

The Fear of the Other Reviewed in Literature

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Frantz Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*, as his doctoral thesis in 1952 in France. Fanon later published *Black Skin, White Masks* as a book and became an influential writer in the field of postcolonial studies. Fanon proposed that blacks were robbed of their identity under colonial rule. The loss of identity of the black people continued even after slavery was abolished and colonialism had ended. I intend to show through my research that the loss of identity by the Negro community has greatly influenced literature. Machado de Assis, one of the greatest Brazilian writers, was influenced by the effects of slavery during the era of colonialism in which he had to develop a unique technique of writing, where his voice of a mulatto writer had to be concealed because of his fear of upsetting the Other.

Nigel C. Gibson in his book entitled *Fanon – The Postcolonial Imagination*, discusses much of Fanon's ideas on racism as an end product of slavery during colonial times. Gibson speaks of Fanon's point of view in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (BS) about the dialectal impasse suggested by Hegel. Gibson points out that Fanon criticized Hegel's master-slave dialectic about the reciprocity relationship, in which master and slave become so dependent of each other that one masters the other. Fanon did not believe that this phenomenon occurred in slavery during colonialism. Whites overpowered blacks. Gibson points out Fanon's belief of the master and slave relationship:

Hegel's master/ slave dialectic is initially a struggle to the death, and the victor expects service not discourse. In the colonial situation the language used indicates that no real reciprocity obtains. Because the colonizers speak in the language of violence: 'Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an

inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local culture originality – finds itself face to face with the language of civilizing nation’ (BS 18). (30)

Black slaves and white masters did not have a reciprocal relationship as proposed by Hegel even though colonial masters depended greatly on slavery work. Blacks were forced to give up their language, culture and traditions. The white masters wanted them to incorporate the European tradition instead. Furthermore, in order to impose slavery, whites not only demanded that slaves forgo their cultural background but also elaborated a racist ideology in which the black race was considered inferior and therefore, masters could be justified in the practice of forcing slaves to do manual work (Abbott 189). Even though slavery was abolished, the colonial racist ideology was not erased from the minds of individuals. Blacks and whites had never been standing in common ground, and therefore, the white man has always been considered as the Other.

Furthermore, Gibson also argues in his book that Fanon advocates that negroes never had a real chance against the Other, “Because the Other does not recognize the Black as a human being, Fanon insists that ‘the only solution was to make myself known’ (BS, 115) (75). Fanon desired that Blacks would fight for their individual identities and become recognized in society as “primal value.” Opposing history and the effects of slavery and colonialism, Fanon believed that in order for one to overcome the Other one would have to lose oneself in “negritude” (values that characterized the Black peoples). However, Fanon also realized that it would be impossible to live in a society where the Other would not be present. Gibson points out:

Though this negativity, namely Black consciousness, might create a deplorable confusion. Fanon demands a more situational view, insisting that the Black is not a given a priori but rather is a product of White Society. Against the argument that negritude obliterates difference. Blacks in Europe – whether Antillean, Ethiopian, Senegalese or Malagasy – remain Black wherever they go. In a racist society, negritude must be taken as an absolute value, that can be a new point of departure for consciousness, the certainty that it is all of reality. (76-77)

Gibson explains that Fanon would contend that the “Black’s existence” had to be defined from within. In other words, in order to confront racism, one would have to learn to live as a black person not wanting to become as the whites by wearing a “white mask” but rather assuming the identity of a Negro. Racism, the feeling of superiority of whites over blacks during colonial times, did not allow an equal relation between slaves and masters. Elizabeth Abbott in her book *Sugar a bittersweet history*, states that Eric Williams wrote about racism as a consequence of slavery: “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (189). Slavery in colonial society created a society based on a caste system. Speaking of differences of social castes caused by slavery, Abbott states:

Freed or freemen naturally sought the same economic and social advantages they saw whites enjoy. (...) Brazil’s more porous caste system underscored the absurdity of racial classification. For example, mulattoes could obtain legal documents identifying them as whites and, thus armed, work in white-only professions. (190)

During colonial times mulattoes would still feel the presence of the Other even though they could obtain work that was reserved for whites only. Because of their skin color, in Brazil it

was very difficult for mulattoes and blacks to obtain any kind of work that wasn't manual labor.

According to Gibson, Fanon argued in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (WE) that intellectuals would have to fight for the liberty of the people by engaging themselves in educating the masses: "It is not only necessary to fight for the liberty of your people. You must also teach the people once again, and first learn once again yourself, what is the full stature of a man; and this you must do for as long as the fight lasts" (WE) (171). Gibson clarifies that Fanon's conception of the role of intellectuals would occupy a central but somewhat problematical relationship in society. The intellectuals would play an important function in vanquishing the "old colonial truths" and would be engaged in bringing out new conceptions that would erase racist ideologies. However, their "script" was not readymade (172).

In the colonial system, intellectuals occupied a very different place in society and therefore were set apart from the people. Fanon appeals to intellectuals to recognize their "duty" and become engaged in educating the masses about the "national cause" (172). Machado de Assis, a nineteenth Brazilian writer, answered Fanon's call in "recognizing his duty" and becoming engaged in educating the masses even before Frantz Fanon's birth.

Machado de Assis, one of the most important Brazilian writers, felt greatly the influence of the Other. Machado was born during the second empire. Brazil was no longer under colonial rule but still maintained slavery. Brazilian plantation owners would state during the nineteenth century: "O Brasil é o café e o café é o negro" (Brazil is coffee and the coffee is negro) (Fausto 104). Slavery was viewed as an essential element of the economy's

equilibrium. Machado was born in 1839 to a wall painter, Francisco, and to a Portuguese mother, Maria Leopoldina. Francisco, Machado's father, was mulatto son of freed slaves (Aguiar 29). Machado did not have a formal education. Most of his training came from his own desire to read good books (31). He was multilingual, having learned French, English and German all by himself. Luiz Aguiar in his book entitled *Almanaque Machado de Assis*, cites Harold Bloom, who stated: "Machado de Assis is some kind of miracle" (6). He was self-taught in practically in all that he knew what to do. Machado was a mulatto writer trying to earn a living in a very prejudice society. He had to learn from the beginning of his career to choose carefully what to write in order not to offend his readers that were formed as a vast majority of slave owners. Machado became fond of English writers, such as Laurence Sterne, William Shakespeare, Lord Byron and Jonathan Swift. Machado, learned to say the "unspoken" in a very interesting manner. He would quote well-known writers such as Shakespeare to expose his own point of view in his literary works, and thus expose his beliefs and critics by using intertextuality.

Machado as a writer was not only interested in producing literary works but in educating the masses. By engaging himself in this very purpose, Machado ended up innovating the creation process of the Brazilian novel itself. Machado was an avid reader of the European novel. Earl E. Fitz in his article entitled "Machado de Assis' Reception and the Transformation of the Modern European Novel" states:

And when we add to this Machado's own inventiveness, his iconoclasm, and, above all, his extraordinary originality, it becomes easier to see how and why he decided to create what I have come to call not merely the first 'nova narrativa latino-americana,'

nor even the first 'new narrative' of the Americas, but the first truly 'modern' novel of the Western tradition. (44)

Machado reinvents the European novels by using these texts within his own texts. Machado does so in order to educate the people by criticizing the society of the Rio de Janeiro of his time. In order to educate his readers, Machado seeks to establish a close relationship with his readers. Fitz observes that Machado changes the conventional role of the reader, as pointed out by Harold Bloom that Machado addresses his viewers "frequently and directly" (48). Fitz states: "The reader's role emerges from out of the text itself and thus establishes itself, for the first time in modern Western narrative, as what is essentially the destabilizing force of *différance* in the literary experience" (49). In this process, Machado's readers are forced to become active and engaged in their reading. Machado forces their readers to think through the narrative process and sometimes they have to fill in the blanks for the missing parts of it, which were left out on purpose by the author Machado.

Because Machado used other texts within his own texts, he was often accused of making poor imitation of European novels. For instance, *Dom Casmurro* is one of the greatest works of Machado. However, literary critics criticized Machado for imitating Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as he published *Dom Casmurro*. Fitz points out that Machado actually surpasses Flaubert because he creates in *Dom Casmurro* a very complex narrative structure. Emma in *Madame Bovary* is caught up into "two ways of using language, two different modes of constituting 'meaning'" (52). However, the narrator "Dom Casmurro" is caught up into two conflicting systems in which reality contradicts unreality. "Dom Casmurro" is a bitter old man who earlier in his life may have misinterpreted something that made all his loved ones die away from him.

Just as the process of signification requires that the signifier and the signified differ, so too does *Dom Casmurro's* supposed 'master discourse' undercut, dismantle, or deconstruct itself via the several secondary discourses that are inscribed in it, one of which, of course, is that of Machado's ideal new reader, the one he wants to create along with his "new narrative." This explains why so many chapters in *Dom Casmurro* deal not with one of the several plot lines but with the craft of fiction writing and the reader's necessarily active role in it, a role for many ends up challenging the account of what happened as it is spun out by the narrator. (52)

Fitz suggests that, Machado, had discovered the essence of *différance* even before Derrida coined the term. Machado chose to use fantasy as a setting for his novel and thus found a structure that could adapt to the Brazilian reality of his time much better than trying to rewrite *Madame Bovary* in a Brazilian setting (53).

Perhaps because Machado was so engaged in educating his readers, he developed aesthetic techniques that were beyond of his own time. He had no other choice than recreating not only the European novel but the Brazilian novel as well. How could a mulatto writer express his points of views, his critics on slavery and on the bourgeoisie of Rio de Janeiro of the nineteenth century? He had to do it in a subtle way. Because signifier and signified did differ in *Dom Casmurro*, this novel was for many years misunderstood by critics. *Dom Casmurro* was published in 1899. Literary critics unanimously believed that this novel was a story of adultery. However, only in the 1960's with the publications of Helen Caldwell, critics started to reconsider the way they viewed *Dom Casmurro*. In the preface of her book *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis*, Caldwell states:

The Brazilians have a jewel for all the world to envy (...) But, more than any other people, we of the English-speaking world should envy Brazil this writer who so constantly used our Shakespeare as his model – so neatly fused into his own stories the characters, plots, and ideas of Shakespeare. (v)

Why would Machado quote other texts so much? Was it because of lack of originality? No, Machado had to find a way of expressing his own voice in a disguised way in the attempt of not disturbing the Other, but still awakening those interested in changing the values of the Brazilian society.

Machado often quotes Othello in *Dom Casmurro* in order to criticize the narrator Dom Casmurro. In *Dom Casmurro*, there are two narrating voices: Dom Casmurro and Machado. One can only hear Machado's voices if one follows the hints left out by the Machadian voice on purpose. For years, it was believed that Capitu had betrayed Bentinho (Dom Casmurro). However, after Caldwell's interpretation critics have come to an understanding that it was Bentinho (whose name is Santiago and later in the book becomes Dom Casmurro) who committed the crime of jealousy just like Othello in Shakespeare's play *Othello*. Dom Casmurro accuses his wife of infidelity based on the resemblance of their son, Ezequiel, to Bentinho's best friend Escobar. Caldwell elaborates on one of the parallels established by Machado:

The "accessory" – the "handkerchief of Desdemona" – in Dom Casmurro is the resemblance, or fancied resemblance, of Ezekiel to Escobar. (...) We must reword Machado's formula for dramatic action to read: the jealous soul of Othello-Santiago, the perfidy of Iago-Santiago, and the guilt (or innocence) of Desdemona – Capitu— these are the principal elements of the action. (12)

So the voice of Machado establishes a parallel between Capitu and Desdemona and Othello and Bentinho (Dom Casmurro). Machado forces his readers to become involved in the narrative process and to draw their own conclusions.

Machado de Assis, a mulatto writer, had to learn to conceal his own voice in the fear of the Other. Many literary critics have criticized Machado for not speaking openly against slavery. How could a mulatto writer criticize a society based on a caste system where slave owners occupied the highest rank? He understood the Brazilian ranking system as well he understood his role as an "educator" within that social group. Even though Machado openly speaks against slavery on two tales : "O Caso da Vara" (The case of the whip) and "Pai contra Mãe" (Father against Mother), these are very insignificant when all Machadian works are considered. However, Machado as a realist writer wanted to educate the masses against the evil doings of the bourgeoisie. And, perhaps later attempt to prepare the minds of the people to understand the devastating consequences of slavery. However, we must also understand that Machado knew that he could not upset the Other through his writing and thus had to create a new way of writing in order to speak his voice in a subtle way.

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