



CULTURAL IDENTITY AND COLONIAL LEGACY IN *RED ISLAND HOUSE: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY*

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Lee's *Red Island House* through the frameworks of Delgado's race theory and Fanon's theory of colonialism. It explores the themes of race, colonialism, and cultural identity that foreground the social construction of race and offers a robust framework for analyzing the characters' experiences. Integrating these theoretical perspectives sheds light on how characters negotiate their identities and relational dynamics within the postcolonial context of Madagascar. Lee's narrative, set against the backdrop of a vacation home on the island, is enriched with this dual-theoretical approach, offering a more nuanced interpretation of the text. The interplay between race, colonialism, and cultural identity highlights the multifaceted nature of the characters' journeys. Shay, an African American professor, and her Italian husband, Senna, encounter various sociocultural dynamics that challenge their perceptions and beliefs. Shay's evolving relationship with Madagascar and its people reflects a complex negotiation of identity and belonging, shaped by the country's racial and colonial histories. The novel's exploration of race, gender, and cultural exchange is thus situated within a broader discourse on identity and postcolonial theory. By analyzing the intricacies of the characters' experiences through Delgado's and Fanon's theories, this study highlights the enduring impact of racial and colonial legacies on personal and cultural identities. Thus, the comprehensive analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's thematic richness and its relevance to contemporary discussions of race and post-colonialism.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Cultural Identity, Delgado, Fanon, Post-Colonialism, Race Theory.*

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1. Introduction

Lee's (2021) *Red Island House* examines race, identity, colonialism, and cultural interactions within the historical context of Madagascar. The study navigates postcolonial complexities through the narrative of Shay, an African American professor, unfolding a journey of self-discovery and a critique of the lasting effects of colonialism. Madagascar, colonised by France in the late 19th century, suffered cultural suppression and exploitation. Despite gaining independence in 1960, colonial legacies persist in its social, political, and economic systems. The novel's setting reflects the exploration of patriarchy's identity in this historical context. The title, *Red Island House*, refers to a home built by Shay's Italian husband, Senna, which symbolises the wealth inequality defining the expatriate-local dynamic in Madagascar. Initially, the house symbolises stability for Shay, but as the story progresses, she confronts the ethical dilemmas it embodies, paralleling her evolving understanding of privilege and identity. The house itself becomes a metaphor for the colonial mindset, one that sees Madagascar as a site of consumption and domination rather than a place to be understood and respected. The broader theme of expatriate identity is explored through Shay's experience as a Black American woman who, despite her racial identity aligning with the Malagasy people, is still tied to a system of privilege due to her marriage to Senna and her expatriate status. This duality of belonging and estrangement is at the core of her internal conflict. Her awareness of the colonial history and the power dynamics at play creates tension between her desire for solidarity with the locals and her recognition of her complicity in maintaining the systems that oppress them. Lee's narrative makes a significant contribution to contemporary literature, offering a sophisticated and thought-provoking examination of postcolonial identity, privilege, and the ethical dilemmas of cultural exchange. Through its richly layered narrative, the novel invites readers to reflect on the complexities of race, identity, and belonging in a world shaped by colonial legacies.

2. Literature Review

In the context colonialism, Said (1978) critiques how the Western powers have historically constructed the 'Orient' as an exotic and backwards counterpart to the civilised West. He views that Orientalism is not merely an academic or geographical concept but a system of knowledge production that reinforces European dominance over Eastern societies by portraying them as irrational, inferior, and in need of Western intervention and control. The Western portrayal of the East is not a neutral or objective representation but rather a construction rooted in imperialist ideology, designed to justify colonial domination (Said, 1978).

Bhabha (1994) provides a nuanced perspective on colonial dynamics through his concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space. He challenges simplistic binary oppositions between coloniser and colonised, suggesting that colonial encounters result in

the creation of new, mixed cultural identities. His concept of hybridity refers to the blending of both colonial and indigenous cultures, resulting in identities that are neither fully colonial nor indigenous. This hybrid identity subverts the colonial notion of cultural superiority, destabilising the authority of the coloniser. Similarly, Bhabha's idea of the third space is a site of cultural negotiation, where new meanings and identities emerge through the encounter of two cultures. This space, marked by conflict and contestation, challenges old power dynamics and offers a platform for the colonised subject to assert their agency (Bhabha, 1994).

For Hall (1997) race is a social construct, shaped by historical, political, and cultural factors. He emphasises that racial categories are not fixed but are constantly evolving through social processes. These categories are often constructed through stereotypes that reinforce the social hierarchies and challenges essentialist notions of race by highlighting the role of power dynamics in shaping how racial identities are understood and performed. In postcolonial contexts, these representations influence how racial groups are treated and perceived. Hall argues that the struggle over representation is central to postcolonial identity formation, as marginalised groups actively resist and negotiate their identities against dominant cultural narratives (Hall, 1997). Spivak (1988) examines the exclusion of marginalised voices, particularly those of colonised women, from dominant narratives and argues that the power structures governing knowledge production actively silence the most oppressed groups, preventing them from articulating their own experiences. She critiques the notion that the colonised have a straightforward ability to resist or speak for themselves within existing power structures, emphasising that colonialism not only oppressed the colonised physically and politically but also reshaped their intellectual and cultural frameworks. It challenges the assumption that the colonised are voiceless, instead asserting that colonial systems actively suppressed their ability to speak for themselves.

Smith (2022) is of the view that Shay's racial identity creates a unique position of solidarity and distance within the Malagasy community. Her mixed feelings about her place in Madagascar are exacerbated by the historical legacies of colonialism, which continue to shape both her interactions with the local population and her self-identity. Shay's dual marginalisation, racially as a Black woman in a predominantly white expatriate community and economically as a wealthy foreigner, complicates her efforts to forge genuine connections with the Malagasy people. It highlights the limitations of cultural exchange, as Shay's privilege distances her from the locals, hindering her ability to establish deep, meaningful relationships (Gilroy, 1993). The novel critiques how expatriates, even when aware of systemic inequalities, struggle to transcend these power imbalances in their relationships with the local population. Anderson (2022) speaks of expatriates being usually bestowed with a privileged place and in Senna's case, his space

being out of Malagasy culture and creating his Red House as a refuge that belongs to Senna. However, Shay's racial identity is tense because, besides being black, the half folk that are a part of her are also black, while the places that are a part of her through expatriation are also white, rich guy places.

The psychological dynamics of expatriation are further explored through Senna, who is emotionally and culturally detached from Madagascar. Senna's marginalisation within both the Malagasy culture and the expatriate community highlights the difficulties of adapting to a new culture without fully embracing or understanding it. His inability to integrate into Malagasy society contrasts with Shay's attempts to navigate her identity in the context of both the expatriate enclave and the broader social dynamics of Madagascar (Berry, 1997). This contrast illustrates the emotional costs of expatriate life, with Senna embodying the alienation that can result from failing to connect with the host culture.

3. Theoretical Framework

Delgado's (1995) Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Fanon's (1952) theory of Colonialism provide a robust framework for understanding the complex relationship between race, law, and colonial histories. Both theories critique systemic oppression, though they approach the issue from different angles. CRT focuses on how race functions within legal and institutional systems. At the same time, Fanon examines the psychological and cultural toll of colonialism on the colonised. Together, these frameworks offer profound insights into the enduring impact of colonial legacies on contemporary racial dynamics.

Delgado's CRT challenges the conventional understanding of racism as merely personal prejudice. It argues that racism is deeply embedded in social and legal structures that perpetuate inequality. One of the core tenets of CRT is that the idea that ignoring race will lead to fairness obscures racial disparities, allowing systemic racism to persist. Delgado also introduces the concept of '*interest convergence*', which asserts that racial progress typically occurs only when it aligns with the interests of the white majority. This insight challenges the notion that legal reforms alone can lead to racial equality, urging a deeper examination of how legal and societal structures uphold existing power dynamics. Delgado also integrates the concept of intersectionality into CRT, recognising that individuals experience multiple forms of oppression based on the intersection of their social identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality enables a deeper understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect and intensify one another, shaping individuals' experiences of privilege and marginalisation. For example, a Black woman may face discrimination in ways that differ from a Black man or a White woman, as the intersection of race and gender creates unique challenges and experiences. This intersectional approach provides a more nuanced understanding of

how race, gender, and other social categories intersect to shape individuals' access to power, resources, and opportunities.

Fanon's theory complements CRT by exploring the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonised. According to Fanon, colonialism is not only a political and economic system but also a deeply psychological force that shapes racial identities. The process of '*colonial Othering*' dehumanises the colonised, positioning them as inferior and justifying their exploitation. This dehumanisation continues through internalised oppression, where colonised individuals absorb the negative stereotypes imposed by the colonisers, leading to self-hatred and identity fragmentation. For Fanon, liberation can only be achieved through radical resistance, including violent revolt, against colonial power structures. He argues that the lasting effects of colonialism on identity and social structures necessitate a revolutionary transformation, not just legal reform. By combining CRT's focus on the legal system with Fanon's exploration of colonial psychology, a more comprehensive understanding of racial oppression emerges. CRT sheds light on how laws and institutional practices perpetuate racial inequality, while Fanon's work reveals the deep-seated psychological damage caused by colonialism. Together, they emphasise the need for both legal reform and radical social change to dismantle the power structures that maintain racial and colonial oppression.

3.1. The Social Construction of Race and Intersectionality in Contemporary Society

Both Delgado's Critical Race Theory and Fanon's Colonialism Theory address the social construction of race, emphasising that race is not an inherent biological characteristic but a fluid and context-dependent social construct. Delgado (1995) critiques the essentialist view of race, arguing that racial categories are shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional factors rather than being biologically predetermined. This challenges the notion of race as fixed and highlights how racial identities are constructed and maintained through social processes. Fanon's work aligns with this view by showing how colonial powers constructed racial hierarchies to justify their domination. Through *colonial Othering*, the colonised were dehumanised and positioned as inferior to the colonisers, solidifying the racial power dynamics of colonial rule. Fanon's analysis of internalised oppression further explores how colonised people internalise these negative stereotypes, leading to a disintegration of self-identity and a desire to assimilate into the dominant colonial culture. This psychological impact of colonialism continues to shape the experiences of postcolonial societies, where racial identities remain marked by the legacy of colonial oppression. It highlights how the social construction of race and intersectionality are central to understanding racial oppression in contemporary society. These frameworks emphasise that race is not a fixed category, but rather is shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. By understanding the fluid and dynamic nature of

race, we can more effectively analyse how racial inequalities are perpetuated in contemporary legal, cultural, and social systems. This intersectional lens also challenges simplistic notions of oppression by recognising that multiple, overlapping identities shape people's experiences. This framework provides essential insights into how race and power operate within legal, cultural, and institutional contexts and how colonial legacies continue to shape modern racial dynamics. By examining both the structural and psychological effects of racial oppression, these frameworks offer valuable tools for dismantling the systems that perpetuate inequality and for fostering greater social justice and liberation.

4. Analysis

Colonialism's pervasive influence on both individual identities and societal structures is a central theme in postcolonial literature, which often explores the psychological, cultural, and social consequences of colonial rule. *The Red Island House* by Patricia L. Lee provides a vivid illustration of these themes through the character of Shay Senna, a Black American woman who inherits a colonial-era estate in Madagascar. The novel intertwines the personal struggle of navigating colonial legacies with the broader social and racial dynamics of postcolonial Madagascar. This analysis employs Fanon's psychoanalytic theory and Delgado's Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine how colonial histories continue to shape individual identities, cultural displacement, and social structures.

4.1. Fanon's Theory and Psychological Disruption

Fanon's (1952) offers a framework for understanding the psychological turmoil caused by colonialism. Fanon discusses how colonised individuals internalise the oppressive stereotypes imposed upon them, leading to alienation and identity crises. This theory is illustrated in *The Red Island House* through Shay's connection to the Red House, a colonial remnant that forces her to confront Madagascar's colonial past. Shay's ambivalence towards the house, as “there are houses you do not want, that, nevertheless, enter your life and bring with them other lives, whole other worlds” (Lee, 2021, p. 6), it reflects the internal conflict caused by the colonial inheritance she cannot escape. For Shay, the Red House becomes a symbol of the psychological violence of colonialism, similar to Fanon's idea of being “thrown” into an alien culture. Despite her efforts to distance her from the colonial legacy, the house remains a constant reminder of colonial oppression, reflecting the continuing psychological disruption caused by the colonial past. This inner conflict underscores Fanon's argument that the colonised subject is torn between conflicting identities shaped by both the colonisers' and the colonizer's cultures.

4.2. Delgado's CRT: Structural Racism and Colonial Power

Richard Delgado's Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers an analytical tool for understanding the systemic and structural nature of racism. He views that racism is not merely a personal bias but a pervasive force embedded within institutions and social

systems. In *The Red Island House*, the lingering effects of colonial power structures are evident in the social and economic divisions in postcolonial Madagascar. Delgado's concept of interest convergence illustrates how racial progress often occurs when the interests of marginalised groups align with those of the dominant majority. This dynamic is visible in the novel, where the social elite in Madagascar, many of whom are descended from colonisers, continue to hold power and privilege. For example, La Joconde, a luxurious salon, serves as a microcosm of the country's racial and class divides. The patrons, a mix of Malagasy and expatriates, illustrate how colonial legacies still shape the power dynamics between different racial and class groups. This reflects how colonial structures persist in maintaining the racial and class-based inequalities, even after formal colonial rule has ended. Delgado's CRT helps to reveal how these systemic inequalities continue to shape social relations in postcolonial settings.

4.3. Cultural Displacement and Identity Conflict

The theme of cultural displacement is central to both Fanon's theory and Senna's experiences. Fanon's notion of cultural alienation, where the colonised subject is estranged from both their indigenous culture and the colonial culture imposed upon them, is reflected in Shay's disconnection from Madagascar and her idealised, distant notion of Africa. Her sense of cultural alienation underscores the broader psychological impacts of colonialism, which distorts the identities of the colonised and leaves them with fractured senses of belonging. This internal conflict is exacerbated by the structural racism embedded in the societal systems, as Delgado (1995) argues, making it impossible for the colonised to escape the racialised power structures that continue to govern their lives.

The novel also explores how colonial power is not only perpetuated through economic and social hierarchies but also in the spiritual and cultural domains, as exemplified by the ancestral spirits haunting Madagascar. Shay's journey throughout the novel is marked by cultural displacement, a theme central to postcolonial literature. As a Black American woman in Madagascar, Shay grapples with her identity, which is caught between her American heritage and the colonial history of the land she now inhabits. Fanon (1952) argues that colonialism creates a fractured sense of self in the colonised subject, who struggles to reconcile their indigenous culture with the imposed colonial culture. Shay's detachment from Africa, which she describes as "a place that could only ever exist for me as something near-mythical, an idealised motherland" (Lee, 2021, p. 17), reflects the psychological dislocation caused by the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the African diaspora. Shay's view of Africa as a distant and mythologized land mirrors the alienation many Black Americans feel due to the historical erasure of African culture during slavery and colonialism. This disconnection from one's heritage is a key aspect of cultural alienation, which Fanon describes as a consequence of colonial violence. The novel portrays Shay's struggle to navigate her dual identity as a Black American and a

person connected to Madagascar's colonial history, reflecting the broader postcolonial experience of cultural displacement.

4.4. Colonialism's Economic and Social Hierarchies

The economic and social inequalities inherited from colonial rule are central to this research. Even after Madagascar gained independence, colonial power structures remained entrenched in the social fabric, with the elite, often descended from colonisers, continuing to control wealth and resources. Lee (2021) illustrates this through the land transaction involving Colonel Andrianasolo, who acquires land once owned by a Malagasy nobleman, emphasising the neocolonial dynamics at play. The fact that the land remains in the hands of the colonial elite highlights the continuing dominance of colonial economic structures in postcolonial societies. Colonialism's economic legacy is also evident in the disparities between the wealthy elite and the marginalised Malagasy population. Delgado (1995) argues that race and class intersect to create enduring social stratification, which is perpetuated by colonial power structures. The economic control of land by the descendants of colonisers ensures that the wealth generated by colonial exploitation remains concentrated in the hands of a few, perpetuating the cycle of inequality. The novel demonstrates how these neocolonial dynamics continue to shape the social and economic landscape of postcolonial Madagascar.

4.5. The Haunting Legacy of Colonialism

As a colonial artefact, the novel symbolises the enduring legacy of colonialism in both the land and the people who inhabit it. The depiction of ancestral spirits haunting Madagascar underscores the idea that colonialism's influence extends beyond the material and economic realms to the spiritual and cultural spheres. These spirits represent the collective memory of colonial trauma, reflecting the ongoing presence of colonialism in the lives of the Malagasy people. The spirits in *The Red Island House* serve as a metaphor for the lingering presence of colonial power in postcolonial societies. Just as colonialism's economic and political structures continue to shape the material world, its psychic violence persists in the collective consciousness. This spectral presence highlights the enduring scars of colonialism, which continue to haunt postcolonial subjects as they attempt to navigate their identities and histories.

4.6. Colonial Power and Social Stratification

The social divisions in postcolonial Madagascar are further explored through the interactions between characters of different ethnic backgrounds, particularly the tensions between the Merina elite and the coastal Sakalava people. Madame Rose, a wealthy Merina woman, expresses disdain for the Sakalava, reflecting the racial and ethnic hierarchies that persist in postcolonial societies. "Madame Rose, a wealthy Merina from the capital, has scant esteem for the Sakalava and other coastal peoples" (Lee, 2021, p. 67). This prejudice reflects the internalised racism created by colonial power structures, which elevated certain

ethnic groups while marginalising others. Colonialism not only imposes racial hierarchies but also internalises these divisions within the colonised society. Madame Rose's prejudice towards the Sakalava is a manifestation of this internalised racism, which continues to perpetuate social inequality even after colonial rule, has ended. It emphasises the role of systemic racism in shaping social dynamics, arguing that the colonial legacy of racial discrimination is perpetuated through everyday interactions and institutional practices.

4.7. The Continuation of Colonial Power Structures

Despite Madagascar's formal independence, the persistence of colonial power structures is evident in the novel's depiction of elite spaces, such as La Joconde, which reflect the lingering influence of colonialism in postcolonial society. The luxurious salon, where wealthy expatriates and Malagasy elites gather, serves as a symbol of the neocolonial dynamics that continue to shape the country's social and economic life. The foreign clientele at La Joconde, many of whom are descendants of colonisers or wealthy expatriates, highlights the enduring influence of colonial power structures in postcolonial societies. "Customers at La Joconde are a varied lot, many of them women of the island gentry, Malagasy, French, Italian, South African, Indian, Mauritian" (Lee, 2021, p. 56). These elite spaces highlight the persistence of neocolonialism, where power remains concentrated in the hands of the descendants of the colonisers. The power imbalance between Shay and Bertine is further illuminated by Delgado's CRT, which emphasises intersectionality, how race intersects with class and other identities to shape social dynamics. Shay's blackness aligns her with the Malagasy people in terms of shared racial marginalisation, yet her wealth and expatriate status create a chasm that hinders genuine solidarity. This tension is evident when Shay attempts to engage Bertine in conversation, only to be met with polite but distant responses, highlighting how class privilege can overshadow racial kinship (Lee, 2021, p. 67). These moments underscore the enduring impact of colonial legacies, where economic and social hierarchies established during colonial rule continue to dictate the terms of interaction in postcolonial societies. Delgado's (1995) analysis of race and class dynamics helps to explain how these neocolonial systems continue to perpetuate inequality. Despite formal political independence, the economic and social hierarchies established during colonial rule remain intact, reinforcing the dominance of the elite and the marginalisation of the indigenous population.

5. Conclusion

The study vividly explores the psychological, cultural, and social effects of colonialism, highlighting the enduring impact of colonial power structures on postcolonial identities. Through the lens of Fanon's psychoanalytic theory and Delgado's Critical Race Theory, the novel reveals how colonial legacies continue to shape the experiences of marginalised groups, particularly through the intersections of race, class, and power. Shay Senna's struggle to reconcile her Black American identity with her inherited connection to

colonial Madagascar reflects the broader challenges faced by postcolonial subjects who must navigate the complex legacies of colonialism. The novel's exploration of social divisions, economic inequalities, and spiritual haunting highlights the enduring impact of colonialism in postcolonial societies. By drawing on Fanon's and Delgado's theories, the novel illustrates how colonialism continues to shape the identities and experiences of individuals in the postcolonial world, making it a powerful commentary on the lasting scars of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for justice and equality. The novel's exploration of racialised power, cultural alienation, and the lingering legacies of colonialism serves as a potent reminder of the ongoing struggles for identity, justice, and equality in the postcolonial world.

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