

Existentialism versus Self-awareness

Mr. Mohammed Seghir HALIMI

The theses, conceptions, explanations of man and the world do exist; they are usually in correlation. Each person exists with a certain idea of good and of values which characterizes it with behaviours and action which are found justified and interpreted. Each time it is the human position or disposition which is realized and simultaneously revealed by the coherence of theses, values and actions. These natures are, however, called *Senses* which constitute and represent, in fact, the human nature. The latter is brought to existence in order to form what is called '*Reality*'. The sense is in reality a being's disposition according to which man becomes aware of himself (knowledge and thought witnessing a given vision), orientates his aspirations and defines his ends (criterion of good or the scale of values, ethics), and engages his activities and his work (organization, methods, competences, tools and projects, etc).

The totality of the existential testimony of humanity reveals the human nature and its diversity as a sense dwelling within each person and shared among communities (of consensus). It is the case of the individual existence of persons and of groups' cultural realities and human communities. To get access to this recognition is to make man's liberty (choice of senses) very wide. This does not mean the opening of liberty only, but it is also a mastery (of choosing, acting and preserving rightward) and its responsibility of sharing this sense with the others within a common existence.

It is worth mentioning that each human situation is a cross road, a space of the human success that is achieved by and within the pre-action of the best sense. One has, thereafter, to say that it is a matter of choice of theses, conceptions,

knowledge and thoughts, choice of values and the criteria of human welfare, and choice of stakes and means of action in all the fields of the individual as well as the collective existence. If it is admitted that liberty, rationalism, equality, responsibility, action and **commitment**¹ (*Engagement*) do all provide existence with its coherence, then how can one, in an African context, account for a such coherence.

Within a cultural frame, and through literature, the African writer tries to show both the individual and the collective spheres in so far as they are in opposition. Unsatisfied with the collective principles of his society, the individual makes efforts to get rid of the controlling tenets through the denial, the ignorance and, most of the time, through the substitution of the principles that seem to him worth changing because of their irrationality. In reality, the individual seeks for the coherence of the world in which he lives and co-habitation of the allegedly incompatible ideas. It is then an afterward self-definition.

The endeavour of the writer to choose characters is not haphazard. Sometimes, one thinks that the thoughtful ideas, and the reasonable decision are of adult's make, yet it is not always evident.

The Algerian writer Mouloud Feraoun, in his *Le Fils du Pauvre*, seems to have incriminated himself. In reality he questions some way of living, a manner of existing, certainly, towards which he expresses his rebellion.

If there would be a question to be asked, it would be undoubtedly over Feraoun's position vis-à-vis himself as a child (a child character.). He seems to have a rational tendency and he is likely to neglect a certain type of description of a given category of characters (the children). The absence of description of the boy-in a given novel- lets think that the novel in question bears *existentialist germs*, for the being is seen as a *subject* and not as a describable *object*. Moreover, Feraoun's neutrality vis-à-vis any religious tendency consists of a strong argument that enhances two main existential principles:

- The liberty of choice
- The transcendence of man at the expense of all religious considerations.

This does not mean that a definite opinion is developed over Feraoun's position; on the contrary, this makes things too fuzzy and vague. This may as well raise many questions such as what makes Feraoun, for instance, being neutral vis-à-vis religion despite the possibility of converting to Christianity? And what makes him consider studies to be his first objective in life?

In fact, many questions could be asked; questions that deal fundamentally with the essence of the writer's objective.

Nietzsche admits that:

La vie est une lutte. L'individu doit s'imposer de quelle manière, chercher à dominer d'une certaine façon (Muller, 1963 : 42)

Adler considers that :

Le sentiment d'infériorité est naturel chez l'enfant, dont la faiblesse est réelle par rapport aux adultes ; mais qu'il doit disparaître avec développement de la personnalité ; et qu'il disparaîtra si le besoin d'auto-affirmation, dans ce développement, est satisfait d'une manière positive, c'est à dire socialement ou culturellement valable (Ibid)

It seems that both Adler and Nietzsche underline their view towards human struggle; a struggle which is linked to human liberty and thus existence. Man imposes himself through acting against all types of violence that may threaten his existence as human (liberty). The *value* and/or the *self* affirmation, in this case, have a close relation with the intra-subjectivity.

Considering Adler's hypothesis, and his interpretation to the understanding of Sartrean existentialismⁱⁱ, one can think that the notion of existence does have a relation with the affirmation of the *self* for the child. So it is the existence, in the optic of Feraoun's childhood. It is the affirmations of self through rejecting the stereotyped ideas developed by society, and proposing values which allow the affirmation of his own personality. He suggests a model of social value which contribute to the individual self-awareness and hence self-affirmation.

Since in Adler's hypothesis, existence is the resultant of the construction of a certain personality of the child, it seems, then, pertinent to suppose that an existential model that is so often researched by the child would be that which favours 'self affirmation'. Now and that the character of the child has always wanted to make choices, such as 'L'Ecole Normale Superieure', one can think that it is, implicitly, a desire to show his personalityⁱⁱⁱ. Making a choice which is personal means that the child is able of developing a positive halo over his personality, and that he is capable of distinguishing himself from the other's sensibilities that are likely to be irreducible.

It seems that Feraoun's choice to lay school or 'School of Jule Ferry' is not haphazard^{iv}. Here one may ask a very important question over the reasons that really urged this ambitious character (Fouroulou) to praise very highly the modern school. To answer this question, it is pertinent to re-contextualize this analysis, in time and space. One knows, obviously, that the character depends particularly on the social structure where he emerges.

The arduousness and precariousness of life during the 1930' until 60's, has incited the character to realize his deplorable situation: food shortage, sickness, and almost all the social calamities which are, in a certain measure, the consequences of a school that provide no social outlets. The modern school, on the contrary, could at least, provide him with an opportunity to become a school master.

One conceives with the already set idea that the modern school (Ecole Normale Superieur) has marked out his destiny: If there had been no scholarship, Fouroulou's destiny would have been different: the following dialogue is significant enough to confirm this statement .

- *Fils de Ramdane, ils t'ont balancé, hein ! Il te reste les chèvres, comme nous tons !*
- *Mais non, je retournerai à l'école !*
- *Avec l'argent de l'insurier, peut- être?*
- *Qu'est-ce que ce la peut te faire?*
- *Tu es idiot. Au lieu d'aider ton père, tu vas le ruiner...*

- *Lorsque finalement arriva la lettre qui apportait la bonne nouvelle, il retournera à Tizi-Ouzoii le coeur gonflé de joie, avec la farouche résolution de travailler jusqu' a l' épuisement pour réussir (FP, p. 129)*

It is certainly this opportunity that contributed in the raise of an existentialist model, as it is conceived by Feraoun.

Feraoun seems to have shown his tendency more towards the model school (the French School). Yet this does not mean that he is against the traditional school, for he does not deny his social conditions, his father's, and family's. In the absence of a French model, Fouroulou would have accepted to work land. For in the absence of his father Ramdane, he was a responsible, even his mother sees in him that adult to whom one owes respect, and on whom one can rely (FP, p. 102).

The little Menrad, as Feraoun shows, is very conscious of the problems and the plight of his family, particularly of his mother; he is, in fact, realistic. For his inner answer is *C'est-faux.... les enfants sont plus sensibles que cela. Il partagent les misères de leurs parents* (F.P, pp. 109, 1 10). This in another sense means that although Fouroulou prefers the French model, he *respects* at least the traditions and the family education, thus those of the group from which he cannot exclude himself, i.e., the education he had been receiving, despite its impossibility of satisfying Fouroulou's desire, had an impact on him.

To return to the social inconvenient, Feraoun may implicitly declare that the social condition of the country (Algeria), in that period, was not adequate and favourable enough to allow every single individual to join the French school, except very few who had a chance to study like for example, Said (one of the characters) who spent many years for no thing, but now he is among them¹ (FP, p. 116). Ramdane said also to his son *Effer* that studies had been reserved to rich people, and they are so poor that they can not

afford it (Ibid). This means, that in the absence of free studies, one can not improve his social conditions.

Feraoun, finally succeeds in joining a French School, believing that work is the only alternative, if he wants to substitute the already existing way of life. He is not contemplative: the joy of his spirit is in action and effort (Nacib, 1986, p.21). Fouroulou's commitment and action germinate his liberty of choice. Therefore, the way he views things joins, to some extent, the way Sartre views them, i.e., Feraoun transcends the human values in so far as they are conceived by the human himself, and are admitted to shape his personality according to a given model., which is aspired to by the actor himself.

Indeed Feraoun, enrolled a lay school, a school that makes him see things clearly, far from any traditional (archaic) constraints. If abstraction of religious consideration is not made, Feraoun would have been in the impossibility of setting his objective criticism of his society. Because religion prevents one from being objective, and thus suggesting the model of existence as it should. Religious interdictions, prohibition, and constraints are so cornering that may urge him to give in; he keeps distance vis-à-vis religion (Islam), for the tone he allows to talk about 'Mahomet's paradise' (p. 10) is significant enough to underline explicitly that distance which is, also, singled out in the existentialists' philosophy.

In reality, Feraoun, seems to be neutral vis-à-vis both Islam and Christianity. Yet this does not compulsory imply his atheist tendency and ideology. It seems that he tends towards laicism, i.e., he seems to have dealt with matters without referring to religious interpretation.

It is believed that Feraoun, despite the alleged denial of religion, has essentially a great respect to religion (Islam). For Nacib presents Feraoun as some one who pays no importance to Islam. He says that Feraoun and Voltaire approve the same ironic hatred for the Koranic verses. He adds that a believer, especially in Tizi, does not invoke as such the sacral in an indifferent profane tone. *He* refers to what Feraoun himself said in his novel to stress his argument:

Les mosquées out manifestement moins d'importance que les djemaâs...Les vieux que vont y prier ont l'air d'appartenir d un siècle révolu...' (FP, p. 14)

To advance a judgment, and pretend justifying it through a given declaration made by the author himself, or even relaying on what he says, is to set a one directional interpretation, which may not accept a criticism, and even putting one in the impossibility of allowing himself room for criticism. Therefore, relying on other intra-textual elements, one would say that Feraoun pays a great respect to 'Islam'.

In a society like Feraoun's, traditions and customs are tightly bound to religion, thus the type of education suggested and inculcated to a child is almost fully inspired by religion. The respect of adults, to the father, the mother and the relatives are features that are sturdily found in 'Islam' (in order not to generalize, and take other religions in consideration). Fouroulou appears in difficult situations; he had the choice between either disrespecting his father and mother or realizing his dreams. Yet, the way Fouroulou talks to his father implies in fact nothing but his respect:

Et si on m'accorde la bourse? Je pourrai continuer mes études sans t'occasionner de frais. Le maître me l' a dit' (FP, p. 116)

The conditional (tense) in Fouroulou's speech means that he can not declare overtly to his farther his discontentment, and that he wants really to carry on his studies. He completes this condition by a justification; he justifies that not because he is young and unable to protest, but because he is, first, aware of their social conditions, and, secondly, for he is not supposed to act against his father's decision. In Koran, there are verses which incite children to respect their parents:

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel the, but address them in terms of honour.(AL ISRA 17- 24)

We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him and in pain did she give him birth....(AHQAF, 46-15)

One should not forget that a child grows up with the type of education that his family provides him with. Because the nature of his soul in this age (young), allows the

modulations and the shaping of his personality. In this sense Nefissa Zerdoumi, argues that a child is born with a very intact and innocent soul ready to be submitted to the educational prints. The example that he observes, the acquisition of habits, repeated practices are the fundamental means of his education. He abides by the good or bad orientations that his personal experience provides him with (1970, p.59).

Joining Zerdoumi, one would say that Feraoun has acquired an education which prevents him from denying his father's religion (Islam). But now, and he is adult, Feraoun knows very well that there is a reason for which he prefers keeping distance between him and religion.

Certainly Feraoun in one letter of the 21st of March 1950 to '*Nouvelles*', Feraoun writes that:

Le troisième va être ridicule...parce qu'il termine par ce fameux Ramadhan (1962)

This correspondence may imply Feraoun's detachment from the religious practices of his society. And it may imply as well his dissatisfaction with the sacred in general. Feraoun's passivity and indifference manifested towards the religious rites refer to the ir-religious attitude of Voltaire, which condemns that way which does not come to terms with Christianity. Feraoun seems to have adopted the same position vis-à-vis religions (both Islam and Christianity): his position vis-à-vis Christianity could be clearly seen in the fact of not converting to Christianity though he used to attend the canticles, and read some verses from the Bible, but he had no aversion for the protestant religion (FP, p. 125).

One tries then to go further beyond the mere interpretation that could be attributed to the attitude of Feraoun vis-à-vis the sacred, and thus religion. The project of Feraoun seems to be the reproduction of an existentialist model, through his childhood; a model childhood which could be looked at from within an existentialist recipient. His existentialist speculation questions a certain taboo, i.e., religion prevents him from questioning the human existence, in that he tries to find intelligible answers to

the question of humanity. In reality, Feraoun denounces the instrumentation of religion and the rigid interpretation which seems, in essence, irrelevant to religious precepts. He believes that inflexibility of religion is almost absent, the point which makes him revolt against any religious norm.

Speaking about Fouroulou, his predisposition and action, as well as Feraoun's neutral religious tendency constitutes a consistent tissue, in which all the parameters are present to set a critical existentialist perspective. Throughout the 'denial' of the sacred., Feraoun intends to allow himself a free space for criticism, a free space in that it is not subjected to the religious restrictions. For it is argued that human liberty is, sometimes, limited when it is juxtaposed with religion. As existentialist, Feraoun, who praises highly the liberty of man, may find himself subjected to religious prohibitions, thus refrained from criticizing his society.

When he speaks about his sister Tity and his tyranny towards her, as well as the passivity of their parents, he seems to denounce the gender discrimination. If Moslem jurists are unanimous in their view that men are superior to women by virtue of their reasoning, abilities, knowledge and their supervisory powers, Feraoun's innermost conviction is then to join a great deal that of Gh. Ascha who says that:

Islam is deeply anti-woman, and it is the fundamental cause of the repression of Moslem women and remains the major obstacle to the evolution of their position (1989, p. 11)

These restrictions are certainly the factors which allow Feraoun keeping distance as far as religion is concerned. This idea seems, to some extent, acceptable. Yet, how can the distance kept between Feraoun and Christianity be explained?

In Tizi-Hibel, where Feraoun was born, the sacred is respected, and religion is practiced. The language in which Koran is written is never an inconvenient, but the problem, as Necib underlines, is in the conversion to Christianity. For allowing oneself such an act is detaching oneself from the group and thus from the whole Kabylean constellation (1986, p.21). The Kabylean society does not deal with matters

from a liturgical orientation; people believe, since the European is their enemy, any attempt to convert to Christianity is an act of betrayal and is considered blaspheme. It is better in this case to avoid it.

Feraoun is likely to suggest that the very exact position of man is to be free from any restriction, no matter whether it could be religious, political, or other. What is important to him is to visualize things objectively even if the ultimate results tend to act against the set order, code, law, or norms. The life he is acquainted with makes him reformulate his vision. In other words, his autobiography is neither a simple tale that transcribes his life nor a fictive tale; it is the life of 'someone' among his group; someone who might be in either a full contentment or dissatisfaction with their principles. It is then normal to say that this author has some tendency, a given position and thus a particular seal which marks his position. The existentialist vision of Feraoun is then necessary and not contingent. He does not transcend the human existence because he wants to do so, but because that man is so conscious and so free that he is aware of his existence as human being.

To come out with the idea that Feraoun is an existentialist writer, it is to say that he is rational, and that all what man is exposed to, but does not accept, is absurd. What is absurd is the fact of not taking both man and woman on the same footing; what is absurd is to refuse the idea that man needs promotion and thus development. What is also absurd is the ignorance of oneself. This is, I suppose, what could be deduced from Feraoun's suggested childhood, i.e., the childhood through which an existentialist model is elucidated.

One admits that Feraoun has a laic tendency; he may think that laicism is no more than denying the sacred, and refusing to bow in front the sacred. In reality, one may agree with this interpretation. To say that Feraoun is a laic is to say that he refused all the religious norms. Therefore, in this case, one should make clear that confusing and misleading people's conceptions of laicism. It is neither a denial nor a religious indifference or practical atheism, but it is an objective attitude vis-à-vis some matter. The author in this sense refuses dealing with his society objectively without taking religion to

be -par excellence- his very reference. He believes that religion is not flexible, and that society, on the other hand, is in mutation and transformation. This situation may incite man to remodel and shape himself according to changes.

The question of the existentialist vision and theory of self-awareness in *Le Fils du Pauvre* requires a debate. I believe that the diversity of the religious views and orientations as well as people's conception and reception of social matters are a great deal divergent. One cannot judge the idiosyncratic ways of conduct. Feraoun was in position that allows him to *choose* between Christianity and Islam (an act of liberty)^v .

To talk about human liberty and thus human existence, through the character of the child is to make clear that, although, human was born free, as Sartre declares, still his liberty remains conditioned by social, religious and political constraints. In other wording, the respect of the other, from an existentialist view point, is in itself a restriction.

In this regard, one is called to imagine a society where this philosophy is put into practice, andf generalized to reach practicably all the levels of society. The repercussion of the existentialist vision deserves as well being given a deal of importance, for they could have an interpretation especially when they are religiously approached.

NOTES

ⁱ Commitment : it is the French word *engagement*: for in fact In English the word Engagement do take an other meaning different essentially from the meaning aimed at in this context

ⁱⁱ I refer by Sartreian Existentialism to Sartre's philosophy of existence.

ⁱⁱⁱ One can define personality in terms of distinction and originality: in *Le Fils du Pauvre*, it depends closely on the formulation of certain number of choice, of cultural sensibility, and personal taste or *reference*.

^{iv} Après avoir été battu aux élections législatives de 1889, Jule Ferry, par ailleurs président du Conseil général des Vosges, est élu au Sénat en 1891. Il y préside la commission des douanes et la commission de l'Algérie pour laquelle il fera une longue mission en Algérie avril -juin 1892. En 1893 il apparaît comme candidat naturel à la présidence du Sénat où il est élu dès le premier tour. Il ne peut exercer cette charge qu'une vingtaine de jours, puisqu'il meurt d'une crise cardiaque le 17 mars 1893, ce qui fait de lui le Président de la haute assemblée au mandat le plus court. Sur proposition d'Alexandre Ribot, président du conseil, la chambre des députés et le Sénat votent l'organisation de funérailles nationales. Comme Jule Ferry a eu la chance d'influencer le system éducatif français, les écoles qui étaient payantes sont devenues gratuites. La raison pour laquelle quelques écoles françaises, jusqu'à aujourd'hui, portent son nom. C'est pour quoi on peut dire que l'école citée dans le Fils du pauvre est celle de Jule Ferry. (<http://www.senat.fr/evenement/archives/ferr1.html>)

^v Choice is central to human existence, and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose (Feraoun's case) is a choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. For individuals are free to choose their own path, existentialists, have argued, they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads.

Bibliography

- **Ascha, Gh:** *Femme en Islam*, Bernar Grasset, Paris, 1989
- *Assalu* (Kabyle newspaper): *Monday, the 21nd of February 11990.*
- **Feraoun, M :** *Le Fils du Pauvre*, Seuil, Paris, 1950
- **Feraoun, M :** *Journal*, Ed Seuil, Paris, 1962
- *L'Hebdo n Tmurt* (Kabyle Newspaper): Semaine du Lundi 20 Mars au Dimanche 26 Mai.
- **Mueller, F.L :** *la Psychologie Contemporaine*, Petit Bibliographique Payot, Paris, 1963
- **Nacib, Y :** *Mouloud Feraoun*, SNED, Alger, 1982, 1983
- **Sartre, J.P :** *l'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, Naget, paris, 1951
- **Sartre, J.P :** *Situation, X Politique et autobiographie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976
- *TAJWEED Qur4an With meaning translation in English*, by **Abdullah Yusuf Ali** and *Transliteration* by **Sobhi Taha**, Dar-Al-Maarifah, 2003
- **Zerdoumi, N :** *l'Enfant d'Hier : l'Education de l'Enfant en milieu traditionnel Africain*, François Maspero, Paris, 1982