Introduction

Born in Tunisia, a Jew in a predominately Muslim colony, Memmi is qualified to write about both the colonizer and the colonized; he says, "I was sort of a half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one" (Colonizer, xvi).

Memmi's most influential work is a non-fiction piece, The Colonizer and the Colonized (part of which has also been published under the title, Portrait of the Colonizer). First published in 1957, Memmi wrote The Colonizer and the Colonized specifically in response to the decolonization of North Africa in 1956, when his home nation Tunisia, as well as her neighbor Algeria, gained independence from the French. Although Memmi bases his examples on events in North Africa, he states that the dynamics he illuminates are similar in any colonial system. Memmi describes this work as "portraits of the two protagonists of the colonial drama and the relationship that binds them" (Colonizer 145).

Memmi's other works include several novels written in French, including The Pillar of Salt, which is largely autobiographical; Strangers, which explores mixed marriages; and a theoretical piece, Portrait of a Jew.

Memmi's Tunisia

In 1881, Tunisia became a colony of the French. During its colonial period, Tunisia was home to French colonizers, Italians, Tunisian Muslims, and a minority of Jews.

Of the four groups Memmi recognizes in Tunisia, the French are the obvious profiteers. The Italians, although not as well off as the French, are also privileged. The Muslim majority is the most oppressed. Although the Jews are nearly equal in level of poverty and have no more rights than do the Muslims, Memmi describes the Jews as more willing to try to assimilate to the French. Memmi writes of the Jews:

Unlike the Muslims, 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. They chose the French language, dressed in the Italian style, and joyfully adopted every ideosyncrasy of the Europeans. (Colonizer, xiv)

Colonialism was not as difficult for the Jews as it was for the Muslims in Tunisia because of their willingness to take on some aspects of the colonizer's culture. The Jews joined the French in the streets of Algiers during independence uprisings. Although Memmi joined the colonized rather than the colonizer, he says he understood why the Jews chose the side of the French. He
writes, "Because of this ambivalence, I knew only too well the contradictory emotions which swayed their lives" (xiv).

Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956. Since that time, the government has been run by the Democratic Constitutional Assembly, the only officially recognized party in Tunisia, an Islamic fundamentalist organization.

The Colonial System

Colonialism, which Memmi describes as "one variety of fascism" (63), is based on economic privilege, despite suggestion of more noble goals of religious conversion or civilization. Its key tools are racism and terror.

Racism is ingrained in every colonial institution, and establishes the "subhumanity" of the colonized, fostering poor self-concepts in the colonized as well. By using terror to quell any reactionary uprising, the colonizers reinforce fear and submission.

The colonial system favors population growth. In order to keep the salaries of the colonizers high and their cost of living low, there must be high competition among the native laborers. In other words, the birth rate must rise in order for the system to perpetuate itself. Since all resources go to the colonizer despite the need for increased resources by the growing colonized population, the standard of living of the colonized inevitably goes down.

The Myths of Religious Conversion and Social Salvation

The colonizers "never seriously promoted religious conversion of the colonized" because it would have been a step towards assimilation and therefore "the disappearance of the colonial relationships" (72-73). "Social salvation" is not a reality either. The colonized could not rise above his social status and be permitted to assimilate. Writes Memmi, "All efforts of the colonialist are directed towards maintaining the social immobility, and racism is the surest weapon for this aim" (74).

The culture of the colonizer permeates the colony; the dress, the holidays, the flag raised above national monuments are the colonizer's. Social communication and placement tests for civil service are in the colonizer's language.

Through cultural domination, the colonizer creates a group of francophiles who can attain a slightly higher status. These candidates for assimilation will then support the side of the colonizer. Their behavior towards the (other) colonized has much in common with that of the colonizer. The candidates for assimilation ultimately remain outcasts, however, because for the colonial system to perpetuate itself, it must not allow assimilation. If the colonized had voting
rights, for instance, as the majority they would have the ability to destroy the system. The colonizer's ambivalence causes the colonized to live in "painful and constant ambiguity" (15).

The Colonizer

Three factors typify the colonizer (who, according to Memmi, means any European in a colony): profit, privilege, and usurpation.

Europeans living in colonies often consider themselves to be in exile. They are not inclined to leave the colony for their mother country, however, because they are able to live a more comfortable life in the colony. For the colonizer, a colony is "a place where one earns more and spends less" (5). In the mother country "he would go back to being a mediocre man" (61). In the colony, he has superior status and his standard of living is far above what it would be in Europe. The colonizer is privileged and, he realizes his privilege is illegitimate. Therefore he is a usurper.

Occasionally, writes Memmi, there exists a "colonizer who refuses" (19). The colonizer who refuses recognizes the colonial system as unjust, and may withdraw from the conditions of privilege or remain to fight for change. Yet although he is benevolent, he is detached from the struggle of the colonized. He doesn't make an effort to change language or other tools of cultural domination, and is also uncomfortable if the revolutionary struggle of the colonized takes on religious fundamentalism. Unless he "eliminates himself as a colonizer" (45)—that is, unless he returns to his mother country—he is politically ineffective; as long as he is in the colony, by virtue of his European ethnicity, he perpetuates the system.

Like the colonizer who refuses, the colonizer who accepts his role as usurper is also aware of his illegitimate privilege. Memmi assigns the term "colonialist" to the colonizer who agrees to be a colonizer. He will defend his role and must absolve himself by demonstrating the merits of his culture and the faults of the native's culture. He asserts his cultural superiority—virtues such as heroism—and makes a show of his culture in order to impress the colonized. As Memmi writes, "He endeavors to falsify history, he rewrites laws, he would extinguish memories. Anything to succeed in transforming his usurpation into legitimacy" (52).

Memmi also states that "the manner in which the colonialist wants to see himself plays a considerable role in the emergence of his final portrait" (55). In essence, by legitimizing his role the colonizer learns that his identity and his image of the superior culture is constructed. Memmi continues, "The excess of his vanity, the too magnificent portrait he paints of himself, betray him more than serve him" (58). In coaxing a mimic response from the colonized, the colonialist questions the validity of his own identity.
Memmi gives the ambivalence that the colonialist experiences the term "Nero Complex" (53). The more the colonialist oppresses the colonized, the more he realizes the atrocity of the role he has chosen. His hatred of the usurped grows. He wants the colonized to disappear because their existence leads him to act the role of usurper. Yet, "the colonialist realizes that without the colonized, the colony would no longer have any meaning. This intolerable contradiction fills him with a rage, a loathing, always ready to be loosed on the colonized" (66).

The Colonized

The colonizer's rewriting of history to his glorification removes the colonized from history. The colonized child is not taught his own history, but the unknown settings of his colonizer's history. The colonized become "divorced from reality" (106).

The colonized learn that they are inconsequential, no longer in the game, so to speak. Because they are excluded from government, they become less interested in government. They are conditioned that their inadequacy is what makes them unable to "assume a role in history" (94). They have no rights of citizenship and therefore almost never experience feelings of nationality. Resistance movements, when they occur, are severely quelled. "Colonization usurps any free role in... cultural and social responsibility" (91). Thus, the courage of the colonized is destroyed, leading to deficiencies in self-assurance and pride.

Religion for the colonized is a retreat, "one of the rare manifestations which can protect its original existence" (101). Many colonial revolts and subsequent independent governments--in Memmi's homeland Tunisia, in fact--incorporate religious nationalism.

The Two Solutions of the Colonized Telos of the Colonial System

According to Memmi, the colonial system is fundamentally unstable and will lead to its own destruction, due to the mere rigidity of the system.

The colonized have ultimately two answers to the colonial system. The first, assimilation, is impossible because the colonizer will not allow it. Because the colonial system has not provided a democratic process, the other option is revolt.

Revolt is a step in the colonial process and its built-in end. By revolting the colonized reject all colonizers, whether they be refusers or colonialists, as well as their language. Revolt often embraces religion and tradition and is not concerned with humanitarian efforts, such as education; the colonized must find identity first, and thrust themselves, however precariously, back into a history.
Memmi maintains that revolt is still a stage in colonial alienation, and colonialism doesn't disappear until this stage is over.

Works Cited


Author: Helaena White, Spring 1996