

Mouloud Feraoun's *La terre et le Sang*. A Fictionalized Tale

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to present new directions for understanding Mouloud Feraoun's *La terre et le sang* (1953). By considering Walter Benjamin's theoretical reflections, with a particular interest in his concept of «Storytelling», the task is to show that Feraoun can neither be regarded simply as a transmitter and a translator of the popular verb nor the reproducer of specific cultural patterns, but an artist with a rich and fertile imagination. The present paper examines the novel as an embodiment of the community-created culture and counter-colonial discourse making of its author a self-assertive community agent with the potential for forging a new historically informed identity.

Résumé

Le présent article propose une lecture du roman *La terre et le sang* (1953) de Mouloud Feraoun afin de montrer que l'auteur n'est pas uniquement un simple agent qui transmet et qui traduit le verbe populaire, encore moins le reproducteur de schémas culturels distincts. Il paraît tel un artiste doté d'une imagination riche incontestablement inspirée par la tradition orale Kabyle. L'analyse prend son fondement théorique à partir des stratégies discursives initiées par Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), une figure singulière de la pensée critique contemporaine.

It is said that a young man collected stories from everyone he met but he never shared in return. Instead, he placed what he gathered into a bag which he secreted away in his closet. One day, the stories conspired

to harm their collector for keeping them to himself. Luckily, a faithful servant found them and started telling: "Stories are meant to be shared and passed on to others" (An old Korean Folktale).

Introduction

The present article underscores the textual richness and brings to the fore the creative and discursive devices and strategies with which to examine the voice of Feraoun, the storyteller according to the theoretical concept of "storytelling" suggested by Walter Benjamin. It will focus on the teller's voice, which is dynamic in nature, vivid and

vigorous, supple and subtle. It is a voice that is interested in the struggle against colonialism and efforts to overcome its legacy. It provides freedom of expression from one generation to another because it always connects people in good and bad times, and therefore, predisposes the communication focus to be interpersonal. Similar to flexible clay in the hand of the skilled potter, it relentlessly expects renovation by the creative tongue and impulse of the verbal artist to re-shape it into even more fascinating forms. This voice has been, so far, not heard by Mouloud Feraoun's literary reviewers, who have not even begun scratching the surface of the enormous complexity and intricacy of the form and content of *La terre et sang*.

Walter Benjamin's Concept of "Storytelling"

Storytelling, as the German theorist suggests it, is the act of telling stories based on a "communicable experience", which means, a creative art and method contributing to strengthen and to regulate the auditor's sporadic imagination in new ways that meet his needs as it helps his growth intellectually, socially, spiritually, and emotionally (Benjamin[1936], Zohn.1968:85). As a vocation to which everyone is called to participate, the story teller narrates his stories with an exciting and successful way to help the audience to learn. His stories in which listeners can look within and find deeper meanings that inspire and force them to create their own images (Ibid.95). Storytelling cultivates and promotes the use of memory and imagination in order to reinforce the communication skills and provide the tools with which the listener may effectively settle through life's daily interactions. The advantage of storytelling is not meant to know the story as part of the mental collection, but to feel it because it has a profound purpose to guide and transform human lives. Stories avoid thinking of imagination as a historical activity but as a daily necessity (P.102). Through the experience of storytelling, adds Walter Benjamin, the values and beliefs are easily transmitted in an understandable and memorable way to auditors via oral storytelling. Stories are given voice in a respectful and soulful way and a strong sense of community is created through oral performance as a special bond forms between the teller and what is told. The practitioner of storytelling reminds that the addresses are all bound to each other in

some way. He creates the effect of allowing his readers to enter his inner world and share in his personal hardships and achievements. Stories connect people from different cultures. This link is exemplified by stories which bridge cultural divides, to teach the audience the need to respect and care for the elders and ancestors. Incorporating the art of storytelling belonging to societal groups also works towards the creation of tolerance in the community. The storyteller speaks a universal language through which he explores not only his own culture but also refers to the culture of other communities and other worlds, concludes the theorist (P.104).

Strategies of Storytelling in Feraoun's Novel

In Mouloud Feraoun's *La terre et le sang*, storytelling and the folk tradition forms the backbone of the narrative, which is peppered with myths and legends preserved among common people. Storytelling also occupies a prominent place in Kabyle culture as it affords people the best chances for sharing experience across it. The cultivation of language sensibility takes place in the context of storytelling as a creative activity. It recognizes the value of memory as the key to people's relationship with their past, their heritage and sense of identity, as people tend to remember in the present the things, which in the past had borrowed significance for their existence. The novel's characters speak and weave into the fabric of their everyday conversation with some allusions to folktales, legends, and myths. They support their opinions and attitudes with some appropriately chosen proverbs, traditional maxims and cryptic anecdotes. Their dialogues are chosen from an oral tradition. The non-verbal elements and their functions range from the creation of mood to local color, and Algerian flavor. The writer appeals greatly to the use of oral narratives which, in the words of Jack Goody, contain five aspects of literary forms including epics, myths, legends, folktales, and personal narratives which have many functions and many levels of interpretation. The telling of tales is often thought to be characteristic of all human discourse and it is fashionable to speak of narrative as a universal form of expression, one which is applicable to the life experiences of individuals and to the dramas of social interaction (Goody.2010:122).

However, the question addressed, in the context of our analysis, is for what purpose (s) Feraoun uses the oral legacy of storytelling; and how it is displayed in the narrative. First, the reason of using storytelling is a "strategy" aiming, first and foremost, to rescue the image of his world from European Eurocentric and colonial discourse. The use of some elements from oral tradition becomes a means to reclaim the lost heritage through an appropriate use of the cultural and linguistic tools available to him. The task is done mainly in reviving past history found in oral traditions and the memories of old people. More importantly, Feraoun gives voice to "the voiceless," which stands for the quest for his countrymen's voices. The value accorded to storytelling among other oral sources aims to document the knowledge of his people and to democratize history by representing marginalized people and groups whose voices, memories, and actions were often absent from the official (written) records. In other words storytelling in *La terre et le sang* is "not only a means of knowledge but also a frame of authority", which can be understood as a message or a testimony transmitted orally from one generation to another. It is also an evidence of his people's pre-colonial past that was absent from dominant colonial histories and narratives. The task of the storyteller in this regard, is to decode the meaning of oral traditions reported to him as "oral statements" (White. Miesche. Cohen 2001: 2).

Thus, the appeal to storytelling, therefore, can be seen as a kind of counter-history to those fictional colonial accounts about Feraoun's homeland; it also becomes a kind of therapy to rationalize and counteract the displacement and alienation he experienced during his colonial education.

Feraoun went to schools of western education, but his instruction and socialization process started around the family's cooking fires after the evening meals, when all the family assembled to listen and participate in storytelling sessions. He grew up with tales about human beings personified as animals and animated trees, nature and spirits which constitute the largest corpus of the Kabyle oral stories. As a child, he was greatly influenced by the tales that his aunts (Khalti and Nana), used to tell in the nights around the firelight (Kanoun). He was brought up by his aunts who early in life inspired his interest in

Kabyle mythology and folklore, a fact which apparently accounts for the predominance of Kabylian lore in his literary works. In his *Le fils du pauvre* (1950), the author narrates the traditional folk approach of organizing night stories and riddles around his aunts who usually place themselves at the edge of an audience in a circular formation and start by the traditional formula, "Machaho tlem chaho atidba rabi amussaru", the equivalent in meaning of the English "Once upon a time, a very good time. Not my time, nor your time, it is old peoples time". The formulation serves to capture the attention of the audience and establish a close link between the orator and the listener. Feraoun describes his early immersion in story telling through his literary counterpart, Fouroulou Menrad as follows:

When sleep fails to come, we tell stories while Nana works. I have to say that these stories drew me strongly towards my aunts [...]. During storytelling she and I were in another world. From whole cloth, she knew how to create an imaginary real mover which we were rulers. I became judge and benefactor of the poor orphan who wanted to marry a princess, all powerful I witnessed the triumph of little Mquidech, who overcome the ogress, I whispered wise answers to Hechaichi, who tries to escape the chambers of the bloodthirsty Sultan [...] The story flows from Khalti's mouth and I drink it avidly. (McNair. 2000:121).

The stories were used in educating child into the culture of his people, teaching him ethnical principles and moral values, and anchoring in him the feeling of the group. In addition to this, the stories also provide recreation and entertainment. Feraoun is significantly influenced by African oral traditions which he drew from the Kabyle verbal art forms to create new visions of life and new poetic idioms with remarkable originality. The oral elements occur in the form of Feraoun's imaginative use of storytelling. This oral narrative device constitutes the vehicle of the plot and the dramatic action in *La terre et le sang*.

More importantly, as a schoolboy, the influence of oral tradition on Feraoun continued. During the holidays, he and some of his friends enjoyed playing the flute and singing in the summer nights. He usually listened to some of his friends reciting stories and poems by the famous Kabyle bard, Si Mohand ou Mhand. The author was greatly influenced by Si Mohand's poems which he collected and translated

into French, under the title, *Les Isfras de Si Mhand ou Mhand* (1960). The strength of his *La terre et le sang* lies in its author's strong allegiance to the popular traditions of storytelling and folktale. Feraoun reproduces the rhythms, sentence patterns of Kabyle speech rural images, analogies and maxims which directly come from oral tradition. His evocations of cultural traditions serve two purposes: first, it is a counterclaim to the French allegation that Kabyle are uncivilized. Second, it is to provide a background justifying the narratives insistence on its own realism. Apart from serving as means of cultural preservation, the importance of storytelling, its recurrence in his novel assures that the oral collections have value to people there are hardly any of Feraoun's novels that do not employ storytelling as literary devices which he uses to localize his novels in his Kabyle culture.

1-The Technique of Being at Home in the Faraway

Storytelling is displayed all through the narrative of *La terre et le sang*, starting from the name of the village of where the story is set. Ighil-Nzman is a rural community situated in a remote and unidentified space and time. The most outstanding and identifiable feature of storytelling is repetition. According to Isidore Okpewho, it is one of the most fundamental characteristic of oral literature. It has both aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression, whether song or narrative or other kind of statement. It also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organization of the oral performance (Okpewho.1992:71).The same characteristic of repetition is displayed in the first lines of the Feraoun's second novel where the narrator announces that the narrative is based on a true story, which happened in a Kabylia village (Feraoun. 2003: 3). Then the same voice moves to delve into the past in order to reconstruct the story of a people; it tells their way of life; reflect what they usually do; what they think; how they live and have lived; list some of their values, their joys and sorrows. But the voice also warns that the access to such a place is not an easy task, the following passage is illustrative:

La route serpente avec mauvaise grâce avant d'y arriver. Elle part de la ville cette route, et il faut deux heures pour la parcourir quand l'auto est solide. On roule d'abord sur un tronçon caillassé, bien entretenu, puis après, c'est fini : on change de commune. On s'engage, selon le temps, dans la poussière ou la boue, on monte, on monte, on zigzague follement au-dessus des précipices. On s'arrête pour souffler, on cale les roues, on remplit le réservoir. Puis on monte, on monte encore. Ordinairement, après avoir passé les virages dangereux et les ponts étroits, on arrive enfin. On fait une entrée bruyante et triomphale au village d'Ighil-N-zman (Feraoun.2003 : 03).

The device of repetition used in the above passage does not facilitate access to Ighil-Nzman, which suggests a historical place reminiscent of the remote past order and stability when people lived in harmony closely linked by family contacts and their love for their land. Except for brief accounts of disruption, resulting from the exposure of one of its members to a foreign culture and values Feraoun's presentation of the period suggests social tranquility and shows the villagers' sacred respect for the earth, their closeness to it and their dependence on it both in life and in death. The name of the village, Ighil-Nzman, is also suggestive of the author's evocations of Kabyle traditional life style where the concept of the tribe is consistently used as a signifier of order, harmony, and the depository of a valuable cultural heritage and cohesiveness. The community depicted distinguished by its fairly traditional values such as obedience to authority through certain customary laws and the preservation and observance of the ancient cultural practices prescribed by the ancestors. All of them aim to strengthen peace and order. Feraoun conveys, most faithfully, the quality of life in Ighil-Nzman. The scenes he depicts come to life largely because of the wealth of details and the liveliness and appropriateness of the imagery stored in his and others' memories.

2-The Power of Collective Memory in the Narrative

Another commonly used stylistic device which can be identified with storytelling is the circular quest. The structure of Feraoun's second novel is grounded in the paradigm of storytelling and oral folktales which appear in the circular passage of Amer through a series of adventures which start, with his departure from his native village, Ighil-Nzman, through his nomadic life in Europe, and his

decision to return to his fatherland. The quest for a return to his origins, and his efforts to reintegrate himself in his native village, all correspond to the pattern of the Kabyle storytelling. Three phases describe the spatial and chronological progression of Amer-Oukaci in the novel; the happy and incessant period when he lives in his village a well-structured universe with its norms and social values. Then follows the difficult period when he resides in an alien setting, an environment which does not help him to make choice. The final stage corresponds to Amer's return. As a storyteller, the author exposes the traumas of this Algerian idealist young man. After his coming back from France, he attempts to reintegrate himself into his native village life. The tragic consequences of his emigration and encounter with the European cultures reveal certain problems due to French colonialism. The time of the narrative spans over twenty years. The story begins with Amer's departure to France and ends with his death. In France Amer stays fifteen years. *La terre et le sang* contains retrospective movements, described by Gennette in his *Narrative Discourse* (1980) as analepses that differ from conventional flashbacks, referring to related incidents which have occurred before the time of their narration. Through these analepses, the narrator departs from the present story of Amer in his village to inform the reader of some earlier events. Feraoun uses ellipses to depict, for example, the origins of Amer's alienation, the various hard conditions of emigrants in France, and Amer's involvement in Rabah's murder.

More significantly, Amer resembles the hero of Kabyle oral folktales since he makes a circular journey in crossing the sea to France then returning to his village of birth. The second stage is represented by the withdrawal from home by Amer into France where he loses all sense of identity. The withdrawal is further intensified by being made into a completely alien environment. As folktale heroes Amer views life outside his village as chaotic; he discovers that people he has come across during his journey to France tend to behave contrary to the villagers of Ighil-Nzman. But unlike, the heroes of folktales, though Amer gains lucidity as a result of his journey, he remains unable to integrate himself into his community. His quest results in rupture, not in reintegration. He fails to adapt himself to his

time and place because he is not in tune with his culture and does not possess the moral means to meet the eventualities of the story. He neither respects the values of his community nor collaborates in their preservations. He rather transgresses 'the code of honour' and becomes socially maladjusted, out of tune with his native culture. His love affair with Chabha does not conform to the conventions of his community. Therefore, his clansmen stigmatize him because he disobeys the customs. Amer's conflict is caused by social circumstances which change his intentions and prevents him from reaching his objectives.

3-Immersion in the Ancestral Traditions Through the Voice of the “Amusnaw”

Feraoun, as mentioned earlier, grew with the habit to hear oral renderings of tales from various adults during his childhood life. In his turn, as a storyteller, he uses a whole repertoire of voices to tell about the traditional governance process as it is embedded in the Kabyle tradition. The storyteller's voice captures the historical interpretations of their politics and its implications for local development through the eyes of a rural population. It is also the voice probing land use and questions about the changing concepts of land tenure among the dwellers of Ighil-Nzmen that reveal how land was an important symbol of control for the Kabyles. It is the burning voice that has embraced oral histories, particularly to capture the knowledge and memories of people, both nationally-prominent and in local community, who struggled against the colonial oppression, racism and injustice. These oral sources challenge the dominant historiographical assumptions. It is also the voice bringing its culture traditions knowledge and habits in its heads and heart, resurrecting and transmitting them in their new worlds. It is the voice, which offers the closer look at his society's value than any written record could. Finally, it is the voice reiterating that people's culture, identity, and view of the world cannot be fully expressed and totally understood in isolation from its language.

More precisely, the voice of the storyteller is complemented by that of the “Amusnaw” represented by Ramdane. In his voice, resides an abiding, soft nature which forces the reader to feel respect and

sympathy. Though he is not a great talker, he speaks when he must and his words are carefully chosen, go to the point, and speak of tolerance and forgiveness. He is equally dedicated to communal rather than personal welfare. He is presented as a unifier, a moralist, and therefore a model of character to follow. Feraoun shapes Ramdane as a wise man who ought to be consulted in time of conflict. His wisdom is clear and untiring from the beginning of the novel and appears in his readiness to reconcile the Ait Larbi and the Ait Hamouche families. He also mediates the quarrel between Amer and the Ait Hamouche, attempts to convince Slimane to not only accept and forgive Amer, but also to agree for a compromise (P.74). He convinces him that his nephew deserves kind consideration and forgiveness and hopes to spread the gospel of reconciliation and brotherly love between the two families. He tries to erase the disagreement and hate of the Ait Hamouche and the Ait Larbi caused by Rabah ou Hamouche's accident in the French mine and keeps insisting that Amer is neither a guilty nor a wicked person, and that he is rather a victim of André's conspiracy. More significantly, Ramdane is shaped as the guardian of the tradition too, the voice of old ancestors as well as an executive of wise decisions. Feraoun also uses this character as a vehicle for expressing some of his own ideas and projects. He advises Amer and invites him to come back to the wisdom of the ancestors in the cemetery (P.103). He has proven to be wise and succeeds in maintaining his position in the village. He also keeps the respect of his neighbors integral. In the course of the narrative, Ramdane is depicted as a more thoughtful man than Amer. The expression of his own passionate feelings is made in coherent and carefully structured sentences which indicate his considerable self-control. As the situation deteriorates with the women's gossip at the fountain, followed by the drinker's sharp words, Ramdane remains quiet and succeeds in using, without any reservation, whatever means are necessary to avoid humiliation (P.200). All these examples prove that Ramdane accommodates himself with his surrounding environment; all his virtues force the reader to regard him as the sanest and the most sensible character throughout the novel.

4-The Tale and its Multitude of Interpretations

The next idea that links Feraoun's second novel to storytelling is through what Walter Benjamin calls "amplitude of interpretation". This technique can be seen in the open-ended closure of the narrative. Amer's tragic end can be subject to four interpretations: Firstly, the death of Amer means that no one can escape his fate; he falls in a trap exactly on the same model as that which André sets for Rabah ou Hamouche. Secondly, Amer's tragedy signifies his failure to reintegrate into his community. As he becomes alienated and unable to reintegrate, he kills himself since Western values implanted arbitrarily lead to his destruction. Thirdly, Amer's death means victory and not a hopeless ending since, in death, Amer finds the harmony and rest that eluded him from the moment he left his homeland. The closing chapter is an epilogue in which the death of Amer leads him towards peace, reconciliation, and reconnection to the earth: "Ce sont les pierres et la terre- même qui le tuent" (P.220). The return to his final resting place can be seen as the ultimate source of peace and harmony that Amer found so deceptive in his life. It is a place where all his conflicts vanish. It becomes perfectly clear that the death of Amer and Slimane have merged their souls at rest. The sinister death ends Amer's consciousness of guilt while Slimane is granted grace and peace by his return to his beloved land. Finally, what the death of Amer offers, is a warning to observe correct behavioral codes. Amer's misbehavior as a man, who rebelliously steps beyond cultural limits, is met by troubles as a consequence of his misconduct. If we consider Amer's tragic death, then the fault is something in him, which leads to the love affair with a married woman and his error remains his belief that his personal desires can be or have a right to exist in a traditional society. Amer's love affair with Chabha does not only bring shame and humiliation on their families but also brings to the ground Marie and Chabha and affects the lives of the entire village. As the novel closes, the love affair takes the calamity to its furthest extreme by the sense of blow it causes to his mother, his wife, his relatives and friends. The story is subject of many "endings": the first is the horrific death of Amer; the second the effect on Chabha and Marie; finally, is the apparently conclusion drawn by the villagers, who discuss the

incident thoroughly from all sides until it was understood, and that one among other conclusions, is spelled out briefly by Lamara. The inevitability of death is also presented in metaphorical language in which life is symbolized as a journey with the beginning of life and its end. It represents the world beyond the physical and mortal realm in which the dead man's exists. The connection between the two worlds is expressed by a folktale to show the wisdom of ancestors. It tells the story of a Cheikh and the Sultan, told by Si Mahfoud to his visitors (P.79) and it is expressed as a piece of advice to Slimane and Ramdane.

Conclusion

In sum, Feraoun works the oral elements and uses storytelling as a means to investigate the worldview of the Kabyles and provide a snapshot of the social and historical context that has shaped and continues to shape this culture. Storytelling can be seen as a part of his larger project of reassessing the history of his Algerian people by presenting divergent accounts of what really happened. Storytelling the quintessential ingredient in the oral tradition, is used by Feraoun to empower his characters with a voice and, therefore, provide the means to reconstruct their own histories. As a storyteller, he becomes a kind of cultural mediator, building a bridge to allow the listener/reader to cross from one culture space to another. One of his projects in his work is the examination of how history and memory intertwine and interfere with each other. Feraoun uses apt metaphors and vivid similes that reflect the social and spiritual experiences of his people. The literary significance of the expression is made manifest in the elegance of the words used by Ramdane; their appropriateness, and their perceptiveness with which they are uttered within the context of the narrative. The contents of the stories are changed by oral transmission, which gives birth to "numerous versions of a tale, often very different from each other and sometimes hardly recognizable. Feraoun draws on the tradition of unraveling numerous versions of a tale to add different perspectives to the story. Storytelling, therefore can be seen as a kind of counter-history to those fictional colonial accounts about his fatherland. As mentioned earlier, it can also

regarded as a remedy to lessen and counteract the displacement and alienation he experiences during his colonial education; his resort to storytelling as a survival tactic not only amidst unwelcoming surroundings but, more importantly, to compensate for his own inadequacies and frustrations. More importantly, storytelling presents the bulk of material used by Feraoun. It must be emphasized that other forms of oral narrative, folktales that focus on gender and legal problems, divorce and custody dispute settlement of women, and interethnic marriages, which the author uses as various elements from oral traditions which have an important place in his community. He uses them as a way to enrich his narrative, to give it form and structure, and from there, to imbue it with meaning. His use of material from his oral tradition range from the use of familiar images and symbols, myth, proverb forms, songs to fables including the morality they preach, and vision they express. All of them are assigned a function in the narrative. So, we can deduce that the hold that oral tradition exerted on Feraoun is so strong that we can say that although he is greatly influenced by their readings of Western writers there is sufficient evidence of his use of traditional material, which comes to sight in the vocational and cantatory devices from oral traditions used imaginatively to draw attention to his traditional society.

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