

## **Colonial Disidentification and the False Route to African Identity in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask***

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### **Abstract**

#### **Introduction**

Colonialism is a term that captures the expansive agenda of some European nations right from the Renaissance to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the practice of colonialism stretches back to about 1450 AD, its entry into the *English Dictionary* in the mid-nineteenth century speaks volume of the ferocity of the practice during the period. There is always a difficulty in most attempts to define the term as it is often confused with another term, imperialism, to which it is closely related. Edward Said's distinction settles the conceptual problem that exists between the two terms when he associates imperialism with a nation ruling another nation from a distance and imperialism with a nation implanting settlement of its citizens to rule over a distant territory and its peoples (Said, 1994).

The imposition of colonial rule on any nation is always a function of power imbalance between two nations. It subordinates the less powerful to the more powerful, and creates a system of rules whose only consideration is the interest of the colonizing power. At the inception of any colonial enterprise, the disparity that exists between colonizing nations and colonized ones is only expressed in military terms. Hillaire Belloc (1898, vi) expressed the difference that military prowess makes in any colonial relationship thus: "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not," was how. Nations that had more armaments were more likely to impose themselves on others, and more likely to defend themselves against external imposition.

What is emphasized above is physical violence that attends colonialism. Earliest critics of colonialism like Diderot based their criticism mainly on this physical violence which colonialism entails, and the consequent loss of lives and limbs of the colonized and the colonizer. Indeed, this is the most visible form of colonial violence. Frantz Fanon (2008) follows the same lead that defines colonialism as a violent phenomenon. He avers that violence defines the first encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, and that colonialism is maintained by violence. Adele Jinaudu (1976) analyses Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* and arrives at the conclusion that Fanon's conception of colonialism as violence differs from others

whose only emphasis is on the physical form of colonial violence. He holds that Fanon's description of colonialism as a violent enterprise does not see violence as only physical event. For Adele, Fanon's description has an eye on Galtung's types of violence where violence is seen as manifesting in three dimensions: physical, structural and psychological.

Fanon's exposition of physical violence follows the same route as has been depicted above. He points at discriminatory practices that characterize colonial societies as proof of structural violence which colonialism entails. Apartheid South Africa is the most vivid example here and Fanon does not hesitate to demonstrate the fact of structural violence inherent in colonialism with it. He writes of compartmentalization, of different quarters for the natives and for the settlers, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans. These structures are consequences of the colonial disidentification of the colonized.

Frantz Fanon articulates the path of reidentification undertaken by the Africans in the presence of colonial disidentification. He regards this as false route to African identity and highlights their weaknesses. In this paper we are going to expose these false routes to African identity as highlighted by fan importance of development in the confidence and recognition of the African as a being in the world. In this paper, we shall examine Fanon's thought on the themes of African decolonization, African identity and African development as espoused in the *Black Skin, White Mask*.

### **The Identity of the Colonized**

Colonialism is built on the assumption that the Other is different. The truth about identity is such that it is expressed in sameness and otherness, and in difference. Otherness and difference are neutral concepts as they do not express axiological judgment in themselves. Thus, the statement "I am not you" expresses the range of being I may not assume, and which is unlike me, which is different. It is a statement that renders you the Other of me, and at the same time makes me the Other of you without any statement about value judgment.

Colonialism thrives in contriving value judgments about concepts that are intrinsically neutral. Thus, when it is said that colonialism is built on the assumption that the Other is different, both terms, Otherness and Difference, are divested of their inherent neutrality. They acquire the toga of measure of values. The values that are measured in this case are the colonizers and the colonized. Hence, in every encounter that involves the colonizer and the colonized, the latter is viewed as the natural inferior of the colonizer. This mode of conceiving the colonized as natural inferior of the colonizer is the result of racism which permeates the colonial enterprise. Racism thrives in assigning rigid, unchangeable status or identity to a group of persons. Colonialism brought the white people in contact with people of other cultures whom they labeled as inferior. This toga of inferiority permeates every aspect of the relationship involving the colonizer and the colonized, and plays the role of legislating social status in a colonial encounter. The white man who is perceived as superior assumes natural position of leadership while the black man assumes a subordinate role (Fanon, 2008).

To keep the colonized in his place requires a more elaborate philosophy and reason. Exploring the Manichean terms of 'men' and 'native' that was popularized by Sartre in his foreword to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, that has also characterized colonial literature, Abdul JanMohammed (1985) holds that the colonizer contrived a systematic order that was founded on the ethical in which: "... to say "native" is automatically to say "evil" and to evoke immediately the economy of the Manichean allegory.

What JanMohammed shows is that the identity of the colonized people is the product of their being labelled by the colonizer. This idea is well expressed by Roy Porter (1987) who invokes the abstract imagery of madness in order to show the nature of colonial identity: "Madness is another country." Foisting a perjured identity on the colonized serves the purpose of justifying the colonizers business of colonization. Thus, an ambush against the identity of the colonized is considered the ultimate foundation for the colonialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Frantz Fanon explores the mode of this identification in a black colonial territory. For Fanon, the black man is discriminated against because he is black, and his blackness pegs him at the zone of non-human where his being is a complete negation of all that it entails to be human. Fanon was forthright as he sums the situation of black man's identity, the nature of his being, thus he states forcefully: "At the risk of arousing the resentment of my coloured brothers, I will say that the black man is not a man" (Fanon, 2008, 1).

What then is the black man if he is excluded from the zone of being human? Fanon's answer thrusts back to the recesses of evolutionary theory popularized by the English naturalist, Charles Darwin. Fanon does not speak for himself. The answer he gives is not as a result of his own rational consideration of what it means to be a black person. He merely reports an epistemological understanding prevalent in his time: "It has been said that the Negro is the link between monkey and man—meaning, of course, white man." (Fanon, 2008, 18).

Fanon exploits the general mode of identifying a colonized black man in the colonial situation. The general tendency is to regard him like a mammal. Whichever mammal that he is connected with at every point of identification depends on which assigned peculiar characteristics the speaker wants to emphasize. The reference to the Negro as the link between monkey and man plays on the fact of the Negro's bipedalism. What is being emphasized here is that the identification of the Negro as a particular species of mammal is fluid. Jean Paul Sartre bears witness to this when he shows the mode of identifying a black person prevalent in his native France, with which he was also indoctrinated. "The Negroes did not worry me;" he writes, "I had been taught that they were good dogs. With them, we were still among mammals." Sartre does not elaborate on the reason behind this identification of the Negroes as dogs but the reason begins to emerge when it is discovered that the dog is highly regarded as a hyper active sexual animal. Thus, regarding the Negro as a dog emphasizes the predominant view about the Negro as being endowed with high sexual prowess and were immoral, promiscuous, libidinous and always desired white people (Loomba, 1998).

Indeed, the ascription of animalistic and sexual qualities to the black person serves to delineate a range of human qualities which they cannot assume. From such ascription follows the assumption that the Negroes are irrational, immoral, base, and generally evil. How does the African rescue

himself from this? We attempt an exposition of the many attempts made by Africans to reidentify themselves as humans. Fanon regards them as false route to identity and points out what is wrong with them.

### **Marriage and Sexual Relationship with a White Person**

The first of these efforts is shown in the treatment of marriage and sexual relationship by Fanon. He begins with his profession of his belief in the possibility of love. This belief is founded on his own conception of the human person as a movement toward the world and toward his like. He emphasizes that one of the dimensions of this movement towards one's like entails a movement of love, and a gift of oneself. Fanon leads one immediately into the depth of his meaning by calling in the notion of gift into the discussion. A gift involves giving and receiving out of free will. It is a human expression of goodwill. Thus, love is a gift, a free giving of oneself to another.

Sexual relationship that involves a man and a woman ought to be a love affair. For Fanon it ought to entail a free giving of oneself to another, and should be devoid of any intentionality. Authentic love, as conceived by Fanon, means:

Wishing for others what one postulates for oneself, when that postulation unites the permanent values of human reality—(It, authentic love) entails the mobilization of psychic drives basically freed of unconscious conflicts. (Fanon, 2008, 28).

Fanon assumes at once that this sort of love, authentic love is impossible in any relationship that involves a black person and a white person. A return to the white man's mode of conceptualizing the black person is necessary here. The black person, in the white man's view is an animal. From this point of view, a white person who engages in a sexual relationship with the black person is a degenerate. He knows this but still chooses to allow himself a momentary slip into the world of the irrational. Fanon shows that such a relationship is not grounded in authentic love as there is no mutual postulation for the other what one postulates for oneself. The white person in the relationship does not define the black person the same way he defines himself as a human person. As a result of this, his psyche is marred by unconscious conflict. Fanon quotes Mayotte Capecia to prove the point of this unconscious conflict which exists in the psyche of the white partner in any relationship involving him and a Negro woman: "But a woman of colour is never altogether respectable in a white man's eyes. Even when he loves her. I know that." What Fanon wants to question is the meaning of love without respect. What is love if it does not lead to the recognition of the dignity of the one loved?

Karen Taylor tells that the act of sexual relation with a black woman was intended to denigrate her all the more. She was seen as symbol of her race, and her conquest in a sexual relationship symbolizes the subordination of the race which she symbolizes as such a relationship serves to demonstrate to the colonized man that he is powerless. Beyond this, the black woman is completely dehumanized in the psyche of the colonizer that he sees the sexual liaison with her as a sort of personally-permitted-depravity on his part. Taylor observes this point this way: "Through the coercive nature of colonial domination, colonizers sought to create a sexualized native bereft of will, desire, or gaze. This native was to be a tabula rasa for European sexual imaginings."

The black woman is not restrained by the fact of this pejorative perception. She is not unaware of the manner in which she is perceived by the white man. Fanon analyses her reaction to it which manifests in ambivalence of trying to turn white into black and trying to turn black into white. In the first instance, which represents the infantile stage in the development of the black woman, she wants to make the white man black. Fanon demonstrates this desire with Mayotte Capécia's childhood attempt where she emptied an inkwell on the head of a white child. The appearance of the child the next day, still retaining his white colour must have frustrated the black girl.

Fanon makes no reference of such desire to turn the white man black among adult black women. Rather reference to turning whites black is made by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, & Helen Tiffin (1995) who write that in inter-racial sex, the "sexual liaisons with 'native' peoples were supposed to result in a contamination of the colonizers' pure stock and thus their degeneracy and demise as a vigorous and civilized (as opposed to savage or degenerate) race." This process aims to bring the colonizer down to the level of the colonized. A sexual encounter in this case makes him less human too and makes him equal of the black person in a negative way.

But what use does it serve to degrade the white man. The best alternative is to elevate oneself. A mature Mayotte Capécia's understands this and expresses it in her desire: "I should have liked to be married, but to a white man." From Fanon's own analysis it is clear that Mayotte Capécia loves a white man with whom she has gone into a relationship. But her love is not pure. It is a utilitarian love that seeks to take from the white man that which he denies people of Capécia's race. Her love seeks to appropriate as it gives. What does she want to appropriate from the white man? It is his whiteness which expresses his humanity, his personhood. The Negro woman wants to be white. It is only in being so that she can be human.

In a context where whiteness is defined to be human the black person who engages in a sexual liaison with a white person hopes to become white, and therefore human, by the mere mixing of his sexual fluid with that of a white person. Fanon explains the way this thinking works in a black man.

I want to be acknowledged not as black but as white... Who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization... I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (Fanon, 2008, 45).

Indeed, the question is not about how to affect the skin colour of the black person through sexual engagement with a white person. Since wealth is associated with whiteness, a person who has wealth is white. What the black who seeks amorous relationship with a white person wants is the elevation of his social status, a departure from his peasant status to a higher social rank. The white man brings his wealth and his status, and since she is his partner the wealth and the status rob off on him.

The question suggests itself now to us: to what extent does the black person who engages in a sexual relationship with a white person succeed, by virtue of that act in affecting his or her identity?

This question is very important to Fanon, for an answer to it is necessary if he must proceed in his quest for the authentic route to the human identity of the black person. He writes that no matter how many times a white man went to bed with a black woman: "... there was undoubtedly no tendency on his part to respect her entity as another person." Fanon hid this answer in a footnote. The Negro fails partially, and succeeds partially. She succeeds on the other part where she is recognized by her fellow Negroes who now regard her as a white person. But this is not really important. What is important is the recognition by the Other, the white man. This is not possible. So she fails, and this failure explains the futility of the chosen route.

Fanon sees the adoption of this route to authentic identity as a result of neurotic disorder engendered by the nature of colonial environment. The black man who seeks to enhance his identity by seeking to become white is a victim of inferiority complex instilled in him by colonialism. What he suffers is a mental disorder that induces him to run away from himself.

Fanon also considers the ethical implication of what the black person who seeks to regain his identity as a human person does when he relies on his relationship with a white person to elevate himself. The white man is already in error for colonizing the black man and for turning him into an object. Fanon's analysis and rejection of this as route to authentic identity is rooted in his adoption of the Kantian imperative: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, always as an end, never merely as a means." The black man who hopes to upgrade his identity through his sexual relationship with a black woman has not treated that woman as a being of dignity, an end in herself. He becomes guilty of the same offence with which the white man is charged. This point, too, makes this route a fruitless one.

## **History**

The second false route to restoring African identity is history. Early African writers were led into proving their humanity through an effort to counter Hegel's postulation that the African is not a historical being. From Hegel's conception, history represents great achievements and man's effort to reshape the world, and move it farther away from the frontiers of nature. He later points at some great achievements of certain nations as proof of their historic nature. The English, for instance, would point at their maritime prowess as proof of their achievements as a people. What concrete proof has the African to point at as proof of his humanity? For Hegel, the answer is nothing.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century threw up a number of African responses to such views as expressed by the German philosopher. For such African writers like John Jackson, Leopold Senghor, and Cheik Anta Diop, Hegel's view above and others similar to it were as a result of distortion of history which followed European colonization of mankind, world scholarship, and writings. According to John Henrik Clarke, the European colonization of the world was a process that ensured writing or re-writing of history in order to portray the Europeans as the major, if not the only creators of civilization. Setting the widely accepted Egyptian civilization as their foundation, African writers seek to prove that what is regarded as Egyptian civilization was indeed black man's civilization and not the product of Europe and Asia as postulated by Hegel. Senghor was one of the earliest pioneers of this view as he asserted that Negro blood circulated in the veins of ancient Egyptians.

Thus, in what Oguejiofor (2002) regards as a restoration project meant to regain what was lost or to bring to light what was swept underground on the assumption of the backwardness of Africa the

Africans attempt to show that the intellectual and cultural materials which the ancient Greeks borrowed from Egypt were indeed black African invention. Proponents give reasons to prove that Greek philosophy and civilization, the development of language, writing, discovery of other continents, have African imprints in them. D. A. Masolo's effort is new. Masolo departs from the practice of tracing the source of Greek philosophy to ancient Egypt but goes a step forward to show that there were African contemporaries of ancient Greco-Roman philosophers. Masolo compiles a list that includes such figures as Augustine, Origen, Plotinus, Hypatia, and so on.

Fanon gazes at such efforts that seek to restore the identity of the black person as a human person and poses the question: "Was this our salvation?" When Fanon provides an answer to his own question he seems to say that the denial of the humanity the black person suffers is an exercise that takes place in the present. He regards it as a futile effort to recoil to the past in order to foster an identity of the present. In the argument of Fanon, other peoples of the world do not rely on their past achievements in order to prove their contribution to the development of the world. Rather, they point at concrete achievements that are made to solve today's problems. The focus of today's African intellectuals should be to enthrone a continent that is able to contribute its own quota in the present movement of history.

Lay aside your history, your investigations of the past, and try to feel yourself into our rhythm. In a society such as ours, ... what matters now is no longer playing the game of the world but subjugating it with integers and atoms. (Fanon, 2008, 100).

Fanon sees as particularly dangerous, Aliene Diop's position that upholds the inconsequentiality of the concept of history as progress as far as the Negro is concerned. This shows Fanon's complete awareness of the debate between Afrocentric scholars and their Eurocentric counterparts. He surmises that those who want to prove the humanity of the black man by recounting some great deeds of his ancestors have lost the battle. Fanon's position is understandable. If it is possible to point out the great achievements of one's ancestors as proof of the humanity of one's race, what concrete achievements can one point out today in order to continue to prove that the humanity of one's race has not slipped since one's ancestors? For scholars like Aliene Diop such exercise is of no consequence and is indeed antithetical to the African spirit.

A proper awareness of the implication of such position as the above in the light of Darwinian evolution must have informed Fanon's classification of it as dangerous. Darwin speaks of evolution in order to mark the progress of human development. Will pointing out great achievements of the Negro's ancestors without showing any contemporary replication of such achievements not lead to questioning whether the evolved man has not regressed irretrievably in the Negro? It is on this note that Fanon dismisses such exercise as seeks to hinge the human identity of the Negro on the achievements of his ancestors.

### **Ethnocentrism**

Anthropological studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were heavily influenced by the social evolutionary thoughts of Karl Marx and Auguste Comte. Both Marx and Comte are reputed for their gradation of human societies according to their level of technological advancement and

scientific knowledge. Such gradation, with time, makes connection between developed societies and civilized individuals. On the contrary, underdevelopment was linked to human primitivity, and this influenced Lucien Levy-Bruhl to undertake a work which examined the manner of thinking of the primitive men.

Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* (1965) professes to correct such view about the Africans. Tempels has set out to uphold the humanity of the African people but argues that despite their humanity the Africans are hierarchically inferior to the Europeans. Most literature which previously emphasized the inferiority of the Africans thrive in excluding the Africans from belonging to the animal species of homo sapiens. JanMohamed traces an instance of this in the writings of Dinesen which collapsed African natives into African animals. Tempels work seems different in that the African is different from the European but such difference is qualitatively different from that which exists between man and other animals.

It is on their possession of a peculiar system of thought, philosophy, that Tempels hinges his proof of the humanity of Africans. He feels that the African is misunderstood as previous attempts to study him have failed to unmask his thought system, a thought system he holds that the African is incapable of developing without the aid of the European. Tempels then goes ahead to show what he sees as the authentic understanding of the African thought system. He identifies the concept of force as the key to understanding Bantu thought. For Tempels, the concept of force in African world is what takes the place of the concept of being in western world. Force accounts for the existence of all realities in the African world, and it is also the concept that expresses the nature of all these realities, their existential relation, among others.

His effort to free the African from the stereotype prevalent in his days notwithstanding, Tempels finds himself grading reality according to their positions in the hierarchy of forces. In such gradation, God stands at the head as the primal force, uncaused by any but from whom all other forces ensued. From God there is a hierarchical descent of force to spirits and divinities, ancestors, living men, unborn children, animals, inanimate objects.

Fanon's critique of Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* finds its place in this hierarchy of forces. Particular exception is taken in the relationship between the African and the European. Tempels recognizes the two of them as human species but holds that in the gradation of forces the European man and the African man occupy the same category as men. However, in that category a proper gradation of the two people places the European at the top of the ladder. Superior forces which the Europeans are expected to assume exercise force and power against the inferior forces in that they, superior forces, can regard the inferior forces as mere objects which can be harnessed for the strengthening of the vital force of the superior force which the European is expected to be. When Fanon criticizes Tempels' position he goes straight to the heart of the matter and points out that such theory can be used to justify the whole exercise of colonialism and colonial violence. In this case if the colonial master uses violence against the black man it is justified because it still falls under the auspices of increase and decrease of vital forces. Fanon dismisses the project of *Bantu Philosophy* as rubbish and points out its tendency to substitute "the exploiter for the ontological relations of Forces... And there is nothing ontological about segregation. Enough of this rubbish."



Another form of ethnocentrism is expressed in Negritude. Negritude differs from Placide Tempels' effort because Tempels' was the work of an European describing the African from the third person point of view. Thus, despite the level of assimilation he claims he has attained among the Bemba people, Tempels's work remains the effort of an outsider. Negritude represents what we may call a phenomenological account of the humanity of the Negro person. It views the African from the first person perspective. More specifically, Negritude represents an attempt by the African to account for his own ontology through the description of his own consciousness.

Negritude emerged as a philosophy of protest. David Cauter presents the historicity of that protest when he traces it to American occupation of Haiti which began in 1915. That occupation triggered a protest by black intellectuals of Haitian origin who rejected western culture which the Americans sought to impose on the black population. This led to their revival of African legends, proverbs and music (Cauter, 1970).

This protest was to form the cornerstone of what later came to be known as Negritude, a movement that was inspired among the French speaking Africans by Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor and Leon Damas. From the point of view of this discourse, Negritude was an attempt by black intellectuals to foster their human identity from the perspective of ethnocentrism. Proponents seem to have internalized the stereotypical appellation imposed on the black men by European theorists of white superiority. They accepted the fact of white and black division emphasizing that white men are not in any way superior to black men.

In his conceptualization of the term, Negritude, Senghor describes it as "... a certain way of being human, above all of living as a human." Sylvia Ba (1970) identifies the nature of ethnocentrism inherent in Negritude when he writes that Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Senegalese soul of Negritude conceives Negritude as "... the affirmation of a specific psychophysiology proper to the black man." Senghor expresses this psychophysiology in his famous attempt to distinguish between African mode of being from European mode of being, between African mode of knowing from European mode of knowing.

Senghor furnishes this difference in his notorious remark that "... emotion is Negro as reason is Greek." (Senghor, cited in Ba, 1973).

Fanon's was one of the earliest critiques of Negritude. He has provided the plank on which succeeding critics built. He begins his critique of Negritude by stating at once that the ethnocentrism which Negritude intends to actualize was entirely impossible.

I wanted to be typically Negro—it was no longer possible... And, when I tried, on the level of ideas and intellectual activity, to reclaim my Negritude, it was snatched away from me. Proof was presented that my effort was only a term in the dialectic. (Fanon, 2008, 101).

The reference to Negritude as a term in the dialectic refers to the manner of presentation of Negritude as always a response to Europe and its view of the African. This indeed is the view of Sartre who feels that Negritude comes into the dialectical machine as a minor term. This makes it to be dependent on a major term which is more foundational to it. It presents Africa as only existing

because there is an Europe that exists elsewhere. Peter S. Thompson explores the implications of this. He writes that it means: "... that blackness only exists in opposition to whiteness, and that Africanness-to whatever extent it exists-will have a common destiny with Europe."

### **Conclusion**

Colonialism is basically a dehumanizing exercise that objectifies the colonized. The Kantian postulation that man is to be treated as end in himself and never as an object does not apply to the colonized. To the colonizer, the colonized is an object whose value is instrumental for the attainment of something more valuable. In this sense the colonized is turned into a thing, an object. Fanon has shown how this practice of objectifying the black person impugns on his identity as the human person and ascribes to him an animal identity. The black person is reduced to the same level as animals and made to bear in his person the burden of animalhood. If to be an animal equates being stupid, base, and senseless, then the black person is stupid, base and senseless.

How does the black person react to this mode of identification? He recognizes himself as a subject of rules on account of his rationality. He knows within himself that he is a human person, that the only problem which he suffers is the violation of his personhood, and he is convinced that nothing is defined from the point of its violation or perversion. A correct definition of man cannot define man from the perspective of a dead human person. In the black person's understanding, a colonized person is a violated person, a person perverted and determined by social conditions which prevail around him. Fanon notes this point when he writes that the black person is the creation of the white man. This understanding calls forth some form of effort from the black person to restore himself to the level of being human, to assert his humanity. In paper attempts are made to capture the various efforts, as treated by Frantz Fanon, which the colonized Africans made in order to restore their battered identity. Fanon shows how defective and inadequate these efforts were.

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