

Book Review

The Quintessential Frantz Fanon

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Frantz Fanon: Alienation and Freedom

Edited by Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young

Translated by Steven Corcoran

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[...It] is always necessary to remember that mental illness is often manifest through an alteration in the notion of the 'I' (p. 318).

Alienation and Freedom is a voluminous collection, which reaffirms Frantz Fanon's stature as a prolific writer and epitomizes his eclecticism by demonstrating the multi-disciplinary calibre of his intellectual acumen. Divided into 5 sections, namely, 1. Theatre; 2. Psychiatric writing; 3. Political writing; 4. Publishing Fanon's Library and Life, this collection of Frantz Fanon's posthumous writing helps to fill the gap on what has, hitherto, been missing in the studies of Fanon's oeuvre by publishing, to a great extent, previously inaccessible writings of this revolutionary public intellectual. The collection covers a wide spectrum of genres, including Fanon's doctoral thesis, case studies, letters, journal entries, speeches, lectures, articles etc.

Largely known for his psychiatric and political writings, the bulk of the chapters of this Fanon collection focus on his unwavering commitment to and straddling of these discourses. Regarding the section on Fanon's psychiatric writing, it is somewhat befitting that it begins with his doctoral

dissertation, which is preceded by Jean Khalfa's broader contextualization of Fanon's psychiatric writing. This is the more so because herein lies the roots of Fanon's transgressive discourse that was meant to challenge and invert colonial logic. Jean Khalfa provides an incisive argument on Fanon as a revolutionary psychiatrist by delineating an evolution of Fanon's thought that some Fanon scholars seemed to have glossed over, either because of his neuro-psychiatric approach which, Khalfa argues, may not be as easily accessible to scholars from other disciplines, unlike his focus on the psychopathology of the colonized, which has been the staple diet for most studies on Fanon. He goes on to point out that the bulk of Fanon's initial or early publications were taken from his doctoral thesis, which focused on neurology but dealt, albeit glibly, with the alienation of the Black person.

The editors have chosen to follow a somewhat chronological order in the structure of chapters on psychiatric writings for the purposes of their readers' understanding of the evolution of Fanon's trajectory in this field. As can be inferred, for readers not well conversant with the technical intricacies of psychiatry, Khalfa's introduction as well as annotations are extremely useful, especially when it comes to grappling with the gist of Fanon thesis. Some of the case studies are, however, easily accessible, for example, 'Maghrebi Muslims and their Attitude to Madness', when Fanon argues:

.... [The] mentally ill patient is absolutely alienated, he is not responsible for his disorder; the genies alone bear responsibility. The patient is an innocent victim of the genie or genies that possess him The patient's conduct is 'interpreted' according to general beliefs.... His credit remains intact (pp. 422-423).

Sounds familiar for readers rooted in African communities! Of course, there are those chapters that are rather too technical for a lay person's eye and this is to be expected.

The profundity of Fanon's thought is, nevertheless, captured as he proffers succinctly his view on what may be considered the mundane practices of everyday life, as in the chapter titled 'Trait d'Union', which is taken from the ward journal of Saint Alban psychiatric hospital, where Fanon was an intern. For example, in his entry to the journal on 30 January 1953 titled 'The human being faced with things', he writes: 'to want or desire a car is to want to have the desire for a car no longer. To desire something is to want to desire

it no longer' (281) or, later 6 March 1953 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow': 'Memory is often the mother of tradition. Now, if it is good to have a tradition, it is also agreeable to be able to go beyond the tradition and invent a new mode of living' (283). These are just a few of the examples that demonstrate Fanon's consummate writing skills in persuading his readers to endorse his views. Uppermost in Fanon's psychiatric writings, is the notion: 'Colonialist psychiatry as a whole has to be disalienated' (417) and this is a stance that draws on the 'disalienist' teaching of Saint-Alban asylum and Professor Tosquelle, according to Khalfa. The last chapter in the section on Fanon's writing titled 'The Meeting between Society and Psychiatry', is based on the notes taken by Lilia Ben Salem, Tunis, 1959-1960 (27). It has to be pointed out that this is the most accessible chapter to a lay person, maybe because these are lecture notes meant for the consumption of Fanon's students:

The mad person is one who is 'foreign' to society. And society decides, to rid itself of this anarchic element. Internment is the rejection, the side-lining of the patient. The psychiatrist is the auxiliary of the police, the protector of the society... (p. 517).

There are shades of Du Bois in the subsection 'Problem of the Encounter' in this passage:

In a society that is as divided as American society, to what extent can a Black encounter a White? When a Black American is face to face with a White, stereotypes immediately intervene; it is necessary for him not to be 'true' with the White because the value systems are not the same; at bottom, there is a lie which is the lie of the situation When a Black addresses a White, first he has a particular voice, as well as particular demeanour and style. When the white element intervenes in Harlem, racial solidarity is immediately manifest (p. 526).

This obviously calls to mind Du Bois metaphor of 'double consciousness', in terms of which the African American of the 20th century had to negotiate the dichotomy of reconciling the self with an all-embracing American identity in order to resolve his or her predicament and find the true self.

Fanon was obviously a voracious reader who had a keen interest in psychology, politics and sociology, literature, as can be inferred from his

previous publications, however, what came as a surprise to me was that Fanon also dabbled with creative writing; theatrical productions such as *Drawing Eye* and *Parallel Hands* (1949) included in this collection are a case in point. Robert Young's lengthy introduction to Fanon's theatre provides the historical context of Fanon's theatre as well as a profound analysis of the two plays, which is crucial for potential readers to get to grips with Fanon's theatre. As Young puts it, in parts:

[...] the plays could be best described as philosophical dramatisations: they are primarily plays of ideas not of character. However...they are not merely cerebral, as a result of the distinctive poetic-surrealist idiom of Fanon's language, they come across as 'lived things', intensely physical, visceral, full of affect, with the sensations of the trembling dispersed body emphasized from it (p. 14).

Indeed, Young's analysis of both plays is illuminatingly exhaustive in its provision of possible multi-readings of the two plays by Fanon. It will not come as a surprise, therefore, if there is, in the recent future, a proliferation of papers or studies with a keen interest in focusing on these two plays.

Most important with regards to the literary Fanon, is his scathing critique of Richard Wright's 'White Man Listen'. Having read with interest and enjoyed Wright's writings prior to this (as clearly indicated on the footnote, p. 637), he takes issue with the political logic of this work, in a letter to Wright. Fanon indicates here that he was so interested in Wright's work that he was working on a study on the human significance of Wright's work. He goes on to make his point by immediately pointing out the pitfalls of Richard Wright's liberal humanism:

If we can point to a sterile approach, then it is one that consists for an oppressed person, in trying to speak to the 'heart' of his oppressors: history contains no example of a dominant power yielding to the tongue lashings, however, reasonable and moving, of those that it crushes, against material interests, sentiments and good sense are never heard (p. 637).

He continues in his objection to Wright's ideological stance (p. 638): 'Wright is satisfied with citing the main components of the black man of whom he provides a global and, consequently, superficial view [...] the black man that

Wright shows to the white man is not the black man he speaks to him about'. He sums up his argument with this cynical question: 'Has history taught Richard Wright nothing?' and a retort, 'We might be permitted to think so' (640).

For South African literary scholars, this brings to mind the debate that Njabulo Ndebele raised in the 1980s over the proposed title of the anthology of Black South African poetry that was due for publication. When the editor Essop Patel suggested the title 'Ask Any Black Man', Ndebele wrote a long letter to *Staffrider* taking issue with that title on the grounds that it implied targeting the 'hearts' of whites, which was a rather futile exercise given the historical context of the struggle narrative at that point in time. As a result of his intervention, the title was changed to *The Return of the Amasi Bird*. Coming back to Fanon's reading of Wright's book, the title of Wright's book, in terms of the clarion call of its plea here, bears the imprint of such an anachronism within the American context in that era, and Fanon captures this very succinctly in his letter to Richard Wright which appeared in *El Moudjahid*, No. 47, 3 August 1959 (p. 637-638).

The bulk of the book consists of Fanon's political writings; the recurring message throughout is summed up in his radical political stance, marked by his revolutionary zeal, as can be seen here:

The African peoples, in a painful and heroic effort, are standing upright, and have decided at all costs to take back their stolen personality, to affirm their humiliated dignity, to wrest back their status as free peoples, to turn forever the hideous page of slavery and servitude (p. 627).

Some of the chapters in this section overlap with or reiterate Fanon's political stance as found in his collection of political speeches that appeared in *Towards an African Revolution*. This includes his endorsement and justification of violence in the fight for liberation against colonialism, as well as his analysis of the unfolding of the liberation struggle in Algeria and the continent. The difference in this collection is that these ideas are more clearly pronounced than in the earlier publication. Fanon's unwavering commitment and revolutionary zeal ring true in the following retort, which appears in chapter 3 of his political writings, under the title 'National Independence: The Only Possible Outcome'.

The revolution is by essence an enemy of half-measures, compromises and backward steps. Taken to its end, it saves peoples; stopped in the process of happening, it brings about their loss and consummates their ruin. The revolutionary process is irreversible and inexorable. Political sense commands that its march not be stymied (p. 553).

As can be inferred from these words, writing this piece for *El Moudjahid* in September 1957, these are the pronouncements of an activist brimming with confidence that the gains of the revolution were irreversible and victory was within reach.

Having said that, Fanon's posthumous collection provides a new dimension to the Fanon scholarship in so far as it unearths some previously unpublished material and, therefore, serves as an invitation for Fanon scholars to re-read and rediscover Fanon. Whether this new publication will throw the existing Fanon scholarship into disarray or will help augment and shed more light on the existing scholarship even more, is a moot point; what is clear, however, is that, in the light of this revelation of a broader canvas of Fanon's work, Fanonian studies will need revisiting. For cultural studies and literary studies scholars, however, the book paves the way for an appreciation of Fanon's aesthetic perspective; but, more importantly, it provides something to ponder for scholars in psychiatry and politics. Ultimately, this collection is the quintessential for the Fanon scholarship across disciplines: Fanon's attention to detail, his astute analysis and clarity of vision are amplified in this collection. As a matter of fact, the richness of Fanon's *Alienation and Freedom* cannot be exhaustively captured within the confines of a book review; its profundity requires a longer review article.

Be that as it may, this collection of Fanon's work not only bears testimony to Fanon's versatility, but also provides yet another wider dimension of Fanon's astute analysis of the postcolonial human condition. The broader packaging of the book, and its representation, is excellent, and noteworthy; it makes for insightful reading. If you want to immerse yourself in yet another Fanon milestone contribution to postcolonial studies, this should be your bedside book!

References

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