

ROUTLEDGE *Critical* THINKERS

Frantz  
Fanon

Pramod K. Nayar



# FRANTZ FANON

Frantz Fanon has established a position as a leading anticolonial thinker, through key texts such as *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. He has influenced the work of thinkers from Edward Said and Homi Bhabha to Paul Gilroy, but his complex work is often misinterpreted as an apology for violence.

This clear, student-friendly guidebook considers Fanon's key texts and theories, looking at:

- postcolonial theory's appropriation of psychoanalysis;
- anxieties around cultural nationalisms and the rise of native consciousness;
- postcoloniality's relationship with violence and separatism;
- new humanism and ideas of community.

Introducing the work of this controversial theorist, Pramod K. Nayar also offers alternative readings, charting Fanon's influence on postcolonial studies, literary criticism and cultural studies.

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# ROUTLEDGE CRITICAL THINKERS

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# FRANTZ FANON

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First edition published 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Nayar, Pramod K.

Frantz Fanon / Pramod K. Nayar. -- 1st ed.

p. cm. -- (Routledge critical thinkers)

Includes index.

1. Fanon, Frantz, 1925-1961--Political and social views.

I. Title.

JC273.F36N39 2012

325'.3092--dc23

2012028786

ISBN: 978-0-415-60296-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-60297-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-07318-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Perpetua

by Taylor & Francis Books

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# SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

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The books in this series offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities. The *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series provides the books you can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies.

Each book will equip you to approach a key thinker's original texts by explaining their key ideas, putting them into context and, perhaps most importantly, showing you why this thinker is considered to be significant. The emphasis is on concise, clearly written guides which do not presuppose a specialist knowledge. Although the focus is on particular figures, the series stresses that no critical thinker ever existed in a vacuum but, instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history. Finally, these books will act as a bridge between you and the thinkers' original texts: not replacing them but rather complementing what they wrote. In some cases, volumes consider small clusters of thinkers, working in the same area, developing similar ideas or influencing each other.

These books are necessary for a number of reasons. In his 1997 autobiography, *Not Entitled*, the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote of a time in the 1960s:

On beautiful summer lawns, young people lay together all night, recovering from their daytime exertions and listening to a troupe of Balinese musicians.

Under their blankets or their sleeping bags, they would chat drowsily about the gurus of the time ... What they repeated was largely hearsay; hence my lunchtime suggestion, quite impromptu, for a series of short, very cheap books offering authoritative but intelligible introductions to such figures.

There is still a need for 'authoritative and intelligible introductions'. But this series reflects a different world from the 1960s. New thinkers have emerged and the reputations of others have risen and fallen, as new research has developed. New methodologies and challenging ideas have spread through the arts and humanities. The study of literature is no longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems, novels and plays. It is also the study of ideas, issues and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. Other arts and humanities subjects have changed in analogous ways.

With these changes, new problems have emerged. The ideas and issues behind these radical changes in the humanities are often presented without reference to wider contexts or as theories which you can simply 'add on' to the texts you read. Certainly, there's nothing wrong with picking out selected ideas or using what comes to hand – indeed, some thinkers have argued that this is, in fact, all we can do. However, it is sometimes forgotten that each new idea comes from the pattern and development of somebody's thought and it is important to study the range and context of their ideas. Against theories 'floating in space', the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series places key thinkers and their ideas firmly back in their contexts.

More than this, these books reflect the need to go back to the thinkers' own texts and ideas. Every interpretation of an idea, even the most seemingly innocent one, offers you its own 'spin', implicitly or explicitly. To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that thinker, is to deny yourself a chance of making up your own mind. Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is not so much its style or the content as the feeling of not knowing where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and works and by guiding your further reading, starting with each thinker's own texts. To use a metaphor from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), these books are ladders, to be thrown away after you have climbed to the next level. Not only, then, do they equip you to approach new ideas, but also they empower you, by leading you back

to the theorist's own texts and encouraging you to develop your own informed opinions.

Finally, these books are necessary because, just as intellectual needs have changed, the education systems around the world – the contexts in which introductory books are usually read – have changed radically, too. What was suitable for the minority higher education systems of the 1960s is not suitable for the larger, wider, more diverse, high technology education systems of the twenty-first century. These changes call not just for new, up-to-date introductions but new methods of presentation. The presentational aspects of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* have been developed with today's students in mind.

Each book in the series has a similar structure. They begin with a section offering an overview of the life and ideas of the featured thinkers and explain why they are important. The central section of each book discusses the thinkers' key ideas, their context, evolution, and reception; with the books that deal with more than one thinker, they also explain and explore the influence of each on each. The volumes conclude with a survey of the impact of the thinker or thinkers, outlining how their ideas have been taken up and developed by others. In addition, there is a detailed final section suggesting and describing books for further reading. This is not a 'tacked-on' section but an integral part of each volume. In the first part of this section you will find brief descriptions of the thinkers' key works, then, following this, information on the most useful critical works and, in some cases, on relevant websites. This section will guide you in your reading, enabling you to follow your interests and develop your own projects. Throughout each book, references are given in what is known as the Harvard system (the author and the date of a work cited are given in the text and you can look up the full details in the bibliography at the back). This offers a lot of information in very little space. The books also explain technical terms and use boxes to describe events or ideas in more detail, away from the main emphasis of the discussion. Boxes are also used at times to highlight definitions of terms frequently used or coined by a thinker. In this way, the boxes serve as a kind of glossary, easily identified when flicking through the book.

The thinkers in the series are 'critical' for three reasons. First, they are examined in the light of subjects which involve criticism: principally literary studies or English and cultural studies, but also other disciplines which rely on the criticism of books, ideas, theories and unquestioned

assumptions. Secondly, they are critical because studying their work will provide you with a 'tool kit' for your own informed critical reading and thought, which will make you critical. Third, these thinkers are critical because they are crucially important: they deal with ideas and questions which can overturn conventional understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted, leaving us with a deeper understanding of what we already knew and with new ideas.

No introduction can tell you everything. However, by offering a way into critical thinking, this series hopes to begin to engage you in an activity which is productive, constructive and potentially life-changing.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My parents, and parents-in-law, have been supportive of all my work, while remaining uncertain as to my compulsion to start a new project even before the ongoing one is done! To them I owe a considerable debt for their understanding and patience.

Nandini and Pranav ensure I do have a life outside reading and writing – and accomplish this for me with remarkable aplomb (which sometimes runs to making charts and school projects, but nonetheless!) – thank you, N–P.

Kavita for ferrying a crucial book from the US of A – thank you!

Saradindu Bhattacharya, my determined Research Assistant at the University of Hyderabad, pursued links (some missing ones) through the caverns of journal databases, and deserves high praise and gratitude for his quiet, quick efficiency in retrieving essays.

Sections of the chapter on ‘A New Humanism?’ were delivered as a keynote address titled, ‘Postcolonialism, Suffering and Affective Cosmopolitanism’, at the International Conference on Postcolonial Literatures and the Transnational, 7–9 April 2010, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, India. Parts of it appeared as ‘Frantz Fanon: Toward a Postcolonial Humanism’ in the *ICFAI University Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 3 (1) (2011): 21–35. Sections of the chapters on violence will appear as an essay in the *Sambalpur Journal of English Studies*.

To Robert Eaglestone, Series Editor, Routledge Critical Thinkers, for getting me started on this book and comments on chapters, and Polly Dodson at Routledge for her several efforts, many thanks.

Finally, Anna Kurian, for comments on chapters, gentle admonitions regarding my not-infrequent slip-ups in language, and consistent encouragement.

# WHY FANON?

A black man in the streets of Lyon. A white boy accompanied by his mother. The boy passes the black man and exclaims: 'Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened!' This is Frantz Fanon's famous, oft-cited, account of his 'discovery' – his term – of the nature and effect of his skin colour in *Black Skin, White Masks* (84).

Cut to an entirely different text. A black man seeking accommodation in London identifies himself merely as 'African' on the telephone when speaking with the future landlord. The description, it appears, is inadequate. 'How dark? Are you dark or very light?' The black man has to spell it out: 'West African sepia'. He then proceeds to dissect his body in terms of variations of the colour black: facially, brunette, but palm and soles of feet peroxide blonde, but his bottom, he apologetically admits, is 'raven black'. This is Wole Soyinka's brilliant satire, 'Telephone Conversation'.

What links the two instances cited here is the colour 'black' as the loci of the conversation and enunciation. Fanon wonders (and so, suggests Soyinka, does the prospective landlord) if the black man is seen as a monster: 'the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up' (86).

But both also document the black man's forced evaluation of his *own* body based on the white perception of it. Soyinka's symbolic

dismemberment of the body into its parts, and Fanon's heightened consciousness of his skin colour, proceed from the perceptions of and demands placed on this body by the *white* population. 'Black' in both cases is more than pigmentation: it is the only identity that really matters. A *black* man. Fanon continues with his story to say how, after his 'discovery' of his blackness, he proceeds with an intense awareness of cannibalism and tom-toms, the other markers of his 'Africanness'. Black calls up and distils, Fanon suggests, entire histories of African primitivism and savagery.

The first 'story' marks a moment of initiation: of Frantz Fanon into his cultural analysis of race, racial encounters, national identity and the psychology of colonialism. The second is a literary manifestation of the same 'discovery-of-blackness' theme that Fanon documents. Black, in both Fanon and Soyinka, is more than a racial marker: it is the narrative the black man has to internalize in any encounter with the world. This encounter of blacks, browns, yellows and other coloured races with the world is the subject of an entire field of academic and cultural work today: postcolonial studies.

Postcolonial studies engages with the racial dynamics of personal/individual and collective psychology in the colonial and postcolonial contexts, cultural practices (from literature to music), identity questions, nation- and gender-matters, economy and geopolitics. Many of post-colonialism's concerns with race, nationalism and cultural identity are prefigured in crucial and field-defining ways in the work of Martinican-born, French-educated, Algerian freedom fighter, psychiatrist and political thinker Frantz Fanon (1925–61), the subject of this book.

Postcolonialism is a theoretical approach to literary and cultural texts. It is concerned with the nature of colonial rule in Asia, Africa and South America, and native resistance to colonial domination and the postcolonial (i.e., after political independence) condition. It examines how the native was represented in colonial texts, the instruments of colonial domination (law, literature, education, religion), the forms of colonial knowledge (anthropology, census, topography), the psychological effects of colonial rule and the processes of decolonization (which means both political independence but also the process by which the formerly colonized seek freedom from colonial/European ways of thinking).

In his four major works, *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Toward the African Revolution*, *A Dying Colonialism* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon addressed several of the themes that have come to be central to all postcolonial thought. A brief catalogue of Fanon's key concerns would include:

- the conditions (political, social, economic and cultural) of colonial oppression;
- the psychology of the colonized and the colonizer;
- the processes of anti-colonial struggle;
- the complexity of the decolonization process;
- the inherent dynamics and tensions of cultural nationalism;
- the possibilities of a new humanism born out of the historical experience of colonialism, European humanism, anti-colonial struggles and postcolonial reflections on all these.

So: why Fanon? I can think of two principal reasons. One, Fanon represents the earliest of postcolonial theorists who examined the cultural consequences of colonialism and engaged with racial dynamics in the fields of psychology-psychiatry, cultural practices and national movements, and speculated about postcolonial (i.e., post-independence) societies. Second, Fanon presents – and this is something the present book argues for – a new humanism almost exclusively drawn from the experience of colonialism – and therefore is a postcolonial humanism, different from the European one.

Fanon marks an early moment of postcolonial activism, thinking and theory. His writings are always embedded in local conditions of anti-colonial struggle but with the potential to provide a humanist framework for reading other racialized, colonized situations.

Fanon was a thinker rooted in his very local ethos of the Algerian anti-colonial struggle – he was an active member of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), at one time even serving as its ambassador – but whose ideas have found resonance for similar struggles by other oppressed peoples in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Fanon's relevance has been acknowledged, implicitly or explicitly, in such diverse disciplines as anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, feminist work, social studies of medicine and others. Fanon has been 'applied' with considerable analytical productivity and profit in film studies, media studies and literary-textual analysis.

This book calls for treating Fanon as a *postcolonial humanist*. It suggests the following.

- Despite his emphasis on violence, his work on decolonization, racial relations and the psychiatric disorders of the colonized are linked by one overriding concern: humanism.
- Despite his location in a specific historical, cultural and geographical location (Martinique first, and then Algeria under French colonial rule), his arguments are not restricted to this context alone.
- Despite his emphasis on cultural nationalism and native cultures, he eventually calls for a move beyond the native and national towards universals.

Fanon's new humanism is one that is distinctly postcolonial in the sense that it moves away from the European model (which, as we shall see, was rooted in racial attitudes) and becomes more inclusive. Fanon's reflections on the pitfalls of national consciousness mark a *self-reflexive postcolonial* who (i) understands the limits of binary thinking on race identities (black versus white) and (ii) examines critically the very national consciousness that enabled the anti-colonial struggle. Fanon's postcolonial humanism emerges from his recognition of the potential for xenophobia that exists within national consciousness, which can then become anti-humanist. The new humanism in Fanon begins when he calls the formerly colonized to dismantle not only the racial binaries of colonialism *but also* the xenophobic cultural nationalism of postcolonial nations.

So how does one begin to approach a thinker as complex as Frantz Fanon? His writings and interests span psychoanalysis, colonial discourse, socio-economic analysis, nationalism, cultural criticism, Marxist thought, psychiatric practice, philosophies of identity and African culture. He comes across in his works as a powerful, erudite but not necessarily systematic thinker – though one suspects that his dramatic (some might say melodramatic) narrative modes and his fragmented styles are deliberate strategies to prevent being classified. From his psycho-analytic *Black Skin, White Masks* to the more political *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon seems at once accessible and elusive. There is no *one* Fanon, and therefore, to offer a synoptic view of him must necessarily fail.

This book acknowledges Fanon's *singularity and historical specificity* (Martinique, the Algerian freedom struggle, Africanism) *and his*