

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and the Psychology of Colonial Violence.

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Frantz Fanon is a key intellectual in the postcolonial scenario. His writings have found responsive audiences in the ghettos of the United States, liberation movements in Africa and the marginalised population in Europe and in Asia. His seminal works include *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), *Toward the African Revolution* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (French: *Les Damnés de la Terre*) is both a sociological and a psychiatric analysis of the devastating effects of colonization upon the colonised individual and society. The book is based on Frantz Fanon's dehumanising experiences in his native Algeria then under colonial France. *The Wretched of the Earth* offers an incisive analysis of colonization which is primarily violent and its concomitant therapeutic and liberative violence. It reveals the devastating consequences of colonisation on personal and societal psyches and mental health. Though Fanon's purpose in the book was to "create a new humanity" without any form of discrimination, he also saw the inevitability of violence as a part of the liberation process.

Kew Words: colonization, violence, liberative violence, psychology.

Frantz Fanon (1925 – 1961) was a man of many identities, many talents, and many concerns. As Guy Martins, Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, observes in "Revisiting Fanon, From Theory to Practice: Democracy and Development in Africa", "He [Frantz Fanon] truly embodied the French ideal of 'un honnête homme du 20ème siècle' [a well-rounded 20th century man] (44). His seminal works include *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), *Toward the African Revolution* (1952), *The Sociology of the Algerian Revolution* and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique, Antilles, and grew up in Fort-de-France, the island's capital which was a French colony then. When Frantz Fanon was born, the island was a French colony and the Fanons were a middle-class and a part of Martinique's newly emerging black middle class. Their

comparative affluence enabled Frantz Fanon to be educated at the lycée (a secondary school funded by the French government). The experience of receiving a French colonial education affected Fanon deeply. This education was primarily oriented toward depicting the coloniser as a benefactor–saviour, and the natives as semi barbaric savages who had to be civilised. In other words, the colonial education was bent on instilling in the natives’ psyche a sense of obedience, subservience and loyalty. David Macey one of the earliest biographers of Fanon reports in *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* that Fanon himself later commented on his education at the lycee: “The black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about ‘our ancestors, the Gauls,’ now soon identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages - an all-white truth” (147). Incited by such ideas, Fanon joined the Free French Army in 1944 and left for the war front to fight for France and Martinique which were then under Hitler’s Nazi Germany. Fanon was discharged from the army and decorated with the Croix de Guerre for bravery. Fanon then returned to Martinique and thereafter it was a new Fanon.

His experience with racism in Martinique, in the French army, and on the streets of France had helped Fanon shape his new political outlook. The discrimination he had experienced in the French army had rudely brought to him a consciousness of what he actually was, in spite of his education and love for the colonizers. Fanon had come face to face with raw and unsheathed racism in the French army. But the initial euphoria and enthusiasm were short lived; he could not escape the social and cultural stigmas that had been stitched into his black skin. In the words of David Macey, “It was the experience of a naïve black man thrown into a cruel white world” (94). The trauma of naked racism changed Fanon irrevocably.

By January 1957, Fanon who had joined the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), received a letter of expulsion from the French government and an ultimatum to leave Algeria within forty eight hours. But Fanon would not oblige; he went underground and began to work for Algeria’s independence.

Over the next four years Fanon became the target of assassination attempts by French hired assassins and Algerian settlers. He survived several attempts on his life, including one in which his vehicle was blown up by a land mine near the border between Algeria and Tunisia, leaving him with twelve fractures in his spine.

Shortly afterwards, while travelling in Mali as an FLN representative, Fanon suddenly fell ill afflicted by leukaemia. Writing from what he realised was his death bed, Fanon produced in a period of less than three months, his last and most powerful work, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon died on December 6, 1961 barely seven months before the formal independence of Algeria (July 3, 1962) for which he had fought so hard. He was only thirty six.

Today Frantz Fanon is a key figure and a brilliant intellectual among the Blacks. His writings have found responsive audiences in the ghettos of the United States, liberation movements in Africa and the marginalised population in Europe and in Asia. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (French: *Les Damnés de la Terre*) is both a sociological and a psychiatric analysis of the devastating effects of colonisation upon the individual and the society. The book presents an incisive analysis of imperialism and its concomitant violence and nationalism. It also includes a critique of national culture, and Negritude besides a discussion of the consequences of colonisation on personal and societal psyches and mental health.

Here he declared that, "In a war of liberation, the colonized people must win, but they must do cleanly, without barbarity" (*Dying* 55).

This first part of Fanon's text is titled "Concerning Violence." This chapter establishes the underlying principle that governs the process of decolonisation: "Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (*Earth* 35), Fanon is very clear in his message: The struggle for power in colonised states will be resolved only through violent struggle because colonisation was conceived and maintained by the use of violence or the threat of violence; hence, it is a necessity that it will take violence to reverse these power relationships.

Fanon underscores the manner in which colonisation of Africa is enacted through racism and demarcated systems of inequality that is maintained by the application of naked violence against the Blacks which he documents in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed . . . they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity.

No conciliation is possible . . . The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps

in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners.

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. (*Earth* 38 - 39)

This segregation of the races is so oppressive and strong that the only escape is the comprehensive rejection and substitution of the coloniser by the colonised by a total and radical revolution.

Often Fanon's revolutionary writings are branded as a mission of hatred and violence, and his analysis of colonisation and imperialism, particularly in *The Wretched of the Earth* has been condemned as a gospel of bloodshed and mutual annihilation. Lewis A. Coser, an American anthropologist in *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* regards Fanon as a purveyor of hatred, "whose myth is an evil and destructive vision"(122). Richard Pithouse in *The Riotous Underbelly of the Normal* considers Fanon a prophet of violence: "Fanon can at his best be seen only as an apostle of violence, the prophet of a violent Third World revolution that posed an even greater threat to the West than Communism. He was the horseman of a new apocalypse, the avowed preacher of the gospel of the wretched of the earth" (280).

But these slanted judgmental pronouncements are far from true. In fact, they either deliberately misread *The Wretched of the Earth* or fail to fully comprehend the liberative message of Fanon.

Adolfo Gilly, a Mexican Trotskyite in *The Mexican Revolution: A People's History* observes: "Fanon's work [*The Wretched of the Earth*] is a result of a desire for liberation and human dignity world over" (12). Fanon himself unambiguously declared his intention and hope at the close of *The Wretched of the Earth*: "For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf; we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (*Earth* 255). In *A Dying Colonialism* he wrote: "A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society to be

replaced. No pseudo-national mystifications can prevail against the requirement of reason” (*Dying* 44). Jacques Derrida in “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority” tells that all liberative violence is transcendental and hence justifiable; He calls liberative violence “foundational violence”:

These founding acts are always justified, but only through self-referential, circular arguments. Thus they can be justified, or rationalized; they are transcendental like the divine violence. So the only potentially just violence is transcendental: only God can commit just violence. This divine violence, linked with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, strikes without warning and treats every case as unique. It is bloodless and expiatory while at the same time annihilatory; divine violence is exercised on all life for the sake of the living. (288)

The Wretched of the Earth describes not the necessity of violence but its inevitability, its therapeutic value and the need for a new world order. So, as colonisation itself was founded on violence, the colonised have no other option but to take recourse to violence. The coloniser can be combated only on his own terrain.

From the degradation of European domination, however, lies hope for the African and that hope, paradoxically enough lies in the struggle for liberation. It is in struggle that the people become united, that “a new cultural form emerges, that the spirit of Harambee i.e. a working together in unity is born” (*Earth* 145). Here Fanon employs a metaphor from hydraulics in his analysis:

The colonized exist in a state of tension created by their poor material and political status in relationship to the colonizer. This tension is released in violence and aggression that is initially directed within (accounting for “Black on Black” crime and violence) but later becomes transformed into a thirst for liberation whereby the minimum demands are that the last shall be first. (*Earth* 146)

This emphasis on the cathartic value of violence reveals the influence of Fanon's psychodynamic training: He uses a great deal of Freudian metaphor in this treatise. For example, in discussing the need to release the built-up tension in the colonised, he writes,

The native's relaxation [in dance] takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed, and conjured away . . . There are no limits - for in reality your purpose in coming together is to

allow the accumulated libido, the hampered aggressivity, to dissolve as in a volcanic eruption. (*Earth* 57)

Postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* informs that the systems of governance established by the imperialist nations throughout Africa were not meant to bring democracy or development to these communities. The colonial rulers never really contemplated any form of political or social sovereignty. Instead “the colonies were primarily places where an experience of violence and upheaval is lived, where violence is built into the structures and institutions” (174). According to Mbembe, colonisation thrives on threats of violence, torture and ultimately death at the hands of the coloniser: “The sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies. In the colonies, the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner. Colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules. It is not a legally codified activity” (25). The French poststructuralist Michel Foucault in *Society Must be Defended* argues that “the function of racial colonialism was to regulate the distribution of death” (188). Albert Memmi, a Tunisian born French writer in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* also observes that, “the colonial condition cannot be *adjusted* to like an iron collar; it can only be broken by violence” (194).

Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Preface” to *The Wretched of the Earth*, also reinforces these views: “To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: now there remain a dead man, and a free man” (19). As a counter to the imperialist’s attempts to negate the lives of the natives, Sartre suggested the use of violence:

The only possible way out was to confront total negation with total negation, violence with equal violence. Thus the Algerian rebellion, through being desperate violence, was simply an adoption of the despair in which the colonists maintained the natives; its violence was simply a negation of the impossible, and the impossibility of life was the immediate result of oppression.” (133)

Colonisation does have a brutally violent legacy. It is based not on economic or social interdependence but on the impoverishment of others. This colonisation operated at two levels: the mind and the body. The mind was colonised through ideology and violence as well. The coloniser instilled both awe and fear. The former was done through ideological tools and the latter was accomplished by naked violence.

The most important point here is that liberation can be deferred but not denied. It reveals itself in violent direct action. It is inevitable and in the process of this violent struggle, a sense of human beings realise their real worth.

Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its natural leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and their real value as human beings. When this realization arrives, there is a fulfilment and it gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets. (*Earth* 147)

In this regard, the Spanish anthropologist Alvaro Andrés Reyes in *Can't Go Home Again* explains: "It is the violence of the colonizer that has created the colonized . . . If the colonists can say that the native is an animal it is because their violence has reduced him to an animal-like existence" (108). Sartre in his "Preface" to *The Wretched of the Earth* puts this pointedly:

They [the colonized] are cornered between our [the colonisers'] guns pointed at them, and those terrifying compulsions, those desires for murder which spring from the depths of their spirits and which they do not always recognize; for at first, it is not their violence; it is ours, which turns back on itself and rends them; and the first action of these oppressed creatures is to bury deep down those hidden anger which their and our moralities condemn and which is however only the last refuge of their humanity. (*Earth* 16)

The liberative violence gives the colonised a sense of being his own master. It makes him feel like being a member of a powerful and life-enhancing force. This makes the individual feel at last that he can be the master of his own life and also be powerful enough to improve the destiny of his fellowmen. The native has now found a purpose for his existence. He has discovered a meaning for his life through this contribution. The colonised has uncovered the source of his malady and illness and now tries to surgically remove it from his environment.

Colonisation, in spite of its overtly stated objectives was essentially exploitation carried out through violence and hence decolonization also has to be violent. Fanon suggests that violence should be understood not as an accidental act just here and now; it is a phenomenon that has a definite purpose and hence has a history too. Therefore, the use of liberating violence as a response to oppressive violence would show that it is also driven as much by the dynamics of historical repetition. The initial violence

authorizes and justifies the counter-violence also as another historical phenomenon, as the strategy for power. In this sense, violence is a colonial effect, violence is the uninterrupted continuum of colonial history. Fanon's analysis of colonialism begins and ends with the question of violence.

For Fanon, the anti-colonial struggle takes a common form of resolving the dialectic: only a violent revolution would heal the psyche of the wretched: "Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (*Earth* 22). The violence of the colonized can be justified in ethical terms. According to Fanon, the fact is that colonial rule itself owes its birth to violence. It is sustained by violence, and cannot offer scope or possibility for other forms of response.

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