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White Violence, Black Psyche: Representation of Violence in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Batman Comics

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Abstract: Albert Memmi, like many commentators, found Fanon's violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* disturbing and surprising. The major value of Fanon's work lies primarily not in his generalization, which are devastatingly acute but above all in the relationship of his ideas to direct experience. This paper is an attempt to understand the psyche of violence from the perspectives of the marginalized and the masters. Like power which, according to Foucault, does not work for anybody but rather uses the humans as the agent itself; violence too does not work for anybody but always against everybody - harming the perpetrators and the inflicted alike. Frantz Fanon, in his polemical book *The Wretched of the Earth* analyses the root of violence and its effect. The paper will also refer to other colonial and post-colonial texts like *Kim*, *A Passage to India*, etc.

Keywords: violence, comics, crime, colonization, discourse, popular culture, psyche, psychology.

Albert Memmi, like many commentators, found Frantz Fanon's theory of violence disturbing and surprising for a psychiatrist. In the same vein another psychologist named Dr. Fredrich Wertham (in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*) was disturbed by the use of violence in the hitherto known medium for children – Comic Books; particularly

the superhero comic books that hardly had any restraint in displaying gore and violence. Figures like those depicted below might have prompted him to say so.



Fig 1: Scott Snyder (writer), Andy Kubert (artist). *The New 52, Batman# 18*. New York: DC Comics, May 2013. p.14.

The good doctor said that the comics which were the daily diet of the kids were responsible for the increasing rates of delinquency among children. He argued that comics had a deep influence upon the impressionable conscience of the children. Too much exposure to violence on the printed pages was detrimental to the growth of the children into good citizens. Wertham says, “Murder, crime, and drug are offered to children in a literature which the defenders of comic books call the modern version of the stories of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Anderson or dope peddlers in Mother Goose” (Wertham 1954, 42).

Indeed, the comics say far more about adult’s conduct than children’s because it is the adults in the comics who perpetrate violence. Wertham’s entire campaign was the horror of a society forced to look at its own sins, and wondering if the disease in them would spread to their young. It was a classic case of psychological projection (as is the entire notion of identification): the refusal to see within itself, that which one so readily sees in the ‘other’. But far more interesting than the adult’s fear of the content of comics, with all of the repressed fantasies of

sexuality and violence which lies barely beneath the surface of their own cultural skins, is the effect which Wertham notes that comics have on the process of reading itself.

In response to the charges that Fanon glorified violence, Cesaire' argued that Fanon proposed violence in an attempt to create a non-violent world:

... the violence of justice, of purity and of intransigence... his revolt was ethical, and his endeavour generous. (quoted in Young 2003, 129)

And in the same manner the violence perpetrated by Batman can be defended on similar lines which have been done to some extent above. And if the major value of Fanon's work lies primarily not in his generalizations, which are devastatingly acute, but above all in the relationship of his ideas to direct experience the violence projected in the comic books can be understood in relation to their psychological implications.

The initial violence which the colonizer perpetrates is the result of his anxiety to look superior. George Orwell's shooting an elephant recorded in the essay with the same name is especially illuminating. A colonizer inflicts purposeless violence to act as a "Sahib." For Orwell, "A Sahib has got to act like a Sahib" (Orwell 1968, 194). He wears a mask of violence and his face grows to fit it. And according to the principles of deconstruction as one word points to another in a futile attempt to grasp the ever elusive meaning, the mask of violence too sheds one 'face' only to adorn another equally futile to bring any meaning to the existence of the colonizer or the colonized. Nevertheless, as Jean Paul Sartre in the Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* points out that violence in the colonies is perpetrated not only to put the colonized at weak position but also to dehumanize him and thus to dodge the precepts of western humanistic teachings of Enlightenment. This intense oppression instead of making the native submissive, turns him/her into a creature who understands only one language – that of the whip and the gun. The native gets desensitized, he gets familiar with the daily violence and accumulates the poison

slowly but steadily only to spill it on their tormentors. Thus the chain of violence which is started by the colonizer stops momentarily at the brutalization of the perpetrators. The same is true of a non-colonial society. Violence is everywhere, though in different forms. In a developed country like America the violence is homicidal and not genocidal. The well-known origin story of Batman states that it was a random act of violence by a random mugger which led to the birth of Batman from the billionaire Bruce Wayne. It was this act of violence that created a spirit of vengeance which uses brute force to subdue the criminal element of the city of Gotham. Something good thus came out of something very bad – the vigilante of Gotham City.



Fig. 2: Allan Moore & Brian Bolland (Writers). 2008. *Batman: The Killing Joke*. New York: DC Comics, p.9.

Sartre, using a Jungian principle, tells us that the mad impulse of the native to murder is the expression of the oppressed natives' collective unconscious anxiety. The violence is often a kind of jungle fire which burns the dead and rotting as well as the new born and the innocent. The native muscle always charged up with the anticipation of violence automatically hits his own image, i.e. his own countryman and kin, at the slightest of the provocation. Stylistically speaking the masked vigilante is more alert against another masked delinquent. It often happens that the masked vigilante stands against another. The super hero who is usually a masked person finds himself often against another masked super villain. A vigilante who was born as a result of a random act of mindless violence is surcharged with the same emotion

every time he is out on a patrol. Batman strikes first lest his enemies do it and kill him. Thus the hero and the villain can be regarded as the inverted image of each other and they attack each following the same principle. In a colonial situation however the violence often gets channeled out on the innocent in its absence of bursting forth upon the real criminal – the colonizer. The same happens to the colonial people. The American soldier coming back from Vietnam or more recently from Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq trained and habituated to kill, pointed their repressed violence on their own comrades, family and even themselves. A similar event took place recently on 2nd April this year at the Fort Hood army base in Texas, where a soldier named Ivan Lopez killed three other soldiers and injured another sixteen before killing himself (Wiener-Bronner, Morrison & Bennett 2014). There are no such mistakes in the Batman narrative because if Batman is shown hurting innocent people, then no one is going to read the comic books. Moreover, the killing or getting hurt of an innocent person would neutralize the mission of Batman. Batman doesn't even kill his arch enemies since killing them would require the painful and meticulous preparation of others and since Batman's gallery of villains are very well studied with tremendous characters it will take a huge effort to replace the same. However, Batman's villains always hold some innocent bystander a hostage and threaten his or her life. Some people, including the psychiatrist Victor Hugo blame Batman for the spurt in the violence in the city. In fact, it is Batman, according to his loyal butler Alfred in the movie *The Dark Knight* (2008), who is responsible for the intensification of violence on the streets of Gotham since Batman has driven the thugs to the wall they are retaliating with whatever they have got in a battle for survival. The criminals are much like the cornered cat or rodent which bites violently to escape their tormentors. Now the natives too were cornered and they too bit their tormentors to escape. Fanon only presents the violence in a systematic and psychologically valid language.

All colonizers or all people who belong to the colonial or neo-colonial countries are not evil, for example, Lord William Bentick, Lord Ripon are amongst a few who took up the 'real burden' of the white men. However, Fanon is here talking about France and not

Britain. But even the good intentions of the west are seen as derogatory or as perpetuating dominance as a result of the violence which the race as a whole inflicts upon the natives. Thus violence often turns things upside down. This may be true to the revolutionary ideals as well. The traumatized can hardly distinguish between the face and the mask. If one has ever tried to rescue an animal which is cornered, one could recall that the poor animal attacked its saviour with the same vigour as it would have had attacked its tormentor. In the same vein the colonized could barely manage to distinguish between the white face from their black masks of violence.

Fanon points out to the recent trends of violence in the neocolonial world when he says that the Capitalist first world countries would not decimate the colony’s population for they would lose both their capital in the form of labour and consumers that way. The super powers would use violence only to scare the native men and women and then one should not be able to gather courage and fight back with violence. The violence is used to demoralize them. Therefore, Fanon says that, “The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” (quoted in Carroll 2007, 116). Batman uses his disguise to scare the ‘superstitious’ and ‘cowardly’ criminals into submission by using his fear psychosis. The same is done by Batman’s arch enemy Scarecrow.



Fig. 3: Bruce Jones (writer), Sean Murphy (penciller/inker), Zach Howard, Jay Leisten (colorist). “Batman Scarecrow # 1.” New Jersey: Gotham Entertainment Group L.L.C., May 2005.

It often happens that, after long hours of studykeeping our heads down towards the book, our neck aches and twitching our head sharply to an extremely opposite position, gives us momentary relief from the pain. The same happens with violence; the tormented assumed a completely opposite position but remains same in the attitude or method. Fanon says that the heat of violence purges on one hand and unites on another, all, irrespective of their caste, creed and tribal status. Violence being their unifying factor invests the natives' character with positive and creative qualities. Fanon announces in his prophetic manner:

... violence is a cleansing force. It frees the natives from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. (quoted in Naess 2005, 114)

Therefore, violence, according to Fanon is not the result of conflict, but the source of one's self-reconciliation. Violence not only cleanses the individual from inferiority complex but cleanses the colonizer from the native land. For Fanon revolution is always a violent process. But for decolonization the native has to put the last in the first and the first in the last and to do so one has to follow the course of absolute violence. And the native, specially the peasants and the working class, should deny their erstwhile conquerors the right to define for them what kinds of violence they should take up. Fanon wants to give both the axe and the torch in the hands of the peasant and the worker, for they are the 'last'. Moreover, it is the people in the lowest strata of the society who have been least affected by the western poison.

In Batman's case every time he violently punishes some criminals he mitigates some part of his childhood trauma. It is an established fact that a traumatized child often turns into a bully. So can the same psychological behaviour hold true for the nation as a whole if we take into consideration the idea of Jung's collective unconscious. A brutalized nation turns brutal. The same holds true for the difference of attitude towards violence of Superman and Batman. Superman was not traumatized in his childhood so he is 'soft' on criminals but the power he has got doesn't need him to be very tough either. On the other hand,

Batman needs to be violent to prove his point. Moreover, it’s the suddenness of his appearance that provides the much needed shock to the criminals and not the intensity of the violence that is stupefying. Yet, he has been making his ‘sudden’ appearances for the last seventy five years and thus have become predictable but not for the criminals and not even for the Commissioner of Police. Thus the sudden act of violence and not the perennial acts of brutalization that is awful. In the case of the oppressed they suddenly attack the oppressor and in a sporadic manner and not in any organized manner which makes their act appear all the more brutal. The organized crimes of the colonizers seem to be a routine affair of the big bubble eating the small bubble but the disparate and thus an intense violent act of the natives stands aghast and conspicuous. It so happens that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 seems less brutal to the western media than the Mau Mau rebellion of 1952 in Kenya basically because the former used bullets (and thus sophistication) and the latter, indigenous arms which could not kill with a single blow and not bloodlessly.

Fanon legitimizes the use of violence by marking the colonizer as the ‘other’. He treats the colonizer as a parasite on the native body which has to be exorcised from the body with utmost violence. However, the colonizers dominate not only through the dint of their canons and guns but also through their economic apparatus, which is a thousand times more powerful and deep rooted than the physical and even the political force and onslaught of the colonizer. Fanon describes colonialism as not a thinking machine, not a body with a thinking mind but “... violence in its natural state,” (Fanon 1968, 59) and this abstraction will yield when confronted with greater violence and Mirabeau’s saying: “I am here by the will of the people; I shall leave only by the force of bayonets” (quoted in Fanon 1968, 82) lends support to Fanon’s argument. Cleverly, Fanon by calling the colonizing forces as an abstraction legitimizes the violence. In fact Fanon is too much of a humanist to ask for spilling blood, he calls the people of Africa to arm themselves against an idea and inflict violence upon it. Batman too is not against the criminals (except isolated wishes to kill the Joker) but against the crime as an abstraction. The violence he inflicts is not individual but collective. His punches are aimed at the criminal psyche

and not the face. However, ironically the more he tries the more he fails to reign in the criminal elements and more violent becomes the criminals and their crimes. If we make a comparative analysis of the use of violence and its depictions in the comic books we will be able to see that the depiction have become all the more graphic and detailed.



Fig. 4: Allan Moore & Brian Bolland (Writers). 2008. *Batman: The Killing Joke*. New York: DC Comics, p.17.



Fig. 5: Scott Snyder (writer), Greg Capullo & Jonathan Glapion (Illustrator). 2008. *The New 52, Batman #11: The Dark Knight Rises*. New York: DC Comics, p.6.

In the depicted images we find that in the first picture Batman is beating up a bunch of goons without any bloodshed but in the second picture from the left we find Batman biting out the flesh of a man.

Fanon advocates the use of same violence against all attempts to re-colonize the newly independent nations, even if the attempt is being made by someone who resides within the nation. Fanon does not stop his fellow men to fight against the native bourgeoisie who act like scavengers who gather to strip the nation of its last remnants of strength after the predatory colonial force had rendered the nation bereft of all vitality. Fanon notes quite rightly, that the atmosphere of violence continues to dominate national life, both as a consequence of the past and as a result of its interaction with the world. For Fanon, the Third world is in the “. . . middle of the whirlpool” (Fanon 1968, 74) of the Cold War politics. Fanon observes that though the violence of the native is hopeless when set off against the oppressor’s military might, violence in the dynamics of the international situation constitutes a terrible and persistent menace for the oppressor. It is not only the Africans, Arabs and Koreans living in Africa, Middle-East or Korea who have armed themselves against their oppressors but the Africans, Arabs and Koreans living in America and the other developed countries who have adopted the means of violence to assert themselves among their oppressors. Thus, Fanon on one hand prophesizes the gloom of armed-civil struggles within Africa, for instance Somalia; on the other hand he anticipates the terrorist out-fits like Al-Qaida who not only target the Twin Towers but also demolishes the third world-Bamiyan-Buddha-statues. Now whenever a threat asserts its ugly head a nation or community reacts in several ways. Say for example the birth of the comic book superheroes like Superman and Batman coincided with the spread of the Second World War with Hitler as a supreme power and threat, especially to Jews. It is interesting that both Superman and Batman were created by Jews who were the most vulnerable. These people dreamed up the perfect antagonists of Hitler. It was an automatic defense mechanism which found a creative outpour. The same threat loomed over America after the 9/11 incident and yet again America answered with yet more efficient, yet more muscular superheroes, who this time were against another kind of a fundamentalist.

However, Fanon was immediately concerned with the war of independence in Algeria. The National Army of Liberation in Algeria had inferior weaponry but, Fanon encourages this army and many armies like them (the Maoists in India for example) by talking that the will of the people bends the most sophisticated armies of the world. The Americans did it in the American war of independence in 1776, the English did it against Napoleon, and then, can the Algerians not do it against the French. Fanon advocates guerilla warfare but in a new form if it is to compete with the economic warfare of trusts and monopolies.

Ultimately according to Edmund Burke III, “. . . the strength of *The Wretched of the Earth* rests ... on ... the violence and inspiration of its rhetoric. It's a call to arms; not a scholarly autopsy” (Burke 1976, 127-136). Therefore, even after we have closed the book the argument continues within us for we feel the strength of the people in revolt and we answer or try to answer with equal force of our emotional stamina. Elleke Boehemer says that Fanon's argument concerning revolutionary violence as an effective means of colonial oppression is “Fanon's most controversial contribution to postcolonial theory...” (Boehemer 2006, 347).

Thus, we can find that though the representations of violence are done basically for different purposes in the book of Fanon and the comic books of Batman, they are both a manifestation of psychological encounters with violence. One is a written form of prose poetry and another drawn form of graphic rhetoric. While one looks at the perpetrator of violence another looks at the malady from deep inside. While in the first case we find the black letters impressed upon the white page and thus in this Manichean binarism apparently less ambivalent; in the second case the ambivalence towards violence is all the more colourful.

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