

Hegelian “Master–Slave Dialectic” and Fanon’s Adaptation: A Theoretical Study of the Colonial Context of Africa and Its Present Relevance

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Abstract

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s ‘master-slave dialectic’ becomes a significant area of research as it provides a vantage point to assess violence in its variegated manifestations. The dialectic becomes all the more significant for its basic premise that mutual recognition and self-consciousness emerge from a violent conflict. It therefore becomes imperative to bring in Hegel to answer a central question of the colonial project, namely, the binary of master-slave relationship and the resulting violence which proves detrimental to the interest of both. Hegel saw the ‘state’ as the organizing principle which, through the “institutional civilizing of the ‘situated’ human beings and the protection of the higher values from disruptive disorder, made the creation of culture and philosophy possible in the modern age” (Kelly, 1976, p. 4)). The paper will try to reformulate the philosophical and ideological contours of the colonial enterprise by placing Fanon’s assessment of the difference in Anglophone/francophone experience. It gives credibility to such an assessment as Fanon zeros down upon the standards of binaries used by the colonial masters in forging a prejudicial narrative of differentiation. Hegel describes the encountering of two consciousnesses—that of the master and the slave (or lord and bondsman in his vocabulary)—as profoundly ambiguous which consists of a double meaning. On the one hand, each consciousness sees in the other as simply another object—of identifiable size and appearance that has to be ascertained. On the other hand, each also sees the other a rival consciousness—an experience that allows one to see itself as an Object—perceived, understood, and judged by the other consciousness. As Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*, the world ceases to be centered on the human subject (or the self); it flows away to a new different center, and the self becomes something existing at its periphery.

Keywords : anglophone, francophone, master–slave relationship, binaries

Introduction:

The state of 'Objectification' according to Hegel works primarily through enslavement whereby the loser is subjected to work laboriously for the winner (Hegel, 1977). This political form of 'instrumental objectification' of turning a human being into a mere tool operates precisely under the guise of colonialism (Hegel, 1977). There might be other forms of objectification that Hegel does not discuss, chief among which is 'masochistic objectification' where the pain of the loser becomes the pleasure of the winner.¹ The other form might be 'sexual objectification' where the objects are turned into objects of desire or sexual gratification.² One outcome of this submission of the loser is 'rape' which is a quintessential example of sexual violence.

Discussion:

The state of enslavement that Hegel describes in his book *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1949), is one in which the master is supremely a person and the slave is only a thing. In other words, the slave is subservient to the demands of the master. He is in fact a 'no-body'. To describe in symbolic terms, one has to respect, admire, and praise the other while the other gives no recognition or respect in return. This lack of mutual recognition in the colonial period is largely based on European/Western concepts like 'Civilization' and 'Enlightenment' which demarcated the line of distinction between the 'savage' and the 'civilized'. Mention may be made of A.O. Lovejoy's book *The Great Chain of Being* (1990) as one of a kind pertaining to the context of reference.

It is however intriguing that the master-slave dichotomy is based upon a dialectical relationship. Although the master is powerful enough to express his demands and then experience satisfaction on its consequent fulfillment, it is the slave—the 'in-human brute'—who gains a concrete output of his labour. Secondly, the master claims respect and recognition from one whom he never allowed any status or recognition. Therefore, if a postcolonial or say, anti-colonial stance is adopted, one witnesses that the real power belongs to the slave and that the master in spite of being powerful and strong, is in fact, a mere 'parasite'. This situation is inherently unstable. And it is due to this basic idiocy at the bottom of society that we are compelled to witness through history wars, revolutions, and political turmoil.

Furthermore, if the key activity of the male slave is labour, the key activity of the female slave is her sexual abuse. Labour generates a consciousness in the male slave of an active, powerful person while the female slave is likely to be precisely the opposite. It is her master who acts on her. Colonial history is replete with instances of extreme sexual violence such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade where the wives of the slaves were used by the 'White' traders (erstwhile the masters) both for their sexual satisfaction and to beget them more slaves. The sexual abuse of the female slave reinforces her basic difference from the master. However, if Freud's theory of the *pleasure principle* (italics mine) is taken into account, and since any human life must reveal both pleasure and satisfaction only as a contrast to other experiences, the female slave is likely to find pleasure and satisfaction in being an 'Object'—or in other words, in pleasing her master. It is this condition of

human life that has been evoked by Frantz Fanon in his monumental book *Black Skin, White Masks* where the desire to mate or unite with the 'White body' (and therefore the Other) is sought through the psychological cloak of "lactification".

The focus of Fanon's critique is on the role of race and violence. Hegel's line of thought gets new fabrication in Fanon's critique of the Western imperial project of colonialism. Fanon pays particular interest to the specific relevance of the master-slave dialectic for colonial societies. He attempts to demonstrate in *BSWM* why Hegel's dialectic is still relevant to the colonial context in addressing the problem of mutual recognition in the light of violence and racism. For Fanon, violence complicates and adds urgency, to the need for recognition. Hegel's master-slave dialectic underscores his primary attempt at conceptualizing and describing the process of recognition on the way to mutual recognition. In other words, Hegel's dialectic is set on a *one-to-one correspondence* model (emphasis mine). It describes a specific form of human relations in which domination has a central role to play. Fanon, on the other hand, revamping the Hegelian legacy, adjusts the dialectic with a focus on the role of race and violence.

The Hegelian dialectic takes the form of an analysis of the working of self-consciousness and demonstrates how the self can only become conscious of itself by the presence of, and recognition of an Other. However, this process of self-consciousness takes place at the expense of the Other in which the Self negates or annihilates the Other in order to come to terms with its own being. The Hegelian 'Self' or the Cartesian 'Cogito' is bound to capitalize its existence at the cost of the Other as 'an- Other'. In other words, to quote Sartre, the master is always a "being-for-self" while the latter is always a "being-for-other".

Fanon comes very close to Hegel when he advocates a similar condition in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the black man (or to be more gender-neutral, the black body) wants the "objectifying confrontation with otherness" (Fanon, 1986, p. 72); the "Otherness" here, basically referring to the White master or the White body. Fanon reinterprets Hegel in the colonial context in terms of race, namely, the relationship between the white settler and the black man. He begins exactly where Hegel has left off stating that 'man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man' (Fanon, 1986, p. 14). The basic difference between Hegel and Fanon is further accentuated when Fanon suggests that the extent of imposition of one's existence on the Other becomes the measure of humanity. Fanon thus problematizes the concept of humanity at large by leaving it open for contradiction.

According to Fanon, humanity is inextricably intertwined with the Other, even though it seems that the Hegelian humanity can come about in the consumption of the Other due to the desire or need for recognition. This desire is expressed in an 'open conflict between the Black and White' in the colonial context in that the White settler regards the native (who is black) as a slave because he does not measure up to the so-called "standards of Whiteness". In doing so, the white settler asserts himself as the master. Mutual recognition is never the idea behind Fanon's version of the master-slave dialectic. While some form of reciprocity can be

seen in Hegel, Fanon points to a major departure in the colonial context—the White master looks at the Black slave with contempt and mockery and does not seek recognition from the slave. He (the master) only wants the slave to perform labour for him. Unlike the Hegelian slave, the Black slave in Fanon finds no “liberation” in his work. He never regards the White master as an object because he never turns his own negativity into positive attributes. On the contrary, the Black slave wants to be ‘like’ the White master and he is fixated with becoming a subject. This ‘master-fixation’ sets him apart from the Hegelian slave because he always considers the subjectivity of the master and never his own. This results in a paradoxical situation: the Black slave wants to be recognized as a subject, but the master never grants him such recognition because in his estimation, the Black slave is not human but an animal. Whereas the Hegelian slave attains subjectivity without striving for it on intentional grounds; the Black slave pursues subjectivity but fails to achieve it.

Among the many strategies employed by African writers, one is that of negation of western discourses. The discourse of Negritude, for instance, which is again a very controversial discourse having affiliation to Francophone experience, has served as an assertion of African identity that is voiced in overt opposition to dominant western discourses and totalizing narratives. The polemics verging on this discourse of negritude, postulated to gain an idea of pan-African identity, is bolstered furthermore when the dichotomy of the colonial policy adopted by the French and the British becomes visible. It is significant to assess the patterns of political developments of both the French and the British being the two most powerful and influential of imperial powers to have near to equal share of colonies as evinced from the great Scramble for Africa in 1885. The French pattern of political development of their colonies was based upon the assumption that a unique race of the ‘French Africans’ could be created. The basic concept was of “assimilation” of the population, or the elite class at least, into the social, cultural, ethical, religious and economic framework of France. On this basis, a superbly educated and cultural group of intellectual and political leaders emerged in each of the French colonies which came to be known as ‘overseas territory’ later. It was this unique francophone experience of “assimilation” that came to be critiqued later by the emerging group of intellectuals with the likes of Aimé Césaire and the Senegalese poet-President Léopold Senghor in their theorizing of a unique African brotherhood—‘Negritude’.

It was Aimé Fernand David Césaire who in March, 1935, published a passionate tract against the French colonial policy of assimilation, in which he first coined the term ‘negritude’. In his famous *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972), he vociferously asserts that, “Europe despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore, the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin” (Césaire, 2000, p. 88). This statement clearly pinpoints the politics of formulating worlds along binaries. Léopold Senghor’s poetry in fact transcends the hierarchies in embodying Africa in the figure of a woman. For an Indian reader, this idolizing is not a shocking concern as India has been valorized in the form of a woman by political activists like Bhagat Singh and intellectual scholars

and poets like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore. However, given the paradigm of African male literary tradition, Senghor is in fact the first writer to conceive Africa basically as a mother. His famous poem “Femme Noire” drafted in 1945 illustrates the potential of the writer to think out-of-the-ordinary:

Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.
And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at the heart of summer,
At the heart of noon, I come upon you, my Promised Land.
And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle.

(Senghor, 1977, p. 44)

Seen along the lens of gender differentiation, the poem is basically about the ‘discovery’ of the treasure of Africa which binds all Africans with its pristine nakedness so much emblematic of nature. The beauty of the ‘black naked body’ gives an assurance, a confirmation and a hope for a promising future where Africa would be seen as a unique black hub.

Fanon’s hypothetical assessment of the White man’s dilemma in terms of conceiving the generic differences of the polarities of self and the other is basically sexual in character. In recognizing the other, Fanon believes, the white self which is always *Negrophobic* (emphasis/italics mine) suffers from a psychological impotence which is an existential dread of co-habiting a space with all likelihood of facing complete erasure. That is to say, the white self undergoes an extraordinary neurotic ambiguity in ascertaining the conditions of an amorphous existence, thereby enmeshed in emptiness and depression. In this connection, it must be stated that unlike Wole Soyinka or Mahatma Gandhi, Fanon quite on the contrary, believed in violence which according to him will ensure the rightful place for the ‘Other’ (erstwhile the colonized natives). The conflict potential in such a relationship comes to light in the form of violence through resistance and rebellion. According to Fanon, conflict is crucial if one is to be transformed from being an object to being a subject, thus paving the way into self-consciousness. It is here that one can find a clear rupture in the ideological trajectory adopted by Hegel and Fanon. He obliquely states that “self-consciousness accepts the risk of its life, and consequently it threatens the Other in his physical being” (Fanon, 1986, p. 218). Therefore, the pursuit of subjectivity by the Black slave threatens the master of his life.

Fanon considers action to be superior to reaction when he says, “... man’s behaviour is not only reactional. And there is always resentment in reaction” (Fanon, 1986, p. 222). Here, he seems to echo Friedrich Nietzsche in observing that freedom is to be found in practice. This again reiterates the point that action must follow on the conceptualization of values that are worth pursuing. Fanon’s understanding of violence and the resultant identity as an expression of the psyche cannot be ignored in spite of his affiliation to the Francophone experience. The reason for appropriating Fanon is due to the psychological aspect that he brings to bear upon

his theoretical works. Seen from the lens of ethno-psychiatric approach, Fanon attributes specific mentalities to cultural spheres and “engages in the a priori identification of individuals to the cultures to which they purportedly belong, thereby assigning them a preconceived identity” (Cherki, 2006, pp. 209–210). David Lloyd’s analysis of the colonial body as a significant source of violence becomes an interesting parallel read to Fanon as Lloyd talks about the slippery ground in the transitional phase of postcolonial culture and the trepidation of obviously falling into the vortex of anthropological mode of culture-specific summation when it comes to an assertion of identity.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic finds an interesting twist in Fanon’s version of the same where he gives more importance on the ‘attainment of subject-hood’ through violence. Fanon is still an interesting read because of the troubling persistence of violence in the post-colony.

End Notes:

1. This kind of ‘pleasure’ can be equated to Barthes’ formulation of ‘jouissance’ (orgasmic bliss/ecstasy) in his proposed venture of laying bare the principles of the meaning making process of the ‘Writerly Text’.
2. One can draw in the reference of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade where the White masters used the bodies of the Black women not just for sexual gratification but also with the intent of procuring man-power in the form of the illegitimate offspring. This condition is highlighted in numerous slave narratives.

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