

**The Centrality Of Representation And The Illusion Of Images: A Postcolonial Critical Approach To “Black Skin, White Masks”  
By Frantz Fanon**

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**Abstract:**

*This research aims to invest the categories of cultural criticism and post -colonial criticism to approach the heavy representations of conflicts and tensions between cultural identities based on a critical speech of an aesthetic anti -colonial nature. In this research, we seek to approach cultural issues that intersect with the post -colonial discourse in the book <sup>1</sup>"Black Skin White Masks" by the writer and psychiatrist 'Franz Fanon'. We will use Edward Said's analyzes, a cultural criticism of the concept of Orientalism, based on a basic pillar from which it was launched to read the East relationship with the West from the perspective of knowledge and strength relations when a culture resorted to representing another culture and carries it as descriptions that may not be believed, so you make pictures and representations that define its dimensions from the perspective of culture Strong, but rather power and military and cultural dominance.*

**Keywords:** *Black skin, white masks, knowledge, Orientalism, representation.*

## **1. Introduction:**

The subject of representations evokes a significant scientific contribution that has profoundly influenced cultural studies and post-colonial criticism: the works of the French thinker Michel Foucault. Foucault demonstrated how power is pervasive in all human relations by addressing the biases embedded in power discourses, even when these discourses appear noble on the surface.

In this context, Fanon, through the lens of his book, read violence within the framework of colonialism. The roots of this insightful perspective lie in a critical evaluation of the historical impact of European colonialism on colonized peoples, approached from a psychoanalytic perspective on the phenomenon of colonialism. These reflections reveal historical and factual truths enveloped in age-old questions about the latent intentions of the self in its relationship with the other, different from itself. This dynamic fuels the conflict between the two and intensifies the will to dominate and control by the superior self, a construct based on illusion and imagination.

The colonial institution is founded on dividing the world into classes, subjected to its language, customs, ideas, and laws. This colonial segregation and structuring are vividly reflected in the book *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon examined the calculated violations by the white man against the black man. This includes the occupation of the latter's lands and their exploitation for the former's benefit, as well as the infliction of physical and psychological harm, viewing the black man as a slave.

*Black Skin, White Masks* places the discourse of negritude before three central themes: slavery, colonialism, and racism. These themes assert that the concept of the black man is an invention crafted by the white man, solidified through his gaze, actions, and attitudes. Simultaneously, the white man is also a construct of European imagination, developed and disseminated by the West. Franz Fanon consistently expressed this regarding

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both images: that neither the black man nor the white man truly exists.

In this study, we will present a necessary theoretical framework for the concept of representation, drawing upon thinkers and critics whose intellectual contributions have raised profound questions within the realm of cultural studies. These contributions have branched into fields that reexamined the creative knowledge construction of the relationships between literature, history, philosophy, politics, psychology, and culture. On the other hand, they have led to studies of societies and nations in connection with their colonial histories and the effects of colonization on them. This examination proceeds not merely as a historical framework but also as it pertains to resistance, struggle against domination, and dialogue between cultures.

Within this context of interwoven forms of knowledge that seek to clarify the relationship between humans and their surroundings, we pose a crucial question: What does colonialism mean for non-European peoples? From this primary question, other significant questions emerge: What are the representations of the black man imagined by the white man? Can Franz Fanon be viewed as a thinker of the black margin?

A critical cultural reading tied to the field of post-colonialism will aid us in deconstructing the hierarchical assumptions of European thought. This will rely on mechanisms of representation in their various psychological, social, political, historical, and cultural dimensions.

## **2. Edward Said, West and East: Towards an Epistemological Illumination of the Concept of Representations**

Cultural criticism has enabled the connection of literature to culture and to all the discursive and non-discursive manifestations through which it is expressed. This reading strategy has allowed for linking literature to its historical and cultural context and delving into its implications, surpassing the

structuralist understanding that isolates literary texts from the conditions of their production.

This section explores the concept of representation in various domains of knowledge and Edward Said's notion of cultural representation. Based on this, we pose the following question: In what sense does the concept of representation manifest in cultural criticism, and how can its meaning be utilized to illuminate *Black Skin, White Masks* within a post-colonial context?

Edward Said's analyses emerged from a set of theoretical foundations and perceptions connected to concepts such as power, authority, the authority of creation and representation, the self, and the other. These are cultural concepts tied to history, literature, politics, and society. This intersection between knowledge horizons weaves a narrative that is the history of the self, for itself and for the world, granting the nature of historical truth. This narrative incorporates components such as religion, language, race, myths, and popular experience (Said, 2014, p. 16).

The philosophy of representation in cultural studies—linked to the colonial institution rests on the notion of opposition between dichotomies. Within this framework, ideological discourses emerge, providing "a fortification of the self behind its walls, and an exclusion and rejection of the other, attributing to it undesired characteristics and values" (Khadraoui, 2012, p. 58). This reflects the Eurocentric self's endeavor to assert itself and assume the existence of superior humans over others. Supported by the influence of a narcissistic epistemology, the European self imagines illusory images that affirm its centrality and justify its domination over the other. Simultaneously, it harbors a condescending view toward those who differ in language, color, culture, and civilization.

"Representation is among the key issues that cultural studies address, especially as it intersects with highly diverse philosophical and epistemological disciplines" (Khadraoui, 2012, p. 60). The world we live in requires explanation, understanding, and critique, as it is permeated by contradictions produced by humanity. Connecting culture to the world it refers to "necessitates reconstructing this complex relationship by

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considering its narrative, linguistic, and symbolic structures" (Bouazza, 2014, p. 38).

Representation governs general perceptions and ideas and their forms. To understand the self and the other in cultural studies and colonial/post-colonial discourse, knowledge must be built on essential foundations, avoiding ready-made and imagined stereotypes. Cultural representation is employed in numerous literary and non-literary studies and cultural analyses, particularly those related to narratives in general and novels in particular.

Based on this, representation facilitates an understanding of the intricate relationship between the tangible reality from which the writer derives symbols, emotions, and systems. Undoubtedly, the subject of the self and the other has captured the interest of various fields of knowledge. It is not an exaggeration to say it is a construct of postmodernism, raising worthy topics for research and investigation, such as racism, diaspora, identity, colonialism, and cultural difference.

This view emphasizes the colonized nations' attachment to their identity and the difficulty of uprooting individuals from their origins, land, and history. Therefore, we must reflect on the global cultural critic Edward Said and his analyses of the relationship between culture and imperialism. This relationship reveals the originality of Said's thinking in his writings on Orientalism. His cohesive and integrated intellectual achievement supports a fundamentally political stance opposing imperialism. His work leads to a cultural-critical reading of the grim general landscape of colonialism's brutal and savage forms against colonized peoples.

To highlight the significance of the concept of representation as a reading strategy for deconstructing colonial discourse and addressing the realities faced by Black individuals, we examine Edward Said's work. He articulated his stance on Orientalism and exposed the politics of representations and cultural formations employed by the West to judge the East. These

analyses serve as an essential foundation for approaching *Black Skin, White Masks*.

### **3. Black Skin, White Masks: Writing of Domination and Response through Writing**

Post-colonialism is used to encompass all cultures influenced by the imperialist process. It serves as a pivotal concept in cross-cultural criticism and the discourse through which such criticism is established. Under the umbrella of post-colonial literature, we find the works of African, Australian, Bangladeshi, Canadian, Caribbean, Indian, Malaysian, and other nations whose peoples and lands were subjected to colonization (Ashcroft & Griffiths, 2005).

The book *Black Skin, White Masks* belongs to the tradition of Black writing, characterized by its racial focus on Black identity. It encompasses a broad spectrum of writers from Africa, India, and Australia. Such writings explore counter-images that dismantle the colonizer's methods, reject confinement within their constructs, respond to them, and expose the policies of oppression and racism against Black people, as well as the psychological and intellectual impact of the white colonizer.

In the same vein, this book is part of post-colonial discourse, which is rooted in anti-Eurocentric thought. It also examines the differences between the self and the other within a socio-cultural context, engaging with writings and literature of exile, diaspora, and mass migrations, and articulating ideas of liberation.

The significance of Fanon's book lies in its commitment to a perspective that views writing as a necessity and a bold stance for expressing human issues and faith in the oppressed's ability to liberate themselves from their oppressors. Calmly and resolutely, Fanon states:

"Three years ago, this book should have been written. But at that time, the facts disturbed us. Today, they can be spoken without emotion. These facts do not need to be thrown in people's faces. They do not seek to arouse enthusiasm. We are wary of enthusiasm. Whenever we see it emerge somewhere, we take heed" (Fanon, 2007, p. 7).

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With calm and determination, Fanon restores to the collective Black self the dignity stripped away by the white oppressor's contempt. He elevates it through discourse by employing a counter-representation that serves as a response to the white man's claims and domination. The white man uses all forms of brutality and power to subjugate Black individuals. Fanon, however, does not meet force with force or brutality with brutality. Instead, he subjects the white man to scathing ridicule, confronting him with his hypocrisy and exposing his reliance on violence against those who differ from him in color.

Through this portrayal, Fanon transforms the image of the Black individual, moving it away from the stereotypes imposed by the white oppressor. He offers irrefutable arguments against the oppressor's reliance on weapons and violence to assert superiority over those who differ. This vision is marked by intellectual depth and linguistic economy, reflecting simplicity yet creating an alternative identity born from tragedy. It ascends toward renewal against all forms of obliteration, creating a narrative of resistance that reignites the past with vibrancy and offers the self a space to recover from historical wounds.

This represents a form of resistance through writing and cultural defiance, restoring the voice and freedom of representation to the oppressed. Edward Said discussed such resistance in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (Said, 2014).

Fanon questions the purpose of writing *Black Skin, White Masks*, a question that neither seeks the readers' speculation nor awaits their response. He states:

"Why am I writing this book? No one asked me to. Especially not those I am addressing. However, I calmly reply that there are many fools on this earth. Since I say this, I must prove it."

In the preface to his book, Fanon affirms: "This book is a clinical study," focusing on understanding the relationship between white and Black people, free from a one-sided perspective of their interconnection at the level of the historical condition tied to colonialism. He asserts: "The matter is so important that we aim

for nothing less than liberating the colored man from himself. We will proceed very slowly because there are two camps: white and Black" (Fanon, 2007, p. 7) .

We will not, with Franz Fanon, delve into the genre classification of *Black Skin, White Masks*, as this does not appear to be a polarized issue. Despite Fanon classifying his book as a clinical psychological study, he did not limit the relationship between Black and white people to a purely psychological analysis. Instead, he employed interdisciplinary tools to explore the fate of humanity tormented by cultural differences and the European perception of the other who differs in color, language, and culture.

To achieve the aims of this analysis, Fanon utilized intellectual, psychological, social, historical, and philosophical insights that draw attention. These insights place the white and Black individuals on the scales of post-colonial criticism, revealing concepts of dominance and power. At the same time, according to Fanon's post-colonial perspective, the relationship between white and Black people undergoes forms of aesthetic innovation. This involves the representation of the self (white) and the other (Black), drawing upon reality to narrate historical truths through a discourse that does not require imagination to influence the audience. Instead, imagination refuses to encompass or conceptualize the tragedy of the oppressed Black individual, for it is a subject demanding writing and reading in its relation to the world.

Fanon reflects on the conditions of Black and white people, pondering the fate of both. He remarks:

"In this book, we will see the crystallization of an attempt to understand the relationship between white and Black. The white is trapped in his whiteness. The Black is imprisoned in his Blackness. We will attempt to determine the trajectories of this dual narcissism and what it entails... It is solely the desire to break this vicious cycle that has guided our efforts" (Fanon, 2007, p. 7).

Frantz Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, provides a profound understanding of the relationship between Black and white individuals, capturing its forward-looking essence. He portrays the horrific discourses of racism that have filled the



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world and the history of colonized peoples through a writing strategy that reflects the legacy of post-colonialism and its psychological and social impacts on Black individuals. The richness of the intellectual framework presented by Fanon leads us to pose the following central question: What images, symbols, and meanings did Western thought rely on to justify its hostility toward the Black other, enabling it to represent a false reality that alters the elements of existence?

From the first encounter with Fanon's book, we are struck by expressions of anxiety and pain caused by the exclusion practiced by Western imperialism. Through a tone of epic resistance and the eloquence of the oppressed, Fanon draws upon the voices of his homeland in the Antilles, where deep wounds inflicted by the enemies of humanity persist. He translates the suffering of the oppressed Black individuals, beginning with these poignant words:

"Toward a new humanity... They are the people... our colored brothers... I believe in you, human being... the common racial concept... understanding and love... From all directions, dozens, hundreds of pages rush to impose themselves on me. Yet one line suffices. Perhaps one response suffices. And the issue of Blackness is stripped of its seriousness" (Fanon, 2007, p. 6).

This introduction raises a central question: In what context did Fanon write his book? Fanon reveals the confrontation with a troubling past of detested images and harsh memories, revisiting the details of the historical enmity between the white man and the Black man. This narrative evokes empathy from readers as Fanon recounts the degradation, slavery, and humiliation endured by Black children, women, and men at the hands of white colonizers. This violence creates a psychologically tormented self, subjugated to the colonial institution that produced it.

*Black Skin, White Masks* holds its appeal for two main reasons. First, it successfully exposes the colonizer's image to both themselves and their opposite. Second, it defines the colonial model and the psychological damage inflicted by colonial

experiences through cultural distortion and deliberate repression of Black identity via slavery, alienation, and exploitation.

These questions open the door for further exploration into the tools and reading strategies employed to examine the relationship between colonizer and colonized and to deconstruct the white-Black dynamic.

The world constructed by the white man's perspective of the Black man is rooted in imagination, denial, and illusions of superiority. As the Black man states, "The white man wove me with a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories." These words reflect a three-dimensional colonization symbolic, psychological, and cultural. This colonization involves the white man assuming the right to represent what his imagination dictates, making the Black individual an object of ridicule and derision, while stripping the Black man of the right to self-representation. The Black man's humanity is replaced by dehumanized images, symbolizing a total disconnection between the colonized Black individual, stripped of value, and the colonizing white man, who controls the production of destabilizing images and meanings.

This phenomenon represents a time devoid of past and future, with a present distorted by colonial violence rooted in the idealized centrality of the self. Fanon's book reveals that oppressive Eurocentric hegemony not only destroyed the present of colonized peoples but also sought to erase and distort their past. As a result, this provoked a strong desire among intellectuals in colonized nations to reclaim and revive their national heritage:

"This generated in the minds of intellectuals in colonized countries the desire to recover their national heritage and work to revive it" (Khadraoui, 2012, p. 72).

#### **4. Memory and the Question of Cultural Identity: Representations of the Black Ontology**

In the introduction to his book, Fanon writes:

"The structure of this work is defined within the temporal framework. Every human issue requires being viewed from the perspective of time. The ideal solution is always to use the

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present to build the future... The future must be a continuous construction carried out by the existing human being" (Fanon, 2007, p. 11).

Fanon leads us, through his celebration of humanity, to the issue of existence in its philosophical dimension. He presents it as an essential solution for understanding the current state of the Black individual, who confronts their fate and unacknowledged being, removed from the historical context imposed by the narcissistic white individual with their constant sense of superiority. This superiority serves as a standard for negative representation, governed by the logic of power and violence, which often took the form of extermination and racial discrimination.

Fanon reconsiders this state, starting from the present, which is laden with negativity, suppression, and annihilation, to envision a future that must be shaped by an existing human being—not merely through rhetoric, but as an essence and identity. Regardless of the extent of enslavement, colonization, or skin color, this essence remains unchangeable. Fanon states:

"There is a reality that some whites consider themselves superior to Blacks. And that Blacks, at any cost, want to show whites the richness of their intellect and the equality of their spiritual capacities" (Fanon, 2007, p. 8).

The psychological resistance to colonialism, as depicted by Fanon, intertwines with Sartre's concept of the slave in Being and Nothingness, in the effort to reclaim the self by shedding the effects of the past and present to create a new, liberated, and acknowledged identity.

Homi Bhabha, a post-colonial critic, comments on Fanon's work, emphasizing the necessity of memory as a bridge fraught with risk between colonialism and cultural identity. He states:

"It is not at all a quiet act of internalizing or recalling past events; it is a painful reassembly a gathering of the fragmented pieces of the past to understand the shock of the present" (Bhabha, 2006).

Bhabha's discussion of the therapeutic power of memory is rooted in the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious. Some memories are accessible to consciousness, while others, often repressed or prohibited, navigate the unconscious in dangerous ways, causing symptoms that appear inexplicable in daily life. These symptoms can be alleviated when the underlying memories are released from their confinement.

Fanon unleashes memory, utilizing it as a therapeutic tool to recall and confront the colonial past. This form of psychological recollection, described by Lyotard, encourages individuals to link seemingly trivial details to past circumstances, enabling them to uncover hidden meanings in their lives and behaviors (Gandhi, 2021).

Fanon's representations of the Black lived experience, particularly in Chapter Five (Black Skin, White Masks) (Fanon, 2007, p. 109), serve as a testimony to the oppressed and devastated existence of Black individuals. This approach integrates post-colonial discourse into the meticulous retrieval of historical details, with a political obligation to help post-colonial subjects navigate their fractured condition and move forward in understanding both themselves and the colonial past.

Fanon argues that existence and being become unattainable in a colonized society. In his words:

"In the existence of a colonized people, there is a flaw, a defect that prevents an existential explanation. We cannot understand the being of the Black individual apart from the white individual, who crafted detailed stories, jokes, and myths about the Black person's skin and body. I would look at myself and discover my Blackness, my ethnic features, and the echoes of mental inferiority and slave traders would pierce my eardrums. That day, I found myself lost, unable to be outside with the other, the white individual, who mercilessly confined me. I departed from my existence and transformed myself into an object, a thing" (Fanon, 2007, p. 114).

### **The Master/Slave Paradigm: Representation and Misrepresentation**

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"The concept of the Black man, according to Frantz Fanon, is more about the mechanism of attribution than self-definition" (Mbembe, 2018). He becomes a source of fear for white individuals:

"My body returned to me fragmented, disjointed, and mourning on that winter morning. The Black man is an animal. The Black man is evil... The Black man shivers because he is cold; the little white boy shivers because he is afraid of the Black man. The little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: 'Mommy, the Black man will eat me.'"

This stereotypical image drawn by white individuals portrays the Black man as a subject of insult, employing a surplus of derisive language that establishes a distinction between two worlds of humanity. One strips the Black man of his humanity, viewing him as savage and repulsive, while the other judges the Black man based solely on his skin color. This judgment erodes his self-confidence and drives him away from spaces inhabited by white individuals. This is because the stereotypes that pervaded the life of the Black man are a result of misrepresentation, beginning with the paradox of names: Black, Negro, will eat me.

Hegel, in his philosophical interpretation of the master-slave dialectic, explains that the master and slave initially engage in an inevitable struggle, reinforcing an imperial vision structured by power relations. This vision internalizes distorted and inferior images of the other, evident in the depictions of slavery and oppressed slaves. Fanon sees this division as creating two worlds: the master's world, representing whiteness and light, and the slave's world, representing Blackness and darkness. This dichotomy, built on power relations, grants the white master authority over representation, silencing the other by denying them the right to represent their own identity (Bouazza, 2014, p. 44).

Fanon highlights the concept of debasement by analyzing the identities of the colonizer and the colonized in a world dominated

by white individuals who control the present and future of Black individuals. He states:

"This self-debasement as an unworthy subject of love has grave consequences. On the one hand, it leaves the individual in a state of profound internal anxiety, which distorts or falsifies all relationships with others. Emotional debasement only appears in beings who have suffered from a lack of love or understanding during their early childhood... Tell me, dear Andrée, despite my color, would you consent to become my wife if I asked you?" (Fanon, 2007, pp. 77-78).

Fanon asserts that the Black man sees himself deprived of the ability to trust himself, leading him to live a life filled with questions interwoven with the torment of inferiority and fear of rejection. Consequently, love becomes a deferred subject he does not love to avoid being abandoned. This reflects a fear of revealing oneself and a profound sense of worthlessness.

Fanon supports his representations of the inferiority complex by referencing Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy in describing the psychologically tormented under the dominion of masters:

"Forcing people to deny their existence means driving them to assimilate the possibilities they were deprived of: assimilating the negativity they exhibited in such positions" (Fanon, 2007, p. 79).

Jean Veneuse, deeply tormented internally, retreats into silence when he reunites with Andrée, the woman he had long wanted to marry. His silence, however, is expressive—the silence of those oppressed because of their Black skin. For Fanon, this silence represents those who wish to position themselves intellectually but are rendered neurotic and introverted by the colonial condition imposed upon them.

The body described by Fanon in his series of psychological representations is one of the greatest achievements of colonial imperialism. It involves a being alienated from itself, compelled to endure social and psychological loss, marked by an identity that reflects the animalistic laws of colonialism, laden with inflicting pain and suffering on the other.

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Through these examples, Fanon reveals endless narratives of the human struggle against humanity. The Black other becomes the hero of their story, yet remains marginalized, their image entrenched in a time of rupture and difference. The mask is lifted, yet they lack the ability to confront and instead retreat into silence. This silence is the result of Western thought's dominance.

The Western cultural project imposed a worldview that suppressed dialogue, positioning the center as the sole locus of meaning and relegating the other to the periphery:

"The center determined its position as the core, forcing the other to remain decentered. For the circle has only one center, and any designation outside the center is entangled in an indefinite periphery, where all that is non-central is marginal" (Foucault, 1990-1989).

In this context of hierarchical divisions, Fanon articulated his vision of the world, stating:

"Humanity is a movement toward the world and toward its counterpart a hostile movement that generates enslavement, and a loving movement of self-giving, the ultimate goal of what is agreed upon as moral orientation."

## **Conclusion**

*Black Skin, White Masks*, with its multifaceted representations, unveils the misery of the non-European individual, condemned for their cultural differences or skin color. The tragedy deepens as humanity is subjected to the harshest labels and imagined representations, erasing truth and giving rise to illusion. Cultural studies and post-colonial criticism confront these constructed images and stereotypes that have marginalized individuals, dismantling the war machine that obliterated humanity and alienated individuals from their identity and history.

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