

# Alatas, Fanon, and Coloniality

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## 1 Introduction

This chapter looks at coloniality through the works of Frantz Fanon and Syed Hussein Alatas. Both recognized the physically and discursively violent nature of colonialism, the impact that colonialism had on the colonized, and the debilitating effect it had on the possibilities for liberation, even after formal independence. The writings of Fanon and Alatas complement each other and together provide an approach towards understanding the continuing coloniality in the so-called “post-colonial” world. Both Alatas and Fanon would say that colonialism is not merely an order of the past, but rather persists today through mimesis and mental captivity. Heightened consciousness of this problem is necessary for a more liberated or autonomous mind.

The chapter proceeds as follows: First we will discuss the specific context of coloniality that Alatas and Fanon were speaking in, namely, colonial capitalism. Reading the two of them brings us to the themes of alienation and racism as central features of colonialism. This is followed by a discussion of the post-colonial situation, which is ironically characterized by a continued coloniality. This section elaborates on the nature of a sustained coloniality in the post-colonial era with specific attention paid to Fanon’s indictment of the irrelevance of intellectuals and Alatas’ notion of the captive mind. This section discusses the phenomenon of the native’s internalization of the colonizers’ view of the colonized that defines the cultural and intellectual life in so-called post-colonial societies. This then leads to a discussion in the subsequent section on the “rule of the fool,” which can be understood in the context of the absence of the intellectual. The final section concludes with some thoughts on the implications of Alatas’ and Fanon’s views concerning the tasks of native intellectuals in confronting coloniality.

## 2 The Context of Colonial Capitalism

The formative period of the thought of Syed Hussein Alatas and Frantz Fanon was European colonialism. For Alatas, the context was above all British Malaya

and the Dutch East Indies, while for Fanon it was French Algeria. The nature of these societies can be captured through the concept of "colonial capitalism," an idea which was discussed by Alatas in his demystifying and deconstructing work, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*.<sup>1</sup> Here, we find that the work of Alatas and Fanon complement each other. While Alatas conceptualizes colonial society in terms of colonial capitalism, Fanon is interested in understanding the condition of coloniality in what Alatas would understand as colonial capitalist society. For Alatas, certain European ideas pertaining to the natives functioned as constituent parts of colonial ideology to advance the interests of colonial capitalism. For Fanon, such European ideas formed the basis for what he called the "double alienation of the native." Both were concerned with the nature and perniciousness of colonial depictions and images of the native and how these images affected the colonized to the point of being internalized by them.

Capitalism, as defined by Alatas, takes into account its historically contingent aspects, which are distinguished from capitalism's universal features. The Western-bound concept of historical capitalism may include free wage labor as a determinate feature, but 19th century Dutch capitalism in Java was not founded on free labor.<sup>2</sup> An understanding of colonial capitalism cannot simply be derived from European history. For example, free labor was a historical trait of capitalism, not a universal feature, and was specific to a certain period of European history. The historical configuration of capitalism in the colonies differed from that in Europe and warrants the reference to colonial capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

Colonial capitalism itself was characterized by a number of features including the control of and access to capital by an alien power, highest levels of trade and industry dominated by an alien community, a bias towards agrarian production as opposed to industry, production around semi-free labor, minimal scientific and technological expansion, and a set of antitheses in the colonized society that can be best described by the term "dualism."<sup>4</sup>

1 Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

2 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

3 *Ibid.*, 5.

4 *Ibid.*, 2. The term dualism was in reference to the Dutch economist, J.H. Boeke's notion of "dualistic economics." For Boeke, capitalism did not have the same impact in the colonies as it did in the West. The destruction of social and economic institutions by capitalism in the colonies forced the native population to fall back on small-scale farming. Native production, trade, and system of distribution were destroyed to make way for Western industries. See J.H. Boeke, "Dualistic Economics," in *Indonesian Economics* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1961), 172, cited in Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 31-32, n5.

The ideology of colonial capitalism emerged to justify Western rule or the interests of colonial capitalism. A central feature of this ideology was the denigration of the natives and their history. They were held to be unintelligent, lazy, evil, and unfit to rule.<sup>5</sup> It was the victims of colonial rule who were blamed rather than the colonial masters, the exploiters. The ideologues of colonial rule, that is, colonial administrators and scholars, made no mention of injustices and atrocities committed by the Europeans against the natives or other non-Europeans. This was done in the name of dispassionate, objective scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Neither did they consider that the ostensible laziness of the native was actually a conscious sabotage on his part against colonialism. As Fanon put it:

How many times – in Paris, in Aix, in Algiers, or in Basse-Terre – have we not heard men from the colonized countries violently protesting against the pretended laziness of the black man, of the Algerian, and of the Viet-Nameese? And yet is it not the simple truth that under the colonial regime a *fellah* who is keen on his work or a Negro who refuses to rest are nothing but pathological cases? The native's laziness is the conscious sabotage of the colonial machine; on the biological plane it is a remarkable system of auto-protection; and in any case it is a sure brake upon the seizure of the whole country by the occupying power.<sup>7</sup>

As noted by Said in his discussion on *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Alatas details how colonialism created an object, that is, the lazy native.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the colonial image of the lazy native was to maintain the natives in an intellectual and moral state that left them inferior to the Europeans, although their numbers were far greater.<sup>9</sup>

Concomitant with the colonial discourse on the lazy native was their subjection to “[g]ambling, opium, inhuman labor conditions, one-sided legislation, acquisition of tenancy rights belonging to the people, [and] forced labor...” all of which were part of the fabric of colonial ideology.<sup>10</sup> While subjected to all kinds of human degradation, the natives were also labelled as ingrates when they critiqued the colonizer, as pointed out by Fanon.<sup>11</sup>

5 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 8, 10–11.

6 *Ibid.*, 12.

7 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. C. Farrington (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), 294.

8 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 296.

9 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 56.

10 *Ibid.*, 96.

11 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 35.

As Said put it, "the myth of the lazy native is synonymous with domination, and domination is at bottom power."<sup>12</sup> Said perceptibly notes that Alatas' work did not merely focus on the discursive effect of power but revealed its total and devastating consequences.<sup>13</sup> As Alatas noted, taking the example of the Dutch East Indies:

Power falling into Dutch hands was different from power falling into the hands of an indigenous successor. An indigenous power was generally more liberal in trade. It did not destroy its own trading class throughout the whole area, and continued to use the products of its own industry. It built its own boats and last but not least was incapable of imposing a monopoly throughout the major part of Indonesia. It promoted the abilities of its own people even though a tyrant was on the throne.<sup>14</sup>

In Alatas' description of colonial ideology, he cites Fanon:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense, he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces.<sup>15</sup>

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon says that his analysis is psychological. In fact, his discussion on the psychology of the colonized complements Alatas' critique of colonial ideology. Whereas Alatas focused on the nature of colonial ideology and its function in advancing the interests of capital, Fanon was interested in the development of an inferiority complex among the colonized. Fanon speaks of alienated or duped blacks. He refers to the Negro professional as intellectually alienated when he "conceives of European culture as a means

12 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 307.

13 Ibid., 307-308.

14 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 200.

15 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 33-34. Cited in Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 24.



of stripping himself of his race..."<sup>16</sup> Dis-alienating the black man requires the recognition of the social and economic realities that created the alienation as well as the process by which he internalizes a sense of inferiority. In other words, the inferiority is the outcome of a double process.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, the black man has to wage a war at both the psychological and material levels.<sup>18</sup> As Fanon says, the inferiority complex had been created in colonized people by the death and burial of their original local cultural and their being confronted by the culture of the colonizers. The colonized individual is subsequently elevated above his savage status in proportion to the degree to which he adopts the colonizers cultural standards.<sup>19</sup> These standards are sometimes literally applied. Fanon refers to the "black man who wants to turn his race white..."<sup>20</sup> This has been referred to as lactification:

Lactification, making skin look lighter and acting 'more like the white man' is the desire for whiteness at the EXPENSE of blackness. (The) inferiority complex is created by colonizers to place people in positions of degradation and reinforced to make people believe that they are inferior to their colonizers (their 'superiors') and becomes intra-psychic: internalized inferiority. Deliverance comes through admiring whiteness and 'all things good that come with being white.'<sup>21</sup>

Fanon also notes that "[i]t is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through. And racism is only the emotional, affective, sometimes intellectual explanation of this inferiorization."<sup>22</sup> The native admits his misfortunes; his inferiority is the direct result of his cultural and racial characteristics.<sup>23</sup> He is intellectually and culturally alienated. Part of the experience of alienation is a pejorative judgement of the native toward the self. Drawing lessons from psychoanalysis, Fanon describes the symptoms

16 Fanon, *Blacks Skin, White Masks*, 29, 223–224.

17 *Ibid.*, 12–13.

18 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

19 *Ibid.*, 18.

20 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

21 Arnold Itwaru, "Caribbean Studies Lecture on Psychic Torture," 17 October 2011. Cited in Susan Enberg, "The Epidermalization of Inferiority and the Lactification of Consciousness," 2011. <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281902045\\_The\\_Epidermalization\\_of\\_Inferiority\\_and\\_the\\_Lactification\\_of\\_Consciousness](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281902045_The_Epidermalization_of_Inferiority_and_the_Lactification_of_Consciousness)>. Accessed 20 June 2018.

22 Frantz Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 40.

23 *Ibid.*, 38.

of the inferiorization of the Negro as anguish, aggression and the devaluation of self, that is, the symptomatology of neurosis.<sup>24</sup>

The European image of the native was founded on colonial racism. The general incapacities associated with the natives were explained in racist terms. Alatas noted that while capitalism in Europe undermined and eventually overcame the forces of feudalism, in the colonies, colonial capitalism preserved aspects of the feudal order, underlying it with racism. A race dominated status system was created.<sup>25</sup> This reflected the derogatory views the Europeans had of the natives. For example, British colonial officers such as Thomas Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd regard the Malays as being rude and uncivilized in character, of feeble intellect, and at a low stage of intellectual development, indolent, submissive, and prone to piracy. Furthermore, much of their backwardness and negative traits were blamed on the religion of Islam.<sup>26</sup> European civilization and its best representatives, not just the petty officials, small traders, adventurers and politicians, were responsible for colonial racism.<sup>27</sup>

For Alatas, the internalization of the European image of the native by the natives themselves and the concomitant development of an inferiority complex among them is a vital consequence of colonial rule and a key feature of the post-colonial condition. This internalization began in the colonial period.

In discussing the image which the indigenous people had of themselves we must bear in mind that some 20th century converts to this aspect of the colonial ideology are present among the indigenous people. An ideology is never confined to its originating group. It is also shared by those who are dominated by the system of which the ideology is the rationalization. During the time when slavery was current there were many slaves who believed in it. They shared the false consciousness inherent in the ideology.<sup>28</sup>

In the post-colonial period, it becomes a condition of coloniality without colonialism. There is only one destiny for the black man. He wants to be like the white man. He has long admitted "the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence."<sup>29</sup>

24 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 73.

25 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 18.

26 *Ibid.*, 38-41.

27 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 90-91.

28 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 132.

29 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11, 63, 228.

Fanon and Alatas highlighted how colonialism sought to control the colonized by devaluing their history and distorting their past. Fanon says:

Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.<sup>30</sup>

Complementing the above, Alatas says:

One need not be a Marxist to recognize that a dominant ruling elite upholding a definite social, economic and political order will utilize all channels of influencing thought and behaviour to impart its ideology to the minds of the people. The higher seats of learning, the press, the church, the party, the school, the books, all have been used for this purpose. The vigorous outburst of colonialism in the 19th century was accompanied by intellectual trends which sought to justify the phenomenon. Colonialism, or on a bigger scale, imperialism, was not only an extension of sovereignty and control by one nation and its government over another, but it was also a control of the mind of the conquered or subordinated.<sup>31</sup>

This is the ideological context in which the black man has been prepared and conditioned to "rule."

### 3 The Coloniality of the Post-colonial

It is this ideological configuration that the native was allowed to be master by the white man: "The Negro is a slave who has been allowed to assume the attitude of a master. The white man is a master who has allowed his slaves to eat at his table."<sup>32</sup> For his part, the native intellectual frantically assimilates the culture of the colonized and enthusiastically criticizes his own national culture.<sup>33</sup>

30 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 210.

31 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 17.

32 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 219.

33 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 236-237.

As mentioned above, for Alatas, the internalization of the European image of the native and the inculcation of an inferiority complex among the natives are defining features of post-colonial societies and suggest the continuing coloniality of the post-colonial world. The impact of colonial rule was such that it reproduced its false consciousness among the Malay elite that assumed control of the country upon independence.

The false consciousness distorts the reality. The Malay ruling party inherited the rule from the British without a struggle for independence such as that which took place in Indonesia, India and the Philippines. As such, there was also no ideological struggle. There was no intellectual break with British ideological thinking at the deeper level of thought. The leadership of this party were recruited from the top hierarchy of the civil service trained by the British, and middle class Malay school teachers and civil servants. The few professionals associated with it did not set the pattern.<sup>34</sup>

The native elite was manufactured by the Europeans. Promising young natives were picked out and had inculcated in them the principles of Western culture. They may have had a short stay in the mother country, but they returned "whitewashed," as it were.<sup>35</sup>

In this context, national consciousness was an empty shell.<sup>36</sup> The native elite, like their former colonial masters, continued to propagate the notion of native incapacities. An example cited by Alatas is the work, *Revolusi Mental*<sup>37</sup> (*Mental Revolution*), authored by members of the then ruling party, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO). It was compiled by Senu Abdul Rahman, who was at the time Secretary-General of the party as well as ex-Minister of Information and a former ambassador to Indonesia. The book details a very unflattering image of the Malays. The Malays are not honest with themselves, lack the courage to fight for the truth, consistently fail to resist against exploitation and oppression, adopt a fatalistic attitude, do not think rationally, are uninterested in science and technology, have no spirit of perseverance, lack frugality, are ill-disciplined, are unoriginal and unimaginative, and generally backward.<sup>38</sup>

34 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 152.

35 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 7.

36 *Ibid.*, 148.

37 Senu Abdul Rahman, *Revolusi Mental*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Utusan Melayu, 1971.

38 *Ibid.*, 75, 119, 158, 159, 161-162, 351. Cited in Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 147-148.

Although laziness as a trait is not explicitly discussed, Alatas notes that the attitude of *Revolusi Mental* to the problem is ambivalent and that it is inclined to view the Malays as lazy. The book notes that Malay farmers and fisherman are thought of as lazy but neither denies nor confirms this.<sup>39</sup> Alatas expresses his astonishment at the fact that the book characterizes the Malays in "negative terms unexcelled in the history of colonialism. While many British colonial writers stressed the laziness of the Malays they did not strip the Malays of so many other qualities which the *Revolusi Mental* did."<sup>40</sup> *Revolusi Mental* is a confirmation of colonial capitalist ideology, although its intention was to assess the problems of the Malays and suggest the way towards progress.<sup>41</sup>

The internalization of the ideology of the colonizer, in this case, the ideology of colonial capitalism, is a reflection of the ubiquity of the captive mind. Alatas developed the idea in order to understand the nature of scholarship in the developing world, particularly in relation to Western dominance in the arts and social sciences. Alatas defines the captive mind as an "uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective."<sup>42</sup> The external source is Western knowledge. Such uncritical imitation influences all the constituents of scientific activity such as problem-selection, conceptualization, analysis, generalization, description, explanation and interpretation.<sup>43</sup> Among the traits of the captive mind are the inability to be creative and raise original problems, the inability to devise original analytical methods, and alienation from the main issues of indigenous society. The captive mind is trained almost entirely in the Western sciences, reads the works of Western authors, and is taught predominantly by Western teachers, whether in the West itself or through their works available in local centres of education. Mental captivity is also found in the suggestion of solutions and policies. Furthermore, it reveals itself at the theoretical level and through empirical work. Alatas had also suggested that the mode of thinking of colonized peoples paralleled political and economic imperialism. Hence, the expression "academic imperialism," the context within which the captive mind appears.<sup>44</sup>

39 Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 149.

40 *Ibid.*, 150.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Captive Mind and Creative Development," *International Social Science Journal* 36, 4 (1974): 691-699, p. 692.

43 Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Captive Mind in Development Studies," *International Social Science Journal* 34, 1 (1972): 9-25, p. 11.

44 Syed Hussein Alatas "Academic Imperialism," Lecture delivered to the History Society, University of Singapore, 26 September 1969; Syed Hussein Alatas, "Intellectual

For Fanon, colonialism prepares the ground for the captive mind by uprooting the native, by alienating him from his culture. Colonialism is able to do this because its form of domination is total. Its totality enables it to disrupt the cultural life of the colonized.<sup>45</sup> Further resonating with these ideas are Fanon's statements on the underdeveloped and imitative middle class after independence:

After independence this underdeveloped middle class, reduced in numbers and without capital, which refuses to follow the path of revolution, will fall into deplorable stagnation. It is unable to give free rein to its genius, which formerly it was wont to lament, though rather too glibly, was held in check by colonial domination.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, Fanon notes that the middle class after independence has nothing to do with transforming the nation. Rather, it takes upon itself the task of mediating between the nation and a neo-colonialist capitalism. It is content to play the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent.<sup>47</sup> It has, in fact, assimilated the most corrupt aspects of colonialist thought, including its racial philosophy. Speaking of Africa, Fanon says that the laziness and the will to imitate by the middle class results in its promoting a racism that was characteristic of the colonial period.<sup>48</sup> Fanon laments that the middle class had enthusiastically adopted the mode of thinking of the colonizer and has become alienated from its own thought.<sup>49</sup> The native intellectual's "writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country. This is the period of unqualified assimilation."<sup>50</sup> Fanon also remarked that intellectual alienation is a product of middle class society, a society that is "rigidified in predetermined forms, forbidding all evolution, all gains, all progress, all discovery."<sup>51</sup> Where mental captivity is the norm, the intellectual is irrelevant.

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Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, 1(2000): 23-45.

45 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 236.

46 *Ibid.*, 151.

47 *Ibid.*, 152-153.

48 *Ibid.*, 162.

49 *Ibid.*, 178.

50 *Ibid.*, 222.

51 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 224.

It is interesting to note that Fanon himself may have manifested some degree of mental captivity. In his discussion of the "wretched of the earth," he fails to name their anti-colonial culture as Islamic, although it is known that the Islamic Association of Scholars in Algeria in both city and countryside played an important role in anti-colonial resistance. Fanon was certainly familiar with the Association. In a letter to Ali Shariati, he expresses his appreciation for the Association's contribution to the anti-French struggle, although he had disagreements with them.<sup>52</sup> As noted by Slisli, while the work of the Association is cited extensively by Fanon, it is "stripped of its Islamic references and never attributed to the Association."<sup>53</sup> Slisli even suggests that Fanon at times "degenerates into an orientalism reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" when he compares the "wretched of the earth" to "hordes of rats moved by primordiality of the bush, jungle or desert rather than an Islamic-inspired ideology."<sup>54</sup>

#### 4 The Rule of the Fool

Fanon perceptively spoke of the irrelevance of the native intellectual in the society of the colonized. Alatas would explain this irrelevance in terms of the dominance of the captive mind in intellectual life. Fanon refers to the anxiety felt by the native intellectual in trying to be relevant to his people:

The native intellectual nevertheless sooner or later will realise that you do not show proof of your nation from its culture but that you substantiate its existence in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation. No colonial system draws its justification from the fact that the territories it dominates are culturally non-existent. You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes. At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realise that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country. He contents himself with stamping these instruments with a hall-mark which he wishes to be national, but which

52 Sara Shariati, *Le Fanon connu de nous*. <http://libertaire.free.fr/FFanon29.html> Accessed 18 June 2018. Cited in Fouzi Slisli, "Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, 1 (2008): 97–108.

53 Slisli, "Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*," 104.

54 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 130. Cited in Slisli, "Islam: The Elephant in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*," 104–105.



is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he has no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas that he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation which the men and the women of his country know. The culture that the intellectual leans towards is often no more than a stock of particularisms. He wishes to attach himself to the people; but instead, he only catches hold of their outer garments. And these outer garments are merely reflections of a hidden life, teeming and perpetually in motion.<sup>55</sup>

The native intellectual is irrelevant because he is like a foreigner, having only bookish, superficial, and abstract knowledge of the people. Also, the native intellectual runs the risk of being irrelevant by being out of date. Fanon gives the example of the artist who, in his bid to create a national work of art and construct the principles of national art, confines himself to the stereotypical reproduction of details, turning his back on foreign culture and searching for an authentic national culture. He forgets that the people themselves have changed in their way of thinking about what national culture means, their minds having been dialectically reorganized by modern ideas and techniques, language and so on. The artist, on the other hand, in trying to portray the truth of the nation, turns away from actual events toward the past. As Fanon put it, what the artist comes to know are actually the shells and corpses of tradition. He fails to recognize that the truths of a nation are not to be found in an abstract and static past but in the current realities of the present.<sup>56</sup> A national culture cannot be reduced to a folklore or an abstract populism in which the true nature of a people can be discovered. Fanon views the national culture in far more concrete terms as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence."<sup>57</sup>

The irrelevance of the intellectual and their marginalization in society, so articulately described by Fanon, also presents another problem, that is, the emergence and prevalence of the fool.

Alatas, in one of his last publications, suggested that the International Sociological Association organize a session at the World Congress of Sociology on

55 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 223-224.

56 *Ibid.*, 225.

57 *Ibid.*, 233.

the issue of an autonomous sociological tradition in order to "alert sociologists throughout the world to pool their attention on this extremely vital need for the development of sociology," and, therefore, to counter the influence of the captive mind.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the South is not lacking in creative and original thinkers. Many examples of alternative discourses can be cited from various countries in Asia and Africa. But, the question is whether a tradition of autonomous thinking in the social sciences can develop. According to Alatas:

A tradition can be expected to emerge. By tradition it is not meant the mere presence of disparate studies of local or regional subjects by indigenous scholars. Apart from the traits we have earlier cited, there is one significant overriding trait of a tradition, that is, the continuous discussion of a set of major problems and ideas in the course of long duration, decades or centuries, reflecting the cumulative development of knowledge concerning particular subjects. An example is the discussion on the French Revolution or periodization in European history.<sup>59</sup>

But, whether such a tradition can emerge in much of the South will depend on our ability to make changes in policy, change the reward systems in institutions of learning, reduce corruption and inefficiency, and remove national and local politics from the centers of learning. In other words, this requires nothing short of the non-interference of the fools in the entire art, science, and business of education. But, the fools are dominant.

Alatas, in fact, had also suggested the creation of sessions on a new theme – the sociology of the fools. By this, he meant the sociological fool as opposed to its counterpart, the sociological intellectual. Sociologists should not only be interested in the sociology of the intellectual but also in the sociology of the opposing type, the fool. The concept of the fool is not only an original concept and an example of the type of creativity needed for an autonomous social science tradition, it also points to a diagnosis of the problems that alternative discourses face in societies dominated by fools in positions of leadership.<sup>60</sup>

Alatas had started discussing the topic of the fool in his book *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*.<sup>61</sup> Fourteen characteristics for the definition of the sociological concept of the fool and the concrete consequences of power-wielding

58 Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Autonomous, the Universal and the Future of Sociology," *Current Sociology* 54, (2006): 7–23, p. 17.

59 Ibid., 15.

60 Ibid., 17.

61 Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), Chapter 4.

fools were discussed. Leaders and administrators who are fools stamp their own peculiar foolish imprint on whatever thinking and practices they undertake. For example, in their corrupt practices, "their corruption bears the imprint of the fool. When they are honest, their honesty can be naïve and immature."<sup>62</sup> Among the traits of the fools are: (1) the inability to recognize a problem; (2) the inability to solve a problem if told to them; (3) the inability to learn what is required; (4) the inability to learn the art of learning; and (5) not admitting that they are fools.<sup>63</sup>

## 5 The Task of Native Intellectuals

For Alatas and Fanon, the native became nothing more than a colonial category along with the condition or attributes of laziness and other incapacities. These were internalized by the native elite. Reflecting on the Malaysian context, Alatas would have added that grafted on to that is an exclusivist and legalistic interpretation of Islam that the Malay is supposed to identify with. Therefore, there are two dominant discourses, a colonial one and an internalized, authoritarian Islamic one. What is the task of native intellectuals in this context? Both Fanon and Alatas would argue that the categories of the colonizer have to be rejected. For Fanon:

Colonialism, which has not bothered to put too fine a point on its efforts, has never ceased to maintain that the Negro is a savage; and for the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of 'the Negro.' For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals – in short, the Negro's country. Colonialism's condemnation is continental in scope. The contention by colonialism that the darkest night of humanity lay over pre-colonial history concerns the whole African continent.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Fanon makes an important point, that "[t]he efforts of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism."<sup>65</sup> In other words,

62 Alatas, "The Autonomous, the Universal and the Future of Sociology," 17.

63 Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, 45.

64 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 211–212.

65 *Ibid.*, 212.

the native intellectual has to reject the very categories of colonialism. This is no easy task. The native intellectual has to go through three phases, as far as the relationship with colonialism is concerned. In the first phase, the intellectual is adamant to prove that he has assimilated the culture of the colonizer. He is up to date on the latest trends in literature in the mother country and his writings correspond with those of his counterparts there. In the second phase, a period of greater creativity than the first, the intellectual feels disturbed that he had forgotten what he was and attempts to re-discover and re-call the local culture. Nevertheless, he is looking at his own heritage as an outsider, "in the light of a borrowed estheticism and a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies."<sup>66</sup> The third phase is that of a revolutionary and fighting literati in which the need to speak to the nation and the desire to express what is in the hearts of the people is strongly felt.<sup>67</sup> However, the effectiveness with which this can be done is constrained by the native intellectual's mental captivity and his tendency to view his own society as an outsider, worse still is his internalization of the colonial image of the native, as discussed above. For Fanon, there seems no way out of this conundrum.<sup>68</sup>

For Alatas, writing thirty years after the independence of Malaysia, the state of mental captivity and the prevalence of the fool require the constructive role of an intellectual community, which is needed for "demand for change in the fundamental forms of society."<sup>69</sup>

Since the 1950s, Alatas had devoted a great deal of his attention to the absence of a functioning group of intellectuals in Malaysia and other developing societies. The task of the intellectual is to think, consider specific problems of society, and attempt to arrive at their solutions. He defined the intellectual as a "person who is engaged in thinking about ideas and non-material problems using the faculty of reason." Furthermore, "knowledge of a certain subject or the possession of a degree does not make a person an intellectual although these often coincide. There are many degree holders and professors who do not engage in developing their field or trying to find the solution to specific problems within it. On the other hand, a person with no academic qualifications can be an intellectual if he utilizes his thinking capacity and possesses sufficient knowledge of his subject of interest."<sup>70</sup>

66 Ibid., 222.

67 Ibid., 222-223.

68 Mohammed A. Bamyeh, "On Humanizing Abstractions: The Path Beyond Fanon," *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, 7-8 (2010): 52-65, 61.

69 Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, 52.

70 Ibid., 8.

The inquiry in *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* centered on three issues: (1) why intellectuals are needed in developing societies; (2) what type of intellectuals best answer the need; and (3) what are the obstacles in the way of the emergence and functioning of this group.<sup>71</sup> I may add here that the problems addressed by the group of intellectuals can be divided into two. These are theoretical and practical problems. Theoretical problems refer to problems that are found in the area of knowledge. For Alatas, the foundational theoretical problem of our time was that of the captive mind. This has been discussed above.

The problem of the captive mind is also connected with problems of a practical nature. Examples of practical problems dealt with by Syed Hussein Alatas include Muslim extremism, irrational thought and behavior, and corruption.<sup>72</sup> Because the captive mind is not aware of its conditions of mental captivity and does not think in an autonomous fashion, it is unable to comprehend and analyze problems that afflict its society; on the contrary, it brings problems to its society.

The result of his concern with such practical problems was several proposals that he forwarded to solve some of our problems. This is certainly an area of research that needs to be developed as far as the work of Syed Hussein Alatas is concerned. But, in the hierarchy of factors established by him as requiring attention with a view towards dealing effectively with our problems, what stands at the apex is the problem of leadership. This problem was discussed in a number of works including *Kita dengan Islam* and *Cita Sempurna Warisan Sejarah*.<sup>73</sup> In *Cita Sempurna*, four types of leadership based on the ideals of excellence are discussed. The characteristics of these types of leadership are derived from historical personalities such as Sayyidina Ali (*karramallah wajh-hu*), Khalifah Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz and Sultan Salah al-Din Ayyubi. These are contrasted with the ideals of destruction, which are exemplified in personalities such as the Caliph Al-Kahir, Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban, and Muhammad Tughluk. In today's society, there are types of leaders that are guided by the ideals of excellence as well as those that are guided by the ideals of destruction.<sup>74</sup>

71 Ibid.

72 Syed Hussein Alatas, *Kita dengan Islam: Tumbuh Tiada Berbuah (Islam and Us: Growing without Fruits)*, Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1979; Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Sociology of Corruption: The Nature, Function, Causes and Prevention of Corruption*, Singapore: Donald Moore, 1968; *The Problem of Corruption*, Singapore: Times, 1986; *Corruption: Its Nature, Causes and Functions*, Avebury: Gower, 1990; *Corruption and the Destiny of Asia*, Petaling Jaya: Prentice Hall, 1999.

73 Alatas, *Kita Dengan Islam*, Chap. 8; Syed Hussein Alatas, *Cita Sempurna Warisan Sejarah (The Ideals of Excellence as Historical Legacy)*, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000.

74 Alatas, *Cita Sempurna*, 46.

From what has been said above, we can conclude that in the thought of Alatas, the main factor in the hierarchy of cause and effect is the principle of morality. For example, in his writing on the sociology of corruption, he stressed that structural changes in the administration of government would not have the desired effects if not accompanied by the emergence of leaders with high moral principles.

Throughout his intellectual life, Alatas lived in fear of our society being taken over by the fools. He wrote,

The revolution of the fools which had occurred in many developing societies was to a great extent due to the colonial period. The colonial government did not pay much attention to the creation of high-caliber administrators in the colonies. During that time all the thinking at national levels was done by the colonial government abroad. The commercial and industrial houses were similarly foreign-based. Education in the colonies was mainly geared to provide clerical service or tasks at a subsidiary level. After independence following the Second World War, there was a sudden increase in the volume and intensity of administration and other decision-making centres covering diverse projects which were introduced in increasing number by the newly independent states. During this period there was a shortage of intelligent manpower to deal with the sudden increase of planning and administration, both in the official and in private realms, in the newly independent states. Hence the rise to power of the fools. Once the fools came to power, they perpetuate their own breed. With the fools came nepotism, provincialism, parochial party politics, to condition selection and ascent in the hierarchy of administrative power. Fools cannot cope with a situation where merit and hard work are the criteria of success, and so corruption is the hallmark of the rise to power of the fools, making a farce of government tenders and leading to bureaucratic intrigues to gain office or promotion. Where fools dominate it is their values which become society's values, their consciousness which becomes society's consciousness.<sup>75</sup>

The weakness or non-existence of intellectuals "prolongs the revolution of the fools."<sup>76</sup> Fanon would have been very agreeable with such an assessment for he

75 Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, 45-46.

76 *Ibid.*, 69.

too feared the fools. If asked why he wrote *Black Skin, Whites Masks*, his reply would be that "there are too many idiots in this world."<sup>77</sup>

Such is the context within which our society's sense of morality decays. Fanon said that in ex-colonies, there always exist a few honest intellectuals who reject the competition for positions and pensions, and express contempt for profiteers and schemers. Fanon's plea was for the nation to use such intellectuals.<sup>78</sup> Does our society have the leadership of sufficient integrity, resolve, and bravery to combat the ideals of destruction? If there is one big question that Alatas and Fanon left for us to answer, it is that.

Fanon has not been seriously encountered in the Malay world by scholars and activists.<sup>79</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth* is read by the character, Orked, a bourgeois Malay girl in Yasmin Ahmad's film, *Sepet*. Even here, as much as Orked is able to understand the complexities of colonialism and its effects on the psychology of the colonizer and the colonized through reading Fanon, she is unable to connect all of that to the realities of Malaysia.<sup>80</sup>

Even more perplexing is the relative neglect in Malaysia of Alatas' anti-colonial writings and his plea for an autonomous social science tradition as a response to academic imperialism and mental captivity. These point to the continuing coloniality in the post-colonial world. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "it would not be proper for you to say that you have obtained Home Rule if you have merely expelled the English."<sup>81</sup>

77 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1.

78 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 177.

79 Among the few exceptions are Azhar Ibrahim, *Orientalisme dalam Pengajian Melayu* (Orientalism in Malay Studies), Persidangan Antarabangsa Bahasa, Sastra dan Kebudayaan Melayu ke-2 bertemakan "Ke arah bitara kesarjanaan Melayu", Singapore, 1-3 September, 2002; Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, *The Pathology of Race and Racism in Postcolonial Society: A Reflection on Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks*. <https://dialogosphere.wordpress.com/2015/09/15/the-pathology-of-race-and-racism-in-postcolonial-society-a-reflection-on-frantz-fanons-black-skin-white-masks/>; and Adeline Koh and Frieda Ekotto, "Frantz Fanon in Malaysia: Reconfiguring the Ideological Landscape of Negritude in *Sepet*," in Frieda Ekotto and Adeline Koh, eds, *Rethinking Third Cinema: The Role of Anti-Colonial Media and Aesthetics in Postmodernity*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009, pp. 120-138.

80 Koh and Ekotto, "Frantz Fanon in Malaysia."

81 Mohandas. K. Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj," in M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: November 1909 - March 1911*. (Ahmedabad: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1963), 6-68.



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# Frantz Fanon and Emancipatory Social Theory

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