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2026**RESEARCH ARTICLE****VIOLENCE, COLONIAL STRUCTURE, AND THE PARADOX OF
LIBERATION: RE-READING FANON'S THEORY OF DECOLONIZATION****Anjali***Assistant Professor (Guest), Aryabhata College, Delhi University.*Email: vatsanjali2@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13308>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Frantz Fanon's reflections on violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* have frequently been reduced either to a dangerous glorification of brutality or to an ethically indefensible endorsement of armed struggle. Such readings flatten the conceptual rigor of Fanon's intervention and obscure the historical specificity from which it emerges. This paper argues that Fanon theorizes violence neither as a moral prescription nor as an abstract revolutionary ideal, but as a structural and psychic necessity produced by the conditions of settler colonialism, particularly in the matter of colonial Algeria. By situating Fanon's analysis within the material and affective realities of colonial rule, the article examines how decolonizing violence functions as a disruptive rupture that dismantles colonial subjectivity and enables what Fanon terms a "radical mutation" of consciousness. At the same time, it foregrounds Fanon's sustained attention to the dangers inherent in revolutionary violence, including the paradoxical risk that the oppressed may temporarily reproduce the positional logic of the oppressor. Reading Fanon against both liberal critiques of political violence and romanticized revolutionary narratives, the article reasserts the theoretical complexity of his work and its continued relevance for contemporary debates on decolonization, power, and liberation.

Keywords: *Decolonization, Violence, Algeria, Radical Mutation, Postcolonial Theory, National Bourgeoisie, Manichean Structure.*

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INTRODUCTION

Few figures in postcolonial thought provoke as much unease as Frantz Fanon, particularly in relation to his sustained engagement with violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Written during the Algerian War of Independence, Fanon's text emerges from a colonial situation marked by military occupation, racial segregation, and systematic dehumanization. Yet despite the specificity of this context, Fanon's reflections on violence have often been abstracted from their historical and structural conditions, leading to interpretations that portray him either as an uncritical advocate of revolutionary bloodshed or as a theorist whose work must be ethically disavowed.

This article argues that such readings fundamentally misapprehend Fanon's projects. Fanon does not advance violence as a normative ideal or ethical good; rather, he diagnoses colonialism itself as an intrinsically violent structure that organizes political authority, social relations, and psychic life. Within this framework, violence appears not as a freely chosen tactic of resistance but as a historically imposed necessity produced by a colonial order that forecloses recognition, reciprocity, and reform. Decolonization, for Fanon, cannot be a negotiated transition or moral appeal to the colonizer's conscience. It is instead a total rupture that dismantles a Manichean world sustained through force.

By foregrounding the Algerian colonial context that shaped Fanon's thinking, this article examines three interconnected dimensions of his theory of violence. First, it considers violence as the foundational structure of colonial rule rather than its

accidental excess. Second, it analyzes Fanon's account of violence as a psychic and collective process through which the colonized subject undergoes a radical transformation of consciousness. Third, it addresses the tension at the heart of Fanon's argument: the risk that decolonizing violence may reproduce the relational logic of domination, positioning the formerly oppressed within the structural role of the oppressor. Taken together, these dimensions reveal Fanon as a theorist deeply attuned to both the necessity and the danger of violence under colonial conditions.

SITUATING FANON: VIOLENCE, POWER, AND DECOLONIZATION IN POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Frantz Fanon's reflections on violence have generated a wide and often polarized body of critical response within postcolonial theory, political philosophy, and ethical discourse. Since the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon has been alternately condemned as an apologist for brutality, celebrated as a prophet of revolutionary liberation, or cautiously rehabilitated as a theorist whose claims must be carefully delimited. These divergent readings reveal less about inconsistency in Fanon's work than about the conceptual frameworks through which violence is evaluated. To understand Fanon's theory of decolonizing violence, it is therefore necessary to situate it within the broader theoretical debates on violence, power, and political legitimacy.

One dominant strand of interpretation approaches Fanon through a liberal-humanist lens that treats violence as a moral aberration fundamentally opposed to political order. From this perspective, Fanon's insistence on the necessity of



violence appears ethically indefensible. Hannah Arendt's influential distinction between power and violence has often served as the conceptual foundation for this critique. In *On Violence* (1970), Arendt argues that violence is instrumental, destructive, and ultimately incapable of producing genuine political power, which she associates instead with collective consent and legitimacy. Read through this framework, Fanon's endorsement of revolutionary violence is dismissed as both politically counter-productive and morally regressive.

However, such critiques rely on assumptions that Fanon explicitly rejects. Arendt's separation of power from violence presupposed a political world in which legitimacy, recognition, and institutional mediation remain accessible. Fanon's intervention, by contrast, emerges from a colonial situation in which these conditions are structurally foreclosed. Colonialism, as Fanon theorizes it, does not merely govern through violence; it constitutes a world in which violence is the primary mode of political communication. To judge Fanon's claims by standards derived from non-colonial political orders is therefore to misrecognize the object of his analysis. Rather than proposing violence as an ethical ideal, Fanon seeks to render intelligible the conditions under which violence becomes the only available means of historical rupture.

A second strand of interpretation moves in the opposite direction, romanticizing Fanon as a theorist of redemptive violence. Within certain revolutionary and nationalist readings, Fanon's work is appropriated as a celebration of armed struggle and militant masculinity, emphasizing the purifying and regenerative dimensions of violence while

downplaying its ambivalence. In these accounts, violence appears as an almost mythic force capable of resolving colonial domination through sheer intensity. Such readings often detach Fanon's language of catharsis and rebirth from the careful structural analysis that underpins it, transforming his work into a rhetoric of heroic revolt.

This romanticization is equally reductive. Fanon repeatedly cautions against the dangers of revolutionary violence, particularly its potential to turn or ossify into authoritarianism or to be appropriated by postcolonial elites. His sustained critique of the national bourgeoisie and his attention to the psychological trauma produced by prolonged violence complicate and attempt to read his work as a simple endorsement of armed struggle. Violence, for Fanon, is never sufficient in itself; it is a moment within a broader process of decolonization that remains fragile and incomplete.

More recent scholarship has sought to move beyond these polarized positions by situating Fanon's theory of violence within a structural and psycho-political framework. Thinkers such as Lewis Gordon and Nigel Gibson emphasize Fanon's engagement with phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and lived experience, foregrounding colonialism as a system that produces specific forms of subjectivity. From this perspective, violence is understood not primarily as a tactic or normal choice, but as a response to ontological negation. The colonized subject is not simply oppressed in a material sense; rather he is rendered invisible, disposable, and non-human within the colonial order. Violence thus emerges as a means of reclaiming existence itself.



This structural reading clarifies why Fanon places such emphasis on the psychic dimensions of decolonization. Colonial domination succeeds not only by exploiting labor or expropriating land, but by producing a colonized subject who internalizes inferiority and fear. The dismantling of colonial rule thereof requires more than institutional change; it demands a transformation of consciousness. Violence, in this context, functions as a disruptive force that breaks the colonized subject's identification with his imposed status and enables what Fanon terms a "radical mutation." This mutation is not a guarantee of ethical renewal, but a condition of possibility for political agency.

At the same time, later postcolonial theorists have extended Fanon's concerns by examining the persistence of violence beyond formal decolonization. Achille Mbembe's analysis of the *Postcolony*, for instance, highlights how coercive power and domination often reappear within postcolonial states in new forms. While Mbembe's framework differs from Fanon's revolutionary horizon, it underscores the enduring relevance of Fanon's warnings regarding the reproduction of violence and hierarchy after independence. Fanon's anxiety that the oppressed may come to occupy the position of the oppressor anticipates these later critiques, revealing his acute awareness of the fragility of liberation.

Positioned within these debates, the present analysis aligns with structural and psycho-political readings of Fanon while resisting both liberal dismissal and revolutionary romanticism. It argues that Fanon's theory of violence cannot be reduced to a normative defense or condemnation. Instead,

Fanon offers a diagnosis of colonialism as a violent totality that renders violence both intelligible and, at times, unavoidable. By situating Fanon's reflections within the specific conditions of colonial Algeria, this paper seeks to demonstrate how his theory of violence emerges not as an abstract revolutionary doctrine, but as a response to a world in which domination is already inscribed into the fabric of social reality.

COLONIAL ALGERIA AND VIOLENCE AS STRUCTURE

Frantz Fanon's theory of violence must be understood in relation to the specific colonial formation from which it emerges: French settler colonialism in Algeria. Unlike extractive colonial regimes that governed from a distance, Algeria functioned as a settler colony in which European presence was permanent, spatially entrenched, and violently defended. This distinction is crucial, as Fanon's insistence on the necessity of violence is inseparable from a colonial order that left no meaningful space for reform, negotiation or mutual recognition. In Algeria, colonial domination was not an episodic exercise of force but the foundational condition of social and political life.

The settler-colonial structure of Algeria produced a radically divided world, a division Fanon famously characterizes as Manichaean. This division was not merely ideological or symbolic; it was materially instantiated in space, law, and everyday experience. European quarters were marked by abundance, mobility, and security, while native zones were overcrowded, under-resourced, and subject to constant surveillance. Colonial law did not function as a neutral arbiter but as an instrument designed to preserve this hierarchy. Legal equality was



structurally impossible, as the colonized were positioned outside the moral and political community that law was meant to protect.

Within this framework, violence operated as the primary mechanism through which colonial order was maintained. Police repression, military patrols, and collective punishment were not responses to disorder but techniques of governance. The colonial state's authority rested not on consent but on its capacity to inflict harm. Fanon insists that colonialism reveals itself most truthfully in moments when it abandons the pretense of civility and exposes its reliance on brute force. Yet for the colonized, such moments were not exceptional; they constituted the everyday reality of life under occupation.

Importantly, Fanon extends the concept of violence beyond physical coercion to encompass the structural and symbolic forms through which domination is reproduced. Racial classification, cultural denigration, and epistemic exclusion function as modes of violence that shape how the colonized subject understands himself and his place in the world. The colonizer's discourse presents the native as backward, irrational, and dangerous, thereby justifying continued repression. Over time, these representations are internalized, producing what Fanon describes as a colonized psyche marked by inferiority and self-doubt. Violence thus operates not only on bodies but on consciousness itself.

Fear occupies a central place in this system. Colonial rule depends upon the cultivation of fear as a stabilizing effect, ensuring that resistance appears both futile and suicidal. The omnipresence of armed force, the arbitrariness of punishment, and the normalization of humiliation all contribute to a

climate in which the colonized subject comes to regulate his own behavior. Fanon's analysis here anticipates later theories of biopolitical control, but his emphasis remains on the lived experience of domination. Fear is not simply imposed from above; it is internalized, becoming a constitutive element of subjectivity under colonial rule.

This internalization of violence has profound consequences for the possibility of political transformation. Because colonial domination is sustained as much as psychic submission as by physical force, liberation cannot be achieved through institutional reform alone. Fanon rejects gradualist or reformist approaches that imagine decolonization as a peaceful transition of power within existing frameworks. Such approaches fail to recognize that colonial institutions are themselves products of violence, designed to exclude the colonized from meaningful participation. To appeal to colonial law or morality is therefore to appeal to a system structurally incapable of recognizing the humanity of the colonized.

It is in this context that Fanon's insistence on violence as a necessary rupture becomes intelligible. Decolonization, as Fanon repeatedly emphasizes, is a total transformation that replaces one order with another. This transformation cannot occur within the coordinates of the colonial world, as those coordinates are defined by inequality and exclusion. Violence, in Fanon's analysis, functions as the means through which the colonized break the spatial, legal and psychological boundaries imposed upon them. It is not violence per se that is emancipatory, but the rupture it produces in a world otherwise closed to change.



At the same time, Fanon is careful to distinguish decolonizing violence from indiscriminate destruction. His analysis is grounded in the recognition that colonial violence has already saturated social reality, leaving little room for non-violent forms of resistance to achieve structural change. Non-violence, when invoked within such a context, risks functioning as a demand for submission rather than an ethical alternative. Fanon's critique is thus directed less at non-violence as a moral principle than at its deployment as a political strategy within conditions of extreme asymmetry.

By situating violence at the structural core of colonial Algeria, Fanon reframes the question of legitimacy. The colonizer's claim to order is exposed as a function of force, while the colonized's recourse to violence emerges as a response to systematic exclusion. This reversal destabilizes conventional moral hierarchies, compelling a rethinking of political responsibility under conditions of domination. Fanon does not deny the destructiveness of violence; rather, he insists that the greater violence lies in the maintenance of a system that negates human existence on a daily basis.

Understanding colonial Algeria as a world structured by violence is therefore essential to grasping Fanon's broader theory of decolonization. Violence is not introduced into an otherwise peaceful order by the colonized; it is uncovered as the hidden foundation of colonial rule. Decolonization, in Fanon's account, begins when this foundation is exposed and confronted, opening the possibility—however fragile—of a new social and political reality.

Psychic Violence, Collective Catharsis, and Radical Mutation

If colonial domination in Algeria operates as a total structure sustained through force, Fanon insists that its most enduring effects are psychic rather than merely physical. Violence, in this sense, does not simply wound bodies or destroy infrastructure; it penetrates consciousness, reorganizing how the colonized subject perceives himself, other, and the world. Fanon's theory of decolonizing violence is thus inseparable from his analysis of subjectivity, fear, and internalized inferiority. To understand why violence appears necessary in Fanon's framework, it is essential to examine its role in dismantling what colonialism has produced at the level of the psyche.

Fanon's earlier work in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) provides the conceptual foundation for this analysis. There, he demonstrates how colonial racism produces what he terms an "epidermalization" of inferiority, whereby racial hierarchy is inscribed onto the body and experienced as natural. The colonized subject does not merely encounter oppression externally; he comes to inhabit it internally, measuring himself against norms that render him deficient. This internalization is not an accidental byproduct of colonial rule but one of its most effective technologies. A subject who doubts his own worth is less likely to resist domination, and more likely to accept subordination as inevitable.

Fear plays a crucial role in sustaining this psychic order. Under colonial conditions, fear is not episodic but ambient, shaping the horizon of possibility itself. The constant presence of armed authority, the arbitrariness of punishment, and the normalization of humiliation produce a condition in which resistance



appears not only dangerous but unthinkable. Fanon emphasizes that colonial violence trains the colonized subject to anticipate repression even in the absence of direct force. Fear thus becomes internalized as a mode of self-regulation, ensuring the reproduction of domination without continuous coercion.

Within this context, Fanon conceptualizes violence as a force capable of disrupting the psychic economy of colonialism. Decolonizing violence functions not merely as a means of confronting the colonizer, but as a process through which the colonized subject reclaims agency and presence. Participation in revolutionary struggle enables the colonized to experience himself as an active subject rather than a passive object of history. This transformation is not symbolic; it is lived and embodied. Through struggle, fear is confronted and, crucially, overcome.

Fanon describes this process as a form of collective catharsis. Unlike individual therapeutic release, collective catharsis operates at the level of shared experience, dissolving isolation and restoring communal bonds fractured by colonial rule. Violence, in this sense, becomes a social act that reconstitutes the colonized population as a political collective. The act of resistance affirms the humanity of the colonized precisely because it defies the colonial order's insistence on their disposability. In confronting the colonizer, the colonized subject discovers that the colonizer's power is neither absolute nor metaphysical, but contingent and vulnerable.

This realization produces what Fanon famously terms a "radical mutation" of consciousness. The

colonized subject undergoes a fundamental shift in how he understands himself and the world. Hierarchies that once appeared natural are revealed as constructed, and the illusion of colonial omnipotence collapses. Importantly, this mutation is not reducible to ideological conversion or political education. It is experiential, rooted in the embodied reality of struggle. Fanon's emphasis on violence here reflects his skepticism towards purely discursive forms of liberation that leave underlying power relations intact.

At the same time, Fanon remains acutely aware of the psychological costs associated with violence. He does not deny that revolutionary struggle produces trauma, nor does he romanticize the suffering it entails. His clinical work with victims of war informs his recognition that violence leaves lasting psychic scars, even when undertaken in the name of liberation. This awareness complicates any attempt to read Fanon as celebrating violence for its own sake. Violence, in his account, is simultaneously transformative and damaging—a paradox that resists moral simplification.

Crucially, Fanon insists that the alternative to decolonizing violence is not peaceful coexistence, but the continuation of colonial violence in another form. To demand non-violence from the colonized without dismantling the structures that produce domination is, in Fanon's view, to demand submission. Non-violence, when detached from structural change, risks functioning as a disciplinary ideal that preserves colonial hierarchies under the guise of moral superiority. Fanon's critique is thus directed less at ethical commitments than at political strategies that ignore asymmetry of power.



The psychic dimension of violence also helps explain Fanon's insistence on the totality of decolonization because colonial domination reshapes subjectivity itself and partial reforms or symbolic gestures cannot undo its effects. Decolonization must transform not only political institutions but the affective and perceptual world of the colonized. Violence, as a disruptive force, accelerates this transformation by breaking the colonized subject's identification with imposed inferiority. It enables the emergence of a new political imagination in which liberation becomes conceivable.

Yet Fanon does not regard this mutation as permanent or self-sustaining. The dismantling of colonial subjectivity does not automatically result in the creation of a just postcolonial order. Without sustained political organization and ethical vigilance, the energies released through violence can be redirected towards new forms of domination. Fanon's later reflections on nationalism and post-independence disillusionment underscore his recognition that psychic liberation remains fragile, vulnerable to co-optation by elites and institutions that replicate colonial patterns of authority.

In this sense, Fanon's theory of psychic violence occupies an uneasy position between necessity and caution. Violence appears as the catalyst for transformation, but not its guarantor. The radical mutation of consciousness opens the possibility of liberation, but does not secure its outcome. Fanon's refusal to resolve this tension is central to the enduring power of his work. Rather than offering a programmatic blueprint for revolution, he exposes the psychic stakes of decolonization and the risks

inherent in any attempt to dismantle a violent order through violent means.

Understanding violence as a psychic and collective process thus deepens Fanon's broader critique of colonialism. It reveals why decolonization cannot be reduced to constitutional reforms or symbolic recognition, and why liberation must confront fear, inferiority, and internalized domination at their roots. Violence, in Fanon's framework, is not a solution to colonialism but a response forced into being by a world structured against the humanity of the colonized. It is this tragic necessity, rather than any glorification of brutality, that defines Fanon's theory of decolonizing violence.

CONCLUSION

A careful re-reading of Fanon's theory of violence reveals a thinker far more ambivalent and theoretically rigorous than his critics often acknowledge. Violence, in Fanon's work, is neither exalted nor abstractly condemned; it is rendered intelligible as a response to a world already structured through domination and dehumanization. By framing violence as a structural and psychic necessity rather than a moral ideal, Fanon challenges liberal frameworks that isolate acts of resistance from the conditions that produce them.

Simultaneously, Fanon's sustained attention to the dangers of revolutionary violence complicates any attempt to read his work as a simple endorsement of armed struggle. His reflections on post-independence disillusionment, authoritarianism, and psychic injury underscore a profound awareness of violence's enduring costs. The figure of the oppressed who risks occupying the position of the



oppressor functions not as a contradiction within Fanon's thought, but as its most sobering insight: decolonization is a fragile and unfinished process, vulnerable to the re-emergence of domination even in the moment of liberation.

In an era marked by renewed struggles over colonial memory, structural inequality, and political resistance, Fanon's work remains unsettling precisely because it refuses easy resolutions. To engage with Fanon seriously is not to endorse violence uncritically, but to confront the conditions under which violence becomes imaginable and, at times, unavoidable. Such an engagement remains indispensable for postcolonial theory and for any critical examination of power and liberation in the modern world.

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