The Pathology of Race and Racism in Postcolonial Society

A Reflection on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*

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> *T*here is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men.
> There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs,
> the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.
> How do we extricate ourselves?
>
> - Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* [1]

INTRODUCTION

Every society that manages to extricate itself from colonial domination has to grapple with a set of new problems. The nature of these problems include (1) physical and material ones, such as agriculture, communications and housing), (2) organisational, such as economic relations, political administration, education, social welfare and industrialisation, and (3) socio-psychological and moral problems, such as values and mode of thinking. According to Alatas, the third set of problems is the most formidable and since it forms "the greatest damage occasioned by colonialism" and "hampers the solution to other difficulties."[2]

A similar concern[3] is raised by Frantz Fanon [d.1961], a revolutionary thinker and psychiatrist whose writings have tremendous influence on anticolonial and postcolonial movements worldwide and continues to inspire scholars and activists working on issues of race and domination. He was among the first to link the issue of class domination with the

race question, which Marxists tend to grapple with. In one of his major work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, he wrote:

> "In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem."[4]

It is this relationship between racism and colonial domination that became the primary concern in many of Fanon's analyses. This essay seeks to discuss some of these analyses and argues that Fanon's thought are particularly useful and insightful in diagnosing the racist ideology, albeit in more subtle forms, that continues to dominate postcolonial Malay society. As highlighted by Hansen,

> "One important reason Fanon claims our attention as a subject of serious inquiry is the issues of his writings and the way he deals with them. He presents a serious commentary on significant human problems. The question of the psychological alienation of the black man in a white-dominated world, his inferiority complex, the quest for whiteness, the depersonalization, the feeling of hopelessness, of nonbeing, that Fanon deals with are all current problems of people living in the underdeveloped countries."[5]

Two recurring themes will be dealt with specifically: The first is the **psychopathological condition** of the colonised people. The second is the **problem of alienation** observed in their cultural and intellectual life. Both of these problems are observably found in segments of Malay society, emerging out of postcolonial trauma. Although Fanon's writings covers many other themes, this essay will restrict itself to these two central themes as found primarily in the collected essays of his book *Black Skin, White Masks*.

PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF THE COLONISED

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon seeks to explain the pathology that besets the man of colour. Informed by his training in psychology and psychiatry, as well as deeply influenced by the writings of his mentor, Aime Cesaire,[6] Fanon highlighted the psychological problems that oppressive colonial situations wrought upon the Negro.[7] Through observing the interactions between the negro and the white, and the manner in which these interactions occur, Fanon delves into the *collective unconscious* operating within the colonial society. This collective unconscious refers primarily to essentialised notions of the Negro, - "the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group"[8] – which were repressed, but emerged back into consciousness in a different form – a *catharsis* or release.[9]

To the racist whites, the Negro often symbolises the negative; "whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character" – a symbol of "evil," "sin" and "archetype of the lowest values" in every civilised and civilising countries, particularly Europe.[10] At the same time, the essence of a Negro has often been reduced to the *biological* – often singularly eroticized as being sexually powerful and athletic.[11] This essentialised notion of the Negro is invariably tied to the idea that "Negroes are animals." Fanon captured this racist element well. He wrote:

> "As for the Negroes, they have tremendous sexual powers. What do you expect, with all the freedom they have in their jungles! They copulate at all times and in all places. They are really genital. They have so many children that they cannot even count them. Be careful, or they will flood us with little mulattoes."[12]

Such notions, Fanon argued, soon entered into the consciousness, suppressed to the realm of the subconscious, and eventually emerged as a collective catharsis in a neurotic form. Trapped in these racial images of the black man, the Negro began displaying symptoms of neurosis: *anguish*, *aggression* and *devaluation of self*.[13] Eventually, a debilitating form of psychopathological tendency develops: *lactification* – a word Fanon employs in *Black Skin, White Masks* to denote the attempt by the black to become white through assimilation. "Out

of the blackest part of my soul," Fanon explicate, "across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white."[14] For, "the black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world."[15]

Such desires to be white has a dialectical relationship with a phobic attitude towards anything black/negro. Fanon gave many examples, particularly in his analysis on the coloured person's desire to marry or appetite for sexual relations with whites: for the black woman, to feel accepted; for the black man, to have a sense of conquest. Both are manifestation of a deep-seated contempt for their own fact of blackness imposed by a culture of racism.[16]

Language is another important component in Fanon's analysis of the Negroes' psychopathology. Fanon writes:

> "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."[17]

Observing the Antillean Negro, Fanon notes that those who express themselves well and have mastered the language of their colonial master, are inordinately feared and respected: "Keep an eye on that one, he is almost white" or "He talks like a white man," as they would comment.[18] This tendency to put the language of the coloniser (in the Antillean case, French language) above the local dialects is a sign of cultural dislocation. In Fanon's analysis, such dislocation is to be found in the racist social relation between the Antillean negro and their white French master. He notes that "A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening. It is not one white man I have watched, but hundreds; and I have not limited my

investigation to any one class but, if I may claim an essentially objective position, I have made a point of observing such behavior in physicians, policemen, employers."[19] So much so that such "talking down" is, in fact, a display of the white's own pathological behaviour that corresponds with an inhuman psychology of the racist mind.

In addition, there is an ideological function in talking pidgin-nigger to a black man: to remind them of their position in the human hierarchy. "To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible."[20] Such was the effect of colonial racism that breeds psychopathological conditions within the colonised people. In other words, the Negro "did not have as his purpose the formulation of a healthy outlook on the world; he had no striving toward the productiveness that is characteristic of psychosocial equilibrium, but sought rather to corroborate his *externalizing* neurosis."[21]

CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL ALIENATION

The psychopathology displayed by the colonised people as a result of racist social relations can be viewed also as a form of alienation suffered. "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."[22] Two processes are at work in producing the alienation suffered by the Negro. Firstly, the Negro is constantly humiliated. As it is, he is told that he has no culture, no civilization and no long historical past.[23] And whatever he has is deemed inferior vis-à-vis that of the coloniser. Secondly, everything that he learns and absorbs himself in since young is that of his coloniser's world. Little wonder then that, as Fanon points out, the black schoolboy in the Antilles "in his lessons is forever talking about "our ancestors, the Gauls," identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages – an all-white truth." In addition,

> "There is identification – that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man's attitude…Little by little, one can observe in the young Antillean the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white."[24]

Such alienation is most observable among the educated middle-class. Fanon observed that the black middle-class perpetuates a form of intellectual alienation that rigidify black society in "predetermined forms, forbidding all evolution, all gains, all progress, all discovery."[25]

THE 'MALAY PROBLEM'

As discussed above, much of the symptomatic neuroses of discussed above are not peculiar to the Negro or black community. They can be found within postcolonial Malay society. Given the similar colonial conditions imposed upon Malay society for more than four centuries, it is unsurprising that postcolonial Malay society is still suffering from many of the psychopathologies identified by Fanon in the mid 20th century. As Fanon himself would put it, these are symptomatic of a structural racism that dominates every colonial situation. The sense of inferiority complex suffered by the blacks is an outcome of a "double process": primarily economic (exploitation and deprivation), and subsequently internalisation of the sense of inferiority ('epidermalization' or the struggle to 'become white').[26]

This "double process" is still perpetuating itself in, albeit in a different form as that experienced directly by the Malays during the period of colonisation. In Singapore, as Lily Zubaidah Rahim argues, the continued marginalisation of the minority Malays and the perpetuation of the "cultural-deficit" argument that accords an inferior status to them may explain some obvious pathological symptoms.[27] Suriani Suratman's research has also revealed how Malay local newspapers portray dominant image of Malays as one of[28] (1) "being slow in adapting to changes" in the 1960s; (2) "old fashioned and traditional" in 1970s; (3) "still lagging behind and not integrating" in 1980s; (4) "progressing but cannot be satisfied yet" in 1990s; to (5) "progressing but are distancing themselves" in 2000s. The

existence of structural marginalisation and perpetuation of the image of the "problematic Malays" can be seen as causes for the emergence of the "neurotic Malay".[29]

One example of such neuroticism in display is apt. In a workshop organised by Muis, a prominent youth leader of a Muslim organisation derided the Malays as being "problematic" and remarked that Malays are blind to problems that are "right in front of their nose". When queried by another participant whether he is himself a Malay, the leader replied: "My mother is Chinese."

Such examples are not rare. In fact, similar to Fanon's observations, the tendency to deny and denigrate anything associated with 'Malayness' is most common among the middle-class intelligentsia and Malay leadership. As Lily Zubaidah puts it:

> "Having attained high educational credentials, material success, and social mobility, the meritocratic discourse advocated by the PAP leadership serves to flatter their [i.e. the Malay middle-class] achievements and accords them the esteemed status as role models of exceptional qualities. Their socio-economic distance from the general Malay community and their ethnic difference from the non-Malay community places them in a position of double alienation. This profound level of alienation has rendered the Malay middle class socially vulnerable and susceptible towards uncritically accepting the cultural deficit thesis which gratifies their ego for having extricated themselves from the negative cultural attributes afflicting the Malay community."[30]

Thus, clichés such as "Melayu malas", "Melayu kurang berusaha", "Melayu tidak ada sifat keusahawanan", "Melayu perlu pertingkat diri" and "Melayu harus mengubah sikap dan minda" are often heard and quoted in *Berita Harian*.[31] Such clichés serve to entrench further the cultural deficit thesis, as much as they reveal the level of alienation that segments of the Malay intelligentsia and leadership suffers from.[32] Such alienation, no doubt, is generated by decades of structural marginalisation and ideological use of "meritocracy thesis",[33] apart from colonial domination that victimised and stunted the development of the Malays

through use of the "myth of the lazy native".[34] In simple terms, the very structures of racism remain intact, even after the end of the colonial period.[35]

In Malaysia, examples of the neurotic syndrome can be found in many writings, particularly written by the corporate and ruling elites. In 1971, UMNO published *Revolusi Mental*, that reflects the dominant elites' utilisation of the cultural deficit thesis to explain Malay underdevelopment.[36] Almost three decades later, the thesis still hold sway and employed in several popular works dominating the Malay masses. One such example is *The Malays Par Excellence…Warts and All*, written by two corporate leaders linked to the ruling elites. In several passages, the authors depicted the Malay character as problematic: "In the course of history, the Malays may appear to be divisive and vehemently at odds with each other, even to the extent of appearing to wreck each other's credibility and livelihood in the process."[37]

In another book, *The Malay Ideals*, the author asserted that all forms of Malay underdevelopment were attributed to the Malay mindset, character or attitude. On the Malay's poor educational achievement vis-à-vis the other ethnic groups, for example, the author attributed it to "the nature of Malay people themselves and their attitude towards success." He wrote:

> "The Malay attitude does not contribute favourably towards being a successful student. For instance, the Malays do not usually view the successes of others as something to look up to. Success, to a Malay breeds contempt and jealousy. If a Malay person is successful, other Malays would frequently feel uneasy. They would then focus upon the less positive side of that person's character, in order to find fault."[38]

It is interesting to note that in these examples, there is a tendency to denigrate the Malays in general and attribute essentialising traits in them, while attempting to 'diagnose' their problems. This is a common characteristic of neuroticism that dominates segments of the Malay intelligentsia and elites. As explained by Hansen,

> "The intellectuals, politicians and bureaucrats in the underdeveloped countries, in spite of the rhetoric of populism, have a low opinion of the country people and the masses generally, and sometimes treat them with disdain. They regard them in the same way as the colonial officials did: lazy, superstitious, apathetic, passive, and lacking in understanding of the issues and problems of politics."[39]

Thus, to be able to speak English well is a sign of "sophistication" and symbol of being "modern" and "educated", as one Malay bureaucrat remarked. For, according to him, the Malay language is "kampungan" and to use the language shows that we have not "integrate" in the larger multicultural, modern and globalised Singapore. The neuroticism displayed by him is best captured in the following passage by Fanon, albeit referring to the case of the Black Antillean:

> "The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence."[40]

On another level, there is also a sign of neuroticism in the Malay elites' clarion call of "ketuanan Melayu". One the one hand, the elites views their own people with contempt and blames their culture for problems are structural in nature. On the other hand, they employ the idea of "Malay supremacy" to justify their leadership positions. The ultra-nationalist sentiment that asserts the supremacist position of the Malays is a sign of a deep-rooted sense of insecurity, which can only be explained through centuries of colonial subjugation. Thus, upon independence, the tendency is to prove their worth at all cost. The dominant sentiment of wanting to revive the "Golden Age" of Malaccan Sultanate, and to romanticise the feudal era, is example of such neuroticism. Having been emptied of any history, the Malay elites (like the Black middle class that Fanon observed), want to prove the existence of a Malay civilisation to the white world at all costs.[41] Underneath that desire is the trauma of being told that Malays are a people without civilisation, that is, until the Europeans came with their "civilising mission".

CONCLUSION

One important aspect of Fanon's work is that it displays a unique combination of sociological and psychological understanding in addressing the problem of racism. By way of social psychology, Fanon highlights the dynamics operating between social structures (colonial aggression, domination, exploitation in social, economic and political life) and mental states (pathological behaviours and thinking). The conflation of structural and psychological factors then explains why the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is *always* that of violence.[42]

Thus, it is not enough to merely denounce racism. One must also target the very structures that embed, nurture and perpetuate racism. "If society makes difficulties for him because of his color, if in his dreams I establish the expression of an unconscious desire to change color," wrote Fanon, "my objective will not be that of dissuading him from it by advising him to "keep his place"; on the contrary, my objective, once his motivations have been brought into action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict – that is, toward the social structures."[43]

Last but not least, Fanon was struggling against the enslavement of man by man and for it to cease forever. His appeal to humanity is for them to (re)discover and to love fellow humans, wherever they may be from. "A negro," he remarked once, "is not any more than the white man."[44] Thus, the antidote to white supremacist is not to assert black supremacist. Only through equal acceptance of each other can authentic communication occur. To achieve this, man must struggle for freedom. And freedom requires efforts toward *dis*alienation. It is for this reason that we ought to pay close attention to the perspectives provided in Fanon's insightful work.

"I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other. One duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through my choices."[45]

END NOTES

[1] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 10.

[2] Syed Hussein Alatas, "Some Fundamental Problems of Colonialism," *Eastern World*, Nov. 1956.

[3] Fanon wrote: "To tell the truth, the proof of success [of decolonization] lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded. The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized." *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963), p. 35.

[4] Ibid., p. 40.

[5] Emmanuel Hansen, *Frantz Fanon: Social and Political Thought* (USA: Ohio State University Press, 1977), p. 8.

[6] Aime Cesaire [d.2001], like Fanon, was born in Martinique and received his education in Paris. A former member of the French Communist Party, he spent much of his life as a writer, poet and politician and served as President of the Regional Council of Martinique from 1983 to 1988. See Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (USA: Monthly Review Press, 2001). Fanon himself, remarked once: "I wish that many black intellectuals would turn to him for their inspiration." See *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 187.

[7] Fanon's analyses were based upon his observations and diagnoses of the Antilleans and Martinicans of the Caribbean colonies, as well as the Negroes living in France. Much of his reflections were also closely linked to his own subjective life experiences.

[8] *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 188.

[9] Fanon adopts these concepts from Freud and Jung. See *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 144-145.

[10] *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 188-189.

[11] Fanon noted that a prostitute once told him that the mere thought of going to bed with a Negro would brought on an orgasm. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 158.

[12] *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 157.

[13] Ibid. p. 73.

[14] Ibid., p. 63.

[15] Ibid., p. 51.

[16] Refer to Chapters 2 and 3 of *Black Skin, White Masks*.

[17] *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 18.

[18] Ibid., pp. 20-21.

[19] Ibid., p. 31.

[20] Ibid., p. 35.

[21] Ibid., p. 81.

[22] Fanon quotes from Prof. D. Westermann here. See *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 18.

[23] *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 34.

[24] Ibid., pp. 147-148.

[25] Ibid., p. 224. Fanon discussed this issue further in his essays, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" and "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, op. cit.

[26] *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 11.

[27] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Selangor: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[28] Suriani Suratman, ""Problematic Singapore Malays": The Making of a Portrayal", *Seminar Paper* No. 36, 2004/2005, Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore.

[29] Often, the Malay becomes a repository of everything negative. At the most basic level is his skin colour, akin to Fanon's revealing statement: "[I am] a slave of my own appearance… When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle." (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 116.). The reference to skin colour is apparently common in many conversations. "She's Malay but she's beautiful," a teacher once remarked. When a Malay student achieves academic distinction, it is said to be in spite of being Malay; when he fails, it is to be expected since he is Malay afterall. Thus, policies need to be made to ensure Malays do not form enclaves in a housing estate; they must integrate and live with the Chinese. According to a former Prime Minister, the housing quota for minorities in every estate is needed so that Malays can mix more with the Chinese and learn from their positive values, like hard work. Similarly, a school with too many Malays is not desirable because the performance of the school will be affected. In school textbooks, it is subtly implied that the Malay and Indian boys will run around the class while their Chinese counterpart will write and draw attentively; and a Malay man is depicted as being a bus driver while his Chinese counterpart is a teacher. See Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), pp. 162-167.

[30] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, p. 59.

[31] For examples, see Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, p. 187.

[32] Such syndrome is akin to the experience of the Black middle class in America. Compare, E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

[33] See Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, op. cit.

[34] See Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

[35] A notable Tunisian Jewish thinker, Albert Memmi once noted that racism is dialectical: if one race is seen inferior, the opposing race will by default be superior. (See Albert Memmi, *Racism*. University of Minnesota Press, 1991). This is akin to Fanon's own observation that "The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority." (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 93.)

[36] Senu Abdul Rahman, ed., *Revolusi Mental* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan, 2002). (First published by UMNO Malaysia, 1971). For a critique of this book and the cultural deficit argument in general, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *Siapa Yang Salah: Sekitar Revolusi Mental dan Peribadi Melayu* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1972); and *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

[37] Ismail Noor and Muhammad Azaham, *The Malays Par Excellence…Warts and All* (Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 2000), p. 33.

[38] Asrul Zamani, *The Malay Ideals* (Kuala Lumpur: Golden Books Centre, 2002), pp. 144-5.

[39] Emmanuel Hansen, *Frantz Fanon: Social and Political Thought*, p. 189.

[40] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 228.

[41] Ibid., p. 34.

[42] See particularly, *The Wretched of the Earth*, op. cit. Also, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

[43] *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 100.

[44] Ibid., p. 231.

[45] Ibid., p. 229.