

What is Violence? On Hannah Arendt's Critique of Frantz Fanon

Md. Ishrat Ibne Ismail

PhD Candidate, Department of Modern Languages & Literatures, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* offers a strong intellectual framework established on the author's medical and social experiences to overthrow colonial rule. Specifically, the text is Frantz Fanon's interpretation of the mechanisms of colonialism and of revolution from the perspective of the Algerian struggle to get rid of French colonial rule. Out of the five chapters of the book, the first one, "On Violence," where Fanon supports violence as a requisite weapon to bring down colonial rule towards national liberation and the reinstallation of humanity in the colonized world, is the one often "misunderstood and misrepresented" (Brydon). This paper, by presenting a critique of works such as Hannah Arendt's views on violence, argues that Fanon's concept of violence has to be engaged with and understood within the context in which Fanon has framed it, particularly the Algerian struggle.

Keywords: Violence, Colonialism, Revolution, Context

"Violent social revolution has been a prerequisite for increasing freedom and nationality in the world"
– Barrington Moore (qtd. in Wiener 146)

"Violence is a basic component of a revolution."

– Kabir Ahmed (20)

Neelam Srivastava in her article "Towards a Critique of Colonial Violence: Fanon, Gandhi and the Restoration of Agency" mentions that Hannah Arendt criticizes Fanon on the grounds that his concept of violence is a "glorification of violence for its own sake" (310). Arendt herself in her book *On Violence* claims:

Violence will be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate ... [She] found that Sartre and Fanon fundamentally misunderstood Marx on the question of violence ... [and] though one may argue that all notions of man creating himself have in common a rebellion against the very factuality of the human condition ... still it cannot be denied that a gulf separates the essentially peaceful activities of thinking and laboring from all deeds of violence. 'To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone ... there remain a dead man and a free man,' says Sartre in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. This is a sentence that Marx could never have written. (13)

While responding to Hans Jurgen Benedict's letter, where he asks for her views on violence, Arendt declares:

There's not a single revolution that has prevailed by means of sheer violence. Of course there were violent uproars of the oppressed but that never led nowhere if the existing apparatus of power wasn't undermined. It's always the lack of power, the incredible blind rage of the powerless that expresses itself in violence. Where she wins, chaos reigns the next day – nothing else; and this is for one single reason because those that have cooled their heads disperse the next day. (qtd. in Zwarg and Khatchaturian 305)

Arendt censures Fanon's concept of violence as revolutionary for change by rendering it as an erroneous idea: "Violence is ruled by means-end reasoning ... The most probable change it will bring about is the change to a more violent world" (qtd. in Frazer and Hutchings 100). Arendt further criticizes Fanon by arguing that violence is "instrumental by nature ... [and] can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction" (79). Birmingham notes that "Arendt's conceptualization of violence continuously affirms the main point that violence is devoid of meaning – violence refers only to an evil that is in itself meaningless (qtd. in Ayyash 344). Here, Arendt is unfair to Fanon because she is picking up violence by definition not by context. She does not recognize that Fanon was not writing as a philosopher but as an activist.

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of nonviolence is often used to counter the idea that only violence can bring freedom and national independence. Gandhi has claimed that "[i]t is the acid test of nonviolence that in a nonviolent conflict there is no rancor left behind, and in the end, the enemies are converted into friends ... Nonviolence is a power which can be wielded equally by all – children, young men and women or grown up people – provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all [humanity]" (qtd. in Smith and Burr 277). In contrast to Fanon's persevering attitude towards violence, "for Gandhi, non-violence is the weapon of the poor and the oppressed, and importantly it is a method of anti-colonial struggle that can be taken up by women as much as by men" (Srivastava 305). Then what about the assassination of Gandhi? Was not his assassination a mockery at the peaceful, non-violent protest in gaining freedom for the Indian people?

There are other points that question the legitimacy and credibility of Fanon's concept of violence. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks in her article "I am a Master: Terrorism, Masculinity, and Political Violence in Frantz Fanon" argues that "[t]hrough Fanon stresses the nationalist and universalistic aspiration of political action, he nevertheless distinguishes between spontaneous rage and organized action ... [because] anti-violence ... should primarily be understood as an oscillation between expressive acts of (political) dislocation, and their discursive recuperation" (85). Améry's article, "The Birth of Man from the Spirit of Violence: Frantz Fanon the Revolutionary," provokes serious thought about the plausibility of Fanon's concept of violence. He writes thus:

No matter how convincingly Fanon portrayed the violence of the oppressed as counter-violence; no matter how impressively detailed and precise his narrative of the situation of the colonised, how it is engendered by and how it engenders violence ("The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but you're never close enough to see them,"); no matter how passionately and yet thoughtfully he presents his thesis of the interiorisation of repressive violence; he, the psychiatrist and phenomenologist, has nonetheless neglected to specify what actually happens when passive violence becomes active. He has claimed that revolutionary violence has a redemptive character, but he fails to give us an explanation of why that is. (15)

Furthermore, Frazer and Hutchings in their article "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon" point out that although Fanon argues that

[a]s a libidinal energy, violence is about being rather than doing. It is a force that is inherent in colonial structures of oppression, in everyday colonial life, in the psyche of the native turned citizen-soldier ... [and his] argument is that this violence of being is a condition for the productive use of violence as a political instrument, providing the momentum motivating the colonized to do what is necessary to overthrow the oppressor, and thereby cleanse both themselves and their world of violence ... his representations of perpetrators and victims of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* do not suggest this comfortable conclusion. (98)

Here the critics are dodging Fanon and his reasoning for violence. The reason is Fanon did not look for a “comfortable conclusion,” but rather asked for a sustainable freedom.

Although the above questions and justifications regarding the authenticity and plausibility of Fanon’s concept of violence are not points to be overlooked, surely they are positioned with some misunderstanding in relation to the concept of Fanon’s violence. One of the main reasons for this misunderstanding of Fanon’s concept of violence is that they do not take the Algerian context of the time when *The Wretched of the Earth* was published into cognizance in making generic statements against the violence of decolonization. The suppression of the Algerian people was done through raping, robbing, and inhuman killing by the French since the 1830s. As Fanon had experienced the brutalities done by the French on the Algerians as a psychiatrist in the region, he came to realize – or at least believe – that there was no other option for the Algerians but to take up arms against the French colonizers. He thought that violence would release the colonized from their inner tensions of suppression. At that time in Algeria the concept of a peaceful nation was totally an abstract idea. However, Fanon’s concept of revolutionary violence against the French offered the Algerians a solid cause of freedom to fight together. Roberts in his article “Fanon, Sartre, Violence, and Freedom” justifies violence thus: “Regarding the normative assessment of violence, victimization occurs when linking violence with the innocent. Retribution occurs when linking violence with the guilty. [And a]ny attempt by the colonized to change the status quo of the colonizer hints at a form of future violence seeking retribution” (144). While answering Robert B. Silvers’s question – “Under what conditions, if any, can violent action be said to be ‘legitimate’” – Noam Chomsky replies thus: “My general feeling is that this kind of question can’t be answered in a meaningful way when it’s abstracted from the context of particular historical concrete circumstances” (“The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?”). Emphasizing the importance of context in understanding the concept of violence Gibson states that “Violence cannot be allowed to speak for itself. It does not have its own meaning but it has a context and a history To be made thinkable, violence has to be historicized” (qtd. in Srivastava 306). Srivastava further notes that “[t]he violence needed to turn camp inmates, or the colonized, back into human beings,” is identified by Améry as “revolutionary violence,” which he calls “messianic,” thus resonating closely with Fanon’s idea of violence as a re-humanizing force:

Revolutionary violence is the affirmation of the self-realizing human being against the negation, the denial of the human being. Its negativity has a positive charge. Repressive violence blocks the way to the self-realization of the human being; revolutionary violence

breaks through that barrier, refers and leads to the more than temporal, the historical humane future. (Améry, qtd. in Srivastava 308)

Edmund Burke III in "Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*" also supports the idea of context and declares thus: "*The Wretched of the Earth* needs ... to be situated within the political and intellectual context of postwar France" (128). Achille Mbembe's thoughts in "Metamorphic Thought: The Works of Frantz Fanon" in this connection are particularly relevant:

How was one to put an end to this suffering and agony to allow another world and other figures of the human to emerge in the future? This is primarily what interested him.

If he was proposing any form of knowledge, this was knowledge in context – knowledge of the dehumanising colonial context and knowledge of the means to bring this to an end. To read Fanon today means, on the one hand, to restore his life, his work and his language to its place in the history which he saw unfolding at the time and which he wished to change through struggle and critique. (25)

Another reason for misunderstanding Fanon's concept of violence is due to the omission or the failure to consider the intrinsic value of violence that Fanon aims to advocate in "On Violence." Sartre in the Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* indicates the intrinsic value of Fanon's violence: "[Fanon] shows perfectly clearly that this irrepressible violence ... is man constructing himself. I believe, we once knew, and have since forgotten, the truth that no indulgence can erase the marks of violence: violence alone can eliminate them" (lv). In this regard, Mbembe, by noting "Fanon's thought as *metaphoric thought*," argues that "[f]or Fanon, the irrepressible and relentless pursuit of freedom required us to mobilise all life reserves ... [which] drew the colonized into a fight to the death – a fight that they were called upon to assume as their duty and that could not be delegated to others" (emphasis as found in original, 20).

Responding to Arendt's views on violence, Cynthia R. Nielsen in her article "Resistance through Re-narration: Fanon on De-constructing Racialized Subjectivities" argues that Fanon's "advocacy for violence was never glorification of violence; rather, it was understood as analogous to the violence that must be performed in surgery in order to remove or at least halt the spreading of disease so that healing may begin" (375). She further argues: "Fanon, no doubt, felt the burden of that history [of Algeria], and its carnage convinced him that violence – at least with respect to Algeria's part in the unfolding drama – was the required passageway through which the colonized must travel" (375) to achieve liberty, a new world. Mark Muhannad Ayyash counters Arendt in his article "The Paradox of Political Violence" by arguing what "Arendt misses in her analysis: namely, a deeper explanation of an analytic that attempts to give at least a certain kind of violence a more prominent role in the explanation and institution of political movements and formations" (344). Equally, Roberts argues, "Fanon, like his revolutionary mentor Aimé Césaire, convincingly contends that these psychological effects lead the colonized to place intrinsic value on anti-colonial, tragic violence. Arendt ironically points out how readers of Fanon tend to reduce their comments to the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. It seems Arendt does not go much further in her commentary" (151).

In a compartmentalized world as Fanon puts it, “colonization or decolonization: it is simply a power struggle. The exploited realize that their liberation implies using every means available, and force is the best” (Fanon 23). The revolutionary violence makes “the ‘thing’ colonized ... a man through the very process of liberation” (2). Fanon states that liberation needs acts of violence instead of stories of rituals. He articulates thus: “During the struggle for liberation ... [w]ith his [the colonized] back to the wall, the knife at his throat, or to be more exact the electrode on his genitals, the colonized subject is bound to stop telling stories ... [and] discovers reality and transforms it through his praxis, his deployment of violence and his agenda for liberation” (20-21). Seshadri-Crooks argues that “[f]or Fanon, anti-colonial violence, which at its core is often spontaneous, unorganized, and affect laden, gets legitimated primarily through its elevation or incorporation into the narrative of national liberation” (85). She further notes that “what is important is that the revolutionary action that the colonized people undertake becomes legitimate through its precipitation from a spontaneous uprising into a national struggle for liberation” (85). However, it would be wrong to receive Fanon’s articulation of violence as an instrumental violence which is “either wanton irrational or calculated rational violence ... as a means to an end” (Roberts 145). Rather, Fanon’s “[a]nti-colonial violence, though, in response to the effects of Manichaeian colonial racism, marks a shift from enacting violence out of instrumental concerns towards intrinsic violence on the road to freedom” (Roberts 147). The ultimate goal of liberty is the core of Fanon’s violence which is also noted by Mbembe:

In addition to healing the wounds of colonial atrocities, the violence of the native achieved three goals. First it served as a call to a people caught in the grip of history and placed in an untenable situation to exercise their freedom, to take charge, to name themselves, to spring to life or, if they failed to do this, to be seen to be in bad faith. They were forced to make a choice, to risk their lives, to expose themselves, to ‘draw on all their reserves and hidden resources’—a condition for achieving liberty. (24)

Although Gandhi argues that “[v]iolent means ... could only give rise to violent ends, and violent revolutions ... [and] would eventually build new Bastilles” (qtd. in Finlay 26), history itself is proof that decolonization in India was achieved through violence. And in the Declaration on the Question of the Use of Violence in Defence of Rights of 1938 Gandhi accepts violence, although on condition:

Where the choice is set between cowardice and violence I would advise violence. I praise and extol the serene courage of dying without killing. Yet I desire that those who have not this courage should rather cultivate the art of killing and being killed, than basely to avoid the danger. This is because he who runs away commits mental violence; he has not the courage of facing death by killing. I would a thousand times prefer violence than the emasculation of a whole race. I prefer to use arms in defence of honour than remain the vile witness of dishonour. (qtd. in Young 34)

Although Fanon promotes violence as an agency of liberation, he unveils its shocking impacts in “Colonial War and Mental Disorders.” Fanon states that this chapter “deal[s] ... with the problem of mental disorders born out of the national war of liberation waged by the Algerian people”

(Fanon 181). Here he clinically details the dreadfulness of colonial violence through individual examples as the “war of liberation waged by the Algerian people ... has become a breeding ground for mental disorders” (182-83). He states how an FLN revolutionary struggles, after murdering an unarmed French woman thinking of a kind of revenge of her own mother's killing of the French army, with the nausea of violence and “depersonalization” (192), how “[t]wo thirteen and fourteen-year-olds, Algerian schoolboys, are accused of killing one of their European playmates” (199). These are individual crimes which Holdt identifies as “the trauma of violence [that] can generate cycles of revenge” (125).

All these circumstances he details “pose the question of responsibility in the context of the revolution” (185). However, Fanon's final essay, in spite of its critical analysis of terror, is not a document that ignores the effectiveness of violence as a process of liberation. The essay validates Fanon's awareness of the penalties of violence and he argues that the penalties are needed for a new start, to construct a nation: “The period of oppression is harrowing, but the liberation struggle's rehabilitation of man fosters a process of reintegration that is extremely productive and decisive. The victorious combat of a people is not just the crowning triumph of their rights. It procures them substance, coherence, and homogeneity” (219). Fanon further claims: “The combat waged by a people for their liberation leads them, depending on the circumstances, wither to reject or to explode the so-called truths sown in their consciousness by the colonial regime, military occupation, and economic exploitation. And only the armed struggle can effectively exorcise these lies about man that subordinate and literally mutilate the more conscious-minded among us” (220). Fanon's concept of violence “very well assume[s] an ethical position as a means of last resort, of self-defence ... His ‘new man’ is unable to issue forth from the womb of a colonial situation without violent pangs. The truly decolonised native knows no peaceful birth. For Fanon this is so because of the psychic violation wreaked by the colonial masters” (Tucker 405).

Looking into the chaos around the world, even in Algeria, Arendt is right in asking about the effectiveness of violence. The questions against the legitimacy and justification of violence towards a peaceful end cannot be ignored as even after independence from the French colonialists the crisis still exists in Algeria. There are those who will still argue that the violence in post-independence Algeria is caused by the French colonizers who have not actually left. That is, Fanon's discussion of the Manichean order still subsists and the colonizers have only changed pattern. For instance, they implant corrupt leaders who do their bidding and use one part of the people to war against the other. The divide and rule approach that has led to crises in many colonized countries is the product of a colonization that has not yet ended. However, if we consider the context of time and space, *The Wretched of the Earth* is the result of Fanon's anger towards French colonialists' barbarity on the native Algerians. From the context of what the French colonialists did in Algeria, Fanon's anger is warranted. The brutality of the colonialists, the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, the chaos among the natives, and the rebel leaders' incapability to foster the revolutionary zeal among Algerians outraged Fanon. To overthrow such situations from Algeria and from the colonized world Fanon looks for change, liberation for the Algerians, through violence, and this is his message in “On Violence.”

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