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Course Material

Department of English and Modern European Languages

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B.A. (Hons.) English Semester-IV

Paper IV: Literary Criticism (B) (Code: Eng- 404)

Unit-I: Michele Barrett : *'Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender'**

Unit-II: **Frantz Fanon : Excerpts from *Black Skin, White Masks***

Gauri Viswanathan : *'The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India'* *Oxford Literary Study*.*

Dear Students, Hello.

I'm providing below course material for the topics mentioned above that I'm supposed to teach.

In case you have any doubts you can contact me on phone or send queries to my email.

All the best!

Frantz Fanon : Excerpts from *Black Skin, White Masks*

Bionote

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was born in Martinique and studied medicine in France, specializing in psychiatry. He was one of the most important writers in black Atlantic theory in an age of anti-colonial liberation struggle. He is considered one of the most important theorists of the African struggle for independence and of the psychology of race. Sent to a hospital in Algeria, he found his sympathies turning toward the Algerian Nationalist Movement, which he later joined.

His work drew on a wide array of poetry, psychology, philosophy, and political theory, and its influence across the global South has been wide, deep, and enduring. In his lifetime, he published two key original works: *Black Skin, White Masks (Peau noire, masques blancs)* in 1952 and *The Wretched of the Earth (Les damnés de la terre)* in 1961. Collections of essays, *A Dying Colonialism (L'an V de la révolution Algérienne)* 1959) and *Toward the African Revolution (Pour la révolution Africaine)*, posthumously published in 1964, round out a portrait of a radical thinker in motion, moving from the Caribbean to Europe to North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa and transforming his thinking at each stop.

Publication

First published in French in Martinique, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

Overview

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (French: *Peau noire, masques blancs*) Fanon shares his own experiences in addition to presenting a historical critique of the effects of racism and dehumanization on the human psyche. He considers this as the unavoidable consequence of colonial domination,.

According to Fanon in the colonial situation a conflict and antagonism emerges between the colonizer and the colonized. This eventually leads to violence of two kinds which he describes as--.

-The violence of the colonizer through annihilation of body, psyche, culture, along with the demarcation of space.

- The violence of the colonized as an attempt to retrieve dignity, sense of self, and history through anti-colonial struggle.

Black Skin, White Masks is a strange, haunting melange of analysis, revolutionary manifesto, metaphysics, prose poetry and literary criticism. As a writer he demonstrates how insidiously the problem of race, of color, connects with a whole range of words and images. It is considered a reasoned, explosive, and important book centered on the identity problem of the black man. As Floyd McKissick writes: "This book should be read by every black man with a desire to understand himself and the forces that conspire against him."

Background, Notes, Analysis

-Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is a psychological study of colonialism. According to Fanon, the encounter between white European colonizers and black slaves and their descendants creates a unique social and psychological situation with a characteristic set of psychopathologies. *Black Skin, White Masks* analyzes these psychopathologies, traces their roots in the colonial encounter, and suggests how healing might become possible.

-Fanon works within a broadly existentialist and phenomenological framework, his project is psychoanalytic, and he is sympathetic to the Négritude movement. *Black Skin, White Masks* can be thought of as a series of confrontations between the black subject seeking to theorize his condition and a set of ideas and tools that he eventually overcomes and discards or modifies to suit his purpose, with the ultimate goal of resolving (or rejecting) the contradiction within him.

- Fanon does not limit himself to purely objective modes of argumentation and inquiry – alongside the more standard tools of psychological and philosophical writing; he also makes extensive use of quotations from poetry and deeply personal narratives, and frequently includes anecdotes drawn from his own professional experience as a physician.

- Fanon's task is to describe the black subject's experience from the inside; since anti-black racism assigns black people the role of mere objects and denies the very possibility of black experience, reflecting the black reader's experience back to him is a key step in uncovering and treating the neuroses under discussion.

- A major influence on civil rights, anti-colonial, and black consciousness movements around the world, *Black Skin, White Masks* is the unsurpassed study of the black psyche in a white world. Hailed for its scientific analysis and poetic grace when it was first published in 1952, the book remains a vital force today.

- Fanon experienced racism throughout his childhood in Martinique, part of the French Empire, and then as a French soldier in the Second World War, fighting to free France from the Nazis and to help restore the racist French fascists to brutal and violent control over their empire. He studied in France after the war and qualified to become a psychiatrist. *Black Skin, White Masks* is his angry and very personal response to the racism that he experienced. He later practised as a psychiatrist in Algeria and supported the violent rebellion which finally drove the French out of that country

-It can therefore be taken as established that for this book he consciously chose a highly subjective methodology, an impressionistic presentation and quite obviously put forward his particular perspective on the topics covered because in his judgement this was his preferred methodology.

- His sources and his evidence are very diverse and eclectic, including some that belong to low brow popular culture, in film and in fiction. Fanon is steeped in the literature and culture of his own time because that was when he was alive and active! He was a voracious student, willing and able to read his contemporaries across many disciplines, and he refers to the leading theoretical currents of that period, not because he is quaintly parochial, but because these were the voices and the arguments that dominated his environment and against which he was determined to argue back. He could not write the way he did without being fully familiar with the current thinking of Sartre and de Beauvoir. Fanon was not old fashioned – he was absolutely in touch with the leading edge of contemporary French culture.

- Fanon uses psychoanalytical arguments at length, for instance, because that was part of the language of scientific racism at the time. He was arguing against racist ideologies that were current and respectable in his day and he had to do that by addressing their arguments in their own terms.

- He asserted many times that his evidence could really only be applied directly to his own experience, especially to Martinique, and he was most interested in the impact of settler

colonialism rather than other aspects of Europe's imperialism. He makes clear that racism and the priorities for Black people differ across the world;

- His book explores the subjective experiences of a black man from Martinique and relates this to his contemporary (French) cultural environment. It has much wider significance not because it makes any claim to be comprehensive but, on the contrary, actually because it is very focused and therefore very authentic. He is writing from experience.

- He points out that racism shapes the way we all think and behave and induces all sorts of harmful, poisonous effects on both victim and perpetrator. In particular, the ways in which we may respond to or react against racism, overcompensating, is itself unnatural and harmful.

- The introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* contains key conclusions and foundational pieces of analysis summed up Fanon's simple declaration: that Black people are locked in blackness and white people are locked in whiteness.

- For Fanon, and this is critically important, colonialism is a *total project*. It is a project that does not leave any part of the human person and its reality untouched. This is no more evident than in the opening chapter to *Black Skin, White Masks* on language. Fanon's reflections on language, racism, and colonialism begin with a wide claim: to speak a language is to participate in a world, to adopt a civilization.

- But the colonial situation makes this all the more complicated. If speaking a language means participating in a world and adopting a civilization, then the language of the colonized, a language imposed by centuries of colonial domination and dedicated to the elimination or abjection of other expressive forms, speaks the world of the colonizer.

- In one of the most important moments of the book, Fanon discusses the problem of diction and racial embodiment. The black person can perfect speech, learn to speak perfect French and *sound* like a sophisticated Parisian. That *might* promise a certain kind of liberation from the alienation in and through mastery of proper French. That is, if the black colonial learns to speak as well as the white Parisian, then perhaps there can be equal participation in language and its world. Yet, this is impossible because of what Fanon terms the *epidermal* character of race. To be black and speak with perfect diction is still to be black, and therefore marked as special, unique, and surprising. Fanon's anecdotes in the opening chapter describe this as the surprise of white French people at the articulateness of a black French speaker.

- But "The Lived-Experience of the Black Man" is really the key chapter in the book. In that chapter, Fanon deploys the conceptual tools developed in previous chapters in order to debunk the remaining legacies of racial essentialism. A good bit of this was undertaken in the first chapter, where Fanon critically reads Aimé Césaire and his articulation of Négritude around the question of language. The existential-phenomenological character of the fifth chapter, however, adds real depth and texture to Fanon's position. It begins and returns repeatedly to an anecdote in which a white child points to Fanon and declares "Look, a Negro!" Fanon explores how this phrase is akin to a racial slur, how racism is integral to the declaration itself rather than being an

addition to it: to say “Negro” is to say an anti-Black slur. In developing this account, Fanon revisits Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of the gaze and how it fixes the identity of the other, here infusing that account with a rich treatment of the structures of an anti-Black racist lifeworld. The white gaze fixes blackness, making it with a slur and epidermal character, thus sealing blackness into itself.

- Fanon develops his notion of the inferiority complex, which is his subtle and important account of how anti-Black racism is internalized by Black people and how that internalization adds complexity to the pathologies of living under colonial rule.

- Fanon offers a forceful study of a kind of internalized racial inferiority complex among the Black men and women of Antilles which manifests in psychological, phenomenological and sexual registers.

- The conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks* follows through on his notion of the future identity of the Blacks and their relationship with the Whites.

-Fanon’s conclusion is written in very short paragraphs or provocative, declarative sentences. Across the final pages, Fanon outlines a theory of history and memory that underpins his vision of Black liberation, including most prominently the notion that we are not bound to history, we are not slaves to the past, and therefore any kind of future is possible.

-Fanon rejects the idea of reparations, for example, precisely because that idea would link Black people to the past in a crucial way and make that link inextricable from imagining justice. In place of the past, Fanon appeals to the openness and undetermined character of the future. What does Fanon want for black people? In perhaps the most famous line of the book, Fanon concludes with the plea: “Ô mon corps, fais de moi toujours un homme qui interroge!” (“O my body, always make me a man who questions!”)

- Questioning Subjectivity is therefore Fanon’s solution to the problem of racial entrapment, the opening motif of how white people are trapped in whiteness, black people trapped in blackness. The man who questions has broken out of that trap.

-, Fanon’s closing statements on *Black Skin, White Masks* drive home the lesson of difficult universalism. “There are times when the black man is locked into his body” says Fanon. These are times when he is overcome with the drive to vengefully dismiss the universal as irrelevant and affirming only the immediacy that he is. Yet if he can overcome this temptation, which is borne of alienation and colonialism, if he can magnanimously recapture not just his past but the past of the colonizers who have wronged him, he will be able to “create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world”.

- To sum up: Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* is a book which investigates the ideology of colonialism and its negative, or more precisely destructive effects on colonized people of Antilles. Fanon is a psychoanalyst and social philosopher who uses his observations to analyze

the psychology of colonizer and colonized and his book is the first to handle this matter psychologically. In *Black Skin White Masks* he writes his own personal experiences and tells about other people's as well, in addition he includes some character analysis from certain books dealing with colonialism or black people. Fanon dwells on the struggle of black man who is "enslaved by his inferiority" for being "white" that is to say for being accepted by the white and that white man who is lost in his superiority aims to "reach a human level" by adopting colonialist ideologies and practises.

- He focuses on how colonialist ideology imposed upon colonized peoples, how the inferiority complex is developed among these people and how come these people happen to adore and admire their colonizers who enslave, humiliate and scorn them.

- What he aspires to is a way of living without racism, and that includes refusing to accommodate even the memory as part of his identity. Racism is an idiocy; he wants nothing to do with it or its many effects. Far from being an important aspect of his legacy, it is barren, totally infertile, tediously beside the point.

Read and consider the following passages from Black Skin White Masks

Why am I writing this book? Nobody asked me to. Especially not those for whom it is intended. So? So in all serenity, my answer is that there are too many idiots on this earth. And now that I've said it, I have to prove it. [pxi]

A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language. ... there is an extraordinary power in the possession of a language. [p2]

Once for all we affirm that a society is racist or is not. As long as this evidence has not been grasped, a great many problems will have been overlooked. To say, for instance, that northern France is more racist than the south, or that racism can be found in subalterns but in no way involve the elite, or that France is the least racist country in the world, is characteristic of people incapable of thinking properly. [p66]

In this study I have attempted to touch on the misery of the black man – tactually and effectively. I did not want to be objective. Besides, that would have been dishonest; I found it impossible to be objective. [p67]

The psychoanalysts say that there is nothing more traumatizing for a young child than contact with the rational. I personally would say that for a man armed solely with reason, there is nothing more neurotic than contact with the irrational. [p98]

I had rationalized the world, and the world had rejected me in the name of color prejudice. Since there was no way we could agree on the basis of reason, I resorted to irrationality. It was up to the white man to be more irrational than I. For the sake of the cause, I had adopted the process of regression, but the fact remained that it was an unfamiliar weapon; here I am at home; I am made of the irrational; I wade in the irrational. Irrational up to my neck. [p102]

Adler created in fact a psychology of the individual. We have just seen, however, that the feeling of inferiority is Antillean. It is not one individual Antillean who presents a neurotic mind-set, all the Antilleans present this. Antillean society is a neurotic society... Hence we are referred back from the individual to the social structure. If there is a flaw, it lies not in the "soul" of the individual but in his environment. [p188]

I have found in many writers intellectual alienation is a creation of bourgeois society. And for me bourgeois society is any society that becomes ossified in a predetermined mold, stifling any development, progress or discovery. For me bourgeois society is a closed society where it's not good to be alive, where the air is rotten and ideas and people are putrefying. And I believe that a man who takes a stand against this living death is in a way a revolutionary. [p199]

Sartre has shown that the past, along the lines of an inauthentic mode, catches on and "takes" en masse, and, once solidly structured, then gives form to the individual. But I can also revise my past, prize it or condemn it, depending on what I choose... Here is my life, caught in the noose of existence. Here is my freedom, which sends me back to my own reflection. [pp 202, 203]

"I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos... I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth." (p. 27)~ Thus Fanon reaches into the experience and meaning of the black man's alienation.

This alienation strikes in an essential sense--it stems from the denial of the black man's very flesh:

"The black man is attacked for his corporeality. It is his tangible personality that is lynched. It is his actual being that is dangerous..." (142).

The white man, who has been obsessed with eradicating the body out of collective consciousness for millennia, now associates this abjected domain of the body with the black man, and constructs it as the essential evil Other. The white man does this because he is insecure—he does this out of hatred, a hatred that he works to cultivate, that consumes his time and energy. The white man is dehumanized. Projecting his fears onto the black man, the white man shirks his responsibility to acknowledge his guilt (83) in instrumentalizing the black man (206).
