

THE PATHOLOGICAL CONSTITUTION OF COLONIZED SUBJECTIVITY IN ARMAH'S *THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*: KOHUT AND FANON IN DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

The following theoretical review attempts to provide a distinctly psychoanalytic reading of Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). Integrating a Fanonian conception of intersubjective recognition with Kohut's work on narcissism and self-object relations, it is argued that the enduring nature of psychopathology in colonized peoples is readily sustained by denigrating ties to hegemonic colonial selfobjects- the symbolic "gleam" identified so lucidly by Armah in his novel. It is suggested that positing the existence of selfobjects which are actively harmful, instead of necessarily compensatory and/or curative, enhances the dialectical strength of Kohutian self-psychology in previously colonized nations. Such an extension also places self-psychology in explicit dialogue with Fanon's sociogenic diagnosis of psychopathology; providing one potential interpretative lens through which to explore what processes of decolonization might intimate regarding the psychic reality of the colonizer/colonized dyad.

Keywords: Fanonian conception; decolonization ; Kohutian self-psychology; psychopathology in colonized peoples

INTRODUCTION

Ayi Kweh Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) is a novel which explores the moral and political destitution of postcolonial Ghana from the narrative

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perspective of a character, known only as “the man”, who struggles to retain both moral and psychological integrity in the midst of widespread corruption and institutionalized racism. In this sense, Armah’s text – not unlike Biko’s (1987) *I Write What I Like* – provides an evocative account of how the kinds of psychological sequela and moral aporias that characterize postcolonial subjectivity, often become the disavowed wounds of newly independent societies with predominantly bourgeois aspirations. Armah’s message therefore speaks to the almost Sisyphean task of healing what colonialism (and its subsequent neocolonial capitalist forms) sought to palpably undermine: the humanity of the colonized. Notwithstanding the vivid political commentaries and socioeconomic analyses of Armah’s novel, the following paper attempts to provide a distinctly psychoanalytic reading of the text; intimating, as it were, the centrality of Fanon’s work on intersubjective recognition in developing a counter-hegemonic diagnosis of postcolonial life. Armah himself contends that, “without understanding him (Fanon)... we’ll never get (sic) where we need to go. We may move without him, but only blindly, wasting energy” (Armah, 1969, p.5 as cited in Dunham, 2012, p. 283). In addition to the explicit ‘psychopolitical’ relevance of a Fanonian inspired psychoanalysis, and insofar as a creative, modest integration of theory will allow, I aim to demonstrate the potential complementarity that self-psychology may have in extending an analysis of postcolonial subjectivity. More specifically, I want to suggest, given the pervasive damaging effects that colonial misrecognition has on the subjectivities of the oppressed (a phenomenon that Fanon recognized as Hegelian in nature), that the fundamental psychopathology engendered by colonialism cannot in fact be characterized by a genre of Marxist self-alienation - since this presupposes the possibility of a cohesive self under colonial conditions. But must rather be thought of in terms of the sociogenic production of a particular *type* of human subject, one for whom the very possibility of historical existence is premised upon a chronic negation: on what one is not in relation to the other. In self-psychological terms, this negatively defined subject is reproduced by a sustained (symbolic) relationship with colonial “self-objects”, a concept I adopt from Kohut’s work on narcissism which I then use to substantiate Fanon’s claim that “decolonization is truly the creation of new men (sic)” (Fanon, 2004 as cited in Bird-Pollan, 2015, p.153).

Mutually Exclusive Struggles for Recognition: An Oedipal Dilemma

Hegel, reacting to the autonomous, self-contained conception of the human subject in liberal thought, argues instead that the self only emerges intersubjectively, when it is confronted by otherness: “self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel, 1807 as cited in Dunham, 2012, p. 283). Fanon is famous for re-contextualizing the concept of intersubjective recognition as it applies to the colonial situation, emphasizing the necessity for a *reciprocal* recognition of human dignity in the formation of

healthy self-determining subjectivities; no doubt an event Hegel overlooked in his phenomenology (Bird-Pollan, 2015). The postcoloniality of Fanon's thought is thus expressed by his contention that healing the psychopathology of colonialism, beyond the first (and merely phenomenological) intersubjective encounter, requires a second, more violent, confrontation with otherness; one not entailed by the express attainment of national independence (Bulhan, 1985). Indeed, just as much is implied by Armah's depiction of postcolonial Ghana; a newly independent nation suffering from widespread corruption, spiritual poverty and the neoliberal commodification of human activity – all consequences of a nonviolent encounter with colonial otherness at the turn of national independence, now a Fanonian *fait accompli* (Dunham, 2012).

Post-independence, sociogenic pathologies (pathologies which manifest in individuals but which are caused by sociopolitical factors) represent a central concern for Fanon- especially in *The Wretched of The Earth* (Bulhan, 1985). According to Fanon, the most pressing question that any decolonization struggle faces is whether or not postcolonial societies will “remain stuck within the trajectory of domination” that was socially, politically and economically installed by colonial regimes (Bird-Pollan, 2015, p.7). Armah's protagonist speaks to this very question when ruminating over the “gleam” of the Atlantic Caprice, a luxury hotel for the elite:

Perhaps then the purpose of this white thing was to draw onto itself the love of a people hungry for just something such as this...It would be good to say the gleam never did attract. It would be good, but it would be far from the truth. (Armah, 1968, p.10)

Since Fanon explicitly rejects the apolitical dimension of traditional psychoanalysis (i.e. its ontogenetic explanations of human psychology), and the Oedipal complex in particular, any attempt to synthesize his thought with psychoanalysis must therefore attribute analytic primacy to his *sociogenic* level of analysis (Bird-Pollan, 2015). Applying such a strategy to the above excerpt, we may interpret the desire to obtain that which was previously the exclusive preserve of the white colonizers- indeed objects which derive their value precisely because of this fact- as an Oedipal dilemma functioning at the structural or sociogenic level (Bird-Pollan, 2015). If, on the one hand, such desires are pursued and subsequently met, then the Oedipal (colonized) subject succeeds in symbolically usurping the colonial father – but does so at the expense of both remaining “stuck within the trajectory of domination” and foregoing the violent, but healing potential for reciprocal recognition (recognition in the Fanonian sense) (Bird-Pollan, 2015, p.7). On the other hand, if such desires are relinquished, then the Oedipal subject transcends, or overcomes, the colonial father- but does so at the expense of social alienation and psychic disunity with others (recognition in the Hegelian sense). “The man”, in his symbol struggle throughout the novel to resist “the gleam”, provides the literary vehicle for Armah's commentary on the dialectic struggle between two incompatible forms of recognition; the first which, while fostering social inclusion, perpetuates the nonreciprocal affirmation of human dignity by the colonizers (Hegelian

recognition), and the second (Fanonian recognition), which promises to overthrow the perpetuity of internalized colonial misrecognition, but consequently risks alienating “the man” from those “personal relationships...profoundly affected by his [interpersonal] desire for recognition” (Dunham, 2012, p. 288).

Sociogenic Origins of Relational Conflict

Although the novel as a whole succeeds in expressing Armah’s commentary on this struggle, we risk minimizing the first-person perspective of the protagonist afforded by the text, if we fix our analysis at an authorial level. Indeed, the passage in which Oyo, the man’s wife, is introduced to the reader offers a poignant example of the emotional estrangement experienced within the marriage:

The man walks into the hall, meeting the eyes of his waiting wife. These eyes are flat, the eyes of a person who has come to a decision not to say anything; eyes totally accepting and unquestioning in the way only a thing from which nothing is ever expected can be accepted and not questioned. (Armah, 1968, p.41)

The incompatibility between the two aforementioned forms of recognition finds blistering expression in Oyo’s disdain for her husband. Neither can offer the other respect, let alone love. This reinforces Fanon’s sociogenic diagnosis of particular pathologies since both the man and his wife have *internalized*, or assimilated, the external, socio-economic and historical milieu into subjective reality- and are thus interpersonally acting out what has, in reality, become an intrapsychic conflict (Bulhan, 1985). Furthermore, through the character Teacher, Armah depicts the Stoic resolution of this conflict as a somewhat Pyrrhic victory. As one passage shows, although “the man” is undeniably envious of Teacher’s withdrawal into a life of solitude and relative equanimity, he is unaware of its true cost:

“I think of you as the freest person I know,” said the man. “Then everyone you know is a slave.” “You have escaped the call of the loved ones, as you say.” “Yes, but I am not free. I have not stopped wanting to meet the loved ones and to touch and be touched by them...[but] all they want is that you throw away the thing in your mind that makes you think you are still alive, and their embraces will be a welcome unto death”. (Armah, 1968, p.55-56)

Teacher’s conscious dismissal of “the gleam”- internalized by much of the Ghanaian population- has paralyzed his sense of agency. He has, in effect, suspended the libidinal investment in social relationships, defending against its associated anxiety by intellectualizing his subsequent withdrawal. This is further reflected in Teacher’s appraisal of the “myth of Plato’s cave” which, as Armah (1968, p.80) describes, “possessed a special power over the teller’s mind.” One plausible interpretation of the myth’s power over Teacher is that, again, it functions to intellectually soothe his feelings of alienation, enabling him to identify with that “one unfortunate human being” in the myth whose liberation from the “ancient chains” is rejected by others as “nothing but

the proof of his long delusion...the pitiful cries of a madman lost in the mazes of a mind pushed too far..." (Armah, 1968, p.80). Understood psychologically, Teacher's paralysis of agency is likely a consequence of his attachment to others- all of whom he both desires as well as fears (Hwangbo, 2004).

Undifferentiated Ties to Pathological Selfobjects

But more than this, there is something existentially portentous about Teacher's use of the word "slave" in the above passage that I think lends itself to the self-psychological analysis of postcolonial subjectivity that I now wish to briefly pursue. Central to this approach is Kohut's concept of the "selfobject." Selfobjects are defined as externally located entities (e.g. persons, objects or activities, both abstract and concrete) which are experienced as undifferentiated parts of the self (Hwangbo, 2004). For Kohut, psychopathology is not primarily the result of intrapsychic conflict. Instead, psychopathology arises from distorted self-experiences stemming from the absence or failure of selfobjects to provide sufficient "mirroring" experiences (viz. experiences of empathic relatedness and connection with others) necessary in the development of a cohesive self (Hwangbo, 2004).

However, Kohut's theory fails to consider the potential existence of pathological selfobjects, those that may still be experienced as undifferentiated parts of the self, but which also actively impede healthy psychological development. I attribute this limitation to Kohut's narrow focus on Western societies (indeed societies which have not themselves been colonized, having only done the colonizing) (Hwangbo, 2004). Nevertheless, positing the existence of pathological selfobjects not only provides a critique and revision of Kohut's original theory, but also complements the Fanonian intersubjective and sociogenic analysis of psychopathology by foregrounding the "inseparable connection between the self and its surrounding environment throughout peoples' [lives]" (Hwangbo, 2004, p.32). Linking this back to Teacher's use of the word "slave" in describing colonized subjectivity, it is now possible to see the fundamental psychic pathology of colonialism as being characterized by the production of a particular *type* of human subject; one whose historical existence is constituted by perpetually self-negating experiences with colonial selfobjects (defined here as those oppressive externalities set up by colonial regimes e.g. capitalism, Western values, foreign languages and institutional, structural and personal violence) (Bulhan, 1985; Hwangbo, 2004). Thus the Ghanaian people are still slaves, not primarily because they continue to experience, intra-psychically, that which was internalized during colonialism, but rather because they continue to experience, intersubjectively, an external reality which they unconsciously fail to realize is not their own.

This self-psychological framework helps to explain *why* Fanon insists that freedom from the racism and psychological oppression of colonialism necessarily requires a violent confrontation with colonial otherness. Interpreting Kohut through Hegel,

although the emergence of the colonized subject is originally a product of colonial misrecognition (or non-recognition), it is the *enduring* nature of psychopathology in the colonized peoples that is subsequently sustained by denigrating attachments to hegemonic colonial selfobjects (Hwangbo, 2004). Hence the necessary violence that must accompany decolonization depends on the ability of the colonized peoples to turn their aggression outwards toward the “ancient chains” binding them to oppressive selfobjects (e.g. “the gleam”), and away from themselves as phobogenic objects (Bulhan, 1985).

Moreover, Fanon’s claim that the existence of the oppressed is “always already contingent upon the presence of the Other” requires us to question the notion (popular in Marxist readings of Fanon) that the psychopathology of colonized subjectivity is located in a form of self-alienation (Fanon, 1967 as cited in Hwangbo, 2004, p.39). In order to be alienated from oneself, one must be alienated from some prior ‘true’ or more authentic self. But the point being made is that colonized subjectivity is, by its very nature, constituted by what it is not (Bulhan, 1985). It is therefore problematic to construe colonized subjectivity in terms of a fragmented ontology or self-alienation, simply because that would imply comparing it to a Eurocentric model of (a more unified) self (Bird-Pollan, 2015). However, this is not to say that alienation does not occur. Both “the man” and Teacher experience profound interpersonal alienation as they struggle to redefine themselves in a society yet to challenge the colonial selfobjects upon which they depend for (negative) self-definition. As Bulhan (1985, p.191) argues, “what make this process of negation so insidious and so difficult to overcome is the fact that one’s loved ones along with the family hearth in which one was socialized have unwittingly been enlisted as instruments of the prevailing social order.”

Integrating the perspectives of Fanon, Hegel and Kohut in analyzing Armah’s novel, we may finally expose a glaring psychological paradox in postcolonial Ghana: the narcissism of the colonial enterprise meant that the white colonizer did not give the black subjects their humanity back, they did not recognize this humanity because the black subject was not, for the white colonizer, an other at all. With no ontology of their own, and the colonizers now officially gone, the new national bourgeoisie move forward in a state of perpetual servitude- unable to see what was taken away from them, because it was never in fact given. In order that “the last shall be the first and the first last” (Fanon, 1968 as cited in Bulhan, 1985, p.67) there must be a psychic rebirth, but there must be a death too. If the colonized peoples are to destroy the source of their negative definition, the narcissism of which they themselves cling to, they must break into a space of radical indeterminacy; for if “decolonization is truly the creation of new men (sic)”, the colonized must incur the paradox of psychic death in order to be born again (Fanon, 2004 as cited in Bird-Pollan, 2015, p.153).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES



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