fanon's own conflict that remained unresolved throughout his life.

Conclusion

This research intended to find the impact of colonialism by applying the concepts of Fanon on Nick Makoha's poem At Gunpoint. The poem illustrates how even a dead body is being watched by the patrolling police, thus criticizing the colonial practices of subjugation. It highlights the internal conflicts caused by colonial rule, which dismantles the ability of the oppressed to fight back. Makoha's poem has certain implications of Fanon's view that freedom often comes through conflict, but the poem also shows the emotional and moral cost of such violence. To cut a long story short, the poem reflects Fanon's criticism of colonial and post-colonial systems to show the political and emotional terror waged upon the population by colonials.

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