

## Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*: A Search for a Racial Utopia

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Frantz Fanon's first book *Black Skin, White Masks*, originally titled as *An Essay for the Disalienation of Blacks*, published in 1952, is a discourse on antiracial themes. This text records Fanon's initial reactions towards the black issues, particularly, as they existed in the French Caribbean colonies in the early 20th century. Basing on Lacanian psychoanalytic mold and drawing much on the phenomenological existentialism of Hegel and Sartre, Fanon develops his theory on racial discrimination along the line of Aime Cesaire's negritude philosophy. This paper makes an analysis of the key concepts that are discussed by him in this text.

Fanon was born in a middle class black family in 1925 in the French colony of Martinique which was populated by a people whose forefathers were brought to the Caribbean as slaves from the Western African coast by European tradesmen. In accordance with the French colonial policy, the colonies of France were considered as "overseas departments" of a single empire, France being its metropolis, and the educated "evolved" elites of these overseas departments being given full citizenship in the French republic and being a part of the "professional-administrative, intellectual or artistic establishment" of the state by virtue of their education ("Frantz Fanon"). In keeping with this policy the colonial authority very skillfully introduced their language and culture to their colonial subjects through the education system. Being fanned by the intriguing ideas of nationhood, and being educated in the French linguistic and cultural atmosphere, Fanon, like most of his native people, grew up in an environment in which he couldn't but identify himself as a Frenchman. At the age of eighteen, during the World War II, he voluntarily served the Free French Army, got wounded, and was officially honored for his services. Later he came to France on scholarship to study psychiatry and medicine. And only during his stay in mainland France, first as a student and then as a medical practitioner, did he realize to his utter shock that despite his internalization of French language and culture, he was considered by the French white people as nothing but an "outsider" --a "foreigner." In fact, the French society looked upon the black subjects, let alone having them considered as an integral part of them, rather as a genealogically inferior race: "humanity at its lowest"(126)<sup>1</sup>, being characterized by "[b]lack magic, primitive mentality,

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animism, animal eroticism . . ." (112) and all the pejorative ideas that could be associated with barbarism. Even his education didn't qualify him to be considered more than a stereotyped black.

This initial setback gave birth to a crisis in Fanon concerning his black subject identity. At this time he was also greatly influenced by Aime Cesaire, who in his masterpiece, *Discourse of Colonialism* (1950), questioned the appropriateness of the Eurocentric notion of humanism which advocated European norms to be superior, transcending all geographical, historical and cultural boundaries. Cesaire's text, as Fanon points out, articulates his deep anguish at the manipulative plantation of feelings like "fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement"(qtd in Fanon 7), into the mind of the colonized people so as to breed in them a sense of cultural and genealogical inferiority. Grounding on this point, Fanon makes a "clinical study"--a "sociodiagnostic" (Fanon's coinage), of the psychological development of the non-white colonized people that resulted as a consequence of the imposition of Eurocentric values on them. This imposition, Fanon argues, often backfires, as it creates self-hatred and anger caused from their (the blacks') failed attempts to alienate their souls from their cultural originality. In a mentally dislocated world, absurdly though, such as "[t]he black man wants to be white . . . . to reach a human level"(9). And gradually this dilemma accentuates a process of deculturation. In the backdrop of such cultural ambience, Fanon, overcoming his initial sense of disappointment, works out a plan in his study so as to free the black man from the "arsenal of complexes" (30), which is a by-product of the colonial environment, and thus builds a homogeneous society based on nationhood going beyond racial prejudices.

Developing *BSWM* as an antiracial discourse, Fanon recognizes the cultural factor, more than the political and the economic ones, as effectively perpetuating the colonial domination. Drawing on Lacanian concept of unconscious as having a structure similar to the structure of language, Fanon identifies linguistic phenomenon as an effective tool to impose particular ideas on the mind of the colonized people. He points out that when a person speaks a certain language, he uses certain syntax and morphology of that language, and language, as Fanon asserts, is the beholder and conveyor of particular cultural views. Later the African writer and theorist Ngugi wa Thiongo also upheld similar views. Citing his own experiences in the British colony Kenya where English became "the tickets to higher realm," Ngugi explains the process as:

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Communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture . . . . Culture embodies those morals, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they [a certain generation] come to view themselves, and particularly their place in the universe. Values are basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, breaking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next . . . .(289)

Thereby, Fanon comments, when a Negro gets back to Antilles from France adopting the French language, it is "evidence of a dislocation, a separation"(25) from his own culture. Because, by adopting that particular language, he has acclimatized himself into the "collective unconscious" of that cultural group who speak in this language. Gradually, their view of the world will become that of the white Europeans because in France "no black voice exists"(153). And, as to the whites "[t]he archetype of the lowest values is represented by the Negro"(189), and the Antillean, in his attempt to separate himself from his cultural origin, identifies himself with the whites and to upgrade his status, tries to develop similar linguistic accuracy of that group to prove him "whiter."

Hence, when a Negro becomes angry when pidgin is spoken to him, Fanon explains, it is rather a matter of frustration, a fear that he might get ensnared into his own "effigy," his original cultural identity, which means, "primitizing him, decivilizing him"(32). It never evades his mind that his native language is stigmatized by its association with slavery. However, Fanon does not ignore the historic importance of speaking French either, as to the Negro "it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago"(38). Fanon proposes that when a solution to black-white co-existential problems is to be sought, this phenomenon should be treated as part of the reality.

In the course of his discussion on the mechanics of colonialism, Fanon brings up the text *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (published in 1950), written by Octave Mannoni--Fanon's contemporary French writer and psychologist. Fanon argues that Mannoni has defined this colonizer/colonized relation in terms of two different states of psychology: "authority complex" on the colonizer's part and "dependency complex" on the part of the colonized. In his text Mannoni illustrates the ambiguity-like this:

Not all peoples can be colonized; [but] only those who experience this need for [dependency][Fanon's addition]. . . . Whenever Europeans have founded colonies of the type we are considering [that is, Caribbean colonies], it can safely be said that their coming was unconsciously expected-even desired-by the future subject peoples. Everywhere there existed legends foretelling the arrival of strangers from the sea, bearing wondrous gifts with them. (qtd in Fanon 99)

Broadly speaking, Mannoni, as becomes obvious from the quoted passage, has traced a sense of inferiority in the collective psyche of the people of these lands which is manipulated by the imperialists to establish colonies there. He coins a new term "Prospero complex" to describe the role of the colonizers in the colonies. Fanon, after Mannoni, describe this complex as "the sum of those unconscious neurotic tendencies that delineate at the same time the 'picture' of the paternalist colonial and the portrait of 'the racist' whose daughter has suffered an (imaginary [Fanon's addition]) attempted rape at the hands of an inferior being"(107). Thus, the colonizer, like Shakespeare's Prospero, behaves in accordance with his sense of superiority over the colonized along with the anxiety of getting assaulted by this very subjugated being.

Developing his discussion in this way, Mannoni ignores the fact that the European civilization itself is responsible for colonial racism and lays the guilt on the shoulders of the petty officials and traders who couldn't achieve great success in spite of hard toil. Explaining the desolation of the men of color, particularly of the people of Malagasy in this case, Mannoni says that it surfaces itself only in a situation when the blacks form a minority within a larger community of whites. And this frustration is aggravated by their conscious attempts to equate themselves with the whites, which in the end become "agonizingly" unattainable as for a black turning white, in the literal sense, is impossible. Mannoni even denies the role of economic exploitation as a factor for generating racist attitude, and to substantiate his observation, he refers to South Africa where the poor white's contempt for the Negro has no relevance to economy. At the end he suggests that if the Malagasy, the black man in general, accepts these facts and forms accordingly relations of dependence with his superiors, his inferiority complex would no longer trouble him but if he fails to do so "his feeling of insecurity" would make him suffer "a crisis" (qtd in Fanon 94).

Refuting Mannoni's arguments Fanon says that the inferiority complex on the part of the Negro is a production of the society he lives in. And this



society is a construction of the European civilization which, claims Fanon with reference to Césaire's views on Nazism (in *Discourse of Colonialism*)<sup>2</sup>, legitimated European "savagery," employed against the non-European peoples to meet their political ends (qtd in Fanon 90). Besides, Fanon cross-examines Mannoni's idea of politics of economy in the light of his reading of Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jews*. Sartre views anti-Semitism as "a poor man's snobbery" and says that "the rich for the most part exploit [Fanon's italics] this passion for their own uses. . . . It is propagated mainly among middle classes . . . [a]nd by treating the Jew as an inferior and pernicious being" the poor and middle class people feel that they themselves belong to that "elite" group (qtd in Fanon 87). In a similar manner, as Fanon explains it, the poor white behaving in accordance with Sartre's Jew-hating poor man, tries to level himself with the white elite by showing similar contempt to the black. Thus, discarding Mannoni's theorization concerning colonial perpetuation, Fanon infers that Mannoni's idea lacks substance as to draw any conclusion on resolving the problem.

Fanon's idea about racial discrimination, rather, develops along the line of classical tradition of mimicry that ensues as a result of colonizer's cultural domination in a colonial atmosphere. But unlike Homi K Bhaba, who perceives this phenomenon as a destabilizing force, Fanon asserts that this mimicry on the part of the Antillean Negro asks for greater assimilation into the dominant culture, instead of jeopardizing its stability. (Though Fanon reviewed his opinion about mimicry in his latter essays, and up to this point of time he emphasized on greater assimilation on the basis of cultural inheritance.) Fanon exemplifies this by referring to French novels, written by colored writers.

Fanon draws on René Maran's novel *Un homme pariel aux autres* that portrays an orphan Negro-Jean Veneuse, who is born in Antilles and has spent his childhood in a boarding school in Bordeaux. Pointing to his psychological development Fanon says:

An orphan sent to a provincial boarding school, he is compelled to spend his vacations there. His friends and acquaintances scatter all over France on the slightest pretext, whereas the little Negro is forced into the habit of isolation, so that his best friends are his books . . . . Unable to be assimilated, unable to pass unnoticed, he consoles himself by associating with the dead, or at least the absent. (65)

Thus Veneuse grows up in an environment where comments like, "He is the kind of Negro that a lot of white guys ought to be like" (qtd in Fanon 65),

constantly reminds him of his "bodily schema" (110). And it makes him an anxious man who in spite of himself "cannot escape his body"(65). But the real tragedy takes place in his life when he falls deeply in love with a white lady, named Andree Marielle, and suffers from an extreme sense of defeat at his inability to establish a relationship with her. Expressing his feelings for her, he says: "I love Clarisse, I love Mme. Coulanges, even though I never really think of either of them . . . I study Andree in them and I begin to know her by heart . . . (qtd in Fanon 66).

Still he cannot claim her because his consciousness would not allow him to be oblivious of his Negro self, which is the basis of his identity in that white world. Moreover, a feeling of rootlessness pervades him when he becomes a colonial officer and goes to serve his "adopted country in the land of his ancestors." He soon comes to realize that he is " being betrayed by everything about him," because the whites would never accept him as one of them and the blacks have "virtually repudiated him"(qtd in Fanon 67). Thus he becomes a diaspora in his own country. Referring to Germaine Guex, a French psychologist, Fanon points that Veneuse suffers from abandonment neurosis. His experience of being cast off creates in him a dilemma concerning his identity. Fanon observes that this situation may result in two divergent effects, either it will exhibit itself in the form of revenge-inflicting suffering on others, making them feel the pain one has undergone; or in the form of a defense--withdrawing one's self from the object of love, creating, in Guex words, "an overwhelming feeling of impotence in relation to life and people"(73). In the case of Veneuse when he meets Andree, the "woman whom he has wanted for months and months"(78), again, he remains silent. Thereby, being unable to cope with his surroundings and with his own self, this Negro character collapses into a state of complete alienation.

To describe this phenomenon being present in a female Antillean, Fanon draws lavish illustrations from Mayotte Capacia's novel *Ju suis Martiniquaise* and Abdoulaye Sadjji's novel *Nini*.

Mayotte is a black woman- a Negress. When she was a child she tried to blacken a white by emptying her inkwell over his head. Realizing the futility of such attempts she no longer tries "to blacken, to negrify the world," she rather tries to "bleach" both her physical and mental selves. To start with, "she would become a laundress"(45). At one point she learns that her grandmother was a white woman. Therefore, instead of recognizing her own black self, she denounces it and develops a relation with her white lord to add "a bit of whiteness in her life"(42). Fanon calls this behavior a kind



of "lactification," and says that every woman in Martinique believes that saving the race means whitening it, turning it literally into a replica of the whites.

Sadji's Nini is a mulatto girl, "a perfectly stupid little stenographer"(55), as Fanon puts it. She feels "utmost insolence"( qtd in Fanon 56), when Mactar, a Negro baccalaureate, proposes to marry her, because "to offer black love to a *white soul*"(56, my italics) is considered as a great offence in their society. Even having mulatto admirers is a matter of shame to the family as a whole. It is "a question of saving the race"(55), an avoidance of "slipping back"(54). So such a transgression as Mactar's is considered as a capital offense, which is subject to "castration." "And ultimately," states Fanon, "a request is made that Mactar be formally reprimanded by the police"(56-57). Thus, Mactar--the Negro-- becomes a victim of a racist society, and, like Veneuse, is made to suffer from alienation in the very society he lives in.

Underneath these psychic structures of the black women, Fanon observes, lies the wish to escape "psychological minus-value," to go beyond the feeling of "insignificance and its corollary"(58). Any form of relation with the white man means to them a kind of recognition- an elevation from the degraded class of slaves to the dignified class of masters. Fanon's portrayal of the Antillean women, however, does not escape feminist criticism. Feminists reject Fanon's "simplistic and unsympathetic" (Poulos) characterization of black women as having any complicity in colonization.

Fanon furthers his study on psychoneurosis and Negrophobia, and delves deeply into the world of collective psyche to find the answer to these psychic phenomena. The Negro, Fanon observes, who behaves abnormally when in contact with the white world, in most of the cases, never has had any relation with the whites, and in his childhood memory there may be no evidence of white oppressions. Thus their behaviour cannot be explained by the Freudian concept of suppressed emotion. According to Freud, the psychic traumas that are experienced in the early life of a man continue to exist in the unconscious and any feeling of morbidity brings them back to the conscious and creates abnormal tendencies in them. Refuting Freud's theory as inadequate to explain such psychoses, Fanon employs the concept of "collective catharsis" to explain the abnormal behaviours. Defining this process he argues that every society creates outlet through which "the forces accumulated in the form of aggression"(145) can be released. And, the magazines, storybooks, and various children's games work as outlets that serve this purpose. Illustrating this aspect in the young Negro he says:

The Tarzan stories, the sagas of twelve-year old explorers, the adventure of Mickey Mouse, and all those 'comic books' serve actually as release for collective aggression. The magazines are put together by white man for little white men. . . . In the Antilles-and there is every reason to think that the situation is the same in the other colonies-these same magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines the wolf, the Devil, The Evil Spirit, the bad man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.(146).

And thus in his course of relieving the aggression, the black child simultaneously develops an anti-Negro attitude. He thinks of himself not as a Negro but as an Antillean. To him "the Negro lives in Africa." Hence, Fanon states, "[s]ubjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. But he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe"(148). That is, when he will go to Europe, to France in particular, the European framework will make him feel his difference from the white people. After his first encounter with the European society he will discover the gulf of difference between the structure of this society and that of his native family. And subsequently he will tend to reject his family considering it as "black and savage"(149).

A reading of Fanon along this line would reveal that European literature had all along been dominated by this linguistic racialism, as can be clarified by an example from Shakespeare's *Othello*, where the Venetian Duke, indicating Othello's Moorish origin, tells Brabantio: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is far more *fair than black*"(1.3.289-90, italics added); or, to cite another example, the words of the ". . . Little Black Boy" in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*: "And I am black, but O! my soul is white; / White as an angel is the English child" (1-3), are noteworthy. And this impregnating of racial nuances has almost the same effect in both the black and the white psyches in a colonial atmosphere, as both are exposed to the same pedagogical terminologies based on covert racism.

To show the impact of this racist discourse on the mind of the westerners, Fanon recalls an event when a white child in a street of France, cried out at the very sight of him, as he was horrified to see a Negro: "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!"(112). He narrates another situation of similar consequence:



[L]ook a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up.(114).

Referring to such situations, Fanon points out that as the views of the white child living in France, or any European country, are filtered through the cultural grid which is a construction of the European colonialist enterprise, his notions towards the people of different color get distorted. Nudging this point home, Fanon resentfully says, "I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism [sic], social defects slave ship . . .," which are made up by means of "legends, stories, history and above all historicity"(112). This theorization about the New World can be read in the light of Edward Said's views on Orientalism. According to Said:

[Orientalism] can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institute for dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statement about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.(3).

Thus, like the Orient, the New World is also construed in accordance with the western needs. Peter Hulme's tracking down the source of the term 'cannibalism'<sup>3</sup> illustrates how history evolves from the intricate relation between language and culture to serve certain purposes. Likewise, Virginia Mason Vaughan, in her *Othello: A Contextual History* has shown how the Christian whites' view of blackness of the Negro as a signifier of their "sexual fall from grace," and, as a mark of their "perpetual servitude" is "justified by scriptural authority"(54). Manipulating this aspect of history, Europe, with great dexterity, has created an otherness, an alterity to describe people who are racially different, with a view to establishing a cultural hegemony. And this process has made possible a formation of certain "historically bound cultural system[s]," that "perpetuate themselves as psychology"(Poulos), and thus provides stability to the colonial empire.

But instead of going back into the past that will show the long chain of history of cultural domination, Fanon, in a Marxist manner, concentrates on the present, though Homi Bhaba argues that Fanon's ignoring of the past legacy has also resulted in providing all but an impaired vision, in his

words: "[t]here is no master narrative or realist perspective that provide a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problem of the individual or collective psyche"(115). However, Fanon, in a back and forth style, at times goes back to the past to trace the sources of the Negro myths and at times he comes back to the present to discuss the consequences that those myths have produced. Sometimes he does it so frequently that the narrative becomes incoherent and incomprehensive. Nevertheless, his urge for a racially utopian society where people of different races would live in harmony and with dignity never escapes the readers' mind. Impacted by Hegel's theory on self-consciousness as is expressed in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Fanon explains the value of man in the following terms:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose the existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depends. (216-17)

Fanon's text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, thus stands as a dialectic between the colonized and colonizer, between the blacks and the whites, between the body and the mind, held to bring out the unresolved issues of racial disparity. In Fanon's words: "I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness"(232). And this very demand for recognition reverberates through every line of his text.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All textual references are from *Black Skin, White Masks*, by Frantz Fanon. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- <sup>2</sup> Explaining Nazism as a by-product of European savagery over non-European people, Césaire says: "[B]efore they [European communities] became its victims, they were its accomplices; that Nazism they tolerated before they succumbed to it; they exonerated it, they closed their eyes to it, they legitimated it because until then it had been employed only against non-European peoples; that Nazism they encouraged, they were responsible for it" (90-91). See Fanon.



<sup>3</sup> Hulme points out that the term "cannibale" is supposed to appear initially on the logbook of Columbus where he used to write down the navigation details of his journey through the Caribbean in the winters of 1442-43. But this actual text disappeared in the middle of the 16th century. People first came to know about it later through *Columbus's Journal*, which is a handwritten abstract made in 1552 and probably from the copy of Columbus's original. This later text shows that during his journey Columbus came to know about the inhabitants of an Indian isle from members of another Indian race--who were traditional enemies to them-- who told him that the island was inhabited by people who had one eye in the forehead and there were 'canibals' too, who used to eat man. Thus the term 'cannibal,' as Hulme points, enters the European text without any authenticity. After various observations he comes to the conclusion that the term "canibal" closely resonates with the term "Caniba," which, according to the *Journal* as dated December 11, 1492, stands for "nothing else than the *people of the Grand Khan* [my italics] who must be very near here and possess ships, and they must come to take them captive, and as the prisoners do not return, they believe that they have been eaten" (qtd in Hulme 369). See Hulme.365-69.

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