

## Language and Power: Shaping Self and Identity in Fanon's Thoughts

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### Abstract

The paper explores Frantz Fanon's theoretical assumptions on the effects of colonisation on the language and mind from his seminal work, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon's conceptions on language and self, a brief history of French language in Algeria in the context of French colonisation, his arguments on language of both the colonizer and colonized are explained and analyzed in detail. The degree of ambivalence, the amount of resistance, the intensity of subordination, the extent of assimilating to a colonised culture and civilisation, the level of linguistic suppression in mastering a dominant language and its effects on the construction of self and identity of the colonised forms the essence. The paper is written from the perspective of how language can act as a tool of domination of power and control by creating a sense of alienation and subjugation in the colonised minds.

**Keywords:** Colonisation, Language, Self, Psyche, Society, Culture, Colonial Domination

### Introduction

Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) documents psychoanalysis of the aftermaths of colonisation on the human psyche. The book was written with reference to French colonization of Algeria revealing linguistic, social, cultural and psychological consequences of French colonial rule on Algerian people. It portrays how the dominant, colonial culture forces the submissive colonized people to wear white masks for acceptance in the colonized society. From a dehumanisation perspective, the book is an excellent example of how colonial domination persists silently resulting in a racist society. The 'Black Skin' in Fanon refers to people of all colonised cultures who are subjugated by the colonial rule. Black people are compelled to hide their identities or true selves; they are made to assimilate with the white man's language and culture causing immense psychological depression. They feel inferior in every single way resulting in mental illness. A psychiatrist by profession, Fanon encodes his own personal experience while writing a literary piece for racist psychology and postcolonial theories. He examines the cultural and linguistic societal prejudices and stereotypes that eventually create conflicts between the self and identity forced upon by others. The metaphor of 'white masks' signifies the acceptance of the behavior, mannerisms, culture and language of the colonizer by the Black people at the cost of their existence. Throughout the book, Fanon argues for a humanistic society that appreciates the

lived experiences of the people from colonised cultures and hides the white masks that one tries to assume and project.

### **French language and Algeria in the French colonisation context**

France colonised Algeria, the North African state on the Mediterranean coast, in 1830. The French dominated Algeria in the linguistic, economic, and cultural spheres of the Algerians from 1830 – 1962 till Algerian independence. French language was imposed in all the domains replacing Algeria's native languages Berber and Arabic. Maamri (2009) claims that French colonization was a comprehensive annexation that aimed at eliminating its culture enacted through French control over Algeria's educational systems, government, business, and the intellectual life for one hundred thirty-two years. France's colonial system imposed acculturation which positioned French as the dominant language on its colonies, removing local languages, Arabic and Berber, from the public sphere. Profoundly de-structured by the colonial settlement, Algeria had to face a series of cultural problems relating to its national identity and the dislocation of language was the major effect of colonization in Algeria and French imposition not only meant segregation, illiteracy, and religious intolerance, but also the subordination of Algerian identity and Algerian's native tongues (Maamri, 2009).

The colonial period from 1830s in Algeria witnessed a number of institutions- educational, administrative established by the French. The dominance and assimilation of Algerians to the French language and culture primarily was in the educational domain practiced through the postcolonial and colonial practices. "Education in Martinique stressed French identity. A prominent feature of the French colonial system was the idea that the subjects of its empire were to be raised as Frenchmen. Those in a position of authority believed that this emphasis on French culture and history set their civilizing mission apart from the colonial policies of other nations. (Karklins, 1999)." Therefore, one of the primary means for the imposition of French norms in educational system was through the instructional modes, methodologies, curriculum and language. The colonialist defenders regarded schools as one of the institutional practices to promote the French language in education and the impact of French in the schooling policy of Algeria as a part of the French civilization mission led to the restructuring of the school system through methods of instruction, the choice of French language in schools, educational programs and the pedagogical practices, which resulted in the suppression of native languages Arabic and Berber (Maamri, 2009).

Maamri (2009) further adds that even though there were Arabic schools called 'Medersa', the French colonial officials refused to fund these schools, which were primarily attached to the mosques and confiscated lands, heritage sites and buildings, and subsequently, the schools had to be closed down in the first decades of the colonial rule and less than five percent of the Algerian children attended any school disabling the generations one after the other. Therefore, the Algerian population who depended more on the traditional schools were most vulnerable. Later under the reign of Napoleon III in 1852, restored Arabic in the public schools along with French which promoted bilingual education in the imperial schools and colleges. This was a major step towards the assimilation of the French policy in education.

Despite all these efforts, the French Government in the 1930s passed a law which made French as the official language and Arabic as the foreign language. And Arabic was totally banned in educational institutions and official documents. Even though, the French language symbolized foreign exploitation and was to be resisted, it also served as a tool to raise the

population's awareness and support in favor of such resistance because of the universal values like liberty, equality and fraternity it conveyed (Benrabah, 2007). Thus, for the Algerians, French became the language of power, opportunity and upward social mobility.

As it is a common characteristic of every colonization process, the domination of the colonizer's language over the language of the colonized was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized (Ngugi, 1986), the indigenous people of Algeria too equated French with intelligence and elite status. Fanon (1965) in his book *A Dying Colonialism* discusses about initial encounters of the Algerians at the initial stages of colonization in their attitude towards the French language and gradually the transformations at a later stage.

“When they hear French voices, Algerians suffering from hallucinations quote words that are less and less aggressive. It is not uncommon, at a later stage, to note that hallucinations in the language of the occupier assume a friendly character of support, of protection. The occupation authorities have not measured the importance of the new attitude of the Algerian towards the French language. Expressing oneself in French, understanding French, was no longer tantamount to treason or to an impoverishing identification with the occupier. Used by the voice of the combatants conveying in a positive way the message of the Revolution, the French language also becomes an instrument of liberation. Whereas formerly, in psychopathology, any French voice, to one in a delirium, expressed rejection, condemnation and opprobrium, with the struggle for liberation we see the initiation of a major process of exorcizing the French language. The native can almost be said to assume responsibility for the language of the occupier” (Fanon, 1965).

In the light of this historical background, Frantz Fanon makes his theoretical assumptions regarding language – as language becoming a tool for representation, identification and desire to assimilate to a dominant language and its ramifications on the social psychological processes of the colonial/ postcolonial subjects.

### **Biography of Frantz Fanon**

Frantz Omar Fanon (1925-1961) was born in the Caribbean islands in the French settler colony of Martinique. Hailing basically from a family of middle class, his father was a descendant of slaves and mother from a French parenthood. He was educated in Lycee Schoelcher where he became the follower of his teacher, Aime Cesaire, an influential thinker and poet who extensively wrote on colonial racism. He reacted against the Vichy regime in the Antilles and moved to Dominica to fight against the French dominance in the Caribbean and then in France against the controlling forces of Nazi Germany. Thereafter serving in the military for some years, he joined the medical profession and practiced psychiatry at Lyon. He took the help of psychoanalysis to study the repercussion of racism on subjects, particularly in the case of blacks' self-perception on themselves. He was profoundly motivated by ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre French philosopher and Octave Mannoni, the French psychoanalyst during those times. Fanon was a victim of direct racial experience in the Caribbean and searching his own identity in a racist kind of society. He placed himself along with the freedom fighters in Africa in France seeking allies against European colonialism and he became a nationalist during the 50s. He then took up a job in Bilda-Joinville Hospital, Department of psychiatry. Fanon arrived in Algeria at a time when Algeria was involved in the bloody struggle against French colonizers. The French colonization in Algeria in 1954 was bloody and barbarous and he was heartbroken by the kind of racist attitude shown by the French toward the Algerians and he helped the poor and needy and by employing his

psychotherapies to help them. Meanwhile, he quit his job and joined National Liberation Front (FLN), in 1956. Soon he became active in politics, supported the Algerians and was appointed as the ambassador to Ghana by the Algerian government. Unfortunately, Fanon could not see Algeria gaining independence; he suffered from leukemia and died on December 6, 1961 in Washington.

### **Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (BSWM)**

*Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) explores the psychology of colonization in detail. The rhetoric of dignity, desire, anger, resentment, inferiority, self-analysis and reflection, the kind of racism and its psychic outcomes form the central constructs of the book. The book examines how colonization is internalized by the colonized, how the inferiority complexes are developed and is inculcated through racism and language (Sardar, 2008 as cited in Fanon 1952/2008). The book is a testimony to the millions of colonized victims who has experienced the nuances of the colonization processes coupled with servility, despair, fear, trepidation and abasement (Caute, 1970). The book reflects the historical and the political context of the Algerian revolution and the impact of the revolution on the psyche of the people. As Sardar (2008) claims that BSWM has to be located in time and place and Fanon had written the text at the peak of the Algerian revolution, when there was fervor of intense, bloody liberation and death struggle. Its message is not confined to the Algerian context but is universal in character.

### **Fanon's conceptualization of Black Skin, White Masks**

The blacks and whites dichotomy, of Fanon's BSWM is a generic term, for it refers to all the whites as Europeans and the blacks as the non-Europeans. Since black implies universality, Fanon asserts that people of the Antilles includes every colonized man and that the same behavior patterns are common in every race which has been subjected to colonization (Fanon, 2008). The Antillean man in Fanon's BSWM has basic education in French and is partially assimilated to the French language and culture (Huddleston, 2008).

He aspires to be white, to be equated with Europeans and his intention is to become like a white man. He needs recognition of his intellect and thought and Fanon asserts that there is only one destiny for the black man and that is to be white (Fanon, 2008). Having this kind of confrontation with the white persona, he struggles to locate himself in the European world and is constantly in search for the definition of black identity and experiences rejection, subordination and humiliation from the white man. Hence Fanon's narration of the black skin is a perplexed personality, his self is divided between his native and the colonized culture where he battles his own identity, self-representation and he digs his own flesh to find out a meaning (Fanon 2008). Fanon genuinely attempts to show some of the lived experiences of the people of Antilles and their attitude towards the French language and culture.

### **Fanon on Language and Self**

Fanon's discussion on the fundamental question of language and the Caribbean self-representation in BSWM brings in the question of language and self in the colonial context as to what it means to speak the language of a dominant class. The problem of language and self is centered on the Black man's object of desire, anger, dignity, internalization, mutation, resistance, dilemma, inferiority and liberation in the French Algerian colonial discourse.

He claims that “language provides us with one of the elements in the colored man’s comprehension of the dimension of the ‘other’; For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (Fanon 2008). Here Fanon reveals that it is through the act of the colored man’s speech that he expresses his existence for the other. To exist means being in a relation to ‘other’ and it is through one’s language, one’s speech acts, the ‘self’ is evaluated by the ‘other’ and the ‘other’ also evaluates the ‘self’. To put in other words, the ‘self’ relates to the ‘other’ through the semiotic tool, language. Language is one of the elements that marks the distinction between the self and the other, symbolizing one’s identity.

The process of identification with reference to the white man, is explained as follows: Fanon (2008) reminds, “The Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man and this objective evidence expresses the reality.” This proposition of Fanon has two consequences- one at the bottom, somewhere in the process of evolution and second- he is made to feel inferior to the white man because he is not considered as a human like the whites.

The self of a colonized man is fragmented between two identities- native language, which he speaks with his own community and the other, he is forced to acquire a new identity that is to speak in a language, which gives him power in the society. “The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question” (Fanon, 2008). The black man divides his self in two categories and that his behavior, language, dialects towards the whites and among his fellows are different and this division affects his perception, behavior and thought processes and create a kind of space between the two cultures, among the whites and with his own fellowmen. And he is divided between two cultures- neither he is completely accepted by the west nor by his fellowmen. This is a clear instance of uncertainty, unresolved contradiction and fragmentation. Fanon (2008) argues that this split leads to dislocation and separation from his native group because he speaks a language different from that of the group.

Fanon affirms the desire and the fascination in learning a dominant language, French. He posits a question, “Why a Negro is fond of speaking French?” The Negro in BSWM is desperate to speak in French, for it is the key that can open doors which were still barred him fifty years ago (Fanon, 2008). French was considered to be the language of opportunity and the people were forced to speak in French, because it’s a question of need, power that the French language has in the French Algerian colonial discourse. He is desperate to speak French or else he fears insecure to his white counterpart. The concept of inferiority in the French Algerian discourse has a significant place in Fanon’s writings. According to Fanon the inferiority complex results from a two-way process- essentially economic and eventually the internalization, a kind of habit formation process, in Fanon’s language the internalization is termed as ‘epidermalization’ which deeply affects one’s self.

The command over the French language makes a significant change in the self of the colonized. According to Fanon (2008), by mastering the dominant language, “the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.” To Fanon, this is one of man’s attitudes face to face with being; A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language and mastery of language affords remarkable power. The relationship between language power are intertwined, they are inseparable. By learning French, he becomes civilized and more refined compared to his peers.

Fanon asserts that once the French language is mastered, he rises above his native land and its standards. Fanon (2008) remarks, “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.”

He argues about the experiences of the black man when he has to encounter the whites, “When the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization; His ego collapses; His self-esteem evaporates; He ceases to be a self-motivated person; The entire purpose of his behavior is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as a man; It is the dynamic of this inferiority that concerns Fanon; and which ultimately he wishes to eliminate” (Sardar, 2008 as cited in Fanon, 2008). According to Fanon, the first action of a black man is a reaction and then, the dilemma of self-representation- “how to posit a ‘black self’ in a language and discourse in which blackness itself is at best a figure of absence, or worse a total reversion?”. To Fanon the more perplexing difficulty is “Should the black man define himself in relation to the white man thus conforming the white man as a measure of all the things? How should a black man speak for himself?” (Fanon, 2008). The kind of attitudes, apprehensions, perceptions influence the thought processes leading to demotivation and disconnection from the European world.

The exposure to France makes structural changes within the minds. The fact that the news of getting entry to France makes the black man jubilant and makes up his mind to change and these structural changes as Fanon affirms that they are independent of any reflective process (Fanon, 2008). After spending a few years in France, radical changes are noticed. “The black man who has lived in France for a length of time returns radically changed; To express it in genetic terms, his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation; By that I mean that Negroes who return to their original environments convey the impression that they have completed a cycle, that they have added to themselves something that was lacking; They return literally full of themselves” (Fanon, 2008). There is a complete personality change, and he is transformed as a new person by the French exposure which he got in France. For instance, Fanon (2008) says when he meets a friend or an acquaintance, his greeting is no longer the wide sweep of the arm, which is the traditional gesture but with a slight head bowing act. To Fanon, this is an example of embracing the French language and culture.

In the book, Fanon also deliberates on the kind of strategies employed to master the subtle aspects of language. These strategies are actions resulting from sustained desire and according to Fanon, it reminds us that action demands two primary needs- desire and demand. As mentioned elsewhere the desire is to assimilate to the French language and culture because in Antilles, only those who speak French and behave like a French man has the opportunities for social and economic mobility. Therefore, people needed transformation. With the determined efforts, to be competent with the white man, he starts taking French lessons. “The Negro arriving in France will react against the myth of the *R*-eating man from Martinique. He will become aware of it, and he will really go to war against it. He will practice not only rolling his *R* but embroidering it. Furtively observing the slightest reactions

of others, listening to his own speech, suspicious of his own tongue—a wretchedly lazy organ—he will lock himself into his room and read aloud for hours—desperately determined to learn diction (Fanon, 2008).” On mastery of French language, then the priorities are different, he is more interested in refining the subtle linguistic aspects because the ultimate aim is it at par with the whites. As Prof. D. Wastermann claims, that the low self-esteem is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly; their way of doing so, he adds, is frequently naive: “The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements.” (*The African Today*, p. 331. as cited Fanon, 2008).

The intent of the Black man is not only to master the French language, but also he takes keen interest in the paralinguistic aspects of the speech such as pitch of voice, diction, gestures, body language, accented varieties, facial expressions so as to bring more refinement. There is a conscious attempt by the Black man to bring the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of speech behaviors in him and this sets his verbal competency beliefs. Fanon remarks, “Yes, I must take great pains with my speech, because I shall be more or less judged by it. With great contempt they will say of me, “He doesn’t even know how to speak French; in any group of young men in the Antilles, the one who expresses himself well, who has mastered the language, is inordinately feared; keep an eye on that one, he is almost white; In France one says, “He talks like a book.; In Martinique, He talks like a white man(Fanon, 2008).” Fanon claims the appropriate usage of French language and makes the Black man relate to the white man’s diction, which makes him feel honored.

Fanon conveys the choices that the students from Antilles have when they meet in Paris. The two possibilities being- “either to stand with the white world, and, since they will speak French, to be able to confront certain problems and incline to a certain degree of universality in their conclusions; or to reject Europe and cling together in their dialect, making themselves quite comfortable.” (Fanon, 2008). Thus, he is left with two options- either to integrate to the French speaking group by imbibing their language and culture and be one among them or else to be in his own native dialect speaking group. Therefore, language or dialect that one speaks is a prerequisite to be a part of a group. This kind of segregation and verdict angers him. According to Fanon, this is a kind of judgment that a white man has towards a pidgin speaking man. Fanon adds, this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him makes him angry (Fanon, 2008). To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization (Fanon 2008). The hypothesis that Fanon claims is by appropriating the language of the colonizer, the colonized also assumes the culture of the colonizer. Fanon’s claim implies that one’s world view is largely shaped by the language one speaks which is in consistent with the Sapir Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity.

Fanon exemplifies another crucial point which is the attitude and the perception of the colonized people among themselves; the kind of behavior one has with one’s natives and the non-natives. “I meet a Russian or a German who speaks French badly; with gestures I try to give him the information that he requests, but at the same time I can hardly forget that he has

a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer there; in any case, he is foreign to my group, and his standards must be different; when it comes to the case of the Negro, nothing of the kind; he has no culture, no civilization, no “long historical past” (Fanon, 2008). Fanon suggests that the disapproval of his identity makes him feel motivated, to advance further with all the strategies to master linguistic skills to prove to the white world with his thoughts and intelligence.

According to Fanon, the Europeans have a fixed concept of the colonized people which is impoverished and inferior in all respects. Having said this, Fanon (2008) asserts that if at all he speaks French fluently, the immediate question to be asked to him by the European is: “How long have you been in France? You speak French so well.” This single remark spells out the annoyance and the irritation that one undergoes. This language experience leads to isolation, dejection and subordination. Finally, Fanon articulates a solution for all the above-mentioned realities that is to rise above what the Europeans have constructed regarding the preconception, to reach out for the universal, which is certainly an act of resistance.

## **Conclusion**

Fanon’s ideas and philosophies might have not been approved by many writers of his times but the post-colonial studies in the 90s rediscovered Fanon, particularly, Homi Bhabha’s interest in Fanon’s theories mentioned in Bhabha’s works. Today, Fanon waits to be rediscovered by a new generation burning with a desire for change—the very emotion that motivated Fanon to set sail from Martinique (Sardar, 2008). Even though Fanon was never a post-modern writer, his formulations on the multiple aspects of the racist colonial culture emerged from the colonial experiences, which he had experienced in the French Algerian revolution. The colonial rule may have gone and faded, but colonialism, in its many forms, is still striving in post-colonial world.

In the postmodern societies today, Fanon’s assumptions regarding language and colonization holds relevance as it was during the 50s and the 60s for a number of reasons. Scholars like Ziauddin Sardar (Sardar as cited in Fanon, 2008 ) have argued that “significant changes had taken place since the Fanonian times but the structures of oppression and injustice remain the same; the inhumanity of today is not different from the inhumanity of yesteryears for all sources of exploitation resemble one another; they are all applied against the same “object” man ; and the message is still fresh today when it was written. The realities that Fanon puts forward are applicable to every society, closer to the lived experiences and characterizes universality. As Bhabha (1987) puts it, “There is no master narrative or realist perspective that provide a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche”; and Fanon yearns for the total transformation of Man and society for he speaks from the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality; the unresolved contradiction between culture and class; from deep within the struggle of psychic representation and reality,” which clearly indicates that Fanon’s theory on language amounts to the same value to any other colonized society as that of the Caribbean one. Liberation, for Fanon is psychological and social. Fanon proposes to reject the imposed colonial hierarchies and racial structures and embrace the historical and cultural legacies of black identities. One needs to confront and dismantle the internalisation of a colonial mind set and create socio-cultural spaces where identities can be freely expressed in its entirety. It’s not a passive

freedom that Fanon refers to, but a bold resistance to the hegemonic and oppressive social practices that continue to marginalise and demean the Black existence. The liberation thus attained does not require any kind of validation; it's a self-determined, self-possessive and a self-attained one.

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