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The Confluence of Colonial Memory and History in the Novel *Wanting By* Richard Flanagan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conflicted relationship between colonial memory and historical representation in the light of Tasmania's harrowing colonial past in the novel Wanting. Richard Flanagan attempts to explore the moral ambiguity and cultural cleansing perpetrated by colonialism through the heart-wrenching tale of Mathinna, a Tasmanian girl and fictionalised viewpoints of historical figures like Sir John Franklin, Lady Jane Franklin and Charles Dickens. The novel revisits the popular historical narratives and focuses on psychological traumas subjected to both the colonists and the colonised with a masterful blend of fact and fiction in a nonlinear narrative. The paper explores Flanagan's attempt to navigate the moral conundrum of representing historical pain, shedding light on important themes such as guilt, responsibility and moral ambiguity. Additionally, the paper places Wanting within a wider context of postcolonial studies, echoing the aftermath of understanding the legacy of colonialism in contemporary literature. Moreover, the paper attempts to highlight the power of narrative to reinvent history, conserve colonial memory and magnify the voices of the marginalised

to reveal the persistent effects of the colonial past on personal and collective identities

Introduction:

"The pleasure of remembering had been taken from me because there was no longer anyone to remember with. It felt like losing your co-rememberer meant losing the memory itself, as if the things we'd done were less real and important than they had been hours before." (Green 165)

The novel *Wanting* set in the mid-nineteenth century, tells the harrowing tale of Tasmania, formerly known as Van Diemen's Land as a colony through the intertwined lives of fictional and actual historical figures. The novel spins together two lines of stories: one is about Mathinna, a native aboriginal girl adopted by Explorer and British governor Sir John Franklin and Lady Franklin; the other is about the renowned writer Charles Dickens in his literary prime but his turbulent life at domestic level and his budding romance with Ellen Ternan. "It was 1839. The first photograph of a man was taken, Abd al-Qadir declared a jihad against the French, and Charles Dickens was rising to greater fame with the novel called Oliver Twist. It was, thought the protector as he closed the Ledger after another postmortem report and return to preparing notes for his pneumatics lecture, inexplicable." (Flanagan 3) Flanagan places the novel and its setting amid the time and the world to give us a cultural insight into things happening worldwide and in contrast to the events taking place at Van Diemen's Land. He not only reflects on the impact of colonialism on the oppressed and dominated Aboriginals but also on the settlers who ended up on the island and who are also part of a societal class hierarchy, usually the flagellators, cooks, clerks, etc., in other words, they are at the bottom of the English social order, and they too are marked by moral and ethical conflicts of life in a colony. In addition to being a historical account, the book delves deeply into the human mind, particularly as it relates to themes of memory, desire, and belonging.

Colonial memory is remembering the experience of colonial exploitation by the colonised and the coloniser. It is about the loss, trauma and resistance of Aboriginal people as well as the dilemma, conflict and guilt felt by the colonisers who witnessed or participated in the colonial violence. As the aftermath of colonial history, Australia grapples with a complex legacy where the voices of the indigenous were erased and the incongruity of the settlers' role in history, which intertwines their identity, be it personal or collective. "We didn't come here for society and civilisation. We came here for What everyone who is not a convict comes here for: money." (Flanagan 148) The writer poses pertinent questions about an

individual's role in upholding or questioning the colonial narrative and demands to reflect on past injustices.

Postcolonial literature serves as a tool to conserve and question colonial memory, offering insights that go beyond the records in history. *Wanting* examines the colonial past in a nuanced way, focusing on views and experiences which are often omitted and distorted in the official historical account. The trauma and moral ambiguity prevailing in colonial accounts are examined in such a way that the author highlights historical representation's moral ramifications, particularly in light of Indigenous experience. *Wanting* aligns with other texts on postcolonial studies that confront and reconstruct history to acknowledge the atrocities of past and to develop an understanding of the concurrent complex impact of colonialism. Colonial memory consists of the ways in which colonial past and experiences are remembered, internalised, and transmitted within postcolonial societies. It entails the collective and individual memories that grapple with the trauma, violence, and cultural displacement faced by Indigenous populations, as well as the moral promiscuity and complexity of the identities of settlers.

"The Jewish people, Yerushalmi claims, has preoccupied itself with preserving the collective memory since time immemorial; this appears to be its prime directive: to remember and to be remembered. In fact, the collective identity is linked to this duty of remembering, of stopping time from erasing the details of the past." (Stavans 79) In the novel *Wanting*, the colonial memory works on two levels: Personal memories as embodied by Mathinna, Lady Jane, Dickens and John Franklin. The collective memory can be observed via the lasting experience and legacy of the colonial life of Tasmania. These layers of memory show how narratives of colonialism persist within cultural consciousness, affecting both the colonised and the colonisers beyond the colonial era. This analysis draws on *postcolonial theory*, which is the critical academic study of the cultural, political and economic consequences of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonised people and their lands. (Wikipedia, 2024).

Scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak have stressed how colonialism imposes power structures and cultural narratives that subdue or erase Indigenous histories. In *Wanting*, Flanagan reclaims and reimagines colonial memory by giving voice to Mathinna and the other aboriginal characters and reinventing historical figures who typically dominate colonial narratives. Through this, Flanagan challenges the validity of colonial narratives and reiterates the significance of Indigenous voices and views seeking a place in the historical record. In addition to this, trauma theory

features prominently in the text of Flanagan, wherein the psychological impacts of colonial violence and culture erasure could be located via Mathinna and other Aboriginal characters. The postcolonial aspect of the novel is quite extensive, beginning from questions such as identity, belongingness, and the question of us and them or the idea of the 'Other', to resilience, resistance and attempts to Oppose violently. As the novel begins, we are introduced to the time and a subtle hint of what has aspired so far. "The war had ended as wars sometimes do, unexpectedly." (Flanagan 1) The line sounds ominous at the onset of the given context, the war ending suggests that someone has won the war and the other has lost it. In this case, it is the colonisers who had won and once feared Aboriginal people of the tribe of Van Diemen's Land were captured and brought to "civilisation". The descriptions such as 'Tamed blacks' and 'wild blacks' do tell us that the people of Van Diemen's Land were either being erased or captured and taught the Christian religion and ways of Englishmen. They were brought to the island called Wybalenna (Flinders Land) and cottages made by the English men in which they kept dying. "And the more they took to English blankets and heavy English clothes abandoning their licentious nakedness, the more they coughed and spluttered and died." (Flanagan 2) "remember not past years" (Newman 1834) the line features in the novel as a prayer amid the atrocities of colonialism in full display. The Aboriginals in Van Diemen's Land have been uprooted from their native land and lifestyle, and they are being taught the English ways, where they are maladjusted and dying of diseases and violence. The Aborigines are being urged not to remember their past but amid the befuddling new ways taught all they have is their past as a point of reference. “and the more they died, the more they wanted to cast off their English clothes and stop eating their English food and move out of their English homes..” (Flanagan 2)

Lady Jane’s first visit to Wybalenna introduces her to a little black girl. She is quite taken by her. The black girl, Mathinna, becomes a subject of particular interest to her. She is an exotic subject of the Orient. "you almost wish to hold the little wild beast and pet her" (Flanagan 51). Lady Jane is quite animated on seeing the skull of "King Romeo, last of the Port Davey Kings"(Flanagan 68). She wishes to adopt Mathinna, who is the daughter of Romeo, and to provide her with every advantage of class and rank. Once the girl was brought to the Governor's House, bathed and clothed in English fashion, Lady Jane looked at her, and to her, the girl seemed as a lynx from Siberia or a jaguar from the New World. Lady jane finds the girl a matter of great curiosity and experiment. Mathinna is provided with good food and clothing and is tutored by various people to little success. "She will be treated as a free-born Englishwoman because that, too is part of my experiment."(Flanagan 118) Mathinna did not result in a successful experiment, and the move from the status of an adopted to a pet, 'an exotic object of

amusement' was swift. As Lady Jane became more uncomfortable with Mathinna's sudden entry and exit at her presence, she got a bell tied to her hand. Lady Jane also started calling her 'an empty black vessel'. The attempts of Lady Jane to civilise the girl and the laurels that she aspired for were met with failure. The powerful, civilised Western world fails in an experiment of turning a savage child into a lady of English fashion. She abandons her emotionally at first. Meanwhile, through time, Sir John's interest in Mathinna keeps growing to the level of perversion. Mathinna's Christian name is Leda, and Lady Jane once referred to the story of 'Leda and Swan', in which Zeus takes the form of a swan and seduces Leda.

At the great costume ball being hosted at the *Erebus* and *Terror* ships, Sir John chose the costume of a Black van Diemonian Swan. "Are we no longer Your Excellency but Zeus Himself" (Flanagan 149). The author implies what fate awaited Mathinna at the hand of her adopted father, the governor of Van Diemen's Land. The consequence of this changes Mathinna in such a way that she is withdrawn and less childlike. Looking at the life of Mathinna from the perspective of Lady Jane and Sir John only suggests that they found Mathinna as an object of amusement and experiment and instructed her for this or that through the means of rewards and punishment. However, through certain instances, we do see the girl resisting the civilisation thrust upon her. Her dislike of shoes, later at the orphanage her eating of nothing but insects etc.

As Neumann says, "In their world-creation, literary works resort to culturally predominant ideas of memory, and, through their literary techniques, represent these ideas in an aesthetically condensed form." (Neumann 2010, 335) memory and literature complement each other, and colonial memory in literature has become a significant subject of exploration. In the novel *Wanting*, Richard Flanagan creates characters that serve as living embodiments of colonial memory, their lives deeply moulded by the intersections of personal experience and cultural history. Mathinna, a young Aboriginal girl taken from her community and adopted by the British Governor Sir John Franklin and his wife, Lady Jane Franklin, is the symbol of the traumatic effects of colonial displacement and cultural erasure. Through Mathinna's character, Flanagan explores the complex layers of colonial memory, where trauma, loss, and identity are inseparable. Mathinna's journey highlights the forced removal of Indigenous children—a practice that intended to fashion them in the style of English Ways of life but instead stripped them of their cultural heritage and personal sense of self. She being alienated, struggles with cultural dislocation, and the quest for identity is in fact, a reflection of the broader experience felt by Aborigines under British Rule. "They found Mathinna strange. She saw the whites as her kin, not them." (Flanagan 213) The idea of belonging

was so metamorphosised in her that she was in a flux of identity. ".. she could understand that she spoke in a manner that was neither white nor black" (Flanagan 213). Her existential conundrum is further reflected in the lines "a twelve year old child who had largely ceased to talk and who, in a way she had learnt in Crozier's cabin and refined in the company of other children at the orphanage, had become absent from her life" (Flanagan 211).

Lady Jane Franklin, on the other side, represents the coloniser's side, which is carrying the burden of the conflicting sense of duty and moral superiority. "Did any of them the Protector wondered, have slightest idea what work it was to create such is grand tragedy with yourself at its very heart?" (Flanagan 56) Further, the colonisers and their questionable approaches always seem in contrast to what they claim. "His way was otherwise- persuasion, reason- because at the back of his arguments were always the men with guns anyways." (Flanagan 62)The sense of superiority is ever-present in the minds of the colonisers as they wish to take the aborigines out of the darkness and shine the divine light on them. In a similar fashion, Lady Jane's adoption of Mathinna represents a desire to "rescue" and "civilise" her, which shows the attitude of being superior that validated colonial intervention in Indigenous lives. Lady Jane abstained from expressing love through touch and caress as because she felt "such frivolities would only ruin the experiment and the young girl's chances." (Flanagan 118) Her perspective is emblematic of colonial memory as seen through the lens of the British Empire, in which compassion is clouded by ignorance, cultural superiority, and underlying guilt.

What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess of slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same but *not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence by 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual' it is as if the way the emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (Bhabha 86)

Lady Jane's efforts in *Wanting* reveal how colonialism complicates relationships and moral perceptions as she struggles with her longing for fulfilment and validation, which she tries to project onto Mathinna. By juxtaposing Mathinna's experiences with Lady Jane's, Flanagan bares the unequal power dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised, illustrating how these dynamics warp relationships and contribute to a shared yet deeply conflicted colonial memory.

In the novel *Wanting*, the Tasmanian landscape itself becomes a vessel for colonial memory that symbolises both the beauty of the natural world and the violence imposed upon it by colonial powers. "Wybalenna bottle, blackfella egg" (Flanagan 17). While demonstrating a practical example in the lecture on pneumatics when Robinson heated a bottle and a boiled and peeled egg was sucked into it, Troilus, an Aborigine, remarks so, which deeply reflects on how the people of Van Diemen's Land have been uprooted from their native place and housed in Wybalenna. "His was the Kingdom of great mountains and wild rivers….the sylvan forests and sublime beaches of western Van Diemen's Land". (Flanagan 56) Tasmania's wilderness, marked by isolation and ruggedness, echoes the Indigenous experience of displacement and trauma, acting as a witness to the brutality of colonial policies aimed at subjugating Indigenous communities. Flanagan uses the landscape to evoke a sense of historical and cultural continuity, where the land retains memories of the violence inflicted upon it, serving as a 'silent' archive of colonial trauma. The landscape and memory align with the concept of land as a site of memory (*Lieux de Memoire*), a theoretical exploration by theorists such as Pierre Nora, who asserts that physical spaces with cultural significance become memory sites. (Wikipedia) In *Wanting*, the land holds the memory of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and histories that colonialism has tried to erase. Through detailed descriptions of the Tasmanian environment, Flanagan highlights the deep-rooted connection between Aborigines and the land, showing how the colonial acts of renaming, re-charting, and reshaping landscapes are, in a way, a form of cultural erasure. For the Indigenous people, the land is not just a physical space but a repository of identity and belonging; Mathinna's sense of isolation in the Franklin household tells us about her displacement from this familiar landscape, symbolising her disconnection from her cultural roots.

Also, Flanagan contrasts the natural landscape with colonial constructs, such as the Franklins' household, which Symbolises the encroachment of European values and aesthetics onto Indigenous lands As Hobart Town is described as "it seemed to combine the worlds of the army barrack and the prison yard into town at best monotonous and at worst monstrous" (Flanagan107). The English architecture and lifestyle were opposed to the surrounding wilderness, symbolising the attempt to impose foreign ideals on Indigenous spaces. This contrast reiterates the novel's themes of alienation and cultural intrusion, as Mathinna's presence in the Franklin household serves as a metaphor for the cultural dislocation that Aborigines experienced due to colonisation.

The title of the novel, *Wanting*, embodies a prevailing theme of longing that resonates deeply with the characters' internal struggles. The idea of "wanting" operates on many levels, reflecting both a yearning for fulfilment and a void that defines each character's existence. For Mathinna, "wanting" is a longing for identity and a sense of belonging as she journeys through the liminal space between her Indigenous heritage and the imposed English culture of her adoptive family, as reflected in her letter where she mentions, "I read books not birds….come here to se mee my father…" (Flanagan 121).

Ma'am existed for a reason, for hundreds of reasons with names like Education, Advancement, Civilisation. The convicts longed to escape, the soldiers to become settlers, the settlers to make more money. Even the old people at Oyster Cove held the hope of return to the land and the ancestors if not in this life then in the next. (230)

For Lady Jane Franklin, "wanting" signifies her yearning for purpose and validation within the confines of her colonial role. " Her desire for conformity and approval …..was at war in her with the vitality and belief in self.." (Flanagan 54) Her decision to adopt Mathinna stems from a desire to fill an emotional and spiritual void that was driven by the fact that she could not conceive; thus, the Aboriginal child became a perfect sample for her experiment of English upbringing and pseudo-motherhood, which reflects her broader existential struggle within the rigid structures of British colonial society. Charles Dickens, too, grapples with the effects of unfulfilled desires and moral ambiguity. In his relationship with actress Ellen Ternan, Dickens's sense of "wanting" mirrors the universal human yearning for connection and validation, which becomes complicated by expectations of society and a sense of guilt. "We live a sick child in order to make a speech" (Flanagan 168)

Flanagan employs a blend of historical facts and fictional elements to bring depth and nuance to *Wanting*, using literary techniques that allow him to explore historical reality in a more personal and intimate way. This approach aligns with the postmodern concept of historiographic metafiction(Wikipedia), which puts together historical accounts with fictional interpretations to challenge conventional narratives and demands the question of the nature of historical truth. By interweaving real historical figures with imagined dialogues, emotions, and inner conflicts, Flanagan reveals the psychological aspects of colonial figures and humanises their guilt, motivations, and moral ambiguity. *Wanting* succeeds in encompassing narrative structure, blending historical and fictionalised accounts to create a layered exploration of colonialism, identity, and moral dilemma. Flanagan uses alternating

timelines and perspectives; switching between the lives of Mathinna, the Franklins, and Charles Dickens gives depth and complexity to the novel.

The fragmented narrative structure allows Flanagan to highlight the discord between historical events and the subjective realities faced by each character, with emphasis on the conflicts and contradictions of colonialism. However, the author keeps us reminding the time frames as the novel progresses. The novel is a poignant critique of the colonial narrative, especially the myth of "civilising the savages". It deconstructs such narrative by exposing the ambiguity and contradicting viewpoints. At the very beginning of the novel it is said that the war had ended, however, it wasn't a complete erasure of the aboriginals as, we see some of them break free of Robinson the Protector. they expressed their resistance through their dance and their voice.

They refused to work in the gardens unless they were paid, or to clean their houses unless they got better clothes. They urged the men to stand up. They told the women they must fight back.

Jesus was a trick of the Devil, they said. The Devil ran the world. There was no light at the end, no redemption, no justice. God, heaven, white fella talk-all tricks of the Devil. There was no black dreaming, no white heaven, only that bugger, the Devil, Buggering everything. (220)

The Franklins' failed attempt to civilise Mathinna as a benevolent experiment, to stripping her of her identity, and Sir John's act reveals the moral hypocrisy of it. The compassion is so often revealed to be the urge to control and an attempt at cultural erasure. Flanagan's portrayal of Lady Jane's relationship with Mathinna is an example of the way colonial narratives position Aboriginals as subjects that are to be transformed rather than autonomous individuals, which tells us about the exploitive nature of colonial perspective which attempts to define and reshape Aboriginal identity to suit colonial ideals. Beyond the specific actions of the Franklins, the novel addresses broader cultural and ideological aspects of British imperialism. By illustrating the psychological and cultural violence meted out to Mathinna, the author confronts the patriarchal ideologies that justified colonial expansion and the marginalisation of Aboriginal cultures. He reveals the dehumanisation and moral failure of the colonisers.

The failed excursion of Sir John Franklin and reports of the crews of ships of cannibalism, Charles Dickens' negation of such rumours at the behest of Lady Jane and the enactment of the play *The Frozen Deep*, and Dickens' meeting with Ellan Ternan play out the premise of the novel. However, the

colonial past of Tasmania and the time Sir John Franklin was the governor of Van Diemen's Land and their role in the colonial changes, actions, and cultural atrocities committed at their behest, play out most significant role. The Aboriginal characters, especially Mathinna and Burney, their displacement, loss of identity, the collective trauma and violence leading to cultural erasure are apparently seen, and the colonial legacy left behind and its effects on the characters are delved upon in great detail. The colonial past and its collective memory impressed upon the psyche of the survivors, and the following generations blended with fiction distinguishes the book from the rest. The sufferings, cleansing and violence too, bring out the complicated relationship between the coloniser and the colonisers. The memories of the colonial past and the recorded history where the subaltern voices are subjugated find utterance in the novel *Wanting*.

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