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**‘Dark Skin, Difficult Tasks’- Analyzing the challenges of applying
psychoanalysis in understanding race**

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis functions as a progressive discipline in the present times, thanks to the development of its psycho-social engagements. Over the years, it has learned to utilize the criticism highlighted by other disciplines, and become more comfortable with moving away from a rigid dogma. While such developments are certainly a step in the right direction, the colonial, Eurocentric origin of psychoanalysis continues to persist, both within the clinic, and outside it. The following essay examines the complexity of taking psychoanalysis outside the clinic by drawing upon Stephen Frosh's (2010) idea of 'the portability' of the clinic.

With its application to the discussion of racial subjectivity in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2021/1952) the essay also highlights the specific conflict that psychoanalysis faces, in engaging with race and colonialism. The choice of taking Fanon's work as the object of interpretation, is its autotheoretical orientation, presented alongside its active political voice. As observed among other commentaries, Fanon's complex ideas on female subjectivity are also discussed in the essay, along with its relation to the question of religion, in psychoanalytic interpretation. Lastly, the essay discusses the need for psychoanalysis to give space to more diverse voices, and how in doing so, it may help itself avoid becoming a 'master' discourse.

Turning Psychoanalysis inside-out

In his book, *Psychoanalysis Outside the clinic*, Stephen Frosh (2010) argues that psychoanalysis as both a theory and a praxis, could contribute to the issues that lie 'outside' its clinical interventions. He identifies such movement of psychoanalysis as being 'portable', with the caveat that the discipline must understand the form of knowledge that it is producing. Frosh understands the knowledge that is unique to, and signifiatory of the psychoanalytic discipline as being the *clinical* knowledge derived from the interaction between the analyst and the analysand. It is important however, to first understand the kind of relationship that these two share, and what do we mean by the term 'clinic' itself. Frosh argues that the clinic refers to a designated space within which the speech of the analysand becomes the catalyst for the formation of a dyad with the analyst. The characteristic that separates the clinic from other structures of social interactions is

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precisely the *context* of the interaction between the analysand who desires for the alleviation of a certain form of distress, which the analyst must work towards, *with* the analysand.

Similarly, the analyst understands their role in this relationship as the self that observes, and listens to the freely associating other, in order to resolve the neurotic distress that is being brought to the discussion. Complete lack of speech from the analysand, or an analyst that transgresses their regulatory role, would not allow for the clinic to exist as a setting. Therefore, such a setting, derived from Freud's own work with his patients, is identified as the psychoanalytic 'clinic', the theories and practices that developed in the discipline being those that revolve around such a setting.

Frosh, however, moves beyond this categorization and argues that the psychoanalytic clinic could be perceived as a *metaphorical* space. Again, it is the *reciprocity* and *mutuality* between the speaking analysand and the listening analyst that allows for the existence of such a metaphorical clinic (Frosh, 2010). Another feature of the psychoanalytic encounter identified by Frosh, is the 'liveness' of the encounter between these two agents. The understanding of analysis as a live encounter also helps one understand the significance of said mutuality that sustains such a relationship. The speech of the analysand therefore, is not a mere tool for making a psychoanalytic interpretation, but a part of the relationship that is being cultivated in the here and now. Therefore, the affective exchange in such an interaction, along with the specific context in which it occurs (i.e. the desire of the analysand for alleviation of neurotic distress) also defines 'psychoanalysis'. These characteristics of the psychoanalytic encounter allow Frosh to identify the clinic as being a 'portable' entity. However, psychoanalysis has progressed from a clinical form of practice into a psychosocial discourse, and has to venture 'outside' of the clinic in addressing such issues. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the 'clinic' to move outside of the clinic, and when it does make such a movement, it should also take into account the challenges associated with this move. Having established the plausibility of the movement of psychoanalysis outside the clinic, the essay now engages with its application to the understanding of racial identity, and examines if such application makes any difference *to* 'psychoanalysis itself' (Frosh, 2010, p. 5).

The Lived Experience vs The Live Encounter

The origin of Psychoanalysis, in both its dogmas and geography, lies in a male-dominated, Eurocentric framework. Although Freud had inhibitions on his discipline being perceived as a ‘Jewish science’ (Frosh, 2005), such inhibitions were mostly centered around the prior, as Freud certainly wanted psychoanalysis to be recognized as an established ‘science’. The desire of creating a ‘metapsychological’ discipline was always driven with the emphasis on ontology and reason, despite, as discussed before, the psychoanalytic tradition dealing with the subjective experiences of the analysand. While ontology and the emphasis on rationality have enjoyed their place in the discipline, it is the phenomenological, that poses challenges for psychoanalysis. Such emphasis on reason (and subsequent rejection of the subjective), is not divorced from the Eurocentric ideals at the heart of psychoanalysis. The rationality of the analyst resembles the characteristics of the white Eurocentric male, who possesses the resources for the understanding of the primordial ‘other’ in the figure of the analysand.

While categorizing the whole psychoanalytic discourse as being white Eurocentric would not be resourceful, a post-enlightenment age of reason, along with an imperialist tendency witnessed throughout Europe following it, do form the core of psychoanalytic dogmas. The hesitation that psychoanalysis has shown in encountering questions of race and colonialism is therefore understandable. However, despite such contentious origins, psychoanalysis has offered a unique vocabulary and a structural analysis of our psychic mechanisms, which could serve a crucial purpose in understanding the matters that psychoanalysis leaves unaddressed (or un-satisfactorily addressed). One such individual who used psychoanalysis in his understanding of the racial subjectivity, was the Martinican psychiatrist Franz Fanon. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 2021/1953) documents the impossibility of experiencing a colonized black subjectivity without also internalizing the *portrayal* of such an identity by the white colonizer. Fanon argues that when a black man attempts to sustain his unique identity, in a world that is white in its conception, it results in epistemic as well as psychic forms of violence.

It is crucial to understand that for Fanon, the black man does not exist in the form of an ‘inferior subject’ but rather, as an omnipresent absence, confined to a ‘zone of non-being’ (2021/1953, p. 7). Fanon identifies such a zone of non-being as ‘sterile’ and lacking all necessities. He argues that

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the white European world deems the black man as incapable of possessing white traits such as beauty and virtue, *and* simultaneously capable of ‘primitive’ traits such as violence and hypersexuality. The modern black man, by definition therefore also constitutes the category of the primitive, and the ‘other’. Such a categorization affects both how the world outside sees the black man, and how the black man sees himself.

“The black man wants to be white. The white man is desperately trying to achieve the rank of man” (p. 8), Fanon notes. The primary goal of the black man therefore, is to become ‘human’. Instead of possessing a unique identity of his own, the black man is trapped in the omnipresent white gaze that does not allow for its own subjectivity to emerge. Such psychic violence further propagates in both the visual register of how the black man is seen, and the linguistic register of how he is described by the whiteness that surrounds him. If such a man were, for example, to look into the mirror, he would not even see the reflection of his black self, as observed in the mirror stage (Lacan, 2004), but rather the projection of the white ‘other’, on his black body. The white imago therefore, *imprints* itself upon the black body, shaping its desires and fantasies in the process.

The black body is part of the black identity for Fanon. He argues that the conception of a consciousness separate from the physical body, is a Eurocentric one, as the black man does not share the privilege of ‘disregarding’ his body like his white counterparts. The whiteness is therefore ‘embodied’ by the black man, and the dark epidermal layer of his skin, becomes the marker of his non-being. The quest of the black man therefore, is to become human *while* possessing a ‘primitive’ black body. The impossibility of such an existence does not evade Fanon and he argues that the black man attempts to achieve such humanity by putting on a ‘white mask’. While such an identity indeed allows for the survival of the black body, the black subjectivity still exists within as a lack. Fanon understands this desire for whiteness as not only defining the black identity, but also significant in characterizing the colonizer that makes such an identification possible (Fuss, 2013). The identification of the black man with the white man is enabled by a colonial context, which separates the self and the other.

The black object, internally becomes the bad object for the white man. Similarly, the whiteness of the colonizer becomes a good object (Davids, 2011), and by identifying with it, the black man

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survives the psychic violence of colonialism. However, as discussed earlier, such an identification is difficult if the black man exists in the category of the non-human. The closest that he can come to the white man therefore, is through what Luce Irigaray (1985) identifies as *mimesis* or imitation. It is plausible to assume that Fanon's work was guided by Irigaray's insight into the patriarchal gendered body, as he identified such a body as also being racialized. As colonialism places the black identity outside the demarcated 'civilised' society, all that the black man could do is imitate the practices of the said society. The quality of the black subjectivity therefore, again becomes the focal point of a psychoanalytic investigation. For Freud, it is our phylogeny and ontogeny that lie at the genesis of our subjectivity. However, Fanon experiences the complexities of a subjectivity that is non-white and identifies the sociogenic element as being crucial to the understanding of human subjectivity, along with the prior two (Wynter, 2013).

Inadvertently or otherwise, in bringing sociogeny to the discussion of identity, Fanon highlights the dark spots of psychoanalysis as a discipline that developed out of the psychic experiences of a predominantly white population that did not experience a conflict like Fanon did. By applying sociodiagnostics (p. 11) like Fanon does, one is forced to pay heed to the social factors such as economic disparity and racism that shape the subjective experience of the coloured identity. These social factors result in internalization, or rather 'epidermalization' of the inferiority complex by the black man. The socio-historical understanding of the consequences of colonialism, as outlined in post-structuralist narratives (Foucault, 1966) provide a framework for the development of such constructed subjectivities. Fanon however, perseveres with psychoanalysis due to his belief that the discipline is uniquely capable of understanding the neuroses of both the black man, and the white man, 'trapped' in their blackness and whiteness respectively. Such a neurosis for the black man, can be identified to be the distress of being subjected to racism, but not limited to it.

The desire of donning a white mask allows for the black man to live a 'psychotic' form of truth that does not mirror the racialized society outside. Such psychosis persists alongside a deteriorating self-esteem within the black psyche. The experience of racialization may also result in a peculiar intrapsychic conflict, as the 'mastery' that the human subject desires over its ego, may resemble the 'mastery' of the colonizer. The 'non-being' of the black man therefore, is coupled with not being the master of his own psyche, *nor* his body. The neuroses of the white man however, is different and exists for Fanon, in the form of negrophobogenesis. Fanon's use of the term refers to

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the irrational fear and hatred of blackness, and serves as the psychic reasoning behind the colonialist desire to conquer. Fanon argues that the white man is both scared of, and angry with, the black man, and uses the black body to project his own insecurities and hatred. Fanon narrates the instance of a racial encounter that he faced in a train. A French child, on seeing Fanon, exclaims to his mother, 'Look Mama, A Negro', followed by the remark, 'I'm frightened' (2021/1953, p. 79). The mother explains to Fanon how her son 'had gone mad' and did not realise that he was as civilised as they were. The emphasis on madness here encapsulates the form of white paranoia that Fanon attributes to the negrophobes.

The encounter leads to Fanon understanding his corporeal schema as having been replaced with an epidermal one. Similarly, Fanon is also enraged and disbelieving of how despite him being the one who is subjected to non-being, it was the 'other' who was frightened of him. His own black rage however, again poses a challenge for psychoanalysis which sees the modern black man, and his desire for rage, as similar to those of the 'primitive' tribes (Freud & Strachey 2001/1913) who share his skin color. The need for dismantling the colonizer-colonized psychic structures therefore becomes even more significant for Fanon. However, once these structures are disentangled from their colonial entrapment, the subjectivities that emerge, still remain uncertain. While Fanon makes great use of the psychoanalytic discourse in understanding the psychic motivations behind racial and colonial behaviors, he experiences similar failures as the discipline does, in outlining the nuances of feminine identity.

A Turn towards the Literary, and the Critical

In the introduction passage, Fanon asserts how *Black Skin, White Masks* will not resonate with everyone, and that he is 'resolutely a man of his time' (p. 10). While such an assertion is commendable in understanding the book as a phenomenological account of Fanon's own experiences, it results in a lack of necessary consideration to the question of feminine black identity. Despite dedicating two chapters in order to understand the female subjectivity, Fanon struggles to present a substantial route for the female subject to be able to express herself, in a colonial context. The linguistic form of these chapters represents the female subjectivity as existing *in relation* to the black or the white man. Therefore, like the black man before her, the black woman

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struggles to cultivate a unique subjectivity. Not only does she have to interact with a racialized ‘other’, but a gendered one.

Irigaray’s idea of mimesis, as drawn upon before in this essay, highlights the implausibility of the existence of female subjectivity, if the phallocentrism at its core remains unaddressed. The black woman therefore embodies a dual form of ‘lack’ of subjectivity, i.e. of neither being white, nor being a man. Similarly, her body becomes the site of the hated, frightful bad breast that experiences the aggression of both white and black men. The body, for the black woman therefore, is even more difficult to discard off, than it is for a black man like Fanon as it embodies the projection that not only racializes, but also sexualizes it. Such sexualization in turn, is also significant as an epistemic register that further classifies female subjectivity as synonymous to a sexualized other. The space that women occupy in *Black Skin, White Masks* both physically and psychically also demand a closer look.

While Fanon draws upon various examples of the contributions that black male intellectuals like Aime Cesaire made to the Negritude movement which embraced the black identity and culture, the choice of work produced by women like Mayotte Capécia is that which deals with the female desire for love, the trait historically associated with femininity. Similarly, the black soldier in Fanon’s accounts, despite being racialized, holds agency over his thoughts and behavior, antithetical to the white woman he meets at the bordello for ‘celebrating’ his masculinity. The female subject therefore, despite not being racialized, could still be sexualized and confined to the category of the ‘other’. Fanon appears to pay little attention to this unique difficulty of the feminine self and how this may result in not only a racial neurosis, but a sexual one too. In this matter therefore, Fanon is closer to the same colonial dogmatic understanding, that causes him such immense anguish. While female sexuality existed for Freud as a ‘dark continent’ (Khanna, 2003), for Fanon, this dark continent appears to be surrounded by the ferocious sea of whiteness. To risk venturing into the sea therefore, could cause further damage to an identity that is already uncertain. The perils of such an adventure may hence represent Fanon’s final conclusions on the matter.

Psychoanalysis, however, must venture into such a sea of whiteness that is headed to its intellectual shores. On one hand, if psychoanalysis, in line with a singular focus on its clinical knowledge, continues to ignore these social complexities, the Eurocentric conformism in the history of its

existence will not go unnoticed. On the other hand, if psychoanalysis does not choose the objects of its interpretation wisely, it risks producing a form of ‘wild analysis’ (Frosh, 2010) that risks a crude misrepresentation of culture. The way to achieve the necessary equilibrium of the ‘portable’ clinic therefore, is through an interaction with the discourses that have informed its theories over the course of time. Literary criticism, for example, has helped in decentralizing subjectivity, that psychoanalysis can apply in understanding of its failure in doing the same. However, such interaction with the literary must not result in the form of mastery, that psychoanalysis has replicated more than once (Felman, 1977), but rather replicate the *mutuality* that characterises it, while also helping maintain literature as a discourse in itself.

Poetry and literature both could also serve as a linguistic marker in themselves, as observed in the study of resistance poetry (Harlow, 1987), and minor literature (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). Witnessed in the work of poets like Mahmoud Darwish (2003), the literary, and aesthetic quality of poetry encapsulates the existential struggle of a collective identity. In the case of Darwish, it is the idea of *Sumud* (steadfastness/perseverance) that has become symbolic of the Palestinian identity following the events of the *Nakba* (catastrophe). Like the uncertainty of the Fanonian subject, the subjectivity of the Palestinian in exile, manifests in the form of a floating identity that somehow holds on to the essence of being that, which is more than the projection of its colonizer.

Similarly, Palestinian literary critic Edward Said observes how Freud never thought that his work may have non-European readers, and proceeds to engage in a *contrapuntal* reading of Freudian theory as an attempt to contextualize it in its historicity (Said et al., 2003). The introduction of the element of the non-European to the discussion, further problematizes the cultural products that lie outside of the Eurocentric world, along with an emphasis on religion. Freud’s own dismissal of religion has been well documented by Freud himself (1967/1939) as being irrational and potentially pathological. However, for many in the non-European context, the appeal of religion is inclusive of their subjectivity, and serves as a critical tool for politics and postcolonial theory. If Freud’s assertions of religion being non-rational are not understood alongside the greater European context that it develops within, the significance of religion in the non-European world cannot be conceptualized either. The ‘secularism’ of psychoanalysis therefore, becomes an object of critique in relation to the conformism that such a secular position brings about (El Shakry, 2024). In psychoanalysis, the emphasis on objectivity and rationality is also accompanied by an inherent

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desire to ‘know’ (Tupinambá, 2021). Freud after all, did see psychoanalysis as a ‘metapsychological’ endeavor.

The psychoanalytic desire for knowledge has been identified as an inherently patriarchal one (Moi, 1989). The symbolic image of the man of science that was Freud, wanting to *know* the genesis of hysteria among his emotional, female analysands, attests to such patriarchal undertones of the discipline. Therefore, to study the subjective without paying attention to the religious, the sexual, and the colonial, would result in the form of a wild analysis *par excellence*. Contrary to such subversion, if a psychoanalytic intervention is derived from other sister discourses (Allen, 2020), and is equipped with an intersectional outlook towards its objects, the insight would inform not only its theory, but also its praxis moving forward. As important as it is to understand the portability of the clinic, Frosh’s analysis also helps identify the portable clinic as a porous medium (Frosh, 2010). Therefore, the movement inside, is as important, if not more. for an understanding of the encounter between psychoanalysis and culture.

Fakhry Davids, in his book, *Internal racism: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Race and Difference* (2011) analyses the perils that a black or a coloured analyst faces, when involved in a psychoanalytic encounter with the white analysand. Davids identifies a racist defense mechanism, (and not necessarily a concrete racial attitude), as being the point of interest in such an interaction. On a similar note, Forrest Hamer (2002) narrates a personal experience of being subjected to a racially motivated encounter by the police. He explains how the discussion of such an incident with a white analyst produces guilt in the analyst as a result of racial identification of the said analyst, with the racist cops outside of his clinic. Hamer poignantly describes how these characteristics of racial experience, alongside an interracial psychoanalytic encounter shed light upon the corporeal, and the metaphorical ‘guards’ that stand at the gates of the psychoanalytic clinic. Through a different analysis, Kathleen White (2002) provides an insight into the ambivalent role that hatred plays for the coloured analyst. She separates the self-hatred that is a result of racialization, (similar to how Fanon describes it), the hatred that the analyst experiences in the form of the analysand’s transference, *and* the hatred that is part of the countertransferential experience for the analyst.

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Given the reciprocal nature of the analytic relationship, such subjective experiences of either one of the agents, has a significant impact on the other. Both the analyst and the analysand here, exist as individual subjects, but not free from their collective identities. The encounter therefore, both exists within the clinic, and outside it, in the form of sociocultural constructs. The task of the coloured analyst therefore, is even more difficult especially in matters of transference and countertransference. The understanding on these matters, such as hate in the countertransference, as laid out in the Winnicottian theory (1949), have developed predominantly around a white analyst, and therefore, may not account for the complexities that the experiences such as those discussed above are able to highlight. The reconfiguration of the clinic, in light of such developments has been identified as an attempt at de-colonizing the clinical setting, and psychoanalysis at large.

These attempts of decolonizing the clinic however, will remain incomplete if the majority of the stakeholders in it continue to be white. Such decolonization therefore, must be accompanied by active inclusion of coloured analysts who could be part of the clinic without continuing to harbor the inferiority complex that accompanies a racialized identity (Winograd et al., 2014). Not only does such inclusion result in diversity among the clinicians, but also allow for a critique from *within* the discipline by dismantling the master's house using the resources of the 'master' discourse. As observed therefore, there are enough deterrence for psychoanalysis in engaging with race. However, the transformation of psychoanalysis from such engagement is not only significant, but also important.

Conclusion

The above essay highlighted the perils of taking psychoanalysis 'outside' of the clinic in its understanding of race and colonialism. While psychoanalytic discourse has equipped commentators like Fanon with the vocabulary and insights into understanding these issues, its application to the world outside of the clinic forces psychoanalysis to reexamine its origins and the colonial undertones of the material it produces. Similarly, it has to confront the failures that the discipline has experienced especially in relation to female subjectivity, and embrace the insights provided on the matter by other disciplines such as critical theory and literature. The

movement outside the clinic therefore, has a lot of potential for the development of psychoanalysis as a discipline if it can work with other disciplines without attempting to exercise mastery over them. Similarly, the criticism that it faces must empower psychoanalysis in understanding and commenting upon issues that warrant a political critique, rather than practicing neutrality that it no longer has access to.

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