

# **The Colonizer and the Colonized**

**ALBERT MEMMI**

translated by Howard Greenfeld

Foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre

Introduction by Nadine Gordimer

**P**

PROFILE BOOKS

Published in Great Britain in 2021 by  
Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ  
*www.profilebooks.com*

This 2021 edition published by arrangement with Éditions Gallimard  
Previously published in Great Britain by  
Souvenir Press in 1974 and 2016

Copyright © Albert Memmi, 1974  
Translation copyright © by The Orion Press, Inc., 1965  
Copyright Introduction © Nadine Gordimer, 2003

Translated by Howard Greenfeld from 'Portrait du Colonisé precede du  
Portrait du Colonisateur', © by Editions Buchet/Chastel, Corrèa, 1957  
Subsequent edition published by Éditions Gallimard, 1985

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved  
above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic,  
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written  
permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 772 7  
eISBN 978 1 78283 834 0



# Preface

1965

It would be untrue to say that I foresaw the full significance of this book in 1957 when I wrote it. I had written a first novel, *The Pillar of Salt*, a life story which was in a sense a trial balloon to help me find the direction of my own life. However, it became clear to me that a real life for a cultured man was impossible in North Africa at that time. I then tried to find another solution, this time through the problems of a mixed marriage, but this second novel, *Strangers*, also led me nowhere. My hopes then rested on the "couple," which still seems to me the most solid happiness of man and perhaps the only real answer to solitude. But I discovered that the couple is not an isolated entity, a forgotten oasis of light in the middle of the world; on the contrary, the whole world is within the couple. For my unfortunate protagonists, the world was that of colonization. I felt that to understand the failure of their undertaking, that of a mixed marriage in a colony, I first had to understand the colonizer and the colonized, perhaps the entire colonial relationship and situation. All this was leading me far from myself and from my own problems, but their explanation became more and more complex; so without knowing where I

would end up, I had to at least try to put an end to my own anguish.

It would be equally untrue to say that my ambition in painting this portrait of one of the major oppressions of our time was to describe oppressed peoples in general; it was not even my intention to write about all colonized people. I was Tunisian, therefore colonized. I discovered that few aspects of my life and my personality were untouched by this fact. Not only my own thoughts, my passions and my conduct, but also the conduct of others towards me was affected. As a young student arriving at the Sorbonne for the first time, certain rumors disturbed me. As a Tunisian, would I be allowed to sit for the examinations in philosophy? I went to see the president of the jury. "It is not a right," he explained. "It is a hope." He hesitated, a lawyer looking for the exact words. "Let us say that it is a colonial hope." I have yet to understand what that meant in fact, but I was unable to get anything more out of him. It can be imagined with what serenity I worked after that.

Thus, I undertook this inventory of conditions of colonized people mainly in order to understand myself and to identify my place in the society of other men. It was my readers—not all of them Tunisian—who later convinced me that this portrait was equally theirs. My travels and conversations, meetings and books convinced me, as I advanced in my work on the book, that what I was describing was the fate of a

vast multitude across the world. As I discovered that all colonized people have much in common, I was led to the conclusion that all the oppressed are alike in some ways. Nonetheless, while I was writing this book, I preferred to ignore these conclusions that today I maintain are undeniable. So many different persons saw themselves in this portrait that it became impossible to pretend that it was mine alone, or only that of colonized Tunisians, or even North Africans. I was told that in many parts of the world the colonial police confiscated the book in the cells of militant nationalists. I am convinced that I gave them nothing they did not already know, had not already experienced; but as they recognized their own emotions, their revolt, their aspirations, I suppose they appeared more legitimate to them. Above all, whatever the truthfulness of this description of our common experience, it struck them less than the coherence of ideas which I put forward. When the Algerian war was about to break out, I predicted first to myself and then to others the probable dynamism of events. The colonial relationship which I had tried to define chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, molded their respective characters and dictated their conduct. Just as there was an obvious logic in the reciprocal behavior of the two colonial partners, another mechanism, proceeding from the first, would lead, I believed, inexorably to the decomposition of this dependence. Events in Algeria

confirmed my hypothesis; I have often verified it since then in the explosion of other colonial situations.

The sum of events through which I had lived since childhood, often incoherent and contradictory on the surface, began to fall into dynamic patterns. How could the colonizer look after his workers periodically gunning down a crowd of the colonized? How could the colonized deny himself so cruelly yet make such excessive demands? How could he hate the colonizers and yet admire them so passionately? (I too felt this admiration in spite of myself.) I needed to put some sort of order into the chaos of my feelings and to form a basis for my future actions. By temperament and education I had to do this in a disciplined manner, following the consequences as far as possible. If I had not gone all the way, trying to find coherence in all these diverse facts, reconstructing them into portraits which were answerable to one another, I could not have convinced myself and would have remained dissatisfied with my effort. I saw, then, what help to fighting men the simple, ordered description of their misery and humiliation could be. I saw how explosive the objective revelation to the colonized and the colonizer of an essentially explosive condition could be. It was as if the unveiling of the fatality of their respective paths made the struggle the more necessary and the delaying action the more desperate. Thus, the book escaped from my control.

I must admit I was a bit frightened of it myself. It was

clear that the book would be utilized by well-defined colonized people—Algerians, Moroccans, African Negroes. But other peoples, subjugated in other ways—certain South Americans, Japanese and American Negroes—interpreted and used the book. The most recent to find a similarity to their own form of alienation have been the French Canadians. I looked with astonishment on all this, much as a father, with a mixture of pride and apprehension, watches his son achieve a scandalous and applauded fame. Nor was all this uproar totally beneficial, for certain parts of the book of great importance to me were obscured—such as my analysis of what I call the Nero complex; and that of failure of the European left in general and the Communist Party in particular, for having underestimated the national aspect of colonial liberation; and, above all, the importance, the richness, of personal experience. For I continue to think, in spite of everything, that the importance of this endeavor is its modesty and initial particularity. Nothing in the text is invented or supposed or even hazardously transposed. Actual experience, co-ordinated and stylized, lies behind every sentence. If in the end I have consented to a general tone, it is because I know that I could, at every line, every word, produce innumerable concrete facts.

I have been criticized for not having constructed my portraits entirely around an economic structure, but I feel I have repeated often enough that the idea of privilege is at the heart of the colonial relationship—and

that privilege is undoubtedly economic. Let me take this opportunity to reaffirm my position: for me the economic aspect of colonialism is fundamental. The book itself opens with a denunciation of the so-called moral or cultural mission of colonization and shows that the profit motive in it is basic. I have often noted that the *deprivations* of the colonized are the almost direct result of the advantages secured to the colonizer. However, colonial privilege is not solely economic. To observe the life of the colonizer and the colonized is to discover rapidly that the daily humiliation of the colonized, his objective subjugation, are not merely economic. Even the poorest colonizer thought himself to be—and actually was—superior to the colonized. This too was part of colonial privilege. The Marxist discovery of the importance of the economy in all oppressive relationships is not to the point. This relationship has other characteristics which I believe I have discovered in the colonial relationship. But, one might ask, in the *final analysis*, don't these phenomena have a more or less hidden economic aspect? Isn't the motivating force of colonization economic? The answer is maybe not certainly. We don't actually know what man is, or just what is essential to him; whether it is money or sex or pride. . . . Does psychoanalysis win out over Marxism? Does all depend on the individual or on society? In any case, before attacking this *final analysis* I wanted to show all the real complexities in the lives of the colonizer and the colonized. Psychoanalysis



or Marxism must not, under the pretext of having discovered the source or one of the main sources of human conduct, pre-empt all experience, all feeling, all suffering, all the byways of human behavior, and call them profit motive or Oedipus complex.

I put forward another example which will probably go against my cause; but I believe that as a writer I must state everything, even that which can be used against me. My portrait of the colonized, which is very much my own, is preceded by a portrait of the colonizer. How could I have permitted myself, with all my concern about personal experience, to draw a portrait of the adversary? Here is a confession I have never made before: I know the colonizer from the inside almost as well as I know the colonized. But I must explain: I said that I was a Tunisian national. Like all other Tunisians I was treated as a second-class citizen, deprived of political rights, refused admission to most civil service departments, etc. But I was not a Moslem. In a country where so many groups, each jealous of its own physiognomy, lived side by side, this was of considerable importance. The Jewish population identified as much with the colonizers as with the colonized. They were undeniably "natives," as they were then called, as near as possible to the Moslems in poverty, language, sensibilities, customs, taste in music, odors and cooking. However, unlike the Moslems, they passionately endeavored to identify themselves with the French. To them the West was the paragon of all

civilization, all culture. The Jew turned his back happily on the East. He chose the French language, dressed in the Italian style and joyfully adopted every idiosyncrasy of the Europeans. (This, by the way, is what all colonized try to do before they pass on to the stage of revolt.) For better or for worse, the Jew found himself one small notch above the Moslem on the pyramid which is the basis of all colonial societies. His privileges were laughable, but they were enough to make him proud and to make him hope that he was not part of the mass of Moslems which constituted the base of the pyramid. It was enough to make him feel endangered when the structure began to crumble. The Jews bore arms side by side with the French in the streets of Algiers. My own relations with my fellow Jews were not made any easier when I decided to join the colonized, but it was necessary for me to denounce colonialism, even though it was not as hard on the Jews as it was on the others. Because of this ambivalence I knew only too well the contradictory emotions which swayed their lives. Didn't my own heart beat faster at the sight of the little flag on the stern of the ships that joined Tunis to Marseille?

All this explains why the portrait of the colonizer was in part my own—projected in a geometric sense. My model for the portrait of the colonizer of good will was taken in particular from a group of philosophy professors in Tunis. Their generosity was unquestionable; so, unfortunately, was their impotence, their inability to make

themselves heard by anyone else in the colony. However, it was among these men that I felt most at ease. While I was virtuously busy debunking the myths of colonization, could I complacently approve of the counter-myths fabricated by the colonized? I could but smile with my friends at their halting assurance that Andalusian music is the most beautiful in the world; or that Europeans are fundamentally bad (the proof being that they are too harsh with their children). Naturally the result was suspicion on the part of the colonized. And this in spite of the immense good will of this type of French colonizer and the fact that these Frenchmen were already despised by the rest of the French community. I understood only too well their difficulties, their inevitable ambiguity and the resulting isolation; more serious still, their inability to act. All this was a part of my own fate.

Shall I go even further? Though I could not approve of them, I understood even the hard-core colonizers (*pieds noirs*)—they were more simple in thought and action. As I have stated repeatedly, a man is a product of his objective situation; thus I had to ask myself if I would have condemned colonization so vigorously if I had actually benefited from it myself. I hope so, but to have suffered from it only slightly less than the others did has made me more understanding. The most blindly stubborn *piéd noir* was, in effect, my born brother. Life has treated us differently; he was the legitimate son of France, heir to privileges which he would defend at

any price whatsoever; I was a sort of half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one.

This book has caused as much anguish and anger as it has enthusiasm. On the one hand, people saw it as an insolent provocation; on the other, a flag to which to rally. Everyone agreed on its militant aspect. It seemed to be an arm in the war against colonization, and indeed it has become one. But nothing seems more ridiculous to me than to boast of borrowed courage and feats never accomplished. I have mentioned how relatively naïve I was when I wrote this book. Then I simply wanted to understand the colonial relationship to which I was bound. I am not saying that my philosophy was alien to my search, my anger and, in a way, my whole life. I am unconditionally opposed to all forms of oppression. For me, oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man—of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer. Be that as it may, provocation was not the object of my work. The effectiveness of the material came gratuitously by the sole virtue of truth.

It was probably sufficient to describe with precision the facts of colonization, the manner in which the colonizer was bound to act, the slow and inevitable

destruction of the colonized, to bring to light the absolute iniquity of colonization; and, at the same time, to unveil the fundamental instability of it and predict its demise. My only merit was to have endeavored, over and above my own uneasiness, to describe an unbearable, therefore unacceptable, aspect of reality, one which was destined to provoke continuing upheavals, costly for everyone. Instead of reading this book for its scandalous content or as a permanent provocation to revolt, I hope the reader will calmly examine why these conclusions were reached, conclusions which continue to be reached spontaneously by so many people in similar situations. Is this not simply because these two portraits are faithful to their models? They don't have to recognize themselves in my mirror to discover all by themselves the most useful course of action in their lives of misery. Everyone knows the confusion which still exists between the artist and his subject. Instead of being irritated by what writers say, and accusing them of trying to create disturbances which they only describe and announce, it would be better to listen more attentively and take their warnings more seriously. Do I not have the right, after so many disastrous and useless colonial wars, to think that this book could have been useful to the colonizer as well as to the colonized ?

A.M.

PARIS, 1965

# Contents

<i>Preface (1965)</i>	3
<i>Foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre</i>	17
<i>Introduction by Nadine Gordimer</i>	27
<b>Part One: Portrait of the Colonizer</b>	45
Does the colonial exist?	47
The colonizer who refuses	63
The colonizer who accepts	89
<b>Part Two: Portrait of the Colonized</b>	121
Mythical portrait of the colonized	123
Situations of the colonized	134
The two answers of the colonized	163
<b>Part Three: Conclusion</b>	187