



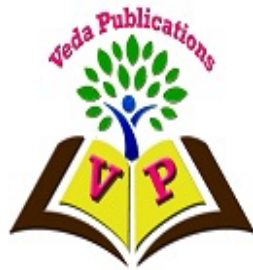
## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**RACISM IN FRANTZ FANON'S *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS***

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13207>**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the concept of racism in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, focusing on the psychological, socio-political, and linguistic dimensions through which racial oppression functions. Fanon exposes how colonial racism fractures identity, imposes internalized inferiority, and structures interpersonal relationships between Black and white subjects. Through a close reading of Fanon's key arguments, including the construction of the "white gaze," the alienation caused by language, and the pathology of colonial domination, this study analyses how Fanon redefines racism as an existential condition rather than solely a system of social discrimination. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon demonstrates that racism is not merely an external system of oppression but a deeply embedded psychological condition that affects language, identity, and desire. Ultimately, the paper argues that Fanon provides not only a critique of racial ideology but also an early framework for understanding systemic and psychological racism in contemporary societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) remains one of the most significant examinations of race, colonialism, and the psychological effects of racism on Black identity. Frantz Omer Fanon usually refers to Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary from Martinique who played a significant role in the struggle for decolonization and the liberation of African nations from colonial rule. Fanon's books, particularly *Black Skin, White Masks*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*, are regarded as seminal texts in postcolonial studies and critical theory. These works have been translated into numerous languages and continue to be studied and debated by scholars, activists, and thinkers worldwide. *Black Skin, White Masks* was originally written in French and translated by Charles Lam Markmann and Richard Philcox. In 2008, Grove published a new translation of the book by Richard Philcox, which, it claims, "updates its language for a new generation of readers" (Wikipedia). Written during a period marked by European imperialism and anti-colonial struggle, the book blends psychology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology to understand how racial hierarchies are constructed and internalized. Fanon argues that racism is not simply a matter of interpersonal prejudice but a systemic and psychological condition rooted in colonial domination. By analysing the lived experience of the Black subject, Fanon reveals how racism shapes identity, language, desire, and social interaction. This paper explores how Fanon conceptualizes racism as a structural and psychological mechanism that distorts both the oppressor and the oppressed, examining three core

dimensions: language and recognition, the internalization of inferiority, and the myth of whiteness.

The Construction of the "White Gaze"- A central concept in *Black Skin, White Masks* is the "white gaze", the way Black people are seen, interpreted, and objectified by white society. Fanon illustrates this through the famous anecdote of the child who cries, "Look, a Negro!" This moment, for Fanon, crystallizes the violent reduction of a person to a racial object. Under the white gaze, the Black subject becomes "sealed into his blackness," (*Black Skin, White Masks* 09) stripped of individuality and forced into a pre-constructed racial identity. Fanon argues that this gaze is rooted in colonial history, where whiteness functions as the normative human ideal and Blackness as its devalued other. Racism, therefore, becomes a system of perception that predates any specific encounter. Even before the Black individual speaks, the white gaze determines their meaning and value. Racism here is not simply interpersonal but epistemological: it controls what can be known and imagined about the Black subject.

Finally, Fanon critiques the concept of whiteness as a myth that sustains racial hierarchy. Whiteness, he argues, is not a biological reality but a socially constructed ideal associated with purity, civility, and superiority. This 'whiteness as norm' positions Blackness as its opposite: primitive, irrational, or hypersexual. Fanon explains that colonial societies create and perpetuate this binary to justify domination. Moreover, whiteness becomes an aspirational identity for colonized subjects, who are encouraged to imitate white cultural norms, clothing, and behavior to gain social acceptance. This



aspiration, however, is impossible to fulfill, since the racial order denies Black individuals' full humanity regardless of their assimilation. Fanon concludes that the myth of whiteness functions as a psychological trap that perpetuates racism by offering the illusion of escape through imitation while reinforcing structural inequality.

Language and Internalized Racism- Language plays a crucial role in shaping power dynamics and reinforcing colonial hierarchies. Fanon explores how language is used as a tool of oppression and resistance, highlighting the importance of reclaiming linguistic autonomy as part of the decolonization process. In Chapter Two, "The Black Man and Language," Fanon critiques the linguistic hierarchy imposed by the colonizer, where the colonized language is denigrated and marginalized. He writes, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Black Skin, White Masks 17). Here, Fanon emphasizes the importance of reclaiming linguistic autonomy as a form of resistance against colonial domination.

Fanon famously writes, "To speak means to exist absolutely for the other" (01). In colonial societies, language becomes a tool of domination. Mastery of the colonizer's language-French, in Fanon's case-signals intelligence, civility, and social belonging. As colonized people internalize these associations, they begin to devalue their own languages, dialects, and cultural forms. Fanon argues that this dynamic produces internalized racism: Black individuals who learn to speak the colonizer's language often adopt the colonizer's worldview, including negative

stereotypes about their own race. The desire to speak "correct French" becomes an attempt to approximate whiteness. This creates a psychological split, a sense of alienation from one's own identity. Thus, racism operates not only externally but also internally, shaping the very structures of thought.

Colonialism and the Pathology of Racism- Fanon, trained as a psychiatrist, approaches racism as a pathological condition produced by colonial power. In his analysis, colonial societies depend on racial hierarchies to justify domination, and these hierarchies affect both the colonizer and the colonized. The white colonizer develops a superiority complex, reinforced through institutions, education, and culture. Meanwhile, the colonized subject internalizes feelings of inferiority, believing themselves less capable, less civilized, and less human. Fanon's psychiatric perspective reveals racism as a mutually destructive force. For the colonized, it produces trauma, anxiety, and identity fragmentation. Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks vividly portrays how colonialism and racism profoundly shape the consciousness and identity of the colonized subject. Fanon says in the second chapter,

"I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos... I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth" (Black Skin, White Masks 27).



Through personal experiences, theoretical analysis, and case studies, Fanon unveils the intricate ways in which colonial domination and racial prejudice intersect to meld the psyche of the colonized individual. For the colonizer, it creates an existential dependence on domination, preventing authentic encounters with others. Racism, therefore, is not simply a social ill but a psychological disorder embedded in the colonial situation.

Love, Desire, and Racial Fetishization- Another dimension of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks* appears in Fanon's examination of interracial relationships. He discusses how romantic desire can be influenced by racial fetishization: Black men may seek white women to gain proximity to whiteness, while white women may view Black men as hypersexual, exotic figures. These relationships, Fanon argues, are not simply personal choices but expressions of racialized fantasies created by colonialism. In this context, racism infiltrates even the most intimate aspects of life. Love becomes a battleground where racial hierarchies are reacted to rather than transcended. Fanon's critique shows that racism is not limited to public institutions; it shapes private desires, emotions, and relationships. In 'The Women of the Colour and White Men' chapter, Fanon explores the intersection of race and gender, particularly focusing on the experiences of Black women in relation to white men. He discusses the fetishization of Black women and the dynamics of interracial relationships, highlighting the power imbalances inherent in colonial societies. In another chapter, 'The Man of the Color and White Women,' Fanon examines the relationship between Black men and white women, exploring the stereotypes and

prejudices that shape their interactions. He delves into the emasculation of Black men in the eyes of white society and how interracial desire is often fraught with taboo and repression.

Racism as an Existential Condition: The book explores the complexities of racial identity, particularly in the context of Black individuals living in a white-dominated world. Fanon discusses how the internalization of racial stereotypes and prejudices leads to feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, and alienation among Black people. Fanon recounts personal experiences of racism, such as being subjected to derogatory stereotypes and racial slurs, which contributed to his sense of alienation and inferiority. He reflects on these experiences, stating, "When a Negro behaves according to the customs of white civilization, he is white. When he tries to assert the negritude, he is deeply and truly a Negro" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 13). This highlights the dilemma faced by Black individuals in navigating their racial identity within a white-dominated society. Fanon ultimately portrays racism as an existential barrier to human freedom. Drawing on existential philosophy, he argues that racism prevents Black individuals from defining themselves on their own terms. Instead, they are forced to navigate identities imposed upon them by a racialised world. Fanon insists that liberation requires a radical restructuring of society, not merely an end to prejudice. Racism's power lies in its ability to shape reality itself, language, perception, identity, and social systems.

Internalization of Racial Inferiority- Fanon argues that colonization instills in the colonized individual a deep-seated sense of racial inferiority. Through the imposition of racial hierarchies and the dissemination



of racist ideologies, colonizers portray Blackness as inherently inferior to whiteness. As a result, Black individuals internalize these racist beliefs, leading to feelings of self-hatred, inadequacy, and shame about their racial identity. Fanon illustrates this phenomenon through his own experiences and observations, highlighting how the pervasive devaluation of Blackness shapes the colonised psyche. Canadian author Dionne Brand describes racism's deep-rooted presence by showing how the "Door" is not just a physical place from the past, but a heavy, metaphorical weight that people still carry with them today, "The door looms both as a horror and a romance, though. The horror is of course three or four hundred years of slavery, its shadow was and is colonialism and racism" (A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging 25).

**Internalization of Racial Hierarchies - Colonialism** imposes a racial hierarchy that places whiteness at the top and Blackness at the bottom. Fanon demonstrates how this hierarchical structure permeates every aspect of society, from education and employment to interpersonal relationships. Colonized subjects internalize these racial hierarchies, leading to feelings of inferiority and self-doubt. Fanon describes how Black individuals come to perceive themselves through the lens of the colonizer's gaze, internalizing racist stereotypes and devaluing their own racial and cultural identities.

**Performance of Racial Identity-** In response to the pressure to assimilate into a white-dominated society, colonized individuals often engage in the performance of racial identity. Fanon discusses how Black individuals adopt certain behaviours, mannerisms, and speech patterns to conform to

white expectations of acceptability. However, this performance of racial identity is often fraught with internal conflict and dissonance, as colonized subjects grapple with the tension between authenticity and assimilation. Fanon highlights the psychological toll of wearing masks to conceal one's true self and the emotional labour required to navigate multiple identities in a racially stratified society.

**Impact on Mental Health-** Colonialism and racism have profound implications for the mental health and well-being of colonized individuals. Fanon explores how the constant exposure to racial discrimination, violence, and oppression contributes to psychological trauma, anxiety, and depression among Black people. Fanon's work challenges us to confront our prejudices and to work towards a more just and equitable world for all. It delves deeply into the experiences of Black people who suffer from the psychological effects of racism and colonialism. In the Introduction chapter, he says: "To Fanon, the truly important questions are: 'What does the man want?' and 'What does the black man want?'" He argues that "a Black is not a man," and that instead black people exist in a "zone of nonbeing" (Black Skin, White Masks xii). He discusses the prevalence of mental health disorders within colonized communities and the limited access to culturally sensitive mental health care. Fanon underscores the importance of addressing the intersectional impact of colonialism and racism on mental health and advocating for holistic approaches to healing and liberation.

**CONCLUSION**

Fanon sees language as a key tool through which racism works. For colonized people, language influences their connection to power and humanity. According to Fanon, speaking the colonizer's language is more than just communicating; it is an effort to assimilate: "To speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (Black Skin, White Masks 01). In colonial societies, mastering the European language is often seen as a sign of intelligence and cultural status, while the speech of colonized individuals is viewed as inferior. This creates a racialized linguistic hierarchy where Black people feel pressured to adopt the language norms of white society to gain recognition. This pressure causes what Fanon calls 'sociogenic' alienation, where a person's identity fragments between wanting acceptance and the difficulty of escaping racial labels. In this context, racism is not just social but also linguistic, assigning value to bodies based on the languages they speak.

Alongside language, Fanon argues that racism produces a powerful internalization of inferiority among the colonized. He employs psychoanalytic frameworks to explain how Black individuals come to see themselves through the racist stereotypes imposed upon them. In one of the most well-known passages, Fanon describes the experience of being called "Look, a Negro!" by a child, illustrating how Blackness becomes an object of fear and fascination (Fanon 89). This moment captures what he calls 'the racial epidermal schema'- the sense of self constructed through the white gaze. The psychological violence of racism traps Black individuals within externally imposed identities, creating feelings of inadequacy, shame, and self-

alienation. For Fanon, this internalization is one of the most destructive aspects of racism because it reproduces colonial power even in the absence of direct force. The colonized person becomes both victim and enforcer of the ideology that dehumanizes them.

His work reveals how colonialism produces racial categories and forces the colonized into positions of inferiority while maintaining the illusion that assimilation offers liberation. By exposing the mechanisms through which racism distorts human relationships and self-perception, Fanon challenges readers to recognize racism as both structural and psychological. The relevance of his work persists today, as societies continue to grapple with the legacies of colonialism, the politics of identity, and the enduring effects of racialized inequality. After the book, Fanon expresses hope for a future where Black people can fully embrace their identity without the burden of colonialist oppression. He calls for solidarity among oppressed peoples worldwide and emphasizes the importance of self-love, self-acceptance, and self-determination in the struggle for liberation. Black Skin, White Masks serves as a powerful critique of racism and colonialism while offering a vision for a more just and equitable world.

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