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Decolonization Dilemma: Liberation, Violence and Cultural Identity in Gandhi and Fanon

INTRODUCTION

Born on the island of Martinique under French colonial rule, Frantz Omar Fanon (1925–1961) was one of the most important writers in black Atlantic theory in an age of anti-colonial liberation struggle. In the course of his writings on language, sexuality, gender, race and racism, religion, social formation, and many others, Fanon supported the Algerian War of Independence from France and was a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front.

Active in his lifetime was a "saint", a scantily-clad Mahatma, who walked the ill-constructed streets of British India with his danda (stick) in his, with hordes and hordes of people following his lead. Mahatma Gandhi championed ardently for non-cooperation and non-violence as a means of attaining *swaraj* (self-rule) from the British.

In this essay, I endeavour to examine how violence and the construction of a cultural identity figure in the enduring narratives of Gandhi and Fanon. While the former spearheaded the freedom movement in the largest country in South Asia, the latter penned several key works which have inspired liberation struggles even post his premature death. It was their lived realities which shaped their outlooks and actions in the world.

ON VIOLENCE OF THE COLONIZED: GANDHI VS FANON

Colonial hegemony is primarily perpetuated and maintained through a framework of violence and suppression. Frantz Fanon articulates poignantly that “colonial rule serves as a harbinger of violence”, infiltrating not only the physical spaces but also the psyche of the colonized. He states that colonialism is the source of violence, which becomes ingrained and eventually an essential part of its functioning.

Fanon views violence as the "natural state" of colonialism rather than just an accidental byproduct of it. This claim clearly demonstrates the fundamental link between the use of force and physical coercion with colonial control. The first cause of this violence is the colonizer's racialized conceptions of the colonized subjects. Immersed in biased views, the colonizer often labels the colonized as essentially primitive, devoid of empathy and reason.

Crucially, Fanon elaborates on the dehumanizing impact of colonialism on the colonized, contending that it reaches such depths that the colonial subject is stripped of their humanity, and reduced to a state akin to an animal. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian movements, of his stink and foulness, of breeding swarms. He refers to his bestiality, and the native man laughs a hearty laugh when he hears these allusions to the animal kingdom because he knows he's no beast; he's a man.

And here, the native sows the first seed of violence.

He clenches his jaw.

As a result of this dehumanization, the use of violence within the framework of colonialism is ultimately justified and justified. Seeing the colonized as less than human, the colonizer thinks that the only way to retain control and domination is by using coercive means since the dehumanized subject is seen to be unresponsive to other forms of communication.

The colonized people find their freedom in and through violence; it's collective catharsis for them. According to Fanon, there must be a means for the accumulated aggressive forces in any society to be let out. Hence, violence has a cathartic quality and the act of liberation serves as a way to rid the colonial subject of the internalized self-loathing that the colonial power put within them. In such situations, violence acts as a trigger that frees the oppressed from the shackles of their damaged self-image, allowing them to reclaim their political agency and self-worth.

Beyond its transformational power, Fanon also explores the therapeutic possibilities of violence, especially in the treatment of mental health issues brought on by colonial neurosis. Using his experience in psychiatry, Fanon distinguishes psychosomatic disorders—which show up as menstruation pain, ulcers, and hair whitening—that result from the persistent systemic denial of the colonized people. According to Fanon, the revolutionary violence functions as a "cleansing force," easing these symptoms and offering a remedy for the mental diseases brought on by colonialism.

But, though, Fanon recognizes the therapeutic value and potential of violence, he also recognizes its risks and unfavourable effects. Fanon tackles several grim aspects in his theory, including the physical harm that violence causes, its pervasiveness as a colonial currency, and its structural violence that methodically undermines the humanity of the colonial subject.

On the other hand, "spread truth and non-violence among mankind in place of violence and non-truth" was Gandhi's stated aim. His writings are filled with aversion against the predatory brutality of the British against natives in South Africa and India. Gandhi substitutes a model of nonviolent resistance that he called satyagraha, or "truth force" for Thoreau's "civil disobedience." This opposition to colonial control is known as "the weapon of the strongest" but also prohibits "the use of violence in any form or by any means."

Gandhi believed, as quoted by Anthony J. Parel, editor of "Hind Swaraj and Other Writings" in his preface, that the Indian middle-class notion of *swaraj*, to be attained by driving out the British by force, by violence is erroneous and "unacceptable". Gandhi felt that even if the British were expelled violently and economic development achieved through rapid industrialization, it would not bring *swaraj*, as "real swaraj consists in restraint; a certain moral development among the people especially the Indian middle class."

He conceptualized Swaraj on two levels: swaraj as "self-rule" (rule of self over our desires or self-discipline) and swaraj as "self-government" (sovereign independence). Only when an individual has learned to control their emotions, make wise decisions, and balance their bodily and spiritual needs, can he truly contribute to the establishment of an independent and sovereign nation.

In his critique of violence, he expands his argument to a universal principle in Chapter 16 of Hind Swaraj titled "Brute Force", contending that force and revenge can never be justifiable means for attaining goals. According to Gandhi, achieving freedom, justice, and equality necessitates the use of free, just, and equal means. The ends, he insists, are intrinsically tied to the means employed to achieve them.

In Gandhi's philosophy, people and countries can genuinely rule themselves only by actively fulfilling their moral duties through free choices. For self-rule to be authentic, it must be a voluntary and conscious decision. Gandhi rejects the notion that a country can be forced into self-rule; instead, individuals and nations must willingly choose self-rule.

Responding to three examples presented by the Reader, Gandhi (the Editor) addresses the use of force against a thief entering one's home. The editor argues that force is not always justified, pointing out that the victim should consider the relationship with the thief and refrain from retaliatory violence. Drawing parallels to the Indian response to British colonialism, Gandhi emphasizes the primacy of moral duties to another over material

possessions. He advocates for empathy and generosity, asserting that pity and love are more potent than physical force.

Examining the second example of petitioning for social change, the Editor acknowledges that some form of force is required to bring about change but distinguishes brute force from passive resistance. Gandhi's concept of satyagraha, or passive resistance, is highlighted as a more potent option than mere physical force. It involves refusing to comply with the government's orders or recognize its legitimacy, emphasizing the strength of nonviolent resistance.

Lastly, the Editor considers the case of a child stepping into a fire, illustrating the nuanced nature of force. If a parent intervenes to prevent harm to the child, it is not considered true physical force because it is done solely for the child's benefit. In contrast, using force against the English, according to Gandhi, would stem from national interest rather than love or pity for the English, highlighting the ethical distinction between resisting evil and advancing one's interests through force.

POST-INDEPENDENCE: FORMATION OF NATIONAL CULTURAL IDENTITY

Constructing a new cultural identity following the overthrow of colonial rule presents a formidable challenge, as Fanon observed. The prolonged period of colonization, according to him, leads to a significant depletion of the national culture. Under the influence of colonial domination, the very identity of the colonial subject is systematically negated, making it difficult for the newly liberated individual to reclaim their original, authentic self.

Adaptive behaviours are necessary for the colonized to negotiate a precarious existence and escape severe oppression from the colonizers while being under their dominance. These survival-oriented adaptive behaviours embed themselves deeply into the psychological makeup of colonial subjects. Fanon emphasizes how hard it is to give up these survival techniques as they become an essential part of a person's coping methods.

Following extensive revolutionary violence, psychological trauma becomes a ubiquitous reality as colonial people strive to construct a positive self-image. The dread that persisted during the long period of colonial oppression makes it difficult to develop a constructive sense of self. The arduous process of reconstructing one's identity serves as a moving example of the lasting damage caused by colonization and the ensuing liberation fight. According to Fanon, the effect of not creating a positive new identity is "severe

psycho-affective injuries, which leave people without a horizon, anchor, colour, state, or roots.”

Fanon also introduces the concept of the "colonized intellectual," who undergoes three distinct stages in the trajectory of cultural development. Initially, the intellectual imitates the colonizer and embraces European culture. The second stage involves a reactive response, as exemplified by the Négritude movement, emphasizing the superiority of African culture to counter colonial denigration. Such an approach, however, oversimplifies the diverse cultures within Africa.

The third stage encompasses a shift towards a fight for liberation, where intellectuals engage in creating "combat literature" to mobilize people against colonial oppression. Fanon, however, argues that it's this fight for freedom that leads to the development of a new culture and nation, not just the emphasis on culture itself; culture follows nationalism rather than justifying it. He believes that the priority should be the liberation struggle, and culture will naturally evolve as part of that struggle.

Gandhi's views on cultural identity formation are rooted in his understanding of the impact of colonialism on individual and collective consciousness. For both Gandhi and Fanon, the notion of cultural supremacy is an important aspect of colonial dominance, from the imposition of the colonizer's language, Western medicine, education, and the influence of the Church.

In Chapters nine, eleven, twelve and eighteen of *Hind Swaraj*, titled “Railways”, “Lawyers”, “Doctors”, and “Education”, Gandhi speaks of the rise of an uncaring middle class influenced by Western ideas – namely, the doctors and lawyers; of the need for educational reforms for attaining independence; and finally on the role of railways in helping British secure control over Indian mainland.

Gandhi's approach to liberation, however, takes a predominantly spiritual trajectory. He viewed the rise of a wealthy, Western-educated middle class as detrimental to Indian society. Their pursuit of material wealth and consumerist values was incompatible with the spiritual values and self-sufficiency essential for a truly independent India; he criticized the tendency of the Indian middle class to blindly imitate Western ideas and practices without considering their suitability to the Indian context.

He advocates for the decolonization of the self by shedding the superficial trappings of Western civilization. Symbolically, Gandhi stripped himself of Western dependencies, such as appearing barefoot and in 'coolie' dress, denouncing not only physical but also mental dependence on the West. These acts demonstrated his commitment to self-sufficiency and identification with the masses.

His concept of Swaraj transcends mere political independence, entailing individual self-awareness and agency in both moral and cultural realms. Swaraj, for Gandhi, signifies a departure from the materialistic society of the colonizer. Gandhi envisions a society where individuals adhere to universal principles like ahimsa and dharma.

In contrast to Fanon's emphasis on cultural regeneration through antagonism and revolutionary struggle, Gandhi envisions a nonviolent path to cultural rebirth. For Fanon, the struggle against tyranny is seen as a creative and unifying force, with violent rebellion serving as a positive, creative process that binds individuals together in the collective pursuit of liberation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the decolonization strategies of Gandhi and Fanon — especially about violence and cultural identity — offer varying but insightful viewpoints on the difficult process of attaining freedom and forging a sense of national identity.

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence rejects the use of force in the pursuit of liberation and emphasizes the practice of satyagraha. He emphasises the value of maintaining a worthy self-image, which can be achieved through peaceful resistance, and promotes self-rule through self-discipline and growth. For him, cultural identities are formed through the decolonization of the individual, spiritual enlightenment of the masses, and rejection of Western materialism.

In contrast, Fanon believes that violence is an inevitable and essential response to colonial tyranny. He views it as a healing and cathartic process that helps the colonised restore their dehumanised identities and forge new national identities. But he also recognises the risks associated with violence and the necessity of post-independence rehabilitation to deal with the psychological damage caused by colonialism as well as the liberation war.

Though their methods are very different, both philosophers are interested in building cultural identities and attaining liberty. Fanon places more stress on revolutionary struggle and social

catharsis whereas Gandhi emphasizes on nonviolence and personal transformation. In the end, comprehending these divergent viewpoints is essential to realising the complexity of decolonization and the variety of routes that lead to independence and the formation of cultural identity.

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