

Liberation and Consciousness: Reading Steve Biko's Struggles Against Inferiority Complex

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Abstract

The Great South African nationalist, anti-apartheid leader, activist and philosopher, Steve Biko (1946-1977), were among few liberation leaders who understood that liberation from colonialism had to start with liberating consciousness before liberating lands. He believed that missionaries Christianity and white education, in south Africa, same as in most of the colonized world established itself by constructing the categories of inferiority/ superiority in the mind of the colonized. In addition, narrating the history of the colonized was another weapon in the hands of the colonizer to enable him reshape the colonized identity and maintain his continuing looking up towards the colonizer. These methods, committed in other parts of the world under the name of 'Orientalism', were the main enemies in Biko's struggle. How did Biko identify these processes of cultural subjugation, how do they work and what were the counter methods that Biko suggested to combat them and achieve liberation? These three questions are the main concerns in this paper. It aims through revisiting Biko's works and interview to understand how white supremacy is constructed, how a liberation from it can be achieved and how Biko's legend could offer us lessons in understanding past and current forms of Orientalism and(or) white supremacy.

Keywords: Biko; Consciousness; Liberation; Blackness; Apartheid; Inferiority; Whiteness.

I. Introduction: Biko & Understanding Inferiority

Stephen Bantu Biko (1946-1977), also known as : Steve Biko ,the South African antiapartheid leader and the former head of SASO "South Africa Students Organization" ,an active member in BCM "Black Consciousness Movement" and the honorary president of the BPC"Black People Convention" had genuinely dealt with the question of political liberation in expressively racial and aesthetic terms. He asserted the quest for liberaton using his famous slogan "Black is Beautiful". Biko's political struggle was mainly concerned with restoring the self-confidence of the black people andtheir pride in their standards, and culture. He was writing and acting against the backdrop of a certain economic, political and psychological predicament the blacks were suffering from in South Africa. It is the apartheid system which -through different mechanisms- practiced the systematic exploitation of blacks and the distortion of their culture. This, according to Biko, led blacks to suffer from an inferiority complex that glorifies everything related with whiteness and despises anything black. Biko found this process unjustifiable. For him, it was employed by the white apartheid system in the various spheres of life to justify the subjugation of blacks- and for this reason Biko stood to resist the Apartheid and liberate the black nation.

A series of questions arises when approaching Biko's black political aesthetics; what made blacks feel inferior and ugly? Who were behind such feelings? What were their means to implant these feelings? How to combat it and restore the confidence of blacks in their standards of beauty- and finally what was the ideal that all Biko's efforts of resistance and self-assertion were oriented towards?

II. Method

In this paper documentary analysis is employed as a method. It is chosen to explore the political implications of alienation, beauty, whiteness and inferiority concepts in the works of Steve Biko and in the analyses made about his work. The paper analyses the main work of Steve Biko (*I Write What I Like*)..

Document analysis is a qualitative method used for interpreting documents so as to infer meanings from them and make conclusions. Documents can be books, laws, constitutions, personal documents, diaries, social media posts, etc (Bowen, 2009, pp. 27-28).

Documents analysis attempts to do many things that ranges a better understanding of the context , helping in formulating main questions, tracing the evolution of the topic and asserting or disavowing research arguments (Bowen, 2009, pp. 29-30)

The process of document analysis starts by listing sources, organizing them into categories relevant to the research topic, reading through them, asking questions and evaluating answers (Bowen, 2009).

III. Biko & Consciousness of inferiority

Biko noticed that in the apartheid system the black man became “a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own miseries, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity” (Biko, 2005, p. 29). The black man under the effect of the white mechanisms of racism and oppression became totally rejecting himself, hating himself and aspiring to be white. He was emptied of all his pride of blackness and he became ‘a shell’. But before understanding that feeling of self hatred and inferiority, why would these whites mastering the apartheid system do that to the blacks?

It is the economic privilege that made the whites do so. The apartheid system is before anything a capitalist system based on the continuous exploitation and the widening gap of inequality between the rich and the poor, between the wealth owners and the wealth creators. And like any capitalist system of exploitation, white capitalism had to create its own ‘ideology’ to justify such a mode of production and invent its own ‘superstructure’ to protect it. The ‘ideology’ and ‘super structure’ were racism and the apartheid system. “The leaders of the white community had to create some kind of barrier between blacks and whites so the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification of it “ (Biko, 2005, p. 88). So “there is no doubt that racism was originally introduced for economic reasons” to justify inequality between the whites and the blacks , to maintain the subjugation of the blacks by moral reasons and to sustain such a system of exploitation (Biko, 2005, pp. 87-88) .In a way or another, Biko argues that racism is a late stage of capitalism .

But how does such state of self hatred work in the minds of blacks?Biko argued that the blacks in the apartheid system suffered from “an inferiority complex which (was) a result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision” (Biko, 2005, p. 21) .Such an inferiority complex was a composite of a two streamed alienation and a feeling of self censure. The alienation two streams are: one made through exploitation where blacks feel alienated from the fruit of their labour that was exploited by the whites -and the other was constructed through political oppression and psycho-cultural negation that made the black man feel he is an aberration from the normal, from ‘the White’ (Biko, 2005, p. 49).

The black in himself developed that state of alienation, he rejects himself because “he attaches the meaning white to all that is good and equates good with white all his life since his childhood. He tends to feel that there is something incomplete in his humanity and that completeness goes with whiteness” (Biko, 2005, p. 101). Such an alienation makes him feel inferior to the extent that some blacks “feel comfortable to drink tea or else with whites who seem to treat them as equal, this boosts their ego and make them feel slightly superior to other blacks who do not get similar treatment from whites” (Biko, 2005, p. 23). This alienation is tied with a feeling of self-censure. Whites with their monopoly of meaningfulness, completeness and values had monopolized the definition of beauty and therefore the white became the only beautiful and the black was ugly. He as a black should aspire to be white if he wants to be more beautiful or be satisfied with himself. Such a feeling of self-censure was a consequence of the imposed white language, the introduced religion and the manipulated culture. The settlers’ language and religion related whiteness with angels, god and beauty, while blackness was related with black magic, black market and the negative dark aspects of things. The “white man (became) some kind of god that his word cannot be doubted” (Biko, 2005, p. 69) and through this language such twisting of meanings and significations was created. In addition to that, the ability of the white culture to solve many problems in the sphere of medicine and other spheres made blacks

look to whites as belonging to a superior culture and despise themselves (Biko, 2005, p. 102). The final outcome of these processes of inferiority, alienation, and self-censure is that the black developed a 'double consciousness', "he tends to find solace only in close identification with white society" and looks to oneself through someone else's eyes; the eyes of the whites" (Kaindl, 2013, p. 67). Beauty as a concept became manipulated in the mind of blacks to see only whites as beautiful; that's why for Biko to deconstruct this train of interrelated racist constructs flowing from economic exploitation, he found it necessary to revive the consciousness and pride of the oppressed blacks and raise his anti-thesis which is 'black is beautiful'.

IV. Means For Rooting Inferiority

Yet before explaining how Biko had tried to revive the consciousness of the blacks, restore their pride in their beauty and repel the processes of white racism, it is important to show how Biko explained the manner in which the whites managed through different means to implant inferiority feelings in the black man's consciousness. Biko claims that the whites, using their power, manipulated certain aspects of life in order to construct their narrative of supremacy and establish black inferiority. Primary among these manipulated aspects was education which influenced other aspects like history narration and culture. Other important aspects were the religion introduced by the white Christian missions and the language of the settlers. All these aspects were manipulated and they played a terrible role in distorting the consciousness of the oppressed blacks.

Education, or miseducation as Biko describes, played a terrible role in constructing both the superiority of the white and the inferiority of the black. "The black kids since their childhood are educated in school to hate their heritage" (Lotter, 2012, p. 6). They were "educated to believe that there is a real difference between black man and white man, between a colored girl and a white girl" (Kaindl, 2013, p. 62) and "were taught under the pretext of hygiene, good manners and other such vague concepts to despise their modes of upbringing at home and to question the values and customs of their society" (Biko, 2005, p. 94). The expected outcome was that children and parents saw life differently and consequently, the former lost the respect for the latter. This corrupted the African life system, stigmatized it and sowed the seeds of the white superiority that grew into a feeling of black inferiority and a glorification of all white things (Biko, 2005, p. 94).

Through miseducation two other aspects of life were distorted in the consciousness of blacks: history narration and culture. History was terribly distorted to the extent that, according to Biko's words, "strangely enough everybody has to come to accept that the history of South Africa starts in 1652" (Biko, 2005, p. 70). In this manner, history starts with the arrival of the whites. The story of black life without whites is not recognized as a true time or memory. It is like days in an infinite oblivion, or "days of tribal battles and internecine wars, people were simply escaping from one tyrant to another, the tyrant who wanted to defeat the tribe for no other reason but to wipe it out from existence" (Biko, 2005, p. 29). In the white narration of black history the heroes of the black nations were depicted in an ignoble way; real revolutionaries like Makana became trouble makers, nation builders like Shaka became tyrants and glorious tribes became greedy thieves (Biko, 2005, p. 95). In a way or another, there was nothing good to remember before the whites, there was nothing beautiful in being black.

For the above considerations, the culture of blacks was distorted and was negatively depicted as 'barbarism'. For Biko, The encounter of the simple African culture with the armed-and-colonially-trapping Anglo Boer culture was quite drastic. The white culture armed with weapons, a complicated religious system and a full fledged system of education managed to manipulate the image of the African culture to depict it as a barbaric vicious life style (Biko, 2005, p. 70). They "arrested the African culture and communicated a myth that African peoples were near cannibals, had no real ambitions in life, and were preoccupied with sex and drink" (Biko, 2005, p. 70). For these reasons, such vicious barbaric culture was- according to the whites- in need of civilization and enlightenment. Education played half the role, religion and language the other.

The arrival of the Christian religious missions and their introduction of Christianity were additional devastating events in the life of the African community. The introduced Christian religion (and its God) was communicating messages imbued with a large amount of lies that distort the African image and traditional religion. First of all, Christianity argued that the ancestor worship was merely superstitious, while Christianity is the only scientific religion (Biko, 2005, p. 31), also the worshippers of such traditional religions were depicted as 'pagans' (Biko, 2005, p. 97). The white missionaries described blacks as thieves, lazy, sex hungry. They equated all valuable things with whiteness in order to justify the white conquests which claim the mission of civilizing the pagans by the use of force and by a cruel religion irrelevant to the African way of life. Through these means the whites and their missionaries subjugated blacks and made them hate their religions and lives.

Finally, languages introduced into the educational system like the Afrikaans 'though originally creolized' and English were key players in the distortion scheme. Since the blacks could not express themselves well using the introduced languages in comparison with the whites who have these languages as mother tongues, this indicated in the blacks "a sense of inadequacy, not just in language, but also in their intelligence as if the white is equipped with a better mentality" (Biko, 2005, p. 107).

Therefore, blacks suffered from alienation, inferiority and self censure that were made by the whites through different means, but what were the means that Steve Biko employed as a reaction in order to combat these feelings and restore the confidence of the African in his beauty?

V. Biko's Strategy of liberation & Recommendation

Biko outlined a two phased strategy for liberation; the first phase aims at achieving psychological liberation by liberating the consciousness of blacks from inferiority and restoring their pride in their blackness. After achieving the goals of the first, the psychologically liberated subject would seek physical liberation which is the second phase within which he would endeavor for changing- on the ground -the material arrangements of the racist exploitative system in order to attain total liberation. Yet in order to undertake such a strategy to its ends Biko found it necessary to do many things_ First; to define accurately the agent of liberation whom he addresses, Second; to change his state of mind psychologically and his practices in reality, and finally; to guide this agent towards the physical change of the system.

Before taking any step, Biko defined the agent he is addressing as 'black'. He argued that blackness is not merely a matter of pigmentation or color; it is a sociopolitical situation and a consequent mental attitude that needs a liberating response. Of course color was an important element in drawing the lines between the oppressors and the oppressed yet beneath these classifications lie unjust sociopolitical arrangements that employed color to privilege the whites and exploit the blacks (Biko, 2005, p. 48). Biko thought that if the black subject understood such a definition of his situation and described himself as the 'black' in it, he would start his way towards emancipation from forces using his blackness to subjugate him (Biko, 2005, p. 48).

The 'black' for Biko is more of a socio-political category that includes those "who are by law or tradition politically and socially discriminated against as a group in the south African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspiration" (Biko, 2005, p. 48). This might include blacks, Indians or the colored in general who suffer from this situation and struggle for its removal. On the other hand, 'the whites' are those whose color of skin is their passport to privilege from this exploitative oppressive situation. They are the oppressor camp by the virtue of their color whether they accepted racism or condemned it as long as they cannot but benefit from the sustained inequality in the system (Biko, 2005, p. 23).

Yet Biko had a further qualification for the black agent since not all those who are not whites are socio-politically 'blacks' because there are some people who are black by color but not black in their attitude, they are defined instead as 'non-white'. "Non whites do exist and will exist for a long time" (Biko, 2005, p. 48). They are those who aspire to be white but their color makes such an attainment impossible. They are those in police force, or security branch, who calls the whites as their '*Baas*'; master. They feel

comforting if the white treated them for some time as equals and as a consequence they feel themselves better than their black peers (Biko, 2005, p. 23). For Biko this type of blacks are danger to the community, they feel no need in any real change of society, just superficial changes would suffice for them , since they would keep their relative privileges in comparison to their black peers. Biko did not count on non-whites in his struggle or even trusted them. He instead focused all his efforts on the ‘black’ agent.

His efforts endeavored at changing the state of inferiority in the mind of the black man to a state of self confidence and pride. This had to happen psychologically and practically. Psychologically, by awakening his consciousness through an inward looking process to rethink his situation, his complicity in surrender and not to allow himself to be exploited again. This ‘inward looking’ is the first step for conscientizing the black (Biko, 2005, p. 29).The real black through such a step is encouraged to raise his head back again and rethink his situation (Biko, 2005, p. 40).This will pump back life to him with pride and dignity , and will enlighten his mind. Through such consciousness awakening, the Black Consciousness Movement will contribute by its practical efforts that help the black man eradicate his sense of incompleteness. For Biko, This is to happen by different means that he was dedicated to.

Biko through his life , leadership of SASO and engagement in BCM (The Black Consciousness Movement) and the BPC (The Black People Convention) was dedicated and focused primarily on restoring the black ability to ‘act collectively’ in order to restore their confidence in their ability to ‘achieve’. For Biko, Community collective projects made by the blacks were methods for practical self-conscientization and confidence restoration. Beside community action, Biko thought that some reevaluation of the distorted heritage has to take place in order to rediscover its positive aspects (Lotter, 2012, p. 1). The black consciousness movement(s), with which Biko was engaged, sought to show to the black people the value of their traditions after purifying them from the racist distortions and explaining how much they had been suitable to the happiness of the black community before apartheid (Biko, 2005, p. 30).

In addition to the revaluation of heritage, the religion introduced by Christian church has to be considered within the efforts of reformation. Biko supported the idea of a ‘black theology’ as a situational interpretation of Christianity that suits the African conditions. It seeks to relate the present day Blackman to god within the context of the black man suffering. It relates god to the daily problems of the black man and instead of calling on man to suffer peacefully, it describes god as a fighting god not a passive one, a god and a religion that do not stand silent to injustices and sufferings but encourage the believers to combat them.

Education too has to re-narrate history and represent culture in a new way to show how much glorious the African heroes and tribes were and how the African culture was collective, cooperative and more humane than that depicted as barbaric by the apartheid. Biko by such reevaluation(s) and confidence restoration methods aimed at an important psychological outcome that is to eradicate the sense of defeat in the African mentality; this attains a true psychological freedom (Biko, 2005, p. 114).

After awakening the consciousness of the blacks and liberating them psychologically, Biko dreamed to guide his liberated black subjects further than the mere resistance to racism. Racism was primarily just a ploy for a deeper aim which is economic exploitation. Only after changing the unjust economic structure and its consequent socio-political arrangements, blacks can be able to achieve real physical liberation from the forces of exploitation that created the very essence of racism. For this reason Biko called for African socialism as an important route, if blacks were to fight exploitation (Kaindl, 2013, p. 49). This needs the overhauling of the economic system because the racial situation would not change unless its underlying exploitative economic structure was destroyed. After achieving psychological liberation and accomplishing the task of changing the physical conditions of existence, physical liberation can be said to be fulfilled and true freedom can be said to be attained (Biko, 2005, p. 83).

VI. The Ideal of Liberation

A certain ideal way of life was in the mind of Biko for both his subjects and society. It would be fulfilled after undertaking his strategy. Biko by his struggle to restore the African confidence and end exploitation aimed at what he terms as 'the envisioned self' on the individual level and an 'open society' on the social level.

The envisioned self is a state of mind which he sought from his diverse psychological liberation efforts and such a self would lead its subject towards his physical liberation. The envisioned self is the free self that is able in each group to attain its style of existence without encroaching or being thwarted by any other group (Kaindl, 2013, p. 55). On the social level Biko wished for an 'open society' that fulfils the three points of: one man, one vote and no reference to color, a society where there can be free participation in the economic and social life and can provide equal opportunities to all (Biko, 2005, p. 123).

Nevertheless, Biko did not show how such an open society could be socialist and African as well. In one of his interviews Biko claimed that he prefers to focus on the liberation process more than the post-revolutionary situation. He justified arguing that too much talking about the details of the post-revolutionary situation might fragment the unity of the different struggling black movements and occupy them with less urgent questions than the most urgent one which is the question of liberation (Gerhart, 2008, p. 27).

V. Findings

Biko maintained that the black needs not to be white in order to feel human or beautiful. The black *is* beautiful. Actually, aspiring to be white is a complicity against the black community since white superiority is used to justify the underlying structures of exploitation and the going processes of violence and oppression. By asserting one's blackness, confidence in the beauty of one's nature, pride in one's history a psychologically liberated black subjectivity can conglomerate and start its way toward the physical change of the exploitative racist system to attain true liberation from one of the most vicious regimes in the history of humanity; from the Apartheid.

VI. Conclusion

The process of liberation of the African mind should not be concerned solely with questions of defying against processes of political subjugation and economic subordination in the world system. Although these issues are of pivotal importance, they can not be dealt with aside from how the consciousness of liberation can be first formulated and thus be determined to be liberated. One main thinker that tackled this issue is Steve Biko, the south African thinker and philosopher, who sought to stress one's confidence in his/her colour so as to allow the African subject more trust in his/her capacities and thus be able to go through the struggles for liberation. Only after liberating this level of consciousness other plans for liberation can be undertaken.

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