Systemic Injustice, Silenced Memory, and the Fragmented Self in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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الظلم النظامي، الذاكرة المُسكتة، وتفكك الذات في رواية The Nickel Boys لكولسون وايتهيد: منظور ما بعد كولونيالي

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Abstract

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* offers a harrowing fictional account of institutional racism in mid-20th-century America, inspired by the real-life atrocities at the Dozier School for Boys. While prior studies have examined the novel's testimonial ethics and historical realism, few have addressed how its narrative structure enacts resistance to systemic injustice. This study examines how the novel portrays systemic violence, silenced memory, and fragmented identity through a postcolonial lens, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature. The research problem focuses on the absence of cohesive theoretical frameworks that connect narrative structure to ideological analysis. The study employs a qualitative hermeneutic approach, utilising a close reading strategy, to examine the interplay between form and content as it is applied in dramatising racial trauma. Based on the theories of psychological alienation presented by Fanon, mimicry and hybridity by Bhabha, and subalternity by Spivak, the study demonstrates that the novel reflects the institutional violence that can occur through narrative disunity, silence, and the dislocation of identity. Findings reveal that *The Nickel Boys* serves as both a memorial and a form of ideological resistance. It critiques not only historical oppression but its persistence through modern institutional frameworks. The study contributes a coherent postcolonial framework for interpreting U.S.-based internal colonialism in literature. It recommends further interdisciplinary applications of postcolonial theory to trauma narratives, particularly those rooted in institutional critique.

Keywords: Postcolonial theory, systemic injustice, narrative silence, racial identity, Colson Whitehead.

الملخص:

تقدّم رواية The Nickel Boys للكاتب كولسون وايتهيد سردًا تخييليًا مروّعًا حول العنصرية المؤسسية في أمريكا منتصف القرن العشرين، مستوحاة من الفظائع الحقيقية التي وقعت في مدرسة "دوزيير" للأولاد. وعلى الرغم من أن الدراسات السابقة قد تناولت أخلاقيات الشهادة والواقعية التاريخية في الرواية، إلا أن قليلًا منها عالج الكيفية التي تُجسّد بها البنية السردية للرواية شكلًا من أشكال المقاومة تجاه الظلم المنهجي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل تمثيلات العنف النظامي، وذاكرة القمع، وتفكك الهوية من خلال عدسة ما بعد كولونيالية، مسلطة الضوء بذلك على فجوة واضحة في الأدبيات النقدية المعاصرة. تتمحور مشكلة البحث حول غياب الأطر النظرية المتماسكة التي تربط بين البنية السردية والتحليل الأيديولوجي. وتعتمد الدراسة منهجًا تأويليًا نوعيًا، من خلال استراتيجية القراءة الدقيقة، لاستكشاف التفاعل بين الشكل والمحتوى في تصوير الصدمة العرقية. وبالاستناد إلى نظريات الاغتراب النفسي لدى فانون، والتقليد والتهجين عند بهابها، ومفهوم

التابع عند سبيفاك، تُبيّن الدراسة كيف تعكس الرواية العنف المؤسسي عبر التفكك السردي، والصمت، وتشوّش الهوية. تشير النتائج إلى أن
The Nickel Boys تُعَدّ في آنٍ واحد عملًا تذكاريًا وموقفًا مقاومًا أيديولوجيًا؛ فهي لا تكتفي بفضـــــح القمع التاريخي، بل تنتقد أيضًـــا
استمراريته ضـمن الأطر المؤسسية الحديثة. وتقدّم هذه الدراسـة إطارًا ما بعد كولونياليًا متماسـكًا لتفسير الاستعمار الداخلي داخل الولايات
المتحدة كما يتجلى في الأدب. كما توصـي بتوسـيع تطبيقات النظرية ما بعد الاستعمارية في تحليل سرديات الصـدمة، لا سـيما تلك التي
تتمحور حول نقد المؤسسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية :النظرية ما بعد الكولونيالية، الظلم النظامي، الصمت السردي، الهوية العرقية، كولسون وايتهيد.

Introduction

In the landscape of twenty-first-century African American literature, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) has emerged as a seminal text in the literary reckoning with institutional racism, historical erasure, and the enduring trauma of racial violence. Utilising the historical atrocities of the Dozier School for Boys, a state-operated reform institution in Florida that functioned for more than a century under the pretence of rehabilitation, Whitehead creates a fictional setting, Nickel Academy, which exposes the systemic torture of Black boys. The narrative centred around Elwood Curtis and Turner is not a historical replay; it transforms humanity by unearthing repressed memory, a kind of photograph of how system-based rules can destroy the individual. The novel's structure and character arcs reflect the long-standing effects of what Domingues (2023) terms "the afterlife of slavery," where violence is not only historical but lived, endured, and inherited in contemporary forms.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the novel's nuanced exploration of trauma and power. According to Swetha and Uthradevi (2024), The Nickel Boys can be described as a form of "testimony of institutionalised trauma" since the reformatory institution can be described as a carceral space with the ability to create fractured Black subjectivities through both physical and symbolic violence. In a parallel manner, Pilgrim (2023) reviews the contemplation of the novel on which racial identity and resilience conflict, stating that Whitehead creates a type of psychological dialectic between two notions of concepts on the side of hope and cynicism in Elwood and Turner, which is a reflection of tensions in the African American historical memory. According to Ghilzai and Shahvaz (2023), based on postcolonial theories, the novel exemplifies epistemic violence perpetrated by state power, which oppresses people by erasing subaltern cultures and creating institutional histories that erase their existence. In the meantime, Martin Salvan (2023) argues that the economy of narrative described by Whitehead, due to its omission, moderation, and deferral, is a form of formal criticism related to the silence in archives and the institutional memory loss.

The novel's power lies in its layered exploration of three interwoven themes: systemic injustice, silenced memory, and the fragmented self. The institutional mechanisms of enacting systemic injustice often purport punishment as reform, while strengthening hierarchies of race. Extinguished memory can be observed in the disappearance of the victims' histories, not only in the narrative, but also in the cultural memory as a whole, as it represents the code of denying the trauma. The fragmented self can be observed in the broken psychology of characters who must balance ideals with insanity, and a sense of self with the mandate of invisibility. Not only are these themes at the centre of the novel, but they are also integrated into its form and structure, as well as the tone it employs. Together, they frame the novel as a literary indictment of racialised power and as a narrative space of resistance.

To shed light on these thematic issues, this study integrates a postcolonial theoretical understanding that focuses on the mechanisms of domination revolving around psychology, ideology, and representation. Based on the concept of psychological alienation, as developed by Frantz Fanon, the analysis explores how institutionalised violence disintegrates the identity lived within a background of inferiority. The concepts of mimicry and hybridity, as described by Homi Bhabha, provide insight into how characters respond to oppression within the system through ambivalent survival strategies. Moreover, the theory of subalternity developed by Gayatri Spivak draws attention to the role of the voices of the other and their absence in memories as manifestations of institutional power and violence. The combination of these frameworks allows one to read even more deeply the tension staged in *The Nickel Boys* between survival and erasure, identity and loss, voice and silence. Together, these frameworks enable a deeper reading of how *The Nickel Boys* stages the tension between survival and erasure, identity and loss, voice and silence. The study thus situates the novel not only as a representation of historical trauma but as a site where the residual structures of colonial power are critiqued through form and fiction.

Although *The Nickel Boys* has received substantial critical attention since its publication in 2019, much of that scholarship has tended to discuss the novel primarily as a historical record or as a moral screed. This question has been addressed in numerous studies, including recent publications such as Junior (2023) and Ali (2023), which highlight the novel as an archival intervention, revealing the secret histories of carceral institutions. The ethical aspects of Whitehead's narrative minimalism are also discussed in terms of silence and omission, which should be read as the historical erasure of Black suffering (Budi & Hkimat, 2023). Although these readings have undoubtedly generated a greater awareness of the social and historical implications of this novel, they have tended to overlook its theoretical implications, particularly in relation to issues of identity and power, as well as narrative form.

The critical gap that this study addresses lies in the lack of sustained postcolonial readings of *The Nickel Boys* that foreground the intersection of systemic injustice, silenced memory, and psychological fragmentation. Although Ghilzai and Shahnaz (2023) have introduced a postcolonial sensibility by historising the reform school and its association with the epistemic violence of colonial institutions, little has been written that thoroughly examines how the novel demonstrates this process of interiorising the struggle and the psychic (dis)integration of the characters. Additionally, according to Martín Salvn (2021), there is still a lack of studies that emphasise the aesthetics of narrative withholding by Whitehead, linking it to more general theories of subalternity and silenced voice. This gap is all the more urgent in the context of the novel contributing to the modern reality of institutional power, in which enforcing disciplinary violence is increasingly bureaucratised, algorithmised, and technocratized.

This study aims to investigate how Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* represents systemic injustice, silenced memory, and the fragmentation of identity through a postcolonial lens. It specifically seeks to analyse how institutional violence not only inflicts external harm but also operates internally, disrupting memory, silencing the voice, and fracturing the self. Accordingly, the central research question guiding this inquiry   is:
How does *The Nickel Boys* depict the psychological and narrative consequences of systemic injustice on Black identity, as interpreted through the lens of postcolonial theory?

This study is limited to a literal form of textual analysis of *The Nickel Boys*, specifically its thematic structure, character construction, and narrative methods. The research does not engage in a comparative study with other works by Whitehead or from a broader perspective on the history of the Dozier School; instead, it is purely a literary form that fictionalises systemic injustice and internalised oppression in the novel. The analysis is also limited by its theoretical framework, which is primarily dominated by postcolonial thought, specifically the works of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. Therefore, the study does not involve sociological or psychological empirical information, nor does it aim to present a historical reconstruction of a real-life institution. It has an interpretive purpose rather than a documentary one, a purpose that seeks to unpack how literature, at the level of narrative silence, fragments of identity, and symbolic violence, critiques the ideological processes behind the continuing racial domination in both historical and contemporary settings.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory emerged as a critical tradition that interrogates the enduring effects of colonialism on culture, identity, and systems of knowledge. Although initially intended to address the historical and psychological implications of European Imperialism in formerly colonised nations, its scope has subsequently grown to include internal colonisation mechanisms within settler cultures, such as the United States. In this context, postcolonial analysis proves particularly valuable for examining racialised institutions, such as reform schools, prisons, and educational systems, that replicate colonial hierarchies under the guise of discipline, rehabilitation, or social order.

The fact that *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead is written about the merciless experiences of two Black boys in a reform school in the Jim Crow-era South allows the book to have a postcolonial reading not only due to the representation of an institutionalised process of racial violence but also because of its thematic treatment of memory, silence, and identity fragmentation. The novel is not an account of historical crimes; it examines the underlying ideologies that enable such violence to persist, as well as the capacity of such violence to conceal the crime under the cloak of collective forgetfulness.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, which centres on the brutal experiences of two Black boys at a reform school in the Jim Crow-era South, invites a postcolonial reading not only because of its depiction of

institutionalised racial violence, but also because of its thematic engagement with memory, silence, and identity fragmentation. The novel does not merely recount historical abuses; it probes the deeper ideological systems that allow such violence to persist and erase itself from collective memory.

To investigate these layered concerns, this study draws upon the works of three foundational postcolonial thinkers: Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. The concept of psychological alienation that Fanon develops offers insight into the process of self-shattering caused by systemic oppression. The issues of mimicry and hybridity, as described by Bhabha, further assist in understanding the complicated strategies employed by characters in a racialised power field as they seek to survive. Meanwhile, Spivak's idea of *subalternity* provides a lens for understanding the institutional silencing of Black voices and the politics of erasure.

Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional analysis of *The Nickel Boys*, clarifying how the novel stages systemic injustice, silences historical trauma, and portrays the disintegration of Black identity under the influence of institutional power.

Frantz Fanon: Psychological Alienation and the Colonised Self

Frantz Fanon's concept of psychological alienation provides strong theoretical guidance for examining the internal repercussions of structural injustice on the experience of blackness. In his work, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Wright, 2022), the author argues that the colonised subject becomes conditioned to perceive themselves through the coloniser's viewing perspective, so that they internalise feelings of inferiority, displacement, and shame. The result of this internalisation is what Fanon refers to as a 'divided self', emotionally and ideologically torn apart by the oppressive pressures of imposed social demands and individual will.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood Curtis embodies this Fanonian split. His unwavering belief in the American legal system, shaped by the moral clarity of Dr. King's rhetoric, reflects an aspirational mimicry of dominant cultural norms. However, according to Fanon, its imitation does not result in recognition; the imitation, on the other hand, strengthens the exclusion of the subject. The moral perfectionism with which Elwood carries himself eventually proves to be more of a bait that leaves him at the mercy of the toxicity of systems. Turner, on the other hand, symbolises a reactionary kind of withdrawal, where he is disengaged from hope, morality, and belief, as a psychological defence mechanism to collapse further, a survival mechanism for the colonised mind, as mentioned by Fanon.

Recent studies support this interpretation. Ndlovu (2020) offers a psychoanalytic reading of Elwood, noting how internalised white morality fuels a tragic disconnect between belief and lived reality. According to Olliver (2023), note that the fragmented identity of the Turner personifies the historical traces of violence in post-institutional consciousness. In another study by Swetha and Uthradevi (2024), Nickel Academy is a microcosm of colonial rule, where the institutional brutality reconstitutes the interiority of black boys employing humiliating and disciplining practices. Fu (2024) extends this by exploring how Black youth in American fiction navigate between compliance and resistance within structurally racist systems, identifying Elwood's breakdown as a Fanonian moment of disillusionment. In addition, Gibson (2024) argues that the novel enacts the afterlife of colonial trauma by staging how Turner finally comes to terms with the memory of Elwood. This psychological inheritance was transferred between the victim and the survivor.

Through Fanon's lens, *The Nickel Boys* reveals that institutional racism does not merely manifest through external control; it penetrates consciousness, distorting moral perception and fragmenting selfhood. This internal colonisation, rendered in the novel through silence, deferral, and narrative dislocation, constitutes one of Whitehead's most profound critiques of racial power.

Homi Bhabha: Mimicry, Hybridity, and Ambivalent Resistance

Two important concepts developed by Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory are mimicry and hybridity, which can be used to understand the volatility of the positionalities of subjects in colonised cultures within primary cultural systems. Mimicry, as formulated by Bhabha, is the practice by which the colonised subject attempts to imitate the language, values, or institutions of the coloniser as a means of survival or acceptance. *Mimicry*, as Bhabha formulates, refers to the colonised subject's imitation of the coloniser's language, values, or institutions as a strategy for survival or acceptance. However, this mimicry is never complete; it is marked by difference, often exposing the cracks in the authority it imitates. *Hybridity*, by contrast, refers to the emergence of new, ambivalent identities that resist binary classifications, formed in the space between domination and resistance.

In *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood Curtis's rigid moral compass, deeply rooted in American democratic ideals and nonviolent protest, can be read as a form of mimicry. He has a genuine belief in justice, but it is fatally misplaced in a world that places little value on Black life. Elwood repeats the language of equality but is not covered by it, a task that demonstrates that the concept of mimicry, as written by Bhabha, reflects the balance of compatibility and criticism.. Turner, by contrast, occupies a hybrid position: disillusioned yet observant, cynical yet loyal in his fractured way. He adapts without submitting, and his resistance is less ideological than practical, a hybrid response forged in the cracks of institutional violence.

Recent studies echo these interpretations. Razaei and Asadi (2022) interpret Elwood's moral position as a threatening tendency of mimicry, a tendency that reveals the structurally impossible nature of full inclusion. Fu (2024) also marks the worldview of the character as presented by Turner, claiming that it reflects a hybrid mode of existence, the elements of which were negotiated through the force of negotiations, rather than a blatant act of rebellion. Miki (2025) draws a parallel between hybrid identities in The Nickel Boys and The Underground Railroad to demonstrate how Whitehead utilises hybridity to describe fissured resistance.

According to Gibson (2024), the post-institutional identity of Turner is defined by the author on the border between memory, guilt, and inherited trauma as a post-Fanonian hybrid. Additionally, according to Martn-Salvan (2021), the ambivalence of Bhabha is linked to the novel's very structure, as certainty is postponed and the truth is presented through broken timelines and fragmented revelation.

Through Bhabha's framework, *The Nickel Boys* becomes a study in ambivalence, where belief and betrayal, resistance and adaptation, coexist uneasily. It is not just a place of punishment, but a place that remodels, redefines, or twists identity, at best. Bhabha enables us to see Elwood and Turner not as contrasting, but as two versions of the postcolonial subject, one structured by aspirational mimicry, the other by hybrid strength.

Gayatri Spivak: Subalternity and the Politics of Silenced Voice

The concept of subalternity, as developed by Gayatri Spivak, is employed to explain the structural invisibility of marginalised subjects within the discursive dualism of mainstream discourses. Spivak states in her classic essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), that the subaltern, those outside the circuits of institutional representation, cannot speak honestly because their voices are either distorted or erased by hegemonic systems. This obliteration cannot be considered linguistic only, but epistemic, since it is a vision of how any knowledge is developed to exclude. Subalternity manifests as a subdued figure in the realm of character, uncollapsed history, and moral dilemmas of representing oppressed groups.

In *The Nickel Boys*, subalternity is symbolically written out in nameless graves in which boys murdered by the system are buried behind the Nickel Academy, with no memorial, with no remembrance. This inability to bear complete witness is further extended by the aesthetic of restraint that permeates the novel, characterised by its quietness, aversion to sensationalism, and silences. The voice of Elwood is cut off forever; Turner, the survivor, takes the name but not the identity of his friend. His narrative replacement is a comment on what Spivak would term the ventriloquised memory, a heritage that has no voice. So the only way out is to form a ventriloquising self, a fractured personality.

Scholars have recognised this Spivakian dynamic in Whitehead's narrative. Budi and Hkimat (2025) describe the novel as performing "testimonial absence," where the very structure of the text resists closure and confessional transparency. Aqeeli (2024) interprets the silences in the novel as a commentary on institutional forgetting, which is connected to other, more wide-reaching mechanisms of historical denial. According to Pistikoudis (2023), the subaltern condition is also dramatised through the characters' inability to define their narrative, which leaves them displaced post-traumatically, as exemplified by the character of Turner. Gibson (2024) situates the aesthetics of minimalism and fragmentation in the novel as opposed to narrative totality, a decision that is consistent with Spivak, who writes that we must avoid overwriting the silenced. Finally, Strickland (2021) notes how the novel's buried truths function as "archival ghosts," evoking the spectral presence of those who remain unspoken, unmarked, and unrecoverable.

Viewed through Spivak's lens, *The Nickel Boys* becomes more than a narrative of individual trauma; it emerges as a meditation on narrative ethics and the structural conditions that render Black suffering inaudible. Refraining from resolution and stressing defeat, Whitehead's novel offers the reader the boundaries of representation itself and the violence of the structures that define who is represented and who is silenced.

Integrating the Frameworks and Defining the Gap

Together, the theoretical frameworks of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak provide a comprehensive lens for interpreting *The Nickel Boys* as a postcolonial critique of racialised institutional violence. The concept of psychological alienation that Fanon draws exposes not only the encroachment of systemic injustice on the interior realities of the oppressed but also the internally fractured subjectivities made as a product of such injustices. The elements of mimicry and hybridity articulated by Bhabha shed light on the potentially shifting identities developed as a reaction to cultural hegemony. The theory of subalternity, developed by Spivak, raises awareness about the voices of Black people being silenced by erasing institutions and marginalising their stories. All three frameworks illuminate different aspects of the novel's thematic centre; Fanon explicates the inner disintegration of identity, Bhabha brings out the ambivalence of resistance, and Spivak explores the theme of the politics of absence and voice.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, most critical studies on *The Nickel Boys* treat these dimensions in isolation, analysing trauma, identity, or memory separately without synthesising them within a unified theoretical approach. In addition, although some readings have emphasised the historical importance and testimonial potential of the novel, few have fully theorised how the novel's form and structure enact the very violence they seek to represent. The intersection of institutional power, narrative silence, and psychological disintegration remains underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by weaving together Fanon's, Bhabha's, and Spivak's insights into an integrated interpretive framework. It argues that *The Nickel Boys* not only recounts systemic abuse but also critiques the ideological systems, legal, rhetorical, and aesthetic that sustain it. In doing so, the study provides a multidimensional reading that contributes to both postcolonial literary studies and a deeper understanding of contemporary racial trauma in American fiction.

Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework employed in analysing Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. The study aims to explore how the novel dramatises systemic injustice, silenced memory, and the fragmentation of identity within a postcolonial framework. The literary and symbolic richness of the text formed the basis for adopting a qualitative interpretive design, as such a method is grounded in hermeneutic analysis of textual dimensions. This approach prioritises depth and theoretical engagement over generalisation, making it ideal for unpacking the ideological and psychological complexities of the novel. According to Lindseth and Norbreg (2022), hermeneutics lends itself to comprehending texts as not only linguistic objects with an earlier existence but also as historical and ethical responses to lived experiences.

Research Design: Qualitative Hermeneutics

The qualitative analysis employed a hermeneutic design, as it allows for a nuanced consideration of the relationship between narrative structure, character psychology, and ideological critique. The approach is constructive in fostering a sensitivity to ambiguity, contradiction, and the symbolic nature of meaning. Robinson (2023) states that hermeneutic inquiry enables the reader to grasp cultural texts within their social-historical contexts, without compromising the reader's interpretive independence. The strategy does not present *The Nickel Boys* as a historical text, but instead as a literary work that merges language, silence, and represents trauma.

Data Source: The Literary Text as Primary Material

The primary data source for this study is Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019). The novel has been chosen due to its high literary quality, depth of themes, and exploration of questions related to race, power, and institutional violence. It can be considered a powerful case study in analysing internal colonialism and systematic racism in the context of the United States, given its fictionalisation of the Dozier School for Boys. As Jameson (2020) argues, literature functions as a "socially symbolic act," offering critical insight into the ideological conditions under which it is produced. Thus, the novel is approached as both an aesthetic and a political object of interpretation.

Theoretical Anchoring and Integration

This study draws its theoretical foundation from postcolonial theory, specifically from the works of **Frantz Fanon**, **Homi Bhabha**, and **Gayatri Spivak**. Fanon's concept of *psychological alienation* provides tools to examine the internalised effects of systemic racism. The concepts of mimicry and hybridity, developed by Bhabha, offer a deciphering of the ambivalence that identity evokes under oppressive structures. The concept of subalternity, lauded by Spivak, can help in analysing the silences in narratives and the politics of erasure. Such theories do not apply outside the interpretive process but are incorporated into it. According to Mongia

(2021), postcolonial theory helps to question the role of colonial power that still functions in the present through contemporary institutions and representations.

Analytical Procedure

The analytical process employs **close reading** as the principal method of data interpretation. Focus is given to the development of characters, narration, symbolic elements of the plot, and the use of silence or withholding of information. It is informed by the thematic network model proposed by Mishra and Dey (2022), which categorises textual data into three levels of theme: basic, organising, and global themes. These categories, in this context, are systemic injustice, silenced memory, and the fragmented self. The critical focus is on how form itself emerges as a mode of resistance, identifying institutional violence even where it is not explicitly declared, but somewhat subtly concealed.

Delimitations and Scope

This study is limited to a single primary text and does not incorporate comparative literature or empirical research. The scope is deliberately narrow to allow for a deep, theoretically grounded analysis of *The Nickel Boys*. It does not attempt to reproduce the historical truth of the events recreated; instead, it is oriented towards understanding how the novel conveys the idea of institutionalised violence and broken identity through the use of literary form.

Methodology Justifications

The methodological choices made in this study were driven by the nature of the research question and the complexity of the literary text under analysis. The decision to adopt a qualitative hermeneutic design stems from the recognition that *The Nickel Boys* demands more than descriptive reading; it requires an interpretive approach capable of unpacking symbolic meanings, ideological undercurrents, and narrative silences. As Nigar (2020) posits, these methods are most suitable for studying subjective and subtle phenomena, such as trauma, identity, and resistance, as they should be examined in their natural environments.

Hermeneutic textual analysis was selected not only for its interpretive depth but also for its alignment with postcolonial theory, which privileges the interrogation of discourse, form, and power. Leyh's (2021) view of hermeneutics as a historically aware and ethically anchored process of reading supports the conclusion that the study aimed to place the narrative form within a system of oppression. Following the same line of thought, Schaufele (2020) focuses on the hermeneutic understanding that enables the text to speak back to the reader, which is particularly important in examining silenced or disjointed voices.

The selection of a single novel as the study's objective justifies the primary data source: to conduct an in-depth, theory-saturated analysis of a complex literary narrative. A broader sample would have introduced vagueness and compromised the depth of interpretation. Moreover, the application of postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Fanon, Bhabha, and Spivak, not only theoretically justified the use of tools but was also necessary to reveal the legacy of internalised implications of systemic violence and epistemic erasure. Such theorists provide a set on which not just the psychology of character and the content of theme may be analysed, but also on which the formal strategies of silence, mimicry, and fragmentation are applied in the novel.

Finally, the decision to employ Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic network model for organising the analysis was made to ensure analytical clarity while preserving theoretical richness. This model enables a flexible yet structured interpretive process, well-suited for studies that seek to trace layered meanings across literary form and ideology.

Analysis

This section offers a close, theory-driven reading of *The Nickel Boys*, focusing on how the novel dramatises the entangled effects of systemic injustice, silenced memory, and the psychological fragmentation of the Black self. The three dimensions, namely, material oppression, epistemic erasure, and interior disintegration, are applied through the compounding theoretical lens of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak. In the analysis, one will no longer work with the content of the narrative alone, but will also work with its form, tone, and formal restraint, reading the novel as a moral and historical response to historical trauma, as well as a postcolonial challenge to contemporary institutional power. Through close attention to selected passages, the chapter demonstrates how Whitehead's novel narrates the effects of racial domination not only on the body but on memory, voice, and identity.

5.2 Systemic Injustice: Institutions as Mechanisms of Colonial Power

In *The Nickel Boys*, systemic injustice is not merely a backdrop; it is the very mechanism through which identity is destroyed and racial hierarchy enforced. Nickel Academy is a carceral echo of colonial domination, built on the structures of watching, beating, and staying silent. Systemic oppression that leaves what Frantz Fanon refers to as 'a zone of nonbeing' (Fanon, 1967) is vividly adapted to fit the description of the black boys becoming expendable bodies in a system of disciplining purported to reform the boys in the novel. Whitehead reveals this dynamic early on through a blunt characterisation of the academy: *"The school operated under the pretence of correction, but its true curriculum was pain"* (The Nickel Boys, p. 14). This sentence sums up the ideological hypocrisy that Fanon sees in colonial institutions: they say they are civilising but are brutalising. For boys like Elwood, the space between what they say and what they do is where their minds are destroyed.

The school's method of racialised categorisation exacerbates institutional injustice: *"They had two schools: the White House for punishment, and the black dorms for containment."* (*The Nickel Boys*, p. 62). In this case, architecture itself turns into a system of racism and abuse. Fanon said that in colonial settings, space is racialised because the coloniser lives in light and the colonised lives in shadow. This idea directly applies to the layout and logic of the school. Finally, Elwood's fate within the system exemplifies how idealism is crushed by systemic cruelty: *"Even when Elwood did what he was told, the beatings came. The rules were a trap, not a guide."* (The Nickel Boys, p. 121). On the same note, Fanon warned that those who are oppressed and try to get justice through the colonisers' rules are often punished the harshest. Being obedient doesn't protect Elwood; it makes him more likely to be hurt.

According to Aqeeli (2024), the Nickel Academy should be read as 'a psychological plantation' since disciplinary violence can be seen not only as a means of reining in bodies but also as a means of reconstructing minds into mutes, fearful, and compliant. Their reading supports a Fanonian interpretation of the institution as a colonial structure transplanted into the heart of modern America, one that destroys identity by criminalising Black existence.

With the help of such descriptions, *The Nickel Boys* reveals the hypocrisy of American reform movements and shows the persistent influence of a colonial logic in our present-day institutions. The novel poses questions to the reader, suggesting that it is not a surprise, but rather an inevitable consequence, as manifestations of injustice within systems are designed, built, and maintained in institutions that reflect the colonial order.

5.3 Silenced Memory: The Subaltern and the Architecture of Forgetting

The aspect of memory in The Nickel Boys is even more devastating, not only because it is suppressed, but the structures of the violence themselves are designed to erase memories. The novel theorises what Gayatri Spivak calls 'epistemic violence', undermining the voices of the subaltern not only through physical violence but also by refusing to recognise them, institutionalising their exclusion, and marginalising them in narrativity. Nickel Academy not only causes physical damage, but it also makes its victims go to unmarked graves, literally leaving no trace behind, not even of their pain. The image of the hidden cemetery is central to the novel's indictment of institutional memory: *"It was not part of any official map. The field had no sign, no marker, just a line of bent grass where the land had been disturbed."* (The Nickel Boys, p. 179). This erasure, as Spivak argues, renders the dead subaltern doubly marginalised: first, they are denied a voice in life, and second, they are denied memory in death.

Even in Turner's adult narrative, there is hesitation to recall, to name, to speak: *"There were names he refused to say. Stories he had locked away, even from himself."* (*The Nickel Boys*, p. 197). This narrative silence aligns with Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak, not because they lack language, but because the structures of discourse disqualify their pain as knowable or legitimate. The final act of Turner adopting Elwood's name serves both as an homage and an obliteration of individual identity: "He had taken Elwood's name and moved into the world as him, because that name deserved to survive." (The Nickel Boys, p. 208). Turner talks, and he does not speak in his own person. His existence depends on being remade in the image of another person, a ghostly reminder of an oppressed rumour. The ventriloquised memory is indicative of what Spivak calls the ventriloquism of history, such that even the very remembrance is linguaged through displacement.

Budi and Hkimat (2025) interpret the restraint and gaps in the novel as aspects of what is known as 'testimonial absence' and claim that the novel *The Nickel Boys* does not seek to be redemptive, thereby maintaining the moral value of its silence. Along the same lines, Aqeeli (2024) perceives the undocumented

field as a metaphorization of national complicity in the forgetting of racial violence- the field is not only a cemetery of the boys but a graveyard of the American conscience.

A postcolonial act of grief is performed by Whitehead's work in revealing the forgotten, the unmarked, the unheard, and the unnamed. It is a silent witness rather than a loud one. The most compelling condemnation of structural injustice in the book is the subaltern's repressed memories.

Fragmented Self: Identity Under Siege

If systemic injustice is the structure and silenced memory, its residue, then the fragmented self is the intimate cost of both. Colson Whitehead portrays two opposite sides of Black youth's reaction to institutional violence in his novel *The Nickel Boys*: Elwood, whose unshakeable belief in justice results in his martyrdom, and Turner, whose morbid detachment eventually turns into armour against the collapse of the self. They are the two tracks of what Frantz Fanon regards as the 'psychological alienation' of the colonised. This existential splitting takes place when faith in human dignity clashes with a world built around its refutation. Elwood's idealism stems from his belief in American civil rights promises: *"He believed what Dr. King said, that love would defeat hate. That doing right would be enough."* (The Nickel Boys, p. 23). However, this belief, which is based on imitating prevailing values, ends in tragedy. As Fanon cautions, *"The colonised intellectual sometimes assimilates too well,"* which leads him into the Fanonian trap of being crushed by the very system he had sought to join.

In contrast, Turner offers a form of hybrid survival, one that neither believes in the system nor openly revolts: *"You think this place has rules? There's only one rule: do what you have to do to live."* (The Nickel Boys, p. 83). Bhabha's notion of hybridity is evident in Turner's rejection of a singular belief system. His scepticism represents a form of emotional defence, developed in the interstitial space between hope and despair, rather than nihilism.

The final revelation that Turner lives under Elwood's name complicates the idea of survival: *"The name belonged to someone else, but so did the shame, the memory, the pain. He carried them all now."* (*The Nickel Boys*, p. 211). This narrative substitution exemplifies Fanon's theory of identity rupture and Bhabha's concept of the ambivalent subject. Turner endures, but as a different individual, tormented by a name that is not his own, yet feels more authentic than his true identity.

This transformation is perceived by Gibson (2024) as a post-Fanonian metamorphosis, where one can speak of identity as becoming spectral, with memory, guilt, and silence posited as the elements that formulate it. In a similar vein, Sultan (2024) argues that Turner is a holistically fractured postcolonial subject, situated between resistance and inheritance. Martin Salvn (2021) presents the delay of the narrative, exploiting the nature of Turner's identity as a narrative structural copy of the nonlinear logic of creating trauma.

Therefore, *The Nickel Boys* not only illustrates injustice but also examines its psychological consequences. Elwood's tragic idealism and Turner's spectral hybridity demonstrate the infiltration of systemic power into the self, resulting in fragmented identities characterised by echoes of split, silent, and incomplete selves.

5.5 Synthesis: Entanglements of Power, Silence, and Identity

The narrative structure of *The Nickel Boys* reveals that systemic injustice, silenced memory, and the fragmented self represent not three distinct mechanisms but rather three interrelated and interconnected components operating within a single postcolonial logic of domination. The fact that Elwood is the victim of physical violence is not what ruins his idealism; however, the cause is rather an institution that claims to be the moral authority instead of the place of psychological distortion, which is a reference to Fanon and his criticism of colonial institutions where the psychological distortion occurs. This kind of violence is reinforced by dispossession: the pain of the boys is covered by a field without a name, without headstones, without voice, an actual representation of the subaltern, silenced and buried by debt. The psychic residue of this violence, in turn, survives in Turner, whose survival, however, brings not restoration but substitution. He does not become Elwood solely in solidarity, but in the ghostly mourning witnessing to the hybridity theory of Bhabha, which posits hybrid identity as an enduring misbelief and a subjugated subject.

Interaction between these elements manifests itself in forms of narrative, such as delayed revelation, minimalism, and narrative reticence, represented within the novel. Martin-Salvan (2021) notes that the novel does not attempt to resolve the story linearly because trauma cannot be resolved linearly. Whitehead does not end in catharsis/redemption but, on the contrary, highlights that violence persists in, and becomes institutionalised by structures that efface the people they are designated to serve and defend. By so doing,

The Nickel Boys performs what Oliver (2023) calls a "postcolonial ethics of refusal": the refusal to resolve, the refusal to forget, the refusal to heal in some satisfying manner.

Ultimately, the novel's aesthetic and thematic architecture converge to critique a system that not only disciplines bodies but fractures memory and subjectivity. Through the interwoven fates of Elwood and Turner, Whitehead crafts a postcolonial indictment of institutional power that persists not in the past, but in the present, silent, sanctioned, and devastating.

5.6 Theoretical Implications: Expanding the Postcolonial Frame

In *The Nickel Boys*, the postcolonial theory is not only proven applicable in explaining racial injustice in present-day literature but also bends the spatio-temporal boundaries of the postcolonial theory itself. Traditionally applied to the Global South and former colonies, postcolonial concepts such as Fanon's psychological alienation, Bhabha's mimicry and hybridity, and Spivak's subalternity are here recontextualised within the internal colonial structures of the United States. The novel, therefore, can serve as a powerful piece of evidence in support of what scholars such as Ghilzai and Shahnaz (2023) and Rezaei and Asadi (2022) refer to as 'internal postcoloniality', a form of critique that locates the logics of coloniality within the structure of modern liberal institutions, including reform schools, judicial systems, and education systems.

The novel brings the paradox of mimicry into the foreground through Elwood, whose journey shows that, most of the time, assimilation to dominant norms does not end in acceptance but in obliteration. Turner, in turn, represents a hybrid subjectivity that is neither fully incorporated nor rebellious, but outlines a model of subversive existence within the pressure of transmitted trauma. In silencing its victims, even in death, the academy supports Spivak in her argument that subaltern voices are, in earlier forms, disqualified as historically illegible not because they are feeble but because they have encountered epistemic violence of institutional discourse.

In addition, the formal means of the novel, its fragmentation, reserve, and withholding of narrative, are reflective of the silencing it seeks to criticise. At that, *The Nickel Boys* is not only a story of what cannot be said but also of what is told, as Gibson (2024) observes. This aesthetics of refusal has become a transition in how the postcolonial literature attempts to cope with trauma, testimony, and memory.

By connecting the African American literary tradition with global postcolonial discourse, Whitehead's novel broadens the theoretical scope of both areas. It asserts that colonial violence is not merely a historical occurrence but an ongoing system, reproduced, concealed, and embedded within institutions. In this way, *The Nickel Boys* revitalises postcolonial theory for the twenty-first century, urging scholars to consider not only the geographical legacies of empire but also its ideological remnants in their contexts.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how *The Nickel Boys* of Colson Whitehead reflects the inherent injustice, the repressed memory, and the broken black identity using a unified postcolonial lens. Based on the theoretical analyses of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, the study employed an interpretive approach to move beyond a theme-based analysis and explore the ideological, structural, and narrative operations that operate within the novel. The literature review revealed a broad spectrum of academic approaches to the novel. Ali (2023) and Junior (2023) interpreted *The Nickel Boys* within the African American tradition of testimonial fiction, highlighting its ethical weight and political urgency. While these readings reinforced the novel's moral force, they approached it primarily as a record of historical trauma, rather than as a postcolonial artefact with formal and ideological complexity.

Memory and silence became the subjects of focus for other scholars in their examination of the novel. The article by Budi and Hkimat (2025) focuses on the matter of testimony absence, whereas Aqeeli (2024) reviews the possibility of institutional forgetting as a narrative form. The interpretations were well understood, especially in terms of the symbolic significance of the secret cemetery and the narrative voice's restraint. However, they did not apply formal postcolonial theory to explain the political dimensions of these silences. Similarly, Pistikoudis (2023) explored subalternity in the novel, but framed it within a race-centred discourse rather than global postcolonial paradigms.

Gibson (2024) argued that the novel's minimalism can be seen as an aesthetic of refusal, resisting the aesthetics of resistance in the form of absence. But it was a stylistic reading that she did. The concept of temporal disruption as a reflection of trauma in the story was introduced by Martín Salván (2021), whereas Mikić (2025) focused on racial geographies and fear as a legacy of trauma. These studies provided essential

groundwork, but none brought together the formal structure, character arcs, and narrative voice into a unified theoretical model grounded in postcolonial theory.

A few studies began to touch upon postcolonial tools. Elwood has been observed by Fu (2024) and Rezaei and Asadi (2022) to exhibit idealism, a form of mimicry, and Turner's pragmatism, a hybrid form of survival. Ndlovu (2020) and Oliver (2023) discussed the psychological aftermath of institutional abuse, and Swetha and Uthradevi (2024) treated Nickel Academy as a plantation in a figurative form. However, their interpretations were fragmented, lacking a model that synthesised the psychological, ideological, and narrative levels in the novel.

In contrast, the present study developed and utilised a three-dimensional theoretical framework that combined Fanon's concept of alienation in the psychological sense with Bhabha's theories of mimicry and hybridity, as well as Spivak's analysis of subalternity and epistemic violence. This frame enabled this study to provide a comprehensive approach that examines not only what the novel conveys about institutional violence and racial trauma, but also how it formally critiques this theme through silence, fragmentation, opaque revelation, and the conflation of identity.

The fundamental findings showed that structural injustice is manifested in the novel not just in overt acts of violence (as in the case of Elwood), but also through psychological haemorrhage (as in the case of Turner, who was robbed of his memory) and narrative blackout (as in the case of nameless graves). Elwood's blind idealism, which imitates mainstream moral speech, is an example of the regard Fanon has for the colonised subject who is being deceivingly hopeful and experiencing annihilation. The ambivalent, hybrid identity of Turner aligns with Bhabha's vision, as expressed in his concept of ambivalence and divided resistance. The hidden histories and erasures in the novel affirm Spivak's claim that subaltern voices are systematically denied legibility and representation.

It is therefore evident that the central research question of the study has been thoroughly addressed in this study: How does *The Nickel Boys* illustrate systemic injustice and the way that it leads to discentering Black identity through a postcolonial framework? The solution is that the novel can form a critique by utilising structure, voice, and restraint to convey the forms of marginalisation that the novel abhors.

Moreover, the study has successfully achieved its research objectives:

- It applied a unified, interdisciplinary theoretical model to the analysis of a single novel,
- It revealed how postcolonial theory can be effectively used to critique internal colonialism in a U.S. context,
- And it demonstrated how narrative form becomes an act of resistance against institutionalised silencing and fragmentation.

Finally, the study has filled a significant research gap. There is no prior literature that combines the theoretical applications of Fanon, Bhabha, and Spivak in reading *The Nickel Boys* as a formal postcolonial architecture of opposition. This synthesis not only enriches Whitehead scholarship but also contributes to the methodological expansion of postcolonial criticism beyond traditional postcolonial geographies.

Conclusion

This study aimed to discuss how the novel *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead showcases the systemic injustice inherent in the U.S. through dispossessed memory and a lack of specific modes of Black identity, employing a postcolonial approach. The study provided a dimensional analysis of the novel by integrating the theoretical knowledge of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak into a cohesive analytical framework that demonstrated how the novel challenged institutional racism not only in its content but also in its narrative structure. Considering the facts revealed through close reading and interpretive analysis, the study demonstrates that Whitehead employs formal strategies, including fragmentation, minimalism, deferred revelation, and narrative silence, as literary expressions of ideological resistance. The main research question was also appropriately addressed: *The Nickel Boys* can be seen as a representation of the eternal impact of systemic violence on the Black psyche and voice because it reflects the mechanism of colonial abuse in its very structure and characters as well. This way, the novel translates into both a historical account and an official protest.

Contributions

This study makes three crucial contributions to literary scholarship. First, it presents an original synthesis of theory through the integration of writings by Fanon, Bhabha, and Spivak to study a modern American novel (a configuration that was not explored in *The Nickel Boys*). Second, it stretches the scope of the postcolonial

theory out of the traditional geographies and utilises it to describe the internal colonialism and institutional racism in the United States. Third, the article contributes to methodological knowledge by demonstrating how a formalist approach to studying literary works, utilising silence, fragmentation, and postponed identity, can be an effective instrument in revealing the ideological aspects of narrative. Placing aesthetics in dialogue with theory, this study resituates *The Nickel Boys* as a novel that is not only about injustice, but also one that resists power through its structure, voice, and absence.

Recommendations for Future Research

This framework may be refined in future research by generalising it to other contemporary African-American novels about institutionalised violence, which could be discussed using similar postcolonial frameworks, such as Jesmyn Ward's "Sing, Unburied, Sing" or Bryan Washington's "Memorial." Comparative approaches may also seek intersections between African American trauma narratives and Global South postcolonial literatures since those systems of carcerality and epistemic erasure collide there. Moreover, empirical studies on the reception of readers may demonstrate the methods by which various audiences read into the narrative inhibition and fragmentation of identity in trauma fiction. Lastly, this framework may be applicable in inter-disciplinary settings, e.g., critical media studies or prison literature, in which the aesthetics of erasure persists in its defiance of systemic forgetting

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