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# BLACKNESS AND BLACK SUBJECT IN FRANTZ FANON'S BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS: AN ONTOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** This article uses one of the early works of Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks* to examine the effects of colonial power through the lived experience of the author in Martinique, in the post-World War II France, as a medical practitioner. The core argument in this article is about the colonial power which has a psychological and cultural effect upon the colonial subjects. Firstly, Fanon sketches the relationship between ontology and sociological structure and asserts that the latter generates the former, which, in turn, lock subjectivities into their racial categories. Secondly, on the power language possesses in transforming the life of blacks as independent subjects. Lastly, on the lived on experience of the blacks and the mechanisms of colonial power over the colonial subjects by inducing desperate feelings of inadequacy in order to reject their 'black' identity and assume and project a 'white' one.

**Keywords:** subjectivity, black identity, racism, whiteness, ontology.

## Article History

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## Introduction

**Ontology**, the philosophical study of being real. The Latin term *ontologia* ("science of being") was invented by the German philosopher Jacob Lorhard (Lorhardus) in his work *Ogdoas Scholastica* (1st ed.) in 1606; whereas the philosophy of Ontology was popularized by the German rationalist philosopher Christian Wolff in his Latin writing *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*. Frantz Fanon is one of the significant writers in black Atlantic theory in an age of anti-colonial liberation struggle. His main focus is on the fundamental issues of his day: language, affect, sexuality, gender, race and racism, religion, social formation, time, and many others.

His key work *Black Skin, White Mask* transpires him as a significant ideologist in postcolonial world. He suggests that 'skin' is symbolic of authenticity whereas the 'mask' projects a fake or contrived identity. He brought an innovation into the philosophy of ontology by bringing psychiatry into racism and colonialism and gave a distant dimension to the relationship between the colonizers and colonized. He is one of the first philosophers to bring about psychology, psychological analysis and political conditions together in the anxiety

of identity production, subjugation, violence and reproduction of identity. This book is an outcome of Fanon's encounter with metropolitan racism and how he was forced to come to terms with it as an intellectual from one of the colonies of France Martinique. He is actively engaged throughout this experience of dependency as this book is an account of his own experience in post World War II France while doing his medicine. *Black Skin, White Mask* was originally written in French in 1952 and it was translated in English by Charles L. Markmann in 1967.

Fanon's main concern is the existential situation of the black subjects among the anti-black. He makes a shift in the focus by not analyzing the blackness as a problem but toward a wider theory of the oppressed, colonialism, and revolutionary resistance to the reach of coloniality as a system. He strongly emphasises the fact that blacks are still in the clutches of colonialism and subjection in this post-colonial world. Subjection still continues to haunt them and there is no break from its hold. But there is a change in the suit of subjection from being cruel, rough explicit nature of the colonial period to a hidden aspect in everyday life which according to him is more complicated and hard to comprehend in the realm of consciousness created due to subjection in the post-colonial world.

Fanon offers a sketch of the relationship between ontology and sociological structures, asserting that the latter generates the former, which, in turn, lock subjectivities into their racial categories. In the racist colonial world, Fanon's observation is that freedom, justice and equality are manipulations of the colonizers and they always remain a mirage for the blacks and reality for whites which are merely propagated as an extension to black subjects. This reflects the racial ontology which is masked by the white category of being which upholds high moral values and does not apply to the black subjects. Thus these façade of freedom, justice and equality is outside the register of blacks and it's a sheer absurdity to think that the ontological demands of the black's ethos can be met as it exists as an exclusionary surface of reality.

The black's exist as a non-being and this existence as non-being is like the "hell", as Fanon puts it. The so called liberal ethos fails to bring change or to liberate them from the clutches of subjection, as a result, the blacks have to wage their own struggle and refrain themselves from being controlled by their moral grounds by creating their own ideologies outside these politics of white register. In order to attain that the black subjects have to condition themselves by creating a state of consciousness by deleting the register that dehumanizes the blacks and create a political position where the black matters a lot.

Fanon draws together the existential experience of racialized subjectivity and the calculative logic of colonial rule. As a first attempt, the blacks make an effort to live life as a social being and not as a race. Fanon believes

that language has the power of transformation which can bring reality to the life of blacks. Hence, the blacks change their register and attempt to live as a social being and eradicate blackness.

“I am not black, I am brown.” “I am not black, I am a mulatto.” “I am not black, I am Martinican.” “I am not black, I am French.” “I am not black, I am simply a human being.” (Fanon)

Fanon describes the double standard of the whiteracist is dangerous is Calibanist: Prospero (the white) is safe so long as Caliban (the black, or perhaps more on the mark, the “nigger”) struggles with instead of “masters” the language of mastery. Blacks are human if they can speak white, but if they can speak white, they are dangerous; therefore, they must be reminded of their limitation: To speak to whites in *their* language represents usurpation.

Furthermore, the black subjects’ love for the world and humanity is slashed by the a mere look or glance of the white on the blacks as a boy from train shouts “‘Dirtyzemedor simply, ‘Look, *anégrei*’” ,drains all forms of humanity reduced them to the level of a body or a property to gaze upon. It is the lived experience of the blacks and Fanon declares that, “I am given no chance. I am over-determined without” (BSWM 87). The forceful language came from the mouth of a child froze Fanon in his tracks and he found himself dried up and laid out in a world of ice-cold exteriority. The words disfigure their identity from being a subject to an object, which has a trampling effect on them. Fanon pours out his torments “My Blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me” (BSWM 88).

Fanon substantiated that the look is a mechanical way to convert a subject into an object and to dehumanize a human. Such an inhuman look implies that “You are not like us and you are not supposed to here!”. This can be inferred as a stereotype depiction of blacks as “[t]he Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly” (BSWM 86). The white construct the blacks as precarious people and it is a form of the mechanistic terror unleashing suffering and misery on the flesh of the Black subject. Blackness has been woven into “a thousand of details, anecdotes, and stories (BSWM 84). With the look it empties all blackness, their humanity, values, and loves to world a void in itself. It is a black image created by the white fantasies and their registers so to dehumanize and it portrays the cruel nature of the racist to derive pleasure by inflicting agony on them.

I came into the world **imbued** with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I **was** an **object in** the midst of **other** object. (BSWM 82)

This exercise of power through look places and displaces the black subject in the realm of existence. “I had rationalized the world and the whole had rejected me on the basis of color prejudice” (BSWM 93). The rationale behind this dehumanization is to stop the arising conscience of these blacks to become a subject. Further this

racist gaze acts as a catalyst which activates its own self-destruction through developing an inferiority complex and creating a desire to become white.

It is understandable that the racist gaze and comments of their body reminds the black about the blackness and instigates hatred towards their body. This hatred to black body finds all possible ways to fulfil their desire to escape from it. There are two principles that emerge in an anti-black society. They are “be white!” and “avoid blackness!”. The Francophone, the pathetic slaves who are in desperate search of civilization in a pair of “white breasts,” if not white women, at least mulattas who condescendingly offer a bit of whiteness, and on and on.

Fanon considers the interracial desire among the blacks as a form of self-destruction in the desire to be white or to elevate one’s social, political, and cultural status in proximity to whiteness. Fanon neither had a hatred towards women of colour nor see them as failures to understand their situation. He is addressing a reality that permeates every racist society. For example Capécia desperately wanted to be white more than to be a woman. As a woman of colour, she longs not only to be white but also to be desired. She believes that to be desired she has to be white.

Both Fanon and Capécia represented a failure, but his failure will manifest itself throughout the work. Whereas Capécia has an aversion to the whites right from her childhood days and she attempts to “blacken” the world by throwing ink over lighter-skinned children and whites who insulted her. The same girl later realizes the harsh reality and adapted herself to the colonized situation and starts to whiten it. She considers her lover André as a key to get white recognition and she surrenders herself completely to get a recognition. She couldn’t find any adorable qualities in him except that he is blond, had blue eyes and white. The only thing the blacks need is recognition as Capécia expects recognition from her lord André. “She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life” (BSWM 42). In contrast, this recognition is not a permanent one which promises their existence. Capécia faces humility and it was something unbearable for her when she accompanies her lover to upper class apartments.

“The women,” she writes, “kept watching me with a condescension that I found unbearable. I felt that I was wearing too much makeup, that I was not properly dressed, that I was not doing André credit, perhaps simply because of the color of my skin—in short, I spent so miserable an evening that I decided I would never again ask André to take me with him. (Pri 35 *IBS* 43; Capécia 1948: 150)

They started leaving their colored colonies and migrated to places like Paris and the result is tragic. But to the dismay of the whites, the horizon offered by language to blacks failed to become a reality. Fanon admits the fact that the accusation of the whites’ language by the whites intensifies the issue of the colonizer and colonized than

pacifying it. In addition to that, mastering their language brings forth a sense of dependency and subjugation. Moreover, the efforts of the black to transform words is considered as “predator” of words and their mastery over the language is considered as a threat and danger linguistically by the whites. The black, thus, becomes a masquerade, a black wearing a white linguistic mask. The reality, in this tragicomedy, is that such a mask signifies a monstrosity, a danger:

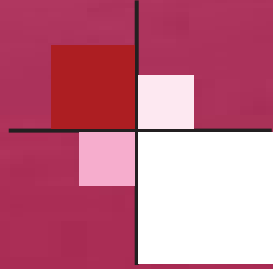
Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world. I have had occasion to talk with students of foreign origin. They speak French badly: Little Crusoe, alias Prospero, is at ease then. He explains, informs, interprets, helps them with their studies (30)

Thus through this interracial relationships, Fanon describes all the effects and effects of desire under anti-black racism, and how gendered notions of power, embodiment, and selfhood are structured *from the inside* by the colonial practice of racism. Fanon concludes that sociogenics of the society like inter-subjective world of culture, history, language, economies are brought into existence by human being. Fanon concludes by not giving a solution to the problem of entrapment because whites are also equally trapped in their race and he asserts that blacks can come out of the racial entrapment by asking questions and the one who asks questions breaks the trap of racism.

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