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Reclaiming Cultural Identity: A Fanonian Study of the Short Story *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai*

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Abstract
This study examines how Waqas Rabbani's short story *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai* (2025) uses speculative fiction to dissect postcolonial dependency. Rabbani published the piece under the alias Thomas De Verne Hovercraft. The plot hinges on a stark premise. Under intense pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Pakistan abruptly halts all tea imports. What follows is not a minor economic hiccup. It is total domestic chaos, widespread physiological withdrawal, and a complete breakdown of daily public life. This systemic collapse reveals that tea is less a simple consumer good than a foundational cultural ritual. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's analytical models, specifically the inferiority complex, epidermalization, and the transformative potential of structural rupture, this paper frames the fictional tea shortage as a necessary shock to the collective psyche. By tracing the narrative's arc from initial public hysteria to decentralized, grassroots tea farming, the study shows how a resource crisis can trigger genuine national consciousness. Ultimately, Rabbani's speculative satire repurposes Fanon's mid-century revolutionary theory for a contemporary world ruled by financial dictates and global market dependencies.

Key Words: Postcolonial Literature, Frantz Fanon, Speculative Fiction, Textual Analysis, National Consciousness, Economic Dependency.

Introduction
Postcolonial fiction frequently wrestles with a stubborn reality: the psychological and structural architecture of an empire outlives its physical departure. This lingering inheritance shapes language, governance, and even the basic anatomy of daily habit. In *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai* (2025), Waqas Rabbani uses speculative satire to expose these vulnerabilities. He writes under the pen name Thomas De Verne Hovercraft. Rabbani describes his work as a product of an "age of collapse," building surreal, dark, and absurd worlds. These narratives force a simple question: what if the worst-case scenario is already here? The story engages directly with this anxiety. It turns a mundane commodity like tea into a volatile symbol of colonial memory and macroeconomic traps.

The crisis begins when the state halts tea imports to satisfy IMF demands. The Finance Minister glibly dismisses chai as a "colonial hangover." The public reaction, however, is immediate and chaotic. Markets shutter. Citizens face visceral withdrawal symptoms. The predictable rhythms of domestic life disintegrate. It turns out tea was never just a drink. It was a baseline social

anchor. Pakistanis have glimpsed this kind of national vulnerability in recent memory. During the real-world 2022 foreign exchange crisis, for instance, state officials publicly urged citizens to reduce their tea intake to save foreign reserves. Rabbani takes this real-world anxiety to its speculative limit. He shows how a centuries-old colonial habit becomes a modern structural dependency that only becomes visible when the supply line snaps.

The narrative moves from this initial infrastructural panic into an unpredictable wave of domestic experimentation, leading to Pakistan's shift toward total agricultural self-sufficiency. The story closes on an assertive note: "They hadn't saved a drink. They had rewritten a future." This study reads that transformation through the lens of Frantz Fanon's core concepts, specifically the inferiority complex, bodily epidermalization, and the therapeutic necessity of a structural rupture. The sudden, forced absence of chai functions as the type of crisis Fanon identified as essential for breaking a colonized population out of its internalized submissiveness. By tracing how citizens abandon imported brands to cultivate their own crops, this paper argues that Rabbani's fiction demonstrates the painful, messy birth of a modern, decolonized national consciousness.

Research Objectives

- To evaluate how *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai* reveals psychological colonization through everyday consumer habits.
- To examine how a large-scale macroeconomic resource crisis can act as a catalyst for cultural reclamation and grassroots production.
- To analyze the emergence of a sovereign national consciousness through Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theoretical lens.

Theoretical Framework

Frantz Fanon is not merely an academic footnote. He remains a bedrock of postcolonial critique. Born in Martinique and working as a psychiatrist in Algeria during its war of independence, he looked past physical occupation. Instead, he targeted the specific ways colonial systems warp the mind of the colonized subject.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), first published in French in 1952, Fanon shows how colonized groups internalize the master's ideology. This creates a brutal inferiority complex. To cope, the subject reflexively copies the colonizer's language, tastes, and lifestyle. It is a desperate, exhausting chase for validation that ultimately fractures the native psyche. Fanon calls the process by which this perceived inferiority is inscribed onto the body and mind of the colonized subject epidermalization. Faddick (2023) points out that this conditioning forces people to see their original identity as secondary or inherently broken. These psychological traps, however, are not permanent. Sekyi-Otu (1996) argues that Fanon's work tracks a moving target: a fluid, shifting political awareness that can turn submissive compliance into radical, independent action.

Fanon shifts his focus from individual trauma to collective revolution in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), first published in French in 1961. He views the colonial world as a stark, Manichean space, violently split into two unequal zones: the colonizer and the colonized. Since this hierarchy relies on systemic violence, Fanon argues that true decolonization requires an absolute, uncompromising rupture. It cannot be patched up. It demands a total substitution of the old order. This radical break is the only way to shatter both the external economic chains and the internal mental prisons. Gibson (2011) notes this tension in modern settings. The real test for any postcolonial nation comes after the flags go up, when it faces a painful truth: the old

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colonizer may have packed up and left, but the underlying economic reliance has not moved an inch.

Literature Review

Most research on Fanon centers on the severe psychological damage done by colonial power. Dizayi (2019) notes that this mental trauma comes first. Subjugated people develop a deep sense of inadequacy, which pushes them to wear what Fanon famously called "white masks." They copy the colonizer's language, tastes, and culture just to feel equal. Dizayi (2019) considers this imitation pathological. It fails because it is built on a fractured, alienated sense of self. This obsession with copying is a major theme across postcolonial literature, where the internalized values of dead empires still dictate modern taste, behavior, and status (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1993).

Current scholars push this idea further. They emphasize that true decolonization requires cutting ties with colonial leftovers completely. Maslovski (2025) argues that real liberation means rejecting assimilation outright and dropping the colonial gaze entirely. For him, psychological freedom must come before real identity can be reclaimed, and this undoing usually requires a massive structural shock to wake up the public. Mallick (2021) targets the systemic inertia that stands in the way. He builds on Fanon's warnings about the postcolonial ruling class and describes the national bourgeoisie as a detached elite trapped in a loop of imitation. Unable to build an independent national project, this elite leaves the postcolonial state tied to old imperial markets, acting as a basic administrative proxy for global financial institutions.

Fanon's demand for a complete systemic overhaul separates him from more moderate, integrationist thinkers. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), for example, described a "double consciousness" and pursued a path of gradual integration and balance between two identities. Fanon did not accept that. As Maslovski (2025) and Mallick (2021) point out, Fanon saw decolonization as a program of total disorder in which the old structures are completely substituted. Mallick (2021) draws on Fanon's clinical notes to highlight how deeply the colonized subject was dehumanized. Without understanding that systemic erasure, one cannot unlock the specific anxieties of the modern postcolonial world.

To understand the modern situation, one has to track how old empires evolved into modern economic traps. Kwame Nkrumah (1965) called this neo-colonialism. A country can have all the outward symbols of independence, including a flag, a constitution, and a parliament, yet its economy and policies are still run from the outside. In this setup, global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund act as financial enforcers for Western capitalism. They push postcolonial nations to suppress their own local manufacturing, which keeps them hooked on supply chains that serve the metropole (Amin, 1976; Patnaik & Patnaik, 2016).

This economic trap directly warps art and culture. In contemporary Pakistani literature written in English, the struggle for identity constantly collides with global market pressures. Mehmood and Janjua (2017) argue that some of this writing falls into a Neo-Orientalist trap. Local writers can easily become "mimic men," reproducing Western stereotypes of their own culture as backward in order to win international recognition. Kanwal (2015), however, sees a shift. She notes a new generation of Pakistani writers who refuse to cater to Western anxieties and instead look inward, critiquing their own country's economic and neocolonial dependencies.

South Asian intellectual history offers other ways to resist. Asghar and Khan (2017) compare the philosophies of Allama Iqbal and Frantz Fanon. Both thinkers demand a radical decolonization

of the mind, but they take different routes. Iqbal pushes for a spiritual awakening through *khudi*, or selfhood. Fanon demands a confrontational, revolutionary break. Yet both reject the urge to copy and the failures of the ruling elite, and both want a collective awakening rooted in history. Iqbal looks to Pan-Islamism, while Fanon leans on class solidarity. Both see these as the only ways to win back sovereignty. It also comes down to daily practice: true decolonization cannot happen until a culture throws out the mental habits of the metropole and reclaims its own domestic rhythms (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Fanon wrote during the physical revolutions of the mid-twentieth century, but his insights remain crucial for decoding modern globalization. Shamsie (2017) notes that Pakistani English prose has long struggled with the identity fractures left by Partition. Rabbani's speculative story plugs directly into this timeline. He takes a modern macroeconomic dependency on tea imports and turns it into a metaphor for psychological colonization and structural escape.

Research Methodology

This study relies on textual analysis as its primary qualitative method. The goal is to track how postcolonial speculative fiction encodes geopolitical and psychological dependency. Within this framework, close reading serves as the core analytical technique. It involves a micro-level examination of linguistic configurations, metaphorical setups, and narrative pacing. By applying close reading to *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai*, the paper systematically dissects the deeper meaning of everyday consumer choices and state-level decisions. This approach allows for a direct mapping of Fanon's core concepts onto the specific narrative movements of the text. Rather than gathering empirical or quantitative data, this research treats the literary text as a complex cultural discourse. Speculative fiction provides an ideal space for this approach, since dystopian literature frequently acts as an allegorical mirror, exaggerating current historical anxieties and financial frameworks to critique existing political structures (Rieder, 2008; Jameson, 2005).

Textual Analysis

Psychological Effects of Colonization

For Fanon, colonial subjugation is never a discrete, concluded historical event. It persists as a subterranean psychic trauma that dictates how the postcolonial subject navigates contemporary reality. In Rabbani's narrative, the abrupt cessation of tea imports, instigated by IMF pressure, triggers an immediate, collective somatic crisis. The fallout is intensely visceral. Bilal, for instance, perceives the sudden shortage not as a minor infrastructural inconvenience but as an existential threat to his very being.

> "Bilal stared at her like she'd slapped him. 'Ammi, this isn't hydration. This is survival'" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 2)

By elevating a missing commodity to a crisis of survival, Bilal exposes a deeply entrenched psychological dependency on a colonial-era import. His interior peace remains tethered to a foreign supply chain. This dynamic illustrates Achille Mbembe's (2001) assertion that postcolonial power functions through profound control over the domestic bodies and daily desires of citizens.

Bilal cannot conceptualize a morning decoupled from this manufactured ritual. While his mother's pragmatism highlights a generational divide, Bilal's panic underscores a grim reality: the younger, supposedly liberated generation is often the most thoroughly trapped by these inherited symbols of empire. The survival at stake here is not biological. It is the survival of a

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specific, colonized ontological framework that shatters the moment its global trade network snaps.

The state's bureaucratic justification for the import ban further illuminates this internal dialectic:

> "The finance minister... declaring that difficult times called for 'a cultural re-evaluation of our dependencies.'... he said, 'Tea is a colonial hangover" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 4)

When the Finance Minister characterizes tea consumption as a "colonial hangover," he demands a sudden, painful awakening from the populace. Yet the metaphor of a "hangover" implies a state of collective stupor: the nation has long been oblivious to how its cultural tastes were historically engineered by imperial structures. This matches Fanon's critique of systemic domination. When colonization succeeds completely, the occupied population accepts the master's habits as natural, baseline reality. Breaking that psychological addiction causes immediate withdrawal, precisely because the postcolonial subject struggles to construct an identity outside the consumption parameters dictated by the historical metropole.

Internalized Inferiority Complex

Fanon's account of the inferiority complex holds that the colonized, or subaltern (Spivak, 1988), subject instinctively devalues native cultural production while overestimating the value of the metropole's outputs. This distortion produces a rigid, internalized hierarchy of consumption: local commodities are discarded as inherently deficient, whereas Western brands are fetishized as indicators of civilizational validation. Rabbani dramatizes this commercial logic in the mundane setting of a local marketplace."Customs stopped everything last night. They blocked three containers. One of them had Supreme. That one I can live without. But Lipton…" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 3)

The hierarchy operates transparently here. By dismissing "Supreme," a domestic blend, while mourning "Lipton," the merchant betrays a deeply internalized corporate alignment. This is Fanon's "white mask" of consumerism performing in real time over a grocery counter. The brand name operates as a surrogate for status, providing the illusion of participation in a "civilized," globalized modernity. As Homi Bhabha (1994) notes, such mimicry functions as a protective posture, yet it remains fundamentally fractured. Even amid structural emergency, the commercial subject maintains this colonial categorization of value. To lose the imperial brand is to suffer an immediate, terrifying exposure: the removal of the protective, imported mask.

This psychological fragmentation quickly spreads from domestic marketplaces into the high-stress professional workspaces of the urban elite:

> "At the office, things were already unraveling. … Bilal tried to act normal, holding his coffee mug filled with nothing but hot water, hoping the illusion might trick his brain into calmness. It didn't." (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 4)
>
> "… he hadn't gone a day without chai since he was ten years old. … Something stitched into mornings, meetings, memories" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 5)

When Bilal attempts to execute his corporate responsibilities without the familiar commodity, the artificial facade collapses. Rabbani's diction here demands a precise close reading: the habit is described as being "stitched" into his cognitive routine. "Stitched" implies an invasive, surgical insertion of colonial discipline into the native body. This maps onto Fanon's concept of epidermalization, in which the historical tastes of the empire are sewn into the somatic tissue and memory of the populace. The empty mug of hot water represents a failed performance. From childhood domesticity to adult corporate spaces, the rhythm of existence has been

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dictated by an external agricultural regime. Stripped of this fuel, the subject faces a sudden, alienating void.

Violence as a Metaphorical Rupture

In classical Fanonist theory, the transition from subjugation to sovereignty requires absolute, unyielding violence, a visceral cleansing force that destroys the colonial apparatus (Fanon, 1963). Rabbani, however, updates this paradigm for the globalized twenty-first century. He translates physical warfare into the structural shock of a macroeconomic resource blockade. While the violence is clean and bureaucratic rather than bloody, its disruptive impact on the postcolonial body remains acutely jarring.

> "At the office, things were already unraveling… By noon, one of the senior project managers collapsed during a planning meeting" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 4).

The sudden, forced withdrawal from chai functions as an act of systemic violence that shatters the sterile, predictable flow of corporate capitalism. The physical collapse of the project manager during a strategy meeting serves as a microcosm of the postcolonial state under macro-fiscal distress. The comfortable illusions of modernity are violently torn away.

This somatic crisis can be usefully read alongside Sidney Mintz's (1985) historical analysis of global commodities. Imperial networks deliberately built stimulants like sugar and tea into the working-class diet to maximize labor productivity. When the corporate manager collapses, the historical assembly line fails. The postcolonial economic engine cannot function without its imported colonial fuel. Yet for Fanon, this moment of catastrophic failure is the necessary precursor to liberation. The colonized subject can only begin to construct an autonomous subjectivity once the false equilibrium of the master's order is shattered. The resource blockade acts as the wrecking ball that clears the path for genuine local production.

Development of National Consciousness

For Fanon, the construction of an authentic national culture is never a nostalgic retreat into a romanticized, pre-colonial past. It is a dynamic, collective process aimed at addressing the immediate material needs of the masses (Fanon, 1963). In Rabbani's narrative, this leap from paralysis to active self-determination is ignited by the unauthorized leak of a suppressed state document.

> "It started with a leak… PROJECT KARAK: Domestic Tea Cultivation Strategy for National Resilience" (p. 11).
>
> "The file was a full pre-feasibility study… The summary was clear: Pakistan could grow its own tea. It chose not to" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 12).

The public realization that the state possessed the agricultural capacity for self-reliance all along alters the political terrain entirely. This revelation that the governing apparatus chose not to use its own geography neatly instantiates Fanon's critique in "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" (Fanon, 1963). Fanon warned that the postcolonial ruling elite frequently functions as a parasitic comprador class, maintaining old imperial trade dependencies because they protect its domestic class privileges. The leak exposes exactly this collaboration. It suggests that the state suppressed indigenous production to keep the population dependent on international market networks.

This exposure catalyzes an immediate shift from passive despair to horizontal, collective resistance:

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> "This is what colonizers feared: educated Pakistanis with time, tools, and a caffeine dependency… A new slogan emerged… 'Chai Hamari Hai'… The revolution wasn't televised. It was brewed" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 23).

Urban rooftops, suburban gardens, and corporate balconies are rapidly transformed into decentralized agricultural hubs. The population ceases to be a passive consumer base for transnational corporations and becomes a community of sovereign producers. The slogan "Chai Hamari Hai" (The Tea Is Ours) signals the authentic birth of a national consciousness. It reorients national identity around local self-sufficiency. The text captures the classic imperial nightmare: a subaltern population that suddenly discovers it no longer requires the metropole to sustain its daily existence. Cultivating the tea locally turns it into an act of defiance. It is no longer a colonial hangover. It is a sovereign fuel.

Toward a New Humanism

Fanon's ultimate vision culminates in a "new humanism," a postcolonial future of self-determination in which a society defines itself by its own human potential rather than constantly reacting to the shadow of the colonizer (Fanon, 1963). In *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai*, this collective rehumanization occurs through the open-source democratization of specialized agricultural knowledge.

> "he found himself in a telegram group called 'Tea Hackers Pakistan'. It had about three hundred members… They shared everything: soil hacks, pH levels, solar exposure charts,…" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 13)

The "Tea Hackers" network represents a sophisticated form of horizontal solidarity. Confronted by a macroeconomic crisis, these digital collectives bypass state bureaucracy to freely distribute agricultural data. This cooperative behavior reads like a digital update to Fanon's essay "This Is the Voice of Algeria" (Fanon, 1965). Fanon tracked how Algerian revolutionaries repurposed the radio, originally a vehicle for French colonial propaganda, into an underground tool for national mobilization. Rabbani's characters perform the same subversion with encrypted messaging applications. They hijack contemporary digital infrastructure to share practical strategies ("soil hacks, pH levels"), reclaiming control over their own survival.

This collective agricultural mobilization eventually causes a structural shift within the global economic hierarchy:

> "Crates stamped with 'Product of Pakistan' … What had started as desperation five years ago was now a billion-dollar export machine" (Hovercraft, 2025, p. 24).

The final evolution from an empty domestic marketplace to a sovereign export power completes Fanon's decolonial arc. The "Product of Pakistan" stamp suggests that the nation has dismantled its internalized inferiority complex. It has dropped the "white mask" of dependency and stepped out with an authentic local face. The speculative framework shows that the country did not merely survive the crisis. It used the structural shock to move from the exploited periphery of global capitalism into a position of sovereignty. At the same time, this ending is not without tension. A billion-dollar export machine could also be read as integration into the very global market that created the dependency, and Fanon himself warned against a national elite that simply takes over the colonial economy. The story's grassroots origins, however, distinguish this outcome from elite capture. The export success grows out of collective, bottom-up production rather than comprador intermediation, which is why it can still be read as a new humanism built from the soil up.

Conclusion

Waqas Rabbani's *The Day Pakistan Ran Out of Chai* uses speculative satire to lay bare the ongoing traps of economic globalization and colonial memory. By focusing on a basic, everyday habit, Rabbani forces a vital question: what actually happens to a sovereign identity when its daily rituals are dictated by IMF restructuring and old imperial trade routes? The text suggests that global capitalism cannot offer genuine identity to a postcolonial nation, mainly because it treats deep seated cultural traditions as simple, swappable commodities.

The story's arc matches Fanon's belief that the colonized are never inherently incapable. While macroeconomic shockwaves can temporarily break a society apart, real resilience comes from grassroots action. People choose to build alternative networks. They manage the pain of withdrawal, organize open-source farming groups, and cultivate their own land.

Rabbani's characters survive a quiet psychological war. They face a massive systemic gap, but they refuse to be erased. Instead, they restructure their lives through urban agriculture and localized resistance. They find their sovereignty in a simple, home-grown cup of tea. Rabbani also updates classical postcolonial thought for a hyper-globalized era. He demonstrates that modern sovereignty cannot be only an intellectual or cultural retreat. To last, it has to be actively won and maintained on the competitive field of global trade, while remaining accountable to the collective that made it possible.

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