CHAPTER XIV

Fanon and Gender

Introduction

This chapter moves to an assessment of Fanon's work in relation to gender. Gender is a theme in all of Fanon's works. In Black Skin White Masks in his analysis of the alienated desires of a racialised society he looks at Mayotte Caprécia's novel about a black woman's desire for a white officer. In his clinical work, for example, his 1956 paper 'TAT and Moslem Women: Sociology of their Perception and Imagination', demonstrates that the results of such tests showed a cultural bias and were not the result of Muslim women's masochism, 'primitivism' or lack of imagination (Razanajao et al 1996: 519). In A Dying Colonialism he looks at the issue of the veil and the patriarchal family and the effect of the revolutionary process on these relations. Fanon's work on the links between ethnicity, gender and sexuality proves to have quite a contemporary ring. Though he refers to the equal place of women and the need to overcome feudal, patriarchal ties in Wretched of the Earth this work addresses women less specifically, though his critique of nationalism can be applied particularly to women.

This chapter begins with an examination of the views of Arab feminists which extends the earlier discussion of the veil in the chapter on contemporary Algeria. Then it looks at a contemporary expression of radical black feminism in the work of bell hooks which builds on the feminist appropriations of Fanon by the radical women discussed in the chapter on the Black Panthers. The focus for hooks is on the representation of blacks, not at the discursive level but at the experiential level thus the theme of spectatorship and the gaze are prominent. Her essays take up Fanonist themes, particularly from his early work, Black Skin White Masks which looks at language, the gaze and internalised racism.[1] Implicitly these appropriations are a critique of the dominant discourse on Fanon in the West namely liberal feminism's portrayal of Fanon as a black patriarch. The final section examines liberal feminism and its denial of Fanon's radical insights.

Fanon and Arab Feminism

The persistence of patriarchy in Algeria is a remarkable phenomenon. It has survived colonialism, revolutionary war and state capitalism. Algeria was one of the few Muslim societies with a major nationalist revolt against colonialism, a strong Western influence and remains the least inclined to engage in reform of the status of women. The reactionary stance of the *colons* and the French policy of assimilation served to reinforce rather than undermine patriarchal relations provoking the nationalists into a defence of the traditional family and Islam. This made the kinds of reforms introduced into Morocco and Tunisia difficult, as they would have been seen as selling out to the French, as Fanon pointed out. French attempts at assimilation saw Islam become a symbol for an Algerian identity in which the psychic void was filled by Ibn Badis' slogan of the 1920s: 'Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country and Islam is my religion.' Knauss (1987: xii) adds that 'to this program was added implicitly: patriarchy is my birthright'.

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[1] Fanon's analysis is not only of use to black feminists. Sandra Bartky (1990) has explored Fanon's analysis of psychic alienation of blacks arguing that there is a clear parallel in the psychological effects of women's oppression on all women, for example, 'internalised inferiority'. She does, however, uncritically repeat claims of his sexism.

The Muslim *ulama*, [religious leadership] while in favour of education, were clear that this meant a modern education for boys and moral instruction for girls to become good wives and mothers. This program was addressed to the males of Algeria's pressed petty bourgeoisie. Its appeal was enhanced by the Manichean situation that Fanon describes whereby attacks on Muslim institutions and anything seen as authentically Algerian provoked the response of affirmation. In this way that Algerian women 'became both the revered objects of the collective act of national redemption and the role models for the new nationalist patriarchal family' (Knauss 1987: xiii). When these men attained positions in the FLN the ideology of cultural restoration within the Algerian Revolution was taken for granted.

The fact that women fought and died to bring about a free Algeria shows the importance of women to the struggle. That Fanon chronicled women's activism demonstrates a resistance to the patriarchal tendency, long criticised by feminists, to exclude women from history. All the more remarkable is his focus on the *self-liberation* of women, as makers of their own history. In response to public unveilings imposed by the French army the veil was donned to show, in Fanon's words, that 'it isn't true that woman liberates herself at the invitation of France and General de Gaulle.' As we shall see this is one-sided but nevertheless, important. In relation to the veil his argument was that in the same way that the Negro is a creation of the colonialist so too is the veiled woman. In defence against French cultural imperialism the 'native' puts even more emphasis on the veil and gives it a renewed meaning.

Fanon traces the changing role of the veil in the struggle and concludes that the 'tactical' use of the veil made it more likely that it would be discarded when the revolution was over, as it lost its 'purely traditional dimension.' He noted the challenge to patriarchal authority in the family: women as wives and daughters could develop a *legitimate* alternative role in the national struggle and this broke down traditional prejudices. Throughout A Dying Colonialism Fanon makes clear that the only way to an authentic existence for the colonised woman is revolutionary praxis. He pointed out that women played an essential role in the Algerian War of Independence and not just as armed combatants but:

> the woman in the city, in the *djebel*, [countryside] in the enemy administration; the prostitute and the information she obtains; the women in prison, under torture facing death, before the courts. All these chapter headings, after the material has been sifted, will reveal an incalculable number of facts essential for the history of the national struggle (1965a: 60).

Fanon (1965a: 48) resists the idea that women are simply 'replacement parts for men' for 'revolutionary war is not a war of men' and thus liberation should not be limited to men. The historical picture in both French and Algerian sources depicts Algerian women as passive and voiceless and ignores their role in the struggle. While contemporary feminist writers have emerged to rewrite the record of Algerian women in struggle such a project was barely started when Fanon wrote A Dying Colonialism in 1959 in which Fanon insists that 'Algeria is not a womanless society' (1965a: 67).

The axis of Fanon's discussion of women's liberation centres on the ways in which the liberation struggle requires her to break with patriarchal traditions. Women were involved in the traditional roles as nurse or seamstress and as victims of rape and violence. Women served as a symbol of oppression or tradition but in 1955 the French stepped up their campaign such that women were seen as central to the colonial enterprise. Fanon spells out that involving women was a decision of the male hierarchy of the FLN. Nevertheless it is clear that women agitated and volunteered to participate. Firstly wives of revolutionaries, then widows and then young unmarried women joined up. They took up an increasing number of roles from nurses, guides, and liaison agents. Fanon writes that a ‘moral obligation and a strength of character that were altogether exceptional would therefore be required of the women’ (1965a: 48).

More so than for the men, rape and death were certain for women fighters. There was no training for the work she had to do; no role models to copy. She had to appear at ease in the European quarter without a veil, no easy task for a woman who has never walked alone for fear of the shame it implied. The experience was both daunting and liberatory as she developed a new ‘revolutionary’ sense of her body. As Fanon puts it she creates a ‘new dialectic of the body of the revolutionary Algerian women and the world’ (1965a: 59).

Having outlined Fanon’s argument it now remains to look at responses to his work from within Algerian and, more broadly, in Arab feminism. The previous chapter discussed Fanon’s critique of nationalism and debates about the liberatory potential of nationalism. Arab feminists have developed their own critique of nationalism and, while sympathetic to Fanon’s portrayal of women, have accused him of fostering a myth that woman’s participation in the Algerian struggle would be sufficient to lead to their liberation.

The general response of Arab feminists is part of a broader debate about the outcome of national liberation struggles for women. At the time there was a general optimism, reflected in Fanon’s work, that the struggle for national liberation would lead to the end of all types of exploitation. It was assumed that the project of women’s emancipation was linked to the struggle for political independence, national identity and modernisation. On the basis of these ‘revolutionary’ experiences feminism now has a more suspicious relationship with nationalism. Fanon warned that there was also ‘the enemy within’ who might steal the victory of the people, which is indeed what occurred. In the particular case of women this lead to widespread disillusionment with the national liberation project which benefited only a small minority of women. In Algeria women despite their participation became objects of national redemption in their role in the family, a role that served the needs of men in their role as head of the house. Minces (1978: 159) argues that Fanon ‘did not take into account the motivation and modalities of women’s participation in the Algerian struggle’ and neglected the prevailing ideology of the FLN in favour of spontaneity.

While Fanon highlighted the progressive tendencies in the struggle it is clear now that women’s participation was largely limited to those from more enlightened families that had allowed them an education, often in France. For most women tradition had the effect of silencing them, to the point that most did not even consider autonomous political action a possibility.

Minces (1978: 163) argues that:

> Their involvement, which was sincere and courageous, occurred here also, essentially, on the basis of replacement. That is, it was chiefly in the capacity of wife, sister or daughter of this or that man that they became involved, especially among the lower classes. (In any case, female students did not exist in large numbers). Women became truly active only when the FLN had a vital need for their participation. In the earlier stages they were not even kept informed of what was being done; the clandestine meetings, the secret councils, only involved men, who made the decisions.

Although the FLN leadership called its program 'socialist' the content was vague and, more importantly, was not used as a basis for a national debate or a popular program of educating the people. Even the key issue, agrarian reform, was not debated let alone an issue as contentious as changing the role of women. An armed struggle only challenges traditional attitudes when combined with a revolutionary ideology that not only draws on but also challenges tradition, as the *Partido Africano da Independencia da Guiné e Cabo-Verde* (PAIGC) did in Guinea-Bissau.

Fanon identifies women's liberation and nationalism and thought that the transformation of values and relations that constituted women's oppression were being overcome. He argues that the Algerian woman 'developed her personality and discovered the exalting realm of responsibility' in the struggle for national liberation (1965a: 107). The problematic nature of these assumptions is much clearer in retrospect. While he could not have foreseen the specific outcomes like the use of the veil in Algeria as a 'justification' for murder by Islamists or that 'westoxification' would be used to deny women citizenship, he did warn about the 'Pitfalls of National Consciousness':

> History teaches up clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism...It also happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between then and the mass of the people, their laziness, and let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps. National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallisation of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilisation of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell...A government that calls itself a national government ought to take responsibility for the totality of the nation...it must guard against the danger of perpetuating the feudal tradition which holds sacred the masculine element over the feminine. Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution but in the life of everyday: in the factory, at school, and in the parliament (1965b: 148, 201-2).

That Algeria never embraced the 'hopes of the whole people' and that women were subordinated in the interest of the 'nation' is clear. Fanon detailed a process of transformation that he saw operating during the struggle. He took embryonic processes (changes in veiling, the family, marriage in the *maquis*) as sufficient to guarantee the liberation of women in 'postcolonial' Algeria when much more organisational and collective work was required.

Increasingly women came to question the nationalist project. Issues like the reproductive rights of women were traded for concessions from religious groups or nationalists who demanded pro-natalist policies. In recent times Islam has sought to counter these images of 'new' women associating them with modernity and the West. In Algeria (and Iran) the unveiled woman has become a cultural traitor, who Islamists seek to reclaim from cultural imperialism. As we saw in Chapter Thirteen these battles coalesced around the symbol of the *moudjahidat*. If women were once silent about such developments they are not so now.

Helie-Lucas (1987) sees women's role as largely symbolic, arguing that Fanon (and films like *The Battle of Algiers*) have created a myth of female combatants and equality between sexes in the Algerian war.[2] This raises the key question about the extent to which Fanon should be read as pro-feminist or as reinscribing traditional gender roles. While women rarely engaged in combat roles, those few that did became well known. Fanon's account implies that women carried arms and shared in the political and military decision making. Even when they performed identical tasks to the men they were defined not as 'fighters' but as 'helpers'. Helie-Lucas draws on biographical material to show how gender hierarchies persisted and were the usual basis for the division of tasks. Since there were 'no humble task in the revolution' most women accepted these arrangements. Women were seen as 'helpers' of men 'fighting for the cause' rather than freedom fighters. Importantly she notes that the women involved 'did not even think of questioning' these arrangements. While the war did disrupt relations between the sexes in the 'new' Algeria women's role was minimised. They were removed from registry of the Veteran's ministry and expected to return home (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 57). They were discriminated against in work and education culminating in the promulgation of the 1984 Family Code that enshrined Algerian patriarchy.

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[2] There is a certain catch-22 in operation here. If Fanon had not written on women he would rightly have been accused of reproducing sexism and since he did he is accused of mythmaking with a sexist agenda. In seeking out the relevance of Fanon we do not need to refrain from criticising his limitations but it is crucial that such a dialogue does not produce myths of its own.

The nationalism of the FLN was able to accommodate the patriarchal values of the Muslim 'consensus' and so Algerian women became the guardians of 'Algerian identity.' The fight to preserve their traditional status was a key signifier in the struggle for national liberation. Women had to be 'protected' from immorality and westernisation (including feminism) as well as rape and violence. As Helie-Lucas points out, this discourse, suitably recycled, serves as a basis for women's oppression in various revolutionary and developmental stages culminating in the current Islamist resurgence. In this context the veil is emblematic of the use and abuse of Algerian women:

> Although there is no doubt that veiling women is a measure for control and oppression, it became for a time a symbol of national resistance to the French. During the war, French officials had insisted that Algerian women should be freed from the oppression of the veil. French army trucks had transported village women to urban areas. There the women were forced to unveil publicly thereby proving their renunciation of outworn traditions. Both Algerian men and women resented this symbolic rape. In addition to its symbolic role, the veil was supposed to have a practical function. Fanon praised the revolutionary virtue of the veil - it allowed urban women freedom fighters to escape the controls of the French army...How, therefore, could we take up the issue of the veil as oppressive to women without betraying both *nation* and *revolution*...The FLN (the National Liberation Front) encouraged such an attitude that emphasised women's modesty, and could also be labelled 'fighting for the Cause' (Helie-Lucas 1987: 108).

The institution of the veil is contradictory and complex. Islamic tradition demands a separation of the sexes and the veil served this purpose in traditional Algeria. The veil was rarely worn in the countryside, and prior to 1957, urban women had abandoned the veil to a large extent. It was the French policing that prompted many women to re-don the veil. Although 'voluntary' the identification of veiling with loyalty meant that it was difficult to do otherwise.[3]

Siapno's (1993) analysis of women's involvement in the armed Moro independence struggle on Mindanao (The Philippines) substantiates the criticism of Fanon as overly optimistic. Here women have been involved in the struggle to the point of armed combat and so are playing a much more public role than is defined for them by traditional Islam. The analogies with the Algerian struggle are close. Firstly this role is seen as an emergency measure, due to government repression men simply cannot carry out these roles effectively, while veiled women are seen as harmless by security forces. Nevertheless this has not led to a change in perceptions of women's role in the home.

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[3] Tohidi (1994) makes the same point in relation to Iran.

Siapno (1993: 119) concludes that as in Algeria:

> It would thus be a mistake to assume that the mobilisation of women in times of abnormal conditions in the southern Philippines has necessarily led to the redefinition of women's gender role in terms of greater equality with men. Rather, women are seen in terms of a supportive role and are permitted to assume functions traditionally associated with the male gender role almost by default.

Siapno also points out that the symbolism of the veil as a signifier of women's oppression is challenged by its adoption as a means of resistance as in Algeria and Iran. The situation is never clear cut. In traditional areas rural women prefer the traditional Filipino *malong* as modest dress for women. Elsewhere it is educated urban women who are veiling as a mark of being a 'good' Muslim but the veil is modelled on the internationally recognised Arab example not the Filipino tradition. For some it is a show of resistance but this is not yet widespread (1993: 120-1).

However, Helie-Lucas' (1987: 107) summary comment in relation to Fanon's original analysis: 'so much for Fanon's and others myth of the Algerian woman liberated along with her country' is an oversimplification. Fanon generalised too widely on the basis of a relatively small number of women. Nevertheless, Fanon's argument is that, regardless of tradition, women became involved in revolutionary praxis and this allowed the space to develop new conceptions of what it was to be an Algerian woman. He is exploring the potentials not documenting established facts.

Woodhull (1993: 22) makes the key point in contextualising Fanon's essays:

> The writing of 'Algeria Unveiled' cannot be accounted for by invoking the opposition between scholarship (with its supposed disinterestedness and historical accuracy) and polemic and situating it, however sympathetically, on the side of the latter...Rather Fanon's essay must be understood as a cultural-political intervention in a historical process whose outcome, in 1959, remained uncertain; 'Algeria Unveiled' tries to *enable* the liberation of Algerian women in a form that complements nationalism and simultaneously challenges Western ideologies, including feminist ideologies, that ignore the specificity of the Algerian situation.

Fanon praises the 'revolutionary virtue' of the strategy of unveiling allowing women to enter the European part of the city. According to him, the 'unveiled Algerian women' assumed an increasingly important place in the struggle.

> Removed and reassumed again and again, the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle...the Algerian women who had long since dropped the veil once again donned the *haik*, thus affirming that it was not true that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General De Gaulle. Behind these psychological reactions, beneath this immediate and almost unanimous response, we again see the overall attitude of rejection of the values of the occupier, *even if these values objectively be worth choosing* (1965b: 62-3, emphasis added)

Fanon argues that even if the occupiers were right in trying to liberate women from patriarchal traditions it was precisely this drive to save women that forced the re-donning of the veil. Whatever the French intentions they strengthened traditional patterns of behaviour. Fanon's key recognition was that women were central to the struggle and that while he advocated the liberation of women this had to be carried out, not in the form of French imperialism masquerading as liberalism, but through the collective struggles of Algerian men and women themselves.

The experience of Algeria showed how nationalism (especially the idea of the 'nation') is incompatible with women's liberation. The 'nation' is both political and cultural, and contested by different classes. In Algerian culture the nation grounds ideas and values as authentic, with women as the bearers of a tradition that denies their rights via representations of the family and the female body. The contradiction here for Algerian feminism is embodied in the veil. Helie-Lucas and Fanon both believe in the need for independence and while the former is critical of the latter's 'mythmaking' one needs to take into account Fanon's own criticisms of the limitations of bourgeois nationalism and the need to move to a 'social and political consciousness' discussed earlier.

Fanon and Contemporary US Radical Black Feminists

Chapter Nine outlined the ways that in the early 1970s black radical women were drawing on Fanon as a weapon to fight sexism in the radical movements. While the terrain of struggle in the 1980s and 1990s is very different, Fanon work has been influential in developing a feminism that is both materialist and activist. This section focuses on the work of bell hooks, who is a central part of forging a feminist agenda that is anti-racist and anti-sexist based in the 'lived experiences' of black women through a matrix of race, gender and class. While focused on black women and black liberation these radical feminists seek to move toward abolition of all structural injustices. It is not surprising given these premises that the liberation theories of Fanon as well as his militant activism should provide inspiration. While they are critical of his masculinist standpoint Fanon continues to have relevance to the black radical project of constructing a gendered new humanism and building a politics of resistance.

One of the most prominent voices in contemporary academic feminism and an influential black intellectual is bell hooks. She is the author of twelve books with Fanon included in the bibliography of seven of them; she is a polemical figure in the academy, as much for her experiential style of writing as for its radical content.

She locates herself firmly in the tradition of theories of liberation and critical consciousness:

> I am often asked to chart a critical genealogy of my intellectual development. In the years before I became deeply engaged with the feminist movement and with the writing of feminist theorists, all the progressive critical thinkers who nurtured my emergent radical subjectivity were men: Fanon, Memmi, Cabral, Freire, Malcolm X (Read 1996: 81).

She draws on Fanon as a global theorist of oppression drawing out feminist analyses and phenomenologies of racism and racist representation the dialectical relations between coloniser/colonised and black liberation.

This section is not a detailed study of her writing, but draws on a few of her key articles and highlights the Fanonian themes that she takes up, in a very different, post-movement context.

The title of her book Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics refers to the key themes of her work: race, gender and culture and a yearning for liberation that she perceives in the lives of everyday people. This highlights her capacity to combine the personal and the political within cultural studies debates. In 'Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism' (1990) she interrogates the discussion on race and black culture noting that terms like 'difference' and 'the Other' have replaced terms like 'oppression' and 'exploitation'. Discourse on blacks (though 'ethnic' is now the preferred term) is produced largely by whites. This is seen by the Academy as evidence of the demise of racism. She points out that this is only the case in theory. In theory, difference is celebrated – only any difference that is about changing policy or engaging in struggle is frowned upon. The key question, hooks notes, is the old one of who is studying whom.

In 'Representations: Feminism and Black masculinity' (1990) she draws attention to the fact that many white students and teachers do not read work regarded as 'sexist' and reminds of the dangers of not reading an author because of their supposed political stance on a particular issue. This is particularly true of feminist comments on black male writers (like Fanon) which see sexism and racism as separate systems of oppression. Also hooks notes the tendency to pass judgements on sexism in black writers far moreso than on white males, like Foucault, who are deemed important (1990: 66). Silencing black men or refusing to engage with their work on the basis of sexism reflects broader hierarchies of inequality. There is a great deal of racism among white feminism - the myth of the black rapist in Brownmiller's Against Our Will is one example - that will be examined in the next section. Conversely complaints from black men that critiques of their sexism are a form of betrayal must also be challenged along with racist representations of men.

In her more recent work (1992) Black Looks even though the focus is on identity and representation, the common themes of cultural studies, the work is clearly located within black radicalism:

> These are essays about identity. Since decolonisation is always a struggle to define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future (hooks 1992: 4-5).

'Loving Blackness as Political Resistance' (1992) explores the theme of black self-hatred, and the desire to be white, extending Fanon's analysis from Black Skin White Masks. This, she notes, is an acceptable theme in her classroom discussions but the idea of 'loving blackness' is such a threat to white-supremacist culture that it is a difficult topic to discuss even with the progressive students who attend her courses. The fascination with black self-hatred highlights the fact that 'blackness' is a sign in the cultural imaginary of hatred and fear. She notes the extent of white supremacist ways of thinking even among black progressives and the lack of scholarly work on this area. It is often a premise of anti-racist workshops to make whites see how they too are victims of racism, a strategy hooks regards as misguided:

> We must be willing to acknowledge that individuals of great privilege who are in no way victimised are capable, *via* their political choices, of working on behalf of the oppressed. Such solidarity does not need to be rooted in shared experience. It can be based on one's political and ethical understanding of racism and one's rejection of domination (p. 13).

In 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance' (1992) she begins with experience of young male students who want to get 'a bit of the Other' and who see this as evidence for their lack of racism. She argues this disguises white supremacist assumptions - 'Others' provide whites with 'experience', especially experiences of the primitive.[4] Of course the desire for Others has not always been spoken openly as it was by these students but it has been expressed, more or less violently, since the advent of colonialism. Desire for contact and pleasure in it are not in themselves evidence for the absence of racism. White desire for contact says nothing about the terms of such an exchange, which must ultimately be one in which both parties recognise the reality of racism. The theme of the book is largely about the prevalence of internalised racism and white-supremacist control over the means of representing black people and the difficulty of finding even a language to articulate the suffering of black people or articulate alternatives.

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[4] The experience described by Neva Mwiti with which this thesis opens also shows how cross racial desire in and of itself is not evidence for lack of racism or sexism.

The final section examines liberal appropriations of Fanon's work on gender of which the Arab and black feminisms described above stand as an implicit critique.

Fanon and Liberal Feminism

The liberal feminist critiques of Fanon's work centre on his discussion of women of colour in Black Skin White Masks. This chapter of the book has served in Western appropriations of Fanon as the basis to dismiss his work as misogynist. The key text that began this reading of Fanon was Susan Brownmiller's Against Our Will. While itself a groundbreaking analysis of rape, she has been criticised by black feminists for promoting the myth of the black rapist (Davis 1981). The concern here though is her treatment of Fanon. She argues that Fanon was in a position as a colonial psychiatrist to make a 'substantial original contribution' to the understanding of rape in oppressing native women. She notes that rape is a theme in all his works but instead seeing this as a strength she accuses him of being obsessed by the relation between native men and white women. She finds his use of the Freudians Helene Deutsch and Marie Bonaparte's theory of female masochism as offensive. Without any discussion of the context in which it is used, namely as an illustration of alienated desire, which Freud took to be natural but Fanon certainly did not.

Brownmiller thinks that Fanon is using Deutsch's theory to justify rape but when she discusses Deutsch's work later in the book her analysis is very different. She argues that despite causing 'real and incalculable damage to the female sex' in promoting the 'fundamental rightness of rape as an archetypal female experience' Deutsch's work is, nevertheless, a 'brave pioneering study' of female psycho-sexuality '*as it has been conditioned by men*'. Deutsch herself though did not recognise the final caveat (Brownmiller 1975: 316, emphasis added). Brownmiller concludes on Fanon that 'purely and simply, this radical theorist of third-world liberation was a hater of women' whose only real concern with rape was as a 'devious colonial trick to emasculate Third-World men' (1975: 249-50).

Another early article written of the second wave of the women's movement was that of Barbara Burris (1973). Her radical feminist perspective is sharply critical of Fanon. She criticises the 'male' Left for its rampant sexism and sidelining of women's issues. She argues that Fanon's work is built on masculinist assumptions and that participation in the 'anti-imperialist' movement ignores the fact that *all* women are, in effect, themselves 'colonised.' The effects of colonisation that Fanon points out in Wretched of the Earth such as the destruction of the culture and history of oppressed people applies doubly to women. For women, Burris argues, the 'national culture' is male culture to which there is a subordinate female culture. In this regard the cultural divide is symbolised by the institution of the veil. The 'national' culture of Algeria, Burris argues, excludes women from self-determination. The 'national' culture then is the dominant male culture. The two cultures that are in competition, the French and the Algerian, are really the dominant 'male' cultures in competition. From this it follows that one must distinguish between national liberation and women's liberation which Fanon conflates in ways that, Burris argues, assume male cultural supremacy. Fanon notes that the veil is a cultural trait that the French are determined to destroy as a part of their assault on Algerian culture. While this is true it elides the effect that the veil has on women. Burris (1973: 343) argues that it would be more honest to state that while French *men* [5] had no interest in liberating Algerian women neither did Algerian men. She argues that Fanon dismisses the idea that women are oppressed and that they choose their oppression, citing the following passage as an illustration:

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[5] It is important to note that Burris does not discuss the role of French women in the colonial project.

> To begin with there is the much-discussed status of the Algerian woman- her alleged confinement, her lack of importance, her humility, her silent existence bordering on quasi-absence. And 'Moslem society' had no place for her, amputating her personality, allowing her neither development nor maturity, maintaining her in perpetual infantilism...Such affirmations, illuminated by 'scientific works,' are today receiving the only valid challenge: the experience of revolution (Fanon 1965a: 65-66).

To argue that Fanon is playing down women's oppression overlooks his general argument that participation in the revolution is liberating for women and that their relationship to the veil may be contradictory and subject to change. While it may be oppressive it is also a symbol of their identification with the national struggle, a method of resisting the French. It is true that Fanon does tend to overplay agency in interests of his general argument as in:

> The Algerian woman's ardent love of the home is not a limitation imposed by the universe. It is not a flight from the world. The Algerian woman, in imposing such a restriction on herself, in choosing a form of existence limited in scope, was deepening her consciousness of struggle and preparing for combat (Fanon 1965a: 66).

While his general argument that the revolution is liberating for women emphasises their agency it is one-sided to say that it was 'not a limitation imposed by the universe,' by which he means it was a self-imposed method of resisting the French. One needs to mention the role of men in imposing this limitation as Burris (1973) rightly points out. Nevertheless, the colonial context would be a difficult one to elaborate this. This contradiction is what made the French strategy of unveiling potentially dangerous; it gave the French a strong beachhead because it exposed a potential division between the sexes. It is misleading to imply that women uncompromisingly rejected French reforms like divorce hearings to be heard by a judge, when these sorts of changes were used by women to improve their social standing. Burris (1973: 344) sums up:

> In this a typical male-supremacist attitude emerges. Women who give up their own struggle for freedom are the most 'conscious' women if they are then prepared to fight alongside their oppressors.

While it is true that Fanon is one sided, this is certainly overstated. There is a struggle from women's liberation to be had, but French colonialists - male and female - were also enemies of Arab women's liberation. No Algerian of either sex can be liberated if the French remain. It is true that women will not be 'automatically' liberated by the national struggle, but it is one sided to argue that *men,* both French and Algerian, are the enemy. Of course it will not do to say that Algerian women have to wait but Fanon is not advocating this. He is not advocating the seclusion of women but arguing that the revolution shows that the view of Algerian women as absent and humble is a myth, as he said 'Algeria is not a womanless society'. .

Fanon in describing the process of the leadership 'admitting' women assumes that the absence of women from the leadership needs no explanation. Their involvement was not the result of consultation with them but they are 'admitted' due to the urgency of the situation and after much soul searching so they could 'support' the struggle, not participate in the leadership. Burris takes exception to this but it is no different from the United States in which women have agitated to join the fighting forces. Burris (1973: 350) quotes *La Femme Algérienne,* a book detailing the experiences of women who fought in the revolution and found themselves returned to their former subservience after 'independence' was gained. Not many participated in the struggle and their lives were not greatly affected. While this is true it requires analysis of what occurred after independence and why, rather than a critique of Fanon's supposed patriarchal attitudes. More recent work on the veil notes that it has a variety of functions and that it is a knee-jerk reaction, especially in the West, that the veil equals oppression. As Watson (1994: 152) argues the veil should not just to be understood in terms of liberation versus constraint but as a negotiation of competing values. In this respect Fanon's analysis has a very contemporary ring.

Burris assumes that national culture is the dominant male culture and that Fanon is pro-male cultural supremacy. She mistakenly assumes that it is Fanon and not the French who identified the veil as an Algerian cultural artifact. She seems opposed to Fanon for his 'hatred' of European colonisers, arguing that Fanon does not recognise female oppression. That the national culture of Algeria has remained patriarchal is tragic, however, assuming that Fanon would have supported such a development is incredible. Her critique is marred also by a 'common oppression' rhetoric and a denial of white women's privilege in an anti- black culture (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 76).

While more recent feminist writing has been less blunt, there is a working assumption that to engage with Fanon on the issue of gender means to critique his sexism. It is his critique of Caprécia's book that is the focus for most critiques of his sexism. The theme of Black Skin White Masks is the alienating effect of anti-black racism on black people themselves. In the first chapter 'The Negro and Language' Fanon explores the alienating effect of learning French as a means of escaping the colonial inferiority complex. The mastery of French in Algeria holds out material benefits allowing a point of entry to a culture in which the culturally deprived *évolvé*, be they Algerian like Ferhat Abbas or Antillean like Fanon, is granted honorary citizenship of the human race.

Fanon opens the contentious chapter 'The Woman of Colour and the White Man' with the observation consistent with his view of the importance of love as recognition. He writes:

> The person I love will strengthen me by endorsing my assumption of my manhood, while the need to earn the admiration or love of others will erect a value-making superstructure on my whole vision of the world (1967a: 41)

Fanon, unlike Sartre, believes that authentic relations are possible. What he proceeds to show in the remainder of the chapter is that in the alienating context of colonialism even love is not a source of emancipation. It is important to recognise that Fanon is examining a particular example of the alienated consciousness which he sees as 'unhealthy'. The book was intended to serve as the basis for overcoming it. For Fanon, Mayotte Capécia's work provides a perfect illustration of an alienated Antillean. She states 'I wanted so much to become a respectable woman. I should have liked to marry but to a white man'. Caprécia sees whiteness as the source of all value and seeks to form relationships only with white men. It is this psycho-existential complex that drives her to seek equality with whites by securing Andre's love. By loving her he proves that she is worthy of love. Fanon's phenomenology of oppression is shows 'love' is no path to redemption for the inferiorised native.

The text that Fanon analyses is Mayotte Capécia's autobiographical novel, *Je Suis Martiniquaise* written in 1949. The novel is a first person narrative that relates her life and her affair with a French officer who eventually abandons her with their child. The novel won the *Grand Prix Littéraire des Antilles* selected by a panel of thirteen Frenchmen and was a best-seller, doubtless because it confirmed all the prejudices held by the French. It was not highly regarded by the *Negritude* movement and was not reviewed in *Présence Africaine* or in works on Antillean literature (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 36). Its popularity and its pandering to French prejudice is what provoked such scathing criticism from Fanon. He begins:

> One day a woman named Mayotte Capécia, obeying a motive whose elements are difficult to detect, sat down to write 202 pages - her life - in which the most ridiculous ideas proliferated at random. The enthusiastic reception that greeted this book in certain circles forces us to analyse it. For us, all circumlocution is impossible: *Je Suis Martiniquaise* is cut rate merchandise, preaching unhealthy behaviour (Fanon 1967a: 54).[6]

Feminist cultural studies relocate Fanon's dismissive critique as evidence of his sexism, for instance Gwen Bergner and Mary-Anne Doane. In her critique Bergner states:

> The terms of Fanon's censure reveal much about the economy of gender, class, and sexuality that binds black women. Fanon belittles Capécia's life story in terms of its economic worth ('cut-rate merchandise') and sexual morality ('a sermon in praise of corruption') - the charges conventionally brought against women's writing and other assertions of feminine autonomy (1995: 83).

She continues that 'Caprécia sometimes - but not always - lapses into valorising whiteness in her aspirations to privilege'.[7]

Likewise Doane states that

> Fanon is relentless in his critique of Caprécia's overwhelming desire to marry a white man...Fanon sees the black woman's desire as representative of a black pathology which he despises (1991: 219).

Here Doane assumes that, for Fanon, Negrophobia is representative of the desire of all black women, rather than an instance of alienated desire. It is not desire per se but the love or hatred of an individual solely on the basis of their colour that is at issue. Fanon (1967a: 8-9) writes:

> the (white) man who adores the Negro is as sick as the one who abominates him. Conversely, the black who wants to turn his/her race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites.

When Fanon winds up his attack with the remark: 'those who grant our conclusions on the psycho-sexuality of the white woman may ask what we have to say about the woman of colour I know nothing about her' (1967a: 179-80). This is interpreted as dismissing all women of colour. More to the point is the difficulty of doing phenomenological analysis of the Other in this situation. This is because as bell hooks has commented black women have no institutionalised Other (Doane 1992: 231). Fanon does offer an observation - that for colonised women in the Antilles the phobic object would be the Senegalese, the blackest black. Despite the colonial reality of rape by the coloniser the fear of rape is projected mainly onto black men, for both black and white women, the culture constructs the black man as a phobic object.

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[6] This is Sharpley-Whiting's (1980: 40) translation: *Malsain* means 'unhealthy behaviour', and is in keeping with Fanon's clinical focus rather than the standard English translation of it as 'corruption.' Critics like Bergner (1995) who is analysed below are aware of the alternative but argue wrongly that both connote the same idea.

[7] Bergner despite her criticisms does regard Fanon's text as foundational for a psychoanalytic understanding of racial subjectivity. She notes that in most cases Fanon's references are to black *men* who are taken to be representative. Feminist psychoanalysis has shown how the masculine gaze displaces anxiety onto woman as 'lack' which is what Fanon argues is the case for black *men*. Instead of the phallus, as in Lacan, it is blackness that becomes the signifier of difference and power though the effects are specific, woman are castrated while Black men are over-endowed. The similarity in the scopic regimes of gender and race suggest parallels Fanon's concern about the dismembering gaze is exacerbated by his placement in the 'feminine' position, as being its object (Bergner 1995: 79-80). While these observations are quite interesting there is no attempt to relate this to Fanon's own sociodiagnostic project.

Doane and Bergner portray Fanon as seeking to control black women's desire in the interests of the patriarchal authority of black men, condemning them as sexually immoral for their agency in choosing partners outside their race. Bergner argues that this desire for white men is economically motivated and Fanon does not pay sufficient attention to the limitations on women in colonial context. Caprécia must, in effect, sell herself to get by.[8] Caprécia herself would be appalled at this and rejects this interpretation throughout the novel.[9] She is in fact quite self-sufficient as a laundress and bar-owner. She rejects even the offer of housekeeping money from her white lover, Andre, lest she be seen as a social climber, trying to *use* Andre. She rejects his offer of a diamond ring as 'treating her like a prostitute' and never pursues him legally to recognise and support his son (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 38-9). As Sharply-Whiting (1998: 39) points out:

> These feminist critics deny Caprécia's agency or at least circumscribe her autonomy and agency more than Fanon ever could. In their logic, the only way a colonised black women would ever acquiesce emotionally/sexually to her oppressor was under extreme economic duress; it becomes unfathomable that a black women would *desire* 'love,' or 'sleep with the enemy' so to speak. Clouded it seems by images of the black superwoman with a will and psychical makeup of steel, inserted within the folds of these analyses is a sheer lack of understanding of the terrorising effects of colonialism and systematic racism and sexism on the psyche of the colonised.

Bergner goes on that Caprécia's book is, contra Fanon: 'a rare, unapologetic and *invigorating* representation of a black woman's effort to carve economic and sexual autonomy (1995: 87, note 23).

Sharpley-Whiting (1998: 40) argues that to romanticise *Je Suis Martiniquaise* as a black feminist manifesto on gender and class that 'sometimes lapses into valorising whiteness' is to pretend that this is not on a profound level 'unhealthy behaviour'. It is to decontextualise the colonialist framework out of which Capécia was writing, which has as its a priori function to inspire acute racial/sexual *malaise* in the psyche of colonial subjects. Capécia is Negrophobic and seeks to whiten herself. Her desire for lactification makes her miserable.

She says on discovering that she has white blood:

> I found that I was proud of it. I was certainly not the only one who had white blood, but a white grandmother?...So my mother then was a mixture?...I found her prettier than ever, and cleverer, and more refined. If she had married a white man, do you suppose I should have been completely white? And life might not have been so hard for me? I could never stop thinking of our priest, and I made up my mind that I could never love anyone but a white man, a blue-eyed blonde, a Frenchman (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 41).

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[8] She goes as far as to say in footnote 19, that Fanon does not mention the 'long-standing abuse of black women by white men' apparently overlooking Fanon discussion of this topic in the chapter.

[9] Gordon makes a similar point in relation to the discussion of Caprécia in Isaac Julien's (1995) film. The commentary by Vergés in the film takes place under the picture of an anonymous black women in traditional headdress with the implication that it 'is' Caprécia when as Gordon points out Caprécia 'wouldn't be caught dead in such an outfit' (1996: 155).

Here it is clear that whiteness represents all that is beautiful and good. Her mother is transformed in her adolescent eyes by the infusion of whiteness. Her desire to marry a white man is an exercise in self-validation that Fanon regards as 'unhealthy'.

Sharply-Whiting goes on to give a Fanonian analysis of Caprécia's second novel, *La Négresse blanche*, which was also well received in France. In it Capécia is no longer concerned as much about 'white male love' as a feeling of inferiority linked to black femininity and the desire to escape this through a mixed-race identity. She describes black men as 'dirty niggers' and black women as 'sluts'. She presents her mixed-race heroine, Isaure, as 'not black' as the title of the book implies, spelling out in detail how 'white' Isaure is. This in contrast to the black maidservant, Lucia, who is the embodiment of the lascivious Negress stereotype. In Caprécia's words: 'she sought pleasure with such a frenzy, she was worse than a cat in heat' (1998: 47). Black femininity is reduced to animal sexuality. Sharply-Whiting (1998:43) sums up:

> Blackness, not colonial oppression and its psychological and material manifestations, is a fundamental source of angst. Her convoluted responses to this existential dilemma range from condescending pity to hatred toward the island blacks and desire to be recognised as anything but a Negress by the whites. Hence our reading will focus particularly on Caprécia's black*femme*phobia exhibited in oftentimes contemptuous and stereotyped sexualised portraits of black femininity in which the heroine incessantly tries to situate herself as 'different' from, or a step above, black women.

Isaure is a single working mother, who is seduced and abandoned by a Creole. She marries a childhood friend, Pascal, who is ostracised by other Creoles because of his family's poverty. He is ostracised by the family for marrying a black woman. Pascal sees himself as having a profound affinity with the island 'Negroes' but insists that his wife is not black. They live on a sugar plantation where Pascal oversees the black natives. In a dispute over pay inequities Pascal is murdered and Isaure flees to Paris. As Fanon noted although Caprécia may have realised her earlier mistakes, in her second work 'all the Negroes whom she describes are in one way or another either semi-criminal or 'sho good' *niggers*.' In both her books her heroines must flee because 'this country of niggers is decidedly accursed' (1967a: 52-3, note 12).

The book betrays a racist logic: black femininity represents bestiality and immorality. She obsesses over the physiognomic differences between her heroine and the other native women in Gobineau-like fashion. Lucia is described as 'of the most pure African type. She had full lips, a flat nose, frizzy hair and brilliant black skin'. As a maidservant she is devoted and deferent - a remnant of 'her slave mentality'. All this is contrasted with Isaure's being 'not black', not eating her r's and not being promiscuous (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 46-7). All this behaviour exemplifies Fanon's analysis of the importance to the alienated Antilleans of not 'falling back into the pit of niggerhood' (Fanon 1967a: 44).

While it is important to see how the colonial situation limits Caprécia's options. Bergner points out the exploitative nature of the relationship with André but it is not André's behaviour that is problematised. After his posting to the colonies ends André abandons her and the child leaving her to conclude: 'I would have liked to marry, but to a white man. Only a woman of colour is never altogether respectable/valued in a white man's eyes. Even if he loves her, I knew this' (Sharpley-Whiting. 1998: 41). The fact that Capécia's problems begin and end with this sort of exploitation by a white man is only mentioned in passing in Bergner's analysis, while Fanon's sexism is the focus of the article.

Fanon’s project of exploring the inadequacies of relations like these based on inferiority and superiority relates less to his desire to control black women than to exposing the internalised oppression that poisons authentic relationships. Fanon concedes that she is not a typical woman of colour in this respect (1967a: 81). Here love fails in its redemptive capacity. In the end when Caprécia and her son attempt to follow André she is denied a passport. She relates in her *r*-eating dialect that: ‘*Je Suis F’ancaise, tout come aut*’/ I am a French woman as any other’ only to be told by the French commandant that she is forgetting that she is a woman of colour. Caprécia believes she is French because she is ‘loved’ by a French man but her dialect and her blackness marks her as ‘native’. The novel’s title reflects this awful realisation - *Je suis Martiniquaise* (Sharply-Whiting 1998:42).

In relation to Fanon’s analysis in Chapter Three of Black Skin White Masks feminist commentators contrast his apparently harsh treatment of Caprécia with his ‘sympathetic’ reading of René Maran’s novel which won the *Prix* in 1921 and was considered a forerunner of the *Negritude* movement (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 52, note 29). Although the dynamics are quite different in each case it should be recalled that the key theme is still a focus on alienation and the falseness of attempting to build authentic relations in the colonial context. Maran’s main character, Jean Veneuse, Fanon describes as a beggar who looks for approval in white men’s eyes. He describes the novel as a sham that seeks to make relations between the races based on organic unhealthiness as he puts it: ‘Veneuse is the lamb to be slaughtered. Let us make the effort.’ Veneuse, Fanon argues is an abandonment neurotic for whom blackness masks his alienation. For Caprécia the psychic pain is culturally produced emanating from without, while Veneuse’s emanate from within, blackness is the vehicle that externalises his neurosis.

Sharply-Whiting (1998: 48-9) is vigorous in Fanon’s defence arguing that the two chapters are written in two different styles about two different neuroses, though she concedes that Fanon’s focus is too narrow in looking solely at Caprécia’s anti-black racism and alienation. There is nevertheless some doubt as to why Caprécia’s neurosis is based in the culture while Veneuse’s is the externalisation of a neurotic complex. Fanon’s problem here lies in the sexist use of language. Caprécia seeks to have her sense of self confirmed by a white other and so does Veneuse. Her validation comes from Andre, his seems to come, not from the white female other – the inverse of Caprécia - as much as white *men*. Fanon overlooks the masculine gender dynamics here that play themselves out in gendered and racialised relations that are external. This would allow him to continue his socio-genetic analysis of the inferiority complex. This will be discussed further in Chapter Sixteen. Sharpley-Whiting sums up arguing that:

> To dismiss Fanon as antifeminist, anti-Caribbean woman of colour because he does not fit liberal feminists’ paradigms of feminism undermines intellectual and pragmatic integrity leaving instead a postmodern mythology - Fanon as a misogynist (1998:48).

Summary

This section has examined several quite different feminist engagements with Fanon. In relation to Arab feminism the debates centre on the need to develop a post-nationalist feminism that is non-Eurocentric and can address the needs of all women, very much an extension of earlier arguments about the limits of nationalism and spontaneity. There is a need to develop a feminist approach that addresses the questions of race, class and gender in an integrated way and Fanon has a useful role to play in thinking these through. Gilliam identifies two issues that are central to women and without which women's equality is impossible. One is 'independent access to money or resources that enable women to contribute to their own and their children's livelihood' and the other 'control over the reproductive decisions that relate to their bodies' (1991: 217-9).

As reflected in the earlier discussion a genuine revolutionary movement must build a broad front against women's inequality. This requires that the basis of struggle must be *issues* rather than gender, ethnicity or sexual identity. Furthermore as Tohidi (1991) spells out the conclusion based on the experience of women in national liberation struggles: 'Specific demands of women must be incorporated into the national anti-imperialist movement and class struggle right from the beginning'.

In the 'post-colonial' period the FLN, who had structured itself around being a defender of Algerian culture repressed by the French, would eventually use Islam as a test of national loyalty. The high rate of unemployment in this context made the equality of women a difficult issue. With one in five men out of work it is axiomatic that women's participation in employment will be low, in the case of Algeria one of the lowest in the world. The social crisis of the unemployed also reinforces nostalgia about the past that is antithetical to women's liberation. The class divisions in Algeria are also important, if somewhat neglected by Fanon in this context.

Knauss (1987: 143) argues that:

> [T]he dominance of the petty bourgeoisie through most stages of nationalism may have precluded an example of greater liberation of women by those higher in the class scale...what is striking about Algeria, unlike Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt, is that there was *never* an attempt to greatly improve women's status, even for better-off women, though no doubt many of the latter did all right in a private individual way.

The treatment of women here is a good test of nationalist and socialist claims that their projects will result in a society in which, in Boumediene's words 'the exploitation of man by man will end'. Once again it is women's bodies that are the physical and symbolic focus for the struggle over national identity. Lewis Gordon's comment which is a gloss on Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled' show how relevant Fanon's method and argument remain. Fanon, he says:

> simultaneously offers a hermeneutic of the colonised people of Algeria through a phenomenology of the body. This phenomenological description explores the correlation of the 'body'/individual Algerian women with the Algerian 'nation'/people...Fanon argues that the veil, regardless of its traditional function, is transformed into a mark of resistance. The Algerian woman thus became the embodiment of cultural resistance *and* violation (Gordon 1995: 63-4).

It remains tragic that Algerian women still are forced to embody such contradictions.

Looking at liberal appropriations of Fanon many of the issues that were of key import in Fanon's project are displaced - particularly the project of liberation. Liberal critics are quick to point out Fanon's masculinist limitations without exploring their progressive potential. This can lead to quite misleading outcomes like attempts to recuperate Mayotte Caprécia as a black feminist because Caprécia is black and criticised by Fanon (Sharply-Whiting 1998: 48-9). To say that *Je suis Martiniquaise* is 'a rare, unapologetic and invigorating representation' ignores the crucial question: invigorating for whom?

Certainly Caprécia is honest but as bell hooks (1992: 80) says that while it is crucial in a patriarchal society that every woman finds her voice it is also crucial to ask what sort of politics animates what is being said. In many respects this is question that animates bell hook's work which is indebted to Fanon. Her books focus on internalised racism and the difficulty of finding even a language to articulate the suffering of black people or to articulate alternatives.

The differences in the liberal versus nationalist and black radical interpretations are based in the fact that much of liberal feminism (even in its radical guise) is focused on equal access and issues of sex and identity that are separate from political economy and the need for systematic change. It leads to a politics of ethnic particularism like *Negritude* or a feminist politics that reifies gender seeing men and women as two distinct classes. All men are oppressors and all women are sisters, which disguises the privileged position of Western feminism - their economic privilege and their control over the system of representation (Gilliam 1991).