

When the Wretched of the Earth Begin to Write: Decolonizing African Literature through Fanon

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In his article “The Wretched of the Earth: Reciprocal Bases of National Culture and the Fight for Freedom” Frantz Fanon argues that it is the duty of the intelligentsia of third-world countries to fight their way into and through a colonial system to uplift their culture through their writing and actions. Though an admirable initiative, many scholars from colonized countries would argue that the underlying issue with healing a culture—and decolonizing its literature—is the presence of the colonial system itself. Decolonization of literature cannot occur within a colonial setting, and it is only when colonial powers are limited that growth and healing occur within a postcolonial culture. Within the context of African literary discourse, there exists a myriad of engagements with this argument, including Chinua Achebe’s desire to alter colonial systems to better complement African culture, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s rejection of stereotypes and collective authenticity, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s vision of recreating African cultural rules through the use of native languages and literature. Each scholar uniquely interacts with Fanon’s theory using their own personal anecdotes and cultural experiences, showing how colonialism bleeds into every corner of a culture and people, with its traumatic effects lasting for generations. Without the eradication of colonial systems, these wounds can never be fully mended.

Fanon explains how colonialism leaves its impact—or “bleeds”—into every sector and person in a society by “the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the natives and their customs to

outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systemic enslaving of men and women.” (Fanon 1361). The effects of colonialism and imperialism in Africa do not just span the period of the transatlantic slave trade but are felt through the oppression of native groups and cultures even after a country achieves “independence”. Ngũgĩ implores readers to “call a spade a spade” and see that

imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial phases continuously [pressgang] the African hand to the plough to turn the soil over, and [put] blinkers on him to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with bible and sword. In other words, Imperialism continues to control the economy, politics and cultures of Africa. (109)

The racist policies of colonial systems that effect oppressed people were and are still justified through the “the idea of the black race as inferior to the white race” (Adiche 43). This framework is what Fanon says creates—within a colonized person—the sense of “inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, to recognize the unreality of his ‘nation,’ and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure” (Fanon 1361). That is, colonization abuses culture and people through damaging political and systemic violence, leaving very little in its wake for the possibility of a lasting sense of self and cultural identity for a colonized person. In the postcolonial context, the need to heal from such a trauma is immense, and sometimes impossible because of the nature of such a system.

Fanon states that “within the framework of colonial domination there is not and there will never be such a phenomena as new cultural departures or changes in the

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national culture.” (Fanon 1361). Because colonial domination is all-encompassing, a culture can never escape its reach because “To control a people’s culture is to control its tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (Ngũgĩ 118). This stunting of growth is evident in the many ways it impacts generations of oppressed people who for most, or sometimes all, of their lives have existed in a fragmented world between the cultural reality of one’s roots and traditions, current reality of day-to-day interactions, and their identity within a colonial framework that shapes school or work. As Ngũgĩ explains, “for a colonial child, the harmony existing between the three aspects of language as communication was irrevocably broken. This resulted in the disassociation of his sensibility from his natural and social environment—what we might call colonial alienation” (119). The “colonial alienation” he describes offers insight into the lack of growth a culture experiences due to colonization. With no unifying reality, how can one child, never mind a culture of a people, have a cohesive identity that shifts and changes as time moves on? A stagnant sense of self cannot adapt and therefore cannot last, leaving a culture lacking an independent reality. Yet, despite this, scholars from colonized countries have found that language and literature can help create a unifying sense of self and heal the fragmentation of a colonized person.

Ngũgĩ explains how “culture transmits or imparts images of the world (and reality) through the spoken and the written language—through the capacity to speak, the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension” (117-118).

Additionally, Fanon offers that “culture is first the expression of a nation, the expression of its preferences, of its taboos and of its patterns” (1365). This forwards the premise that through language, culture can foster the “mutual comprehension” of its expressed cultural signifiers, meaning language can help create the unifying reality required for healing.

Colonial powers employ this phenomenon in a destructive manner by exposing colonial children to the ontology of the colonizer, “where his own native languages were associated, in his impressionable mind, with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, nonintelligibility and barbarism” (Ngũgĩ 119). Chinua Achebe offers an anecdote designed to shed light on this experience in how his wife’s young Nigerian student wrote an assignment about winter and snow, despite never having seen snow, and when asked why he did not write about his reality living in a Sub-Saharan climate, he simply answers that “the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do” (Achebe 44). To explain this phenomenon, Fanon states that “a national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systemic fashion” (1362). While Achebe continues to write in English, he explains that there is “an adequate revolution for [him] to espouse—to help [his] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement” (Achebe 44). In response to this assertion, Ngũgĩ suggests writing in one’s native language as an affirmation of the nation’s sense of identity. Ngũgĩ explains how, if more literature was written in a native language instead of a colonial one—such as English or French—that more colonized people would find security in their cohesive sense of self. In fact, Ngũgĩ offers his own experience of being questioned as to why he began writing literature exclusively in his mother tongue of Gikuyu: “The very fact that the dictates of common sense in the literary practice of other cultures are being questioned in the case of an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities.” (Ngũgĩ 126). That is, Ngũgĩ realized that once he

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began to confront the colonial vestiges in the English language responsible for hampering his literary expression, the backlash he received was a result of those same colonial beliefs.

For Ngũgĩ, writing in his mother tongue of Gikuyu is a form of rebellion against the oppressive colonial framework, whereas other authors find that the subject of their writing helps them to reframe and decolonize their engagement with the culture. Fanon explains how postcolonial literature “at first chooses to confine itself to the tragic and poetic style” then evolves as “expression become[s] less frequent in proportion as the objectives and the methods of the struggle for liberation become more precise.” (1362). And—although writing about the struggles of a nation can be cathartic and help heal unprocessed wounds—some would argue that it perpetuates a violent cycle within a culture and its perception on an international scale. Adiche explains how when she wrote her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, a professor at John Hopkins expressed to her that he felt it “was not authentically African. [Her] characters were educated and middle class. They drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore, they were not authentically African” (48). The struggle to write a story with the need to prove its “authenticity” is a product of colonial power, one that Fanon describes as the result when “the colonialists...become the defenders of the native style” (1364). This is yet another example as to how decolonizing literature must be facilitated and carried through the voices of nation and culture, without the gatekeeping of oppressive forces. Stereotyping and “authenticity” are examples of colonial oppressive systems that keep authors from the freedom to express themselves and stories. Adiche also explains how she feels she should avoid writing about certain topics because “[her] vision of the world is largely a dark one, and [she] sometimes wonder[s] whether being African means that [she] must always indulge in fragile negotiations in order to fully explore [her] artistic vision”

(47); she likens the use of stereotypes to straightjackets in that they limit society's ability to think in complex ways (43). To her, limiting an African story to one stereotype is to diminish the existence of African cultures and experiences (Adiche 47).

To move away from a stereotype-laden, English speaking, colonial system, African authors must reject much of what is standard in the literary world. As Fanon states, "the conscious and organized undertaking by a colonized people to [re-establish] the sovereignty of that nation constitutes the most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists" (1366). In a literary context, the authors of postcolonial societies have a duty to not only fight for their place and honour within a colonial system, which will continue to oppress their culture, but to reimagine their own systems that allow for their culture to thrive and grow within their people. The reinvention of oppressive systems will allow for changes that would help authors of various stances thrive within a newfound identity and community. Fanon's vision for a nation's postcolonial future emphasises the need for unity and rejuvenation amongst an oppressed people, stating that "The birth of national consciousness in Africa has a strictly contemporaneous connection with the African consciousness" (1366). His idea of an "African consciousness" provides hope for a sense of unity and revolution that can help further the path of decolonization in literary circles.

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