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The White Nation in Crisis: A Fanonian Reading of *Sevdalinka* Concerning Colonial Violence and Identity Crisis[1]

Abstract. Inspired by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks,* this study focuses on the process of postcolonial imitative identity construction that results in fragmentation among colonized people in *Sevdalinka,* a novel by Ayşe Kulin. Fanon's theory extensively analyzes the erasure of identity experienced by colonized people and the psychological crises that result in fragmented selves, emerging from futile efforts to attain recognition, and validation. The process of modeling contributes to the colonizers' sense of superiority and, in turn, intensifies their tyranny. Fanon initially criticizes the oppressed for being unaware of their incoherent conditions as well as their estrangement from their authentic selves. The perspectives of Adler, Freud, Bhabha, Ngũgĩ, and Achebe will significantly contribute to this study, as they align with and deepen the theoretical framework of Fanon.
Kulin's *Sevdalinka* offers a profound exploration of Bosnians' experiences of love, the desire for recognition, and the loss of authenticity within the context of Bosnia's tumultuous history. In the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Bosnians are subjugated, particularly by Serbs, who seek independence while demanding Bosnians' assimilation and alienating them. Bosnians are also marginalized and even targeted for possessing distinct religious identities, perceived as Croats by Catholics and as Serbs by Orthodox Christians, yet belonging to neither. The characters adopt their oppressors' lifestyle, with minimal traces of Islamic tradition. The protagonist, Nimeta's illicit relationship with a Croatian, emotional distance from her children, and disapproval of her mother's conventional lifestyle demonstrate her estrangement from Bosnian Islamic identity. Through the protagonist and her family, the novel sheds light on how identities are shaped, fragmented, and ultimately diluted.

Key words: Inferiority, alienation, imitation, identity crisis, fragmented identity, religion

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Introduction

In postcolonial studies, oppression has often been examined through the angle of Black racial victimization, particularly in the context of colonial encounters between the Western world and non-Western societies. Much of the critical discourse has been formed by this dominating paradigm, but it has frequently overlooked the intricate mechanisms of dominance within white ethnic communities. However, colonial power is not exclusive to Black populations; it may also emerge among white groups, especially when shaped by factors such as cultural identity, ethnicity, and religion. By providing a different strategy based on postcolonial psychology, this study questions the mainstream postcolonial narrative. It explores how white groups historically marginalized and dominated by other white authorities have experienced similar forms of subjugation. These pressures lead to psychological consequences such as an inferiority complex, alienation from one's roots, and a split self. In such contexts, individuals and communities often lose the essence of their identity, as imposed or imitative identities replace a sense of authentic selfhood**.**

Recent research conducted among the ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia further supports this perspective, shedding light on the psychological consequences of war and forced displacement. These studies emphasize that the trauma endured during displacement has lasting negative effects on individuals' perceptions of post-conflict peace. According to Harada's sensitivity analysis, Suzuki et al. (2020) point out that people who have gone through tough experiences during displacement, like being socially isolated, lacking support, and facing mistreatment, are more likely to expect political violence to happen again in the future (562). Trauma experienced during displacement contributes not only to emotional distress but also to a fractured relationship with both the self and society. According to Adler (2013), feelings of inferiority drive individuals to seek power as a way to overcome discomfort and achieve equality, often leading to excessive compensation (75–77). However, Fanon—drawing on Juan de Mérida's perspective—interprets the mimicry of oppressors by the colonized not as a quest for dominance but as a coping mechanism aimed at gaining social integration and self-definition. For Fanon, this imitation reflects a deep desire for belonging rather than a pursuit of superiority, with individuals prioritizing conformity over domination. This shift from an Adlerian outlook to a postcolonial psychological perspective reflects a framework in which the white figure is not merely the Other to be overcome but becomes an internalized ideal that surpasses even the ego itself (Fanon 2008, 167–68). This study builds on this understanding of how imitation and identity conflicts emerge under pressure. It examines how cultural and religious tensions cause fragmentation in the mind, as reflected in *Sevdalinka*, particularly through Nimeta's struggle between cultural commitment and personal desires. Analyzing the characters' psychological experiences reveals that Bosnians adopt the Serbian way of life as a coping mechanism.

This study**,** through textual analysis, examines *Sevdalinka* by combining historical, literary, and postcolonial analyses to investigate the influence of identity construction. The emphasis will be on the impact of socio-political factors on the protagonists' subjec-

tivity in the postcolonial context. Psychoanalysis will function as an essential analytical tool to examine the psychological and cultural aspects of the characters' experiences. These methodologies will provide a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between personal experiences and collective historical influences, emphasizing how historical trauma and ongoing oppression shape identity formation. The principal theoretical framework will be centered on Frantz Fanon's postcolonial psychoanalytic approach, focusing specifically on the connection between the subjugation faced by Bosnians and their psychological development. The concepts of the inferiority complex, overcompensation as a defense mechanism, imitative self, and fragmented identity will provide a lens through which the protagonists' struggles with self-perception and societal validation are analyzed. In addition, theoretical insights from Adler, Freud, Bhabha, Ngũgĩ, and Achebe will support and enrich the study by providing alternative perspectives on personal identity and the psychological effects of domination.

Fanonian Perspectives on Colonial Violence and Identity Crisis in *Sevdalinka*

Frantz Fanon is a prominent Martinican psychiatrist, political philosopher, and revolutionary intellectual whose contributions have significantly influenced postcolonial theory and psychology. His principles, rooted in his experiences as a Black man under French colonial rule in Martinique and his therapeutic interactions with colonized Algerian patients during the Algerian War of Independence, offer important perspectives on the psychological ramifications of colonialism. He examines the profound psychological injuries caused by colonial alienation and reflects on his struggle to overcome these traumas using psychoanalytic and existential frameworks. Through his reflections on his romantic involvement with a white woman, he reveals how personal relationships can become symbolic arenas for racial and psychological power struggles. He expresses not only a personal desire but also a symbolic triumph over the racial hierarchy that oppresses him, stating, "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine" (Fanon 2008, 45). He perceives the interaction as an imaginary approval from white society, interpreting it as a form of psychological compensation for racial marginalization, believing that "by loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love" (Fanon 2008, 45). Building upon both his personal experiences and those of his patients, Fanon (2008) describes *Black Skin, White Masks* as "a psychoanalytic interpretation of the life experience of the Black man … and Negro myth" (117). Moreover, inspired by a discussion with his philosophy professor, who tells him, "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you," Fanon (2008) draws a parallel between Black nations and oppressed white nations, stating that "an anti-Semite is inevitably anti-Negro" (92). Drawing from this statement, which reveals his broader, transracial understanding of oppression, the dynamics of exclusion and psychological alienation

directed toward Black people find a comparable counterpart in the oppression experienced by the Bosnian people due to their cultural heritage and religion. Çınar (2020) emphasizes this concrete example of cultural and religious-based oppression by stating that "Bosnian Muslims were turned into 'the Other'/'enemy' during the war merely because of their religious identity" (11).[2]

The novel *Sevdalinka* by Ayşe Kulin powerfully illustrates this dynamic of alienation, offering a comprehensive portrayal of Bosnia's long-standing trauma. The mission of the book is expressed at the outset, aiming to introduce the enduring suffering of the Bosnian people to the Turkish public, a suffering that has lasted for over eight centuries. The nameless narrator tells the history of Bosnia from their perspective, interspersing dialogues from the characters. Through dialogue and additional information, striking conclusions are drawn about Bosnian history, showing how Bosnians, throughout history, engage in heavy psychological battles with enemies such as Croats, Serbs, Chetniks, Ustaše, and Partisans. In their struggle for survival, they even align themselves with Hitler's 13th SS Division, known as the "Dagger" (Kulin 2005, 22). They have been constantly forced to adapt to new conditions while maintaining constant resentment. Nimeta's mother reflects, "How can one explain to those unfamiliar with this regime that lands that had been theirs for centuries are no longer so, solely due to Tito's decree?" (Kulin 2005, 25). The Bosnian War, characterized by constant oppression and efforts to annihilate, culminated in a brutal genocide in the 20th century, a tragedy observed silently by the international community. The narrator's contemplation emphasizes this harsh reality: "The one who is stronger and strikes first prevails. It was similar even in the nineteenth century!" (Kulin 2005, 94). This attack has been the result of complex processes shaped by intertwined historical, cultural, and ideological dynamics.

The logic of oppression extends beyond physical and political control, infiltrating the psyche through mechanisms of alienation. Once internalized, this process fosters a sense of inferiority in the oppressed, which stands out as one of the most striking psychological consequences of colonization. Fanon (2008) points out that colonized individuals who have internalized colonial norms are unable to form a strong, independent sense of identity, emphasizing that ego withdrawal, a defensive, yet ideally flexible, retreat of the self from reality in response to overwhelming social pressures, is "impossible for the Negro who requires white approval" (36). This syndrome occurs when colonized individuals begin to perceive themselves through the eyes of their colonizers, absorbing imposed stereotypes and prejudices. It resonates with Adler's (2013) notion of the 'inferiority complex,'[3] where individuals, in an attempt to cope with their

[2] All translations of cited quotations from Turkish-language articles and excerpts from the novel *Sevdalinka* included in this article have been produced by the author.

[3] An inferiority complex is a deep feeling of inadequacy that naturally arises in early childhood. When intensified or paired with conflicting desires—like seeking both safety and control—it can hinder learning and social adaptation. Such individuals often feel excluded and view their experiences as failures, leading to social difficulties.

perceived inadequacy, may develop compensatory behaviors or strive for exaggerated achievements, leading them to request excessive compensation and pursue an anomaly in the balance as this emotion intensifies (38).[4] According to him, hesitancy and uncertainty, stemming from anxiety, caution, and timidity, serve as mechanisms for certain individuals to mitigate their feelings of discomfort (Adler 2013, 158).

This psychological condition renders the individual both alienated and insecure, lacking a stable identity amid a fragmented social environment corresponding with the identity crises faced by the Bosnian populace: "Bosniaks, who have resided in this territory since the sixth century, were perceived as Croats by Catholics and as Serbs by Orthodox Christians; they had no authenticity and were perpetually stuck in between" (Kulin 2005, 71). The denial of a solid and independent identity feeds directly into a prolonged sense of inferiority, mirroring Fanon's and Adler's observations. This enduring alienation is further captured in Burhan's poignant remark, "Five hundred years of alienation could have served as an exquisite song title," illustrating the deep historical roots of psychological fragmentation (Kulin 2005, 76). This long-standing alienation creates fertile ground for sustained hostility, which is further inflamed by deliberate propaganda efforts. The Serbian perspective fosters the belief that they can easily eradicate the Bosnians. Serbs, fueled by deep-rooted prejudice and animosity, seek to subjugate their neighbors with whom they have coexisted for years. In order to achieve these goals, every strategy is applied against Bosnians by Serbs and sometimes by Croatians. One of the most recognized methods of maintaining dominance is the deliberate and sustained cultivation of hatred, a process Fanon (2008) explains: "Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being" (37).

Colonizers also use strategic militarization to maintain control and swiftly neutralize any challenge. Serbs have gradually gained control over the multi-ethnic Yugoslav army, systematically removing non-Serbs from their positions through coordinated efforts between the military and the administration (Kulin 2005, 47). This shift in power dynamics exemplifies the systematic marginalization and targeting of non-Serbs both in the military and in the broader political arena. The media also functions as a critical tool in escalating the targeting process through its use as a propaganda device. Dušan Mitević, the director of the pro-Milošević Belgrade Television, exploits the media's influence to provoke Serbs and spread deceptive narratives. In the 1990s, President Milošević, in his speeches, incited Serbs by proclaiming, "No one can defeat you in these territories; no one can regard you with disdain," implying that malevolent Muslims have been conspiring against Serbs (Kulin 2005, 30). However, this rhetoric lacks any substantial foundation; Serbs, strengthened by their growing power, are actually perpetrating violence against the police.

[4] Overcompensation refers to an individual's efforts to overcome feelings of inferiority, but unlike Adler, Fanon sees it not as a drive for personal superiority, but as a desire for social acceptance and integration into white society, exemplified in his reference to Juan de Mérida's view of a Martinican man (Fanon 2008, 167–168).

Alongside propaganda, ethnic and political pressures, and religious influences—especially Christianity—have been used strategically to sustain oppression by reshaping cultural and religious identities of the colonized. Postcolonial writers, particularly oppressed Black authors, critique Christianity for being a tool that marginalizes other beliefs and undermines indigenous cultures. Fanon (1963), in *The Wretched of the Earth*, labels the Church as "the foreigner's Church," highlighting its role as a tool for white individuals, further entrenching colonial authority (42). Another postcolonial writer, Ngũgĩ (1972), in *Homecoming*, voices his dissatisfaction by describing Christianity as "the opium of the oppressed and the principal cause of human alienation" (107). In his novel *The River Between*, Ngũgĩ (2015) characterizes Christianity as "the white man's religion" and critiques it for fostering division and turmoil within society (13). In addition to these writers, Bhabha (1994) critiques the presentation of Christianity by the English as a universal truth, emphasizing that this discourse, being "both English and universal, empirical and uncanny," exposes the colonial contradictions inherent in the Christian narrative (167–68).

In the Bosnian context, the Islamic faith of the Bosniaks becomes a basis for stigmatization and dehumanization. They face intense pressure to reject their Islamic heritage, as their religion is used as a marker of otherness and a justification for violence. Radovan Karadžić's chilling declaration in response to the Bosnians' demand for independence from Yugoslavia remarks on this hostility: "This child will be stillborn. Of course, we will not allow a Muslim bastard to be born and raised on our land" (Kulin 2005, 103). In the same year as this declaration, 1992, militants known as "*Arkan*'s *Tigers*" carried out the Zvornik massacre, violently destroying many families through brutal torture. Raif's family is among those exterminated brutally because of their religious identity. The scale of this devastation is conveyed by the anonymous narrator: "About half of the town of Zvornik ... and their common feature were being Muslim" (Kulin 2005, 118). Furthermore, Miza's Croat lover was executed on the accusation of collaborating with "Muslim dogs," illustrating how religious identity was weaponized to persecute those deemed inhuman (Kulin 2005, 225). This perception echoes Aliya Izetbegović's observation that in the eyes of Europe, Bosniaks were seen as "semi-wild people" of Asian origin, associated with their 'Oriental' ancestors (Izetbegović 2011, quoted in Çınar and Limon 2017, 317).

With relentless efforts to impose exclusions on Bosnians, the essential need that would allow these individuals to perceive themselves as equal to others remains unmet, causing them to increasingly associate their own racial and cultural identity with negativity over time. Fanon (2008) powerfully summarizes this dynamic by stating that "the Negro is the symbol of sin," a notion embraced by European societies where Blackness is equated with moral corruption, wickedness, and ugliness (p. 146). This view alienates the oppressed from their authentic selves, leaving them unable to define their identity without the colonial gaze; this dependency and vulnerability result in

fragmented minds incapable of forming a stable sense of self.[5] Fanon (2008) illustrates this psychological condition by asserting, "The Negro is a toy in the white man's hand," underscoring how the colonized subject is reduced to a puppet that is controlled through manipulation and performs roles that appease the oppressor (107). Mimicking their oppressors in behavior, language, appearance, traditions, and even religious norms reflects desperate endeavor of the colonized to pursue wholeness and dignity.

These unconscious and imitative behaviors leave enduring traces in the personal lives of characters in *Sevdalinka*. The protagonist, Nimeta's emotional detachment from her children and her continual mockery of her mother's conventional lifestyle underscore her alienation from Bosniak familial traditions. Her son, Fikret, remarks on her mother "You are perpetually hurried or absorbed in thought" (Kulin 2005, 4). Her sarcastic attitude toward her mother's cleaning habits and strict moral codes signifies her rejection of traditional roles in favor of a contemporary, westernized identity. This attitude is clearly conveyed in her response: "Mother, you disapprove of cigarettes, alcohol, or profanity. Does it imply that whistling is prohibited as well?" (Kulin 2005, 116). Her mother's reaction encapsulates the experience of Bosnian imitators: "I have never understood this nation's affinity for alcohol … Can you not converse without a man, without aggression, or without a fool?" (Kulin 2005, 116).

Nimeta's daughter, Hana, also exhibits behavior shaped by Western influences, particularly in her disregard for the gravity of the wartime situation. Upon learning that her father has decided to join the war effort, Hana remains preoccupied with securing her mother's permission to celebrate her birthday, showing a lack of interest in the crisis unfolding around her. Moreover, Western entertainment culture continues to flourish in Bosnia despite war. Surviving hotels host live music performances, often featuring jazz, which contrasts with *sevdalinka*[6] music tradition that is traditionally sung in the country.[7] This entertainment culture also involves heavy alcohol consumption, which has become prevalent at nearly every social gathering. Nimeta herself struggles with alcoholism, a fact admitted through narration: "For three years, her son, along with her husband, friends, and mother, had undoubtedly observed her excessive drinking, which exceeded what is deemed appropriate for a woman" (Kulin 2005, 2). This indi-

[5] Fragmentation of character refers to the deliberate dissolution or breaking apart of traditional concepts of character unity and coherence. The failure to receive adequate responses from idealized figures leads to a breakdown in narcissistic structures and results in the fragmentation of the self; this becomes especially pronounced in psychotic disorders (Kohut 2009, 7).

[6] Sevdalinka is a music style that embodies themes of melancholy and emotional intimacy, often reflecting the complexities of love and life's challenges. Gültekin notes that in the mid-19th century, the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz described sevdalinka as Muslim poetry and emphasized that these poems, sung in Slavic languages, widely employed the art of exaggeration as an influence of Eastern poetry (Gültekin et al. 2016, 33).

[7] Pitic stresses that during the mid-20th century, communist cultural policies systematically removed oriental elements from sevdalinka, resulting in what she describes as it being "cleansed of oriental influences" (Pitic 2017, 23).

vidual detachment from faith mirrors a broader cultural tendency among Bosnians to minimize their religious identity in public life. Furthermore, Nimeta is never portrayed reading the Quran until her son's injury during the conflict. Kulin (2005) articulates how Bosnians, under the guise of friendship, consistently supported the Serbs during significant occasions, particularly religious ones: "The Bosnian populace, who commemorated their festivities and Christmas alongside them, presenting gifts on their sacred occasions" (120). However, there are no indications or expressions of similar respect or observance toward Bosnian religious ceremonies in return. This one-sided participation in the dominant culture's rituals highlights how religious identity is often diluted or neglected in pursuit of societal acceptance.

In order to comprehend these psychological issues more deeply, it is essential to examine the relationships between men and women of color and Europeans. Fanon (2008) claims that "authentic love will remain unattainable before one has purged oneself of that feeling of inferiority or that Adlerian exaltation, that overcompensation" (28–29). This statement reflects a fundamental aspect of colonial psychology: the colonized individual cannot genuinely experience emotional connection unless they liberate themselves from internalized inferiority and the urge to imitate the colonizer. A woman of color tends to reject her own ethnic background and perceives whiteness as a supremacy symbolizing civility and sophistication. For instance, one of Fanon's (2008) patients repudiates her own racial identity, stating, "I do not like the Negro because he is savage. Not savage in a cannibal way, but lacking refinement" (41). To gain such social advancement, a woman of color yearns to marry a white man, perceiving such a union as a means of escaping racial discrimination. One of the mulatto women in Fanon's (2008) examples, through such a marriage, distances herself from her authentic identity in the search for the transformation she desires: "She was no longer the woman who wanted to be white; she was white" (41). However, this attempt to ascend "from the class of slaves to that of masters" through overcompensation ultimately leads to psychological conflicts and inherent contradictions (Fanon 2008, 41). The price of this class transmission is identity disorientation, as her attempts to ascend to a higher social class are impeded by her ethnic heritage, which continues to define and label her, inhibiting her complete integration and sense of belonging. Consequently, she finds it challenging to reconcile her current social status with her cultural and racial identity, resulting in a fragmented sense of self. Such internal conflict, highlighting that racial identity endures despite societal advancement, is effectively articulated by Fanon (2008), who states, "Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro" (133).

Nimeta experiences a complex emotional turmoil, as she is married to Burhan, a Bosniak, yet simultaneously develops an emotional affinity with Stefan, a Croatian. Her attachment to Stefan is not merely romantic but emblematically tied to her admiration for the Westernized, stable, and modern lifestyle that he represents. Stefan, in this sense, becomes the bearer of a life she yearns for—a standard of living and security that her own war-torn existence seems to lack. Being with Stefan offers Nimeta a sense of wholeness, as though aligning with him allows her to escape sociopoliti-

cal reality. However, this sense of unity is fragile and incomplete since a part of her identity remains rooted in her domestic role as a Bosniak wife and mother, creating a psychological rift. She oscillates between two selves: one shaped by cultural loyalty and familial obligation, and the other drawn to an imagined stability represented by the "Other." Keflioğlu incorporates Paul Ricoeur's (1991) concept of "narrative identity" to examine the transformation of identity over time, which is particularly evident in Nimeta's internal conflicts, which manifest in her fragmentation between the roles of "wife" and "lover" (191).

In a manner similar to Nimeta's situation, her intimate friend Mirsada falls in love with a Serb, decides to relocate to a different city, and commences employment with a Serbian agency to be closer to her lover. For her sake, she hesitantly consents to use the name Miza, which has a more Serbian connotation. Nonetheless, despite her endeavors, her lover ultimately discloses her original identity before his death, leading to his assassination due to his affiliation with Muslims. These entangled and imbalanced cultural relations of both women are strikingly encapsulated in the novel by the statement "Muslims can slip into the arms of Catholics without the slightest unease" (Kulin, 2005, p. 78), which severely conflicts with Bosnian religious and cultural principles, as well as with familial expectations. In Kulin's other works as well, some of her female characters stand out for forming relationships shaped by strong will and a commitment to their ideals. The protagonist of the novel *Füreya* seeks to overcome her inner turmoil by realizing her ideals: "She wants to escape her depression by fulfilling her ideals" (Yılmaz 2004, 72). In this context, even her marital choices are guided by broader ambitions rather than personal sentiment: the marriage proposal "was made attractive mainly because it meant being close to him—Atatürk" (Yılmaz 2004, 76).

Beyond imitation and admiration, a more profound issue critiqued within postcolonial studies is the unawareness of one's religious and historical roots. This lack of historical consciousness is poignantly reflected in the Bosnians' collective naivety throughout *Sevdalinka*. For instance, Fikret's limited understanding of his people's history is evident in the observation that "just as every other child, Fiko had read the official history written after Tito in school" (Kulin 2005, 319). Similarly, the Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegović appears unaware of the severity of Bosnia's situation, as he hands over civilian weapons to the military as a gesture of good faith during a period of quarrels and minor conflicts, even at the expense of the civilians' defense. The narrative voice poignantly captures this collective unawareness by asserting that the Bosnians "had sunk into a deep and pleasant slumber. In this deep sleep, they were dreaming together with their president, Alija Izetbegović" (Kulin 2005, 123). Here, the sleep metaphor embodies both passive political inertia and a collective psychological denial in the face of encroaching violence.

This theme is vividly illustrated as Fiko, wounded and held by his father, witnesses the river Milaçka turn crimson at dawn. Burhan explains, "For the sake of the blood Bosniaks have shed for centuries, Milaçka takes this color at dawn, my son" (Kulin 2005, 251). The river serves as a silent observer of centuries of misery and trau-

ma—a reservoir of suppressed memories, awakening each morning with the wounds of a concealed past. Fiko's failure to comprehend the significance of this river symbol displays his limited perception of history. Burhan's grave statement, "We thought Bosniak blood would no longer be shed. We were misguided," capturing the enduring tragedy of misplaced hope and recurring violence (Kulin 2005, 251). Another illusion of safety and hope is tragically dismantled in the scene where Bosniaks—young and old—march for peace, believing that war will not erupt in their land again (Kulin 2005, 105). During this hopeful demonstration, the Bosniaks hold on to the hope that war will not erupt (Kulin 2005, 105). Yet this fragile belief is violently shattered when a young girl named Suada, holding a red carnation as a symbol of hope, is fatally shot. Kulin (2005) reflects this traumatic moment with her impressive statement, "A deep red carnation of death now blossomed upon Suada's chest" (107). Here, the color red returns not only as a symbol of blood and loss but also as a marker of crushed hope, linking individual tragedy to collective suffering. The depiction of Suada's fallen flower resonates with the crimson waters of the Milaçka, emphasizing the notion that historical traumas endure via symbols, memories, and corporeal forms, perpetually marking the landscape of Bosnian identity. Kulin argues how symbolic landscapes embody the traumas of colonial and ethno-religious persecution, creating the crimson river not merely as a metaphor for historical pain but as a psychic scar of an identity forged through continual subjection and betrayal.

As illustrated throughout the novel, this pervasive unawareness, combined with the internalization of systemic oppression and the pressure to adopt imitative behaviors, causes individuals to become estranged from their authentic identities. Over time, this estrangement fractures their sense of self, producing fragmented identities that struggle to reconcile imposed labels with personal and collective histories. The reason for such fragmentation is the aim of colonial authorities to create "an existential deviation on the Negro"; this imposition serves to maintain ethnic hierarchies and white superiority (Fanon 2008, 6). This disparity not only deepens the oppressed one's identity conflict against imposed labels and illusions but also heightens the colonizer's insecurity about the certainty of their power. While asserting dominance, the colonizer simultaneously seeks admiration yet denies the humanity of the oppressed. Bhabha captures this ambivalence: "The colonizer is himself ensnared in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, oscillating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution" (Bhabha, quoted in Fanon 2008, xxxiii). Perceiving the colonized as a threat to their superiority, the colonizer reacts with fear and aggression, caught between the desire to dominate and the fear of being overthrown. The centuries-old imperative to "turn white or disappear" (Fanon 2008, 75) is now considered a threat by the oppressors themselves, since races resembling white people have become a 'threat' to their supremacy, thereby further intensifying oppression (Fanon 2008, 126).

In light of Bosnia's quest for independence amid the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Serb anxieties intensify, exacerbating their violent tendencies. The violence inflicted upon Bosniaks escalates to such a degree of brutality that it deliberately targets mater-

nity clinics with aerial bombings and opens fire on buses transporting children; moreover, it penetrates even the most sacred spaces, such as mosques, which are desecrated and converted into stables without hesitation. This campaign of violence is not limited to physical bodies but extends to cultural annihilation. As Keflioğlu (2025) emphasizes, the systematic destruction of physical spaces—lands, monuments—is deliberately aimed at erasing collective memory and dismantling the continuity of Bosnian identity (186–87). He further notes that the traumatic rupture of war disrupts the intergenerational transmission of memory, threatening to sever the cultural and historical roots embodied in the collective psyche (Keflioğlu 2025, 181). As of April 6, the concept of "ethnic cleansing" transforms from a political strategy into, as described by Karadžić, a kind of sport carried out with passion and savagery (Kulin 2005, 184). Serbian militants become "lust machines" deployed to commit sexual violence, revealing the extent of the atrocities suffered by the Bosniaks (Kulin 2005, 185).

The Serbs' objective in such destruction is revealed by a chilling statement of a Croatian: "The aim was to terrify the Bosniaks so thoroughly that those who survived would flee these lands and never return" (Kulin 2005, 223). To convey the atrocities committed by the Serbs, the following scene from the novel provides a particularly vivid and horrifying depiction. Bosnians seeking safety in camps to escape the war endure severe mistreatment: "Bosnians were confined in cattle cars, covered in animal excrement, and deprived of sustenance and water" (Kulin 2005, 201). This brutality particularly engulfs Bosniak women and children, who are subjected to additional violence, including confinement in vehicles where Serbian women throw stones and scald them with hot water through the windows (Kulin 2005, 211). As violence intensifies, Bosnians come to the realization that all their efforts fail to provide refuge for themselves. In accordance with Fanon's argument, they are ultimately driven to articulate a reconstituted sense of self, one rooted in resistance, agency, and the reclamation of collective dignity.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the individuals in Ayşe Kulin's *Sevdalinka* struggled to construct their identities amid historical trauma, cultural rupture, and external oppression. It indicated that these individuals were uprooted by the pressures they endured, which led to internalized alienation and compelled them to adopt imposed, foreign identities over time. Consequently, a tendency to imitate dominant cultures emerged. These imitative behaviors were not voluntary acts of assimilation but rather responses to prolonged psychological pressures within a colonial context where the dominant culture was idealized and the local culture devalued. The study detailed how the identity conflicts arising from this context were further intensified through postcolonial mechanisms such as propaganda, threats, and violence employed by colonial powers to enforce hegemonic norms and suppress resistance. Centered on Nimeta, the expe-

riences of the characters revealed how identity is fragmented under these conditions. Nimeta's relationships with her husband, lover, and mother reflected the tension between personal desires and historical and cultural burdens. The novel treated identity not as a fixed and unified structure but as a fragile formation continuously shaped and often fractured by external forces. Thus, it examined the interrelation between identity formation, culture, and history at a societal level.

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