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**Reframing the Island: *Lord of the Flies*, *The Tempest* and the Colonial Imagination**

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**Abstract**

This study analyzes colonial discourse in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* examining how both use island settings as colonial microcosms. Drawing on postcolonial theorists Césaire, Fanon, and Memmi, the paper argues these works expose contradictions in the colonial civilizing mission, showing how "civilized" subjects adopt savage practices when given power. *The Tempest* allegorizes colonial encounters through Prospero's domination of Caliban and Ariel, revealing how Europeans rationalized control through claims of cultural superiority while employing violence. *Lord of the Flies* modernizes this metaphor with British schoolboys who, stranded on an island, replicate colonial power dynamics and racialized violence their culture supposedly transcends. Through postcolonial analysis, both texts critique colonial ideology by demonstrating that civilization-savagery boundaries are constructed, not natural. Colonial relationships create violent cycles corrupting colonizer and colonized alike. The island setting doesn't provide escape from imperial society but concentrates its power structures and moral contradictions. This comparative study reveals how both works function as sustained critiques of colonialism, using the island space to expose the inherent violence and contradictions within imperial projects and their civilizational narratives.

**Key Words:** post-colonialism, civilizing mission, colonial discourse, island microcosm, savage/civilization binary

**Introduction:**

Islands in literature frequently serve as microcosms for broader social, political, and moral terrains, offering writers a contained space to explore complex themes of power, civilization, and human nature. The isolated island setting provides authors with a laboratory for examining how individuals and groups behave when removed from conventional social

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structures and placed in situations where they must establish new forms of governance and social organization. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1611) both utilize this literary tradition to engage with colonial power, indigenous representation, and the civilizing mission in ways that reveal the inherent contradictions and violence of imperial discourse. These texts, separated by more than three centuries, demonstrate remarkable consistency in their critique of colonial relationships and their exposure of the fragility of civilizational claims.

Grounded in postcolonial theoretical frameworks established by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi, this paper argues that both texts reveal differing but interconnected visions of colonization that expose the psychological and social mechanisms through which imperial power operates. *The Tempest* allegorizes early modern colonial encounters through Prospero's European mastery of Caliban and Ariel, demonstrating how colonizers rationalize their domination through claims of cultural and intellectual superiority while simultaneously revealing the violence and coercion that underlies such relationships. *Lord of the Flies* modernizes this colonial metaphor by showing how easily "civilized" British children can regress into savage power dynamics that mirror colonial oppression, suggesting that the capacity for barbarism exists within all supposedly civilized societies and emerges when traditional restraints are removed.

The theoretical framework provided by postcolonial critics illuminates how both texts function as sustained critiques of colonial ideology and practice. Césaire's analysis of the civilizing mission as inherently dehumanizing, Fanon's exploration of the psychological violence inflicted by colonial relationships, and Memmi's examination of the dual alienation experienced by both colonizer and colonized provide essential tools for understanding how these literary works expose the contradictions of imperial discourse. These theorists demonstrate that colonialism creates damaged subjects on both sides of the colonial relationship, corrupting the colonizer's humanity while systematically destroying the colonized's sense of self and cultural identity.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare presents a complex meditation on colonial power through the relationship between Prospero, the European magician-duke, and the island's indigenous inhabitants, Caliban and Ariel. Prospero's imposition of European order over these supernatural beings enacts the colonial civilizing mission with all its inherent violence and hypocrisy, revealing how claims to cultural superiority mask relationships of domination and exploitation. The play's island setting serves as a colonial laboratory where European power can be exercised without the constraints of metropolitan society, allowing

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Shakespeare to explore the true nature of colonial relationships stripped of their ideological justifications.

Caliban emerges as the quintessential colonized subject, embodying the native "Other" who has been partially assimilated into European culture while maintaining his resistance to complete domination. His famous declaration, "You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse" (1.2.366-67), reveals the fundamental contradiction of colonial education and cultural transmission. This linguistic defiance demonstrates what Edward Said identifies as the colonized subject's ability to "write back" to the imperial center, using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Said 78). The colonizer's attempt to civilize the native through language instruction backfires, providing the colonized with tools for resistance and critique rather than grateful submission. This statement encapsulates the double-edged nature of colonial education, where the very instruments meant to ensure cultural domination become weapons of resistance and self-assertion.

Raihan Rahman's analysis links this linguistic resistance to Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, noting that Caliban's language use represents "a mode of resistance" rather than simple imitative subservience. The colonized subject's imperfect reproduction of colonial culture creates a space for subversion and critique, undermining the colonizer's authority through the very act of cultural transmission. Frantz Fanon similarly argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that language serves as the "carrier of culture" and thus becomes a crucial site of struggle between colonizer and colonized, where questions of identity, power, and resistance are constantly negotiated and contested.

Caliban's resistance extends beyond linguistic defiance to encompass a broader critique of colonial legitimacy and European claims to cultural superiority. His assertion that "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me" (1.2.331-32) challenges the fundamental premise of colonial occupation by asserting indigenous rights and questioning the colonizer's authority to claim and redistribute native lands. This challenge to colonial legitimacy resonates with contemporary debates about indigenous sovereignty and the lasting effects of European colonization on native peoples worldwide.

Prospero's domination of Caliban reveals the violent underpinnings of the civilizing mission and exposes how colonial relationships depend on coercion rather than consent or legitimate authority. When Prospero characterizes Caliban as "Thou most lying slave, / Whom stripes may move, not kindness" (1.2.254-55), he exposes the coercive foundation of colonial relationships while simultaneously revealing his own capacity for cruelty and

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dehumanization. The magician's reliance on physical punishment and threats demonstrates that colonial authority depends on force rather than legitimate governance, undermining claims that colonization benefits the colonized through exposure to superior European culture and values.

Césaire's critique in *Discourse on Colonialism* directly applies to Prospero's treatment of Caliban, as the postcolonial theorist argues that the "civilizing mission" is inherently violent and hypocritical, creating a situation where colonial regimes "decivilize" both colonizer and colonized. The process of domination corrupts the colonizer's humanity while systematically destroying the colonized's cultural identity and sense of self-worth, creating a cycle of violence and dehumanization that perpetuates itself across generations. Prospero's magic represents the technological and cultural advantages that Europeans claimed justified their domination over indigenous peoples, but his use of this power reveals the arbitrary and self-serving nature of colonial rule.

The relationship between Prospero and Ariel adds another dimension to Shakespeare's colonial allegory, demonstrating how colonizers employ divide-and-conquer strategies to maintain control over colonized populations. Ariel's apparent willingness to serve Prospero in exchange for eventual freedom represents the colonized intellectual or cultural elite who collaborate with colonial authorities in hope of gaining privileges or eventual independence. This relationship illustrates how colonial systems create hierarchies among colonized subjects, using rewards and punishments to maintain order and prevent unified resistance.

*Lord of the Flies* presents a modernized and intensified version of colonial dynamics through the story of British schoolboys who, when stranded on an uninhabited island, quickly replicate the hierarchical violence and racial othering that characterizes colonial relationships. Golding's novel demonstrates how supposedly civilized individuals can rapidly adopt savage practices when placed in positions of power over others, revealing that the capacity for barbarism exists within all human societies and emerges when traditional social restraints are removed or weakened.

The novel's opening establishes the boys' identity as representatives of British civilization, complete with school uniforms, proper speech, and knowledge of democratic procedures. Ralph's early assertion that "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages" (42) establishes the central binary between civilization and savagery that drives both the plot and the novel's critique of colonial discourse. As Paul Gilroy argues in

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*Black Atlantic*, such binary thinking represents a fundamental characteristic of Western modernity, where European identity is constructed through opposition to imagined primitive others (Gilroy 45-46).

The fragility of this civilizational identity becomes apparent as the boys' democratic system breaks down under pressure from fear, hunger, and the desire for power. The transformation occurs gradually, beginning with the establishment of hunting parties and the adoption of face paint for camouflage, but eventually escalating to tribal warfare and ritual murder. This devolution demonstrates how quickly civilizational restraints can collapse when individuals are placed in situations where they must compete for resources and establish dominance over others.

Simon's crucial insight that "Maybe there is a beast... maybe it's only us" (89) represents the novel's central revelation about the nature of civilization and savagery. The beast that the boys fear exists not as an external threat but as a projection of their own capacity for violence and cruelty. This recognition parallels postcolonial critiques of colonial discourse, which argue that colonizers project their own savage impulses onto colonized peoples while denying their own participation in systems of violence and oppression. Simon's martyrdom for this truth underscores the difficulty of confronting uncomfortable realities about human nature and the tendency to silence those who challenge dominant narratives.

The transformation of Jack from British schoolboy to tribal authoritarian provides a detailed study of how colonial violence becomes internalized and reproduced by those who exercise power over others. His evolution from choir leader to savage chief demonstrates how positions of authority can corrupt individuals and lead them to adopt increasingly violent methods of control. Jack's declaration that "If there's a beast, we'll hunt it down! ... beat and beat and beat" (91) reveals how the language of protection and civilization can mask impulses toward domination and violence.

The adoption of tribal paint, rituals, and hierarchical structures by Jack's followers mirrors the very practices that colonial discourse attributes to savage peoples, revealing the arbitrary nature of civilizational categories. As Anne McClintock demonstrates in *Imperial Leather*, colonial discourse relies on the projection of European anxieties onto colonized bodies, creating racialized stereotypes that serve to justify imperial domination (McClintock 112-13). The boys' ritualistic chanting, face painting, and ceremonial violence replicate these

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stereotypical images, demonstrating how colonial representations function as projections of European fears and desires rather than accurate descriptions of indigenous cultures.

Piggy's role as the voice of reason and scientific rationality makes his eventual murder particularly significant within the novel's colonial framework. His lament that asks "Which is better — to be a pack of painted Indians like you are... or to be sensible like Ralph is?" (180) reveals how deeply racialized thinking has penetrated the boys' worldview, as they understand their devolution in specifically colonial terms. Piggy's reference to "painted Indians" demonstrates how colonial stereotypes shape their understanding of civilized and savage behavior, while his death represents the triumph of irrational violence over reasoned discourse.

The novel's conclusion, with the arrival of the naval officer who expresses disappointment that "I should have thought... a pack of British boys... better show" (202), provides a final commentary on the persistence of colonial ideology even in the face of evidence that contradicts civilizational superiority. The officer's reaction reveals how colonial discourse maintains itself through selective interpretation and denial, refusing to acknowledge uncomfortable truths about the capacity for violence within supposedly civilized societies.

Postcolonial theorists provide crucial frameworks for understanding how both texts expose the contradictions of colonial ideology and reveal the psychological mechanisms through which imperial power operates. Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* offers a foundational critique of the civilizing mission, arguing that "no one colonizes innocently... a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization" (42). This analysis applies equally to Prospero's control over his island kingdom and the boys' descent into savagery, as both reveal how the assertion of civilizational superiority inevitably leads to dehumanization and violence.

Césaire's argument that colonialism "decivilizes" the colonizer provides a framework for understanding how both Prospero and the boys in *Lord of the Flies* become corrupted by their exercise of power over others. The process of domination requires the colonizer to adopt increasingly violent and coercive methods, ultimately undermining the very civilizational values that supposedly justify colonial rule. The colonizer's claim to moral authority becomes hollow when examined against the brutal methods used to maintain control, revealing the inherent contradictions of colonial discourse.

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Fanon's analysis of colonial psychology illuminates the internalized violence and psychological damage present in both texts. His assertion from *The Wretched of the Earth* that "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip... it empties the native's brain of all form and content" (32) describes a process of psychological colonization that extends beyond political and economic domination to encompass the destruction of cultural identity and self-worth. This analysis helps explain how Caliban's resistance to Prospero involves not just political rebellion but a struggle to maintain his sense of identity and cultural authenticity in the face of European efforts to reshape him according to colonial ideals.

Fanon's exploration of internalized violence provides insight into the psychological mechanisms that drive the boys' transformation in *Lord of the Flies*. The novel demonstrates how individuals who have been subjected to hierarchical systems of control can reproduce these patterns when placed in positions of power over others. The boys' adoption of increasingly violent methods of maintaining order reflects their internalization of colonial models of governance that rely on force rather than consent or legitimate authority.

The concept of the "double consciousness" that Fanon explores in *Black Skin, White Masks* helps explain the psychological complexity of colonial relationships in both texts. This psychological splitting, which W.E.B. Du Bois originally theorized in *The Souls of Black Folk*, describes how colonized subjects must navigate between their own cultural identity and the European values imposed upon them, creating ongoing tension and internal conflict (Du Bois 38-39). Colonized subjects experience what Fanon terms "sociogenic" trauma, where racial oppression creates psychological wounds that persist across generations (Fanon 149-50). Caliban's simultaneous attraction to and rejection of European culture exemplifies this double consciousness, as he both desires recognition from Prospero and resents his domination.

Memmi's analysis of the colonizer and colonized relationship provides additional insight into the psychological dynamics explored in both texts. According to Memmi, the colonized both admire and despise their colonizer, internalizing feelings of inferiority while simultaneously craving acceptance and recognition. This dual alienation creates a psychological trap where the colonized can neither fully embrace nor completely reject the colonial relationship, leading to ongoing internal conflict and instability.

In *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph and Piggy represent this internal conflict as they struggle to maintain civilized order while confronting the savage impulses that emerge within their

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group. Their commitment to democratic procedures and rational discourse reflects their internalization of British cultural values, but their inability to prevent the descent into tribal violence reveals the limitations of these values when confronted with primal fears and desires. Similarly, Caliban's relationship with Prospero demonstrates how colonial subjects navigate the impossible space between resistance and accommodation, seeking recognition while maintaining their dignity and cultural identity.

The comparative analysis of these texts reveals both similarities and differences in their treatment of colonial themes and their vision of human nature. Both works use the island setting as a colonial laboratory where power relationships can be examined without the constraints of metropolitan society, allowing the authors to explore the true nature of colonial relationships stripped of their ideological justifications. The isolation of the island setting intensifies the dynamics of power and control, creating situations where the mask of civilization can slip and reveal the violence that underlies colonial relationships.

However, the texts diverge in their conclusions about the possibility of redemption and the potential for moving beyond colonial relationships. *The Tempest* concludes with Prospero's renunciation of magic and his apparent forgiveness of those who have wronged him, suggesting the possibility of reconciliation and the transcendence of colonial dynamics. Prospero's decision to free Ariel and presumably abandon his domination of Caliban implies that colonial relationships can be overcome through moral growth and the recognition of shared humanity.

*Lord of the Flies*, by contrast, offers a more pessimistic vision of human nature and the possibility of escaping colonial dynamics. The novel's conclusion, with the boys' rescue by a naval officer engaged in a larger war, suggests that colonial violence and hierarchical oppression are endemic to human society rather than aberrations that can be corrected through moral development. The officer's disappointment with the boys' behavior reveals how colonial discourse maintains itself through denial and selective interpretation, refusing to acknowledge uncomfortable truths about the capacity for violence within supposedly civilized societies.

The persistence of colonial ideology in both texts demonstrates how deeply imperial discourse has penetrated Western culture and consciousness. Even when confronted with evidence that contradicts civilizational superiority, characters in both works maintain their belief in the binary between civilization and savagery, suggesting that colonial thinking represents a fundamental aspect of Western identity rather than a temporary historical phase

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that can be easily transcended.

Both texts also reveal how colonial relationships create cycles of violence that perpetuate themselves across generations. The trauma inflicted by colonial domination generates responses that often reproduce the very patterns of violence and oppression that created the original injury, creating a cycle of retribution and counter-retribution that makes reconciliation and healing extremely difficult to achieve. This pattern is evident in Caliban's plot against Prospero and in the boys' adoption of increasingly violent methods of maintaining order and resolving conflicts.

The island setting in both texts serves not as a paradise or escape from imperial society but as a concentrated reflection of its power structures and moral contradictions. The supposed isolation of the island does not create a space free from colonial influence but rather intensifies colonial dynamics by removing the constraints and complications that might moderate their expression in metropolitan settings. The island becomes a laboratory for examining how colonial relationships operate in their purest form, stripped of the ideological justifications and institutional mediations that might obscure their true nature.

*The Tempest* explores early colonial power idealized as civilizing mission but revealed as arbitrary domination based on technological and cultural advantages rather than moral superiority. The play's resolution, with Prospero's renunciation of magic and return to the human world, suggests the possibility of moving beyond colonial relationships through moral growth and the recognition of shared humanity. However, the ambiguity of Caliban's fate and the uncertainty about whether he will truly be freed from European domination leaves open questions about the possibility of genuine decolonization and the restoration of indigenous sovereignty.

*Lord of the Flies* amplifies this critique by showing how easily children, supposedly innocent of colonial ideology, can adopt colonial dynamics when placed in positions of power over others. The novel's demonstration that British schoolboys can rapidly become savage demonstrates that the capacity for barbarism exists within all supposedly civilized societies and emerges when traditional social restraints are removed or weakened. This recognition undermines claims to civilizational superiority and reveals how colonial discourse functions as a projection of European fears and desires rather than an accurate assessment of cultural development.

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The theoretical frameworks provided by postcolonial critics deepen our understanding of these texts by revealing how colonial relationships operate at psychological, cultural, and political levels. Césaire's exposure of the colonizer's savagery, Fanon's diagnosis of internalized violence and psychological damage, and Memmi's analysis of dual alienation provide essential tools for understanding how these literary works function as sustained critiques of colonial ideology and practice. These theorists demonstrate that colonialism creates damaged subjects on both sides of the colonial relationship, corrupting the colonizer's humanity while systematically destroying the colonized's cultural identity and sense of self-worth.

Together, these works demonstrate that the colonial encounter fundamentally transforms all participants, creating cycles of violence and dehumanization that persist long after formal colonial structures have been dismantled. The psychological and cultural damage inflicted by colonial relationships continues to influence contemporary social and political dynamics, making the insights provided by these literary works and postcolonial theorists essential for understanding ongoing patterns of domination and resistance in the postcolonial world.

The enduring relevance of these texts lies in their ability to expose the mechanisms through which power operates and to reveal how supposedly natural hierarchies are actually constructed and maintained through violence and ideological manipulation. By examining how colonial relationships function in the controlled environment of the literary island, both Shakespeare and Golding provide insights into the nature of power and domination that extend far beyond the specific historical context of European colonialism to encompass ongoing patterns of oppression and resistance in contemporary society.

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