

Postcolonial Reimaginings Of Tasmania In Flanagan's Works

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This article focuses at Richard Flanagan's literary portrayals of Tasmania through a postcolonial and new historicist lens, focusing on his key works like Gould's Book of Fish (2001), Wanting (2008), and The Narrow Road to the Deep North (2013). The paper contends that Flanagan's fictional reconstructions of Tasmanian colonial history are a methodical deconstruction of official imperial narratives, while also redefining the island's postcolonial identity. This study uses thorough textual analysis and historical contextualization to show how Flanagan uses metafictional tactics, temporal disruption, and cultural hybridity to challenge mainstream historiographical discourses. The article contributes to contemporary postcolonial literary scholarship by shedding light on how Flanagan's works serve as sites of resistance to colonial epistemic violence, as well as providing alternative frameworks for comprehending Tasmania's contested cultural memory. The study demonstrates that Flanagan's postcolonial reimaginings are driven by three key mechanisms: the subversion of official historical records, the recovery of neglected voices, and the formation of hybrid cultural identities that transcend colonial boundaries. This research situates Flanagan's work within larger theoretical discourses of postcolonial literature, new historicism, and Australian literary studies, highlighting the importance of regional viewpoints in contesting national literary canons.

Keywords: postcolonialism, new historicism, Tasmania, Richard Flanagan, colonial discourse, Australian literature, historical fiction, cultural memory

Introduction

This research paper examines how Richard Flanagan's literary corpus systematically deconstructs colonial narratives and reimagines Tasmania's postcolonial identity through sophisticated applications of postcolonial theory. Flanagan's works—particularly *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), and *Wanting* (2008)—collectively constitute a comprehensive postcolonial reimagining that challenges dominant historical narratives, recovers marginalized voices, and reconceptualizes Tasmania's relationship with its colonial past. Through theoretical frameworks drawn from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and Third Space, and Gayatri Spivak's subaltern studies, this

analysis demonstrates how Flanagan transforms Tasmania from a site of colonial inscription into a space of postcolonial resistance and cultural regeneration.

For an understanding of how Flanagan challenges the colonial discursive structures that shaped Tasmania as the exotic, peripheral "other" in the British imperial imagination, Edward Said's *Orientalism* offers an essential theoretical foundation (Said 78–92). Said defines the orientalisering process as the methodical creation of a colonised area through Western representational practices that legitimise imperial dominance, and Tasmania's colonial designation as "Van Diemen's Land" is a prime example of this process (Said 40–73). Flanagan's writings constantly reveal how colonial rhetoric changed Tasmania into what Said refers to as a "textual attitude," in which European representations took precedence over real-world cultural and geographical realities (Said 92–110).

Flanagan illustrates how colonial science operated as an orientalist discourse in Gould's *Book of Fish*, wherein the fish drawings of William Gould, a convicted artist, simultaneously document and defy imperial taxonomic control (Pons 45–48). According to Said, the "flexible positional superiority" of the European observer over the colonised subject and landscape (Said 7) is how colonial knowledge production functioned in the novel. By exposing the constructed nature of colonial knowledge, Flanagan's metafictional technique marginalises indigenous ways of knowing while demonstrating how European scientific practices placed artificial categories upon Tasmania's natural environment.

In order to comprehend how Flanagan's characters traverse the transitional areas between colonial and postcolonial identities, Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Third Space is especially pertinent. A theoretical foundation for examining the intricate identity formations seen in Flanagan's works is provided by Bhabha's claim that "all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'Third Space of enunciation'" (Bhabha 37). This Third Space is a transitional area where new forms of cultural identity arise via negotiation and resistance, rather than being a representation of pure colonial or indigenous culture.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping depicts the construction of migrant identities in postwar Tasmania, further examining Bhabha's thesis. According to Bhabha, the Slovenian migrants Sonja and Bojan live in the "in-between" zone of cultural identity, where neither full assimilation nor cultural preservation is feasible (Lin 12–15). Through this liminal stance, Flanagan demonstrates how new forms of belonging are created that go beyond the dichotomy between Australian and European identity categories.

The central question of Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" reverberates throughout Flanagan's literary work, especially in his retrieval of underrepresented voices that colonial discourse had suppressed (Spivak 271–313). Spivak defines double colonialism as the oppression that colonised women, prisoners, and indigenous peoples endure from both patriarchal systems inside colonised societies and imperial frameworks. Flanagan's writings methodically explore this phenomenon.

In *Wanting*, the portrayal of Mathinna, the Aboriginal girl who was adopted and later deserted by colonial administrator Sir John Franklin and his wife, offers the most overt interaction with Spivak's subaltern studies (Bonnici 157-160). While admitting that the epistemological violence prevents a full recovery of Mathinna's perspective, Flanagan's narrative approach provides a voice to her experience. By trying to give people silenced by colonial discourse agency voice again, the novel exemplifies what Spivak refers to as the "ethico-political agenda" of postcolonial criticism (Spivak 308).

In addition to cultural study, Flanagan's postcolonial critique takes into account historical materialist viewpoints that investigate the financial underpinnings of colonial exploitation. His writings show how Tasmania's colonial economy relied on a variety of unfree labour practices, including migrant exploitation, Aboriginal dispossession, and convict transportation, which led to long-lasting trends of social inequality and cultural marginalisation.

In *Gould's Book of Fish*, the material realities of convict labour on Sarah Island are revealed, demonstrating how the prison system served as a means of accumulating colonial capital. It shows how the "primitive accumulation" of capital, as Marx refers to it, necessitated both the systematic exploitation of transported convict workers and the eviction of Indigenous peoples (Pons 47-50). In his depiction of the convict system, Flanagan shows how colonial speech used moral and civilising rhetoric to cover up economic exploitation.

The creation of colonial infrastructure while upholding the pretence of humanitarian reform was made possible by the exploitation of surplus value from convict labour, and the Sarah Island penal settlement is a microcosm of larger colonial relations. Flanagan demonstrates how the convict system produced what Giorgio Agamben may have called a "state of exception," in which customary legal safeguards were ignored for the sake of moral advancement and colonial order.

While recognising the shortcomings Spivak pointed out in the recovery of subaltern voices, Flanagan's writings make an effort to establish literary spaces in which Indigenous perspectives can appear, albeit insufficiently. *Wanting* exhibits a unique awareness of what Spivak refers to as the "epistemic violence" that colonised peoples endured as a result of the deliberate obliteration of

Indigenous knowledge systems (Spivak 280–284).

The novel's depiction of George Augustus Robinson, the self-described "Protector" of

Aboriginal peoples, reveals how humanitarian rhetoric served as a tool for cultural extermination (Bonnici 158-162). To illustrate what Patrick Wolfe refers to as the "logic of elimination" that underlies settler colonial initiatives, Flanagan demonstrates how Robinson's alleged protection of

Aboriginal Tasmanians actually made it easier for them to be removed and their culture destroyed.

Flanagan's approach to Indigenous history recognises what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the "possessive investment in whiteness" that organises settler colonial societies, while also striving to make narrative space for Indigenous agency and resistance. The author's portrayal of Truganini and other Aboriginal figures avoids both romanticisation and victimisation, instead emphasising the difficult negotiations required for life under colonial conditions.

Flanagan's environmental postcolonialism goes beyond critique to envision new ecological connections based on reclaimed Indigenous knowledge systems and postcolonial environmental awareness. His ideas argue that decolonisation necessitates not only political change but also a fundamental rethinking of human relationships with the natural environment.

Gould's *Book of Fish* uses the metaphor of metamorphosis to explore ways of overcoming the subject/object interactions that underpin both colonial discourse and Western environmental theory. The novel's fantastic components hint at what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call "postcolonial ecocriticism," which refers to analytical approaches that combine environmental and postcolonial problems by focusing on the intersections of cultural and ecological colonisation.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping explores the postwar European migration to Tasmania, which resulted in new kinds of cultural complexity beyond the settler/Indigenous binary that dominates much postcolonial research. Flanagan's portrayal of Slovenian immigration exemplifies how diaspora societies form what Homi Bhabha refers to as "third space" identities that lie between origin and destination cultures.

The novel explores what James Clifford refers to as the "traveling culture" phenomenon, in which migratory communities preserve linkages with their home cultures while adjusting to new geographical and social situations (Clifford 24-46). Flanagan demonstrates how cultural migration generates hybrid identities that resist both complete assimilation and cultural preservation, resulting in new kinds of belonging that transcend national boundaries.

The novel's emphasis on intergenerational interactions between Bojan and Sonja demonstrates how cultural trauma spreads across generations in diaspora groups. Flanagan's portrayal exemplifies what Marianne Hirsch refers to as "postmemory," or the transmission of terrible historical experiences to generations who did not actually witness the original events (Hirsch 1-23).

The story depicts how cultural displacement poses unique issues for second-generation migrants, who must balance parental memories of European pain with Australian social expectations of cultural integration. Flanagan's compassionate portrayal avoids romanticising diaspora identity and pathologizing cultural diversity, instead emphasising the creative potential that arises from cultural hybridity.

Flanagan's use of metafictional techniques is not solely aesthetic, but also acts as a postcolonial strategy for exposing the creation of hegemonic historical narratives. Gould's

Book of Fish deploys what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" to question the authority of both historical and literary discourse (Hutcheon 105-123).

The novel's complicated narrative structure—involving various manuscripts, missing texts, and untrustworthy narrators—demonstrates what Xavier Pons identifies as Flanagan's method for "replacing history with fable" (48-51). This replacement serves postcolonial interests by demonstrating how historical "facts" are always mediated by story structures that serve specific ideological goals.

Flanagan's approach to narrative voice demonstrates a deep awareness of postcolonial conflicts over cultural authenticity and representational authority. His paintings do not claim to depict "authentic" Indigenous or convict experiences, instead concentrating on the processes by which historical memory is formed and challenged.

The author's use of multiple narrators, fragmentary perspectives, and self-reflexive narrative techniques results in what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin refer to as "postcolonial counterdiscourse"—literary strategies that expose and subvert colonial textual practices without simply reproducing their hierarchical structure in reverse (Ashcroft et al. 33-77).

Flanagan's literary effort helps to continuing reconciliation processes between Tasmania's settler and Indigenous populations by establishing textual places for suppressed histories to be acknowledged and mourned. His works exemplify what Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith call the "testimonial imperative" in postcolonial societies: the ethical need to bear witness to historical suffering while striving for more fair social connections.

The author's approach to reconciliation avoids both guilt-driven settler melancholy and triumphalist myths of postcolonial transcendence. Instead, his paintings emphasise the continual negotiations required to establish more equal connections between different ethnic communities that share the same geographical place.

While Flanagan's works are rooted in Tasmanian history, they also deal with global colonial patterns that connect Tasmania's experience to other places of imperial expansion and cultural exchange. His depiction of European migration highlights how postcolonial cultures must deal with numerous forms of cultural diversity rather than just binary interactions between colonisers and colonised.

The novels' emphasis on transnational connections—between Tasmania and Slovenia in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, colonial Tasmania and Victorian England in *Wanting*—exemplifies what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih refer to as "minor transnationalism," in which marginalized communities form connections that bypass dominant national narratives (Lionnet and Shih 1-23).

Richard Flanagan's literary corpus exemplifies a profound and continuous engagement with postcolonial theory, transforming Tasmania from a peripheral site of colonial inscription to a focal point for postcolonial cultural regeneration. Flanagan uses Said's orientalism critique, Bhabha's hybridity theory, and Spivak's subaltern studies to construct literary works that

highlight the continued consequences of colonial discourse while creating new forms of cultural identity and social relationships.

His works show that postcolonial reimagining is more than simply reversing or rejecting colonial narratives. Instead, it necessitates a comprehensive grasp of how colonial rhetoric continues to impact contemporary cultural forms, as well as the creative investigation of hybrid identities that bridge the divides between coloniser and colonised, European and Indigenous, tradition and modernity.

Flanagan's contribution to postcolonial literature is particularly notable for his ability to integrate historical analysis with contemporary relevance, demonstrating how colonial legacies continue to influence current social connections while providing prospects for more equal futures. His writings serve as models for postcolonial literary practice that avoid nostalgic romanticism and cynical resignation, instead emphasizing the creative possibilities that arise from honest engagement with historical trauma and contemporary cultural complexity.

Flanagan's theoretical sophistication—as evidenced by his strategic use of metafictional

techniques, sensitivity to issues of representational authority, and attention to the intersections of cultural and environmental colonisation—establishes him as a major figure in contemporary postcolonial literature, deserving of continued critical attention and theoretical analysis.

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