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## **Culture and Interdisciplinary Models of the West and the Other: The Black Renaissance in America and the Literary Revolution in Algeria**

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In Toward the African Revolution, Fanon argues that since colonialism could not eradicate the colonized people, it perpetuated the agony of their culture by desertifying their cultural space. Thus, what used to be a living culture, open to the future, was forced to become subaltern, closed, fixed and caught in the shackles of oppression. (Fanon, 44) The Black man in America always looked at himself through the eyes of the White men, “trying to be what he thought they were, or trying to be what he thought they wanted him to be” (Huggins, 245) seeking their approval all the time. The war experience and the discriminatory ways the black soldiers were treated when returning from Europe at the end of the First World War became the driving force behind the emergence of a “New” negro, assertive in demanding his rights as a full American citizen while at the same time celebrating a new pride in a distinct cultural heritage.

The “New” negro that emerged carried thus, the burden of both self-consciousness and culture building. Yet, image making and image conceptualizing were not easy things. The black man in America knew no other country than the country in which he was living and spoke no other language than the one spoken by the whites. Indeed, as soon as the African slave reached the New World, he was denuded of his native culture and extirpated of his native language. He was even denied his native religion. Thus, to rebuild his shattered life, he was obliged to adopt the culture of the people he was forced to live with. But even this new culture was not freely open to him. His white masters allowed him access to western culture on a very limited basis. For example, he was not allowed to learn to read or to write, and the few ones who managed to do so, did it secretly and sometimes at the risk of losing their lives. This peculiar situation did little to encourage literary pursuits. In any case, by its very nature, slavery limited the creative expression of black people to folk forms.

It was not until the Emancipation that more freedom was granted to black people, and a group of them could distinguish itself by its literary production. Indeed, the years after the Emancipation witnessed the rise of a Negro middle class who enjoyed a freer access to white culture. They often learned to read and write, and even acquired the advantages of higher education. However, it goes without saying that this new middle class had to adjust themselves to the dominant white culture and model their ideology after that of the whites. Their attitude was assimilationist in character as they tried to identify with the whites in their manners as a way of minimizing the colour line between the two races. This ideology caused

more harm than good to the black man in general and the black masses in particular as the Negro middle class showed hostility and a feeling of revulsion towards them.

During that period, the black middle class novelists or 'Talented Tenth' had no scruple to strengthen their position at the expense of the black masses. Thus, the black characters in their works were akin to minstrels. Their presentations of black men folk were meant to satisfy white men's racist views of blacks as silly, simple, and self-mocking. Moreover, the colour line was unfair to this group of black people not because it despised blacks as a race, but just because it was unable to make a distinction between a black person from the masses and a black one from the middle class. They believed that they were a privileged minority and had to be treated accordingly by both the black folks and the whites.

While trying to reduce the colour line between them and the whites, the black middle class created adversarial relationships that took the form of inter and intra community distancing and feeling of alienation. The black middle class believed they were superior to the rest of black people in both race and class. The fact that lighter –skinned black people were identified as having white ancestry created a discrimination that was divisive within black communities. They thought they were more privileged than dark-complexioned black people and deserved a better treatment. While grovelling before those who had more power than them, they often demonstrated cruelty to those they saw as inferior and darker.

The second generation of black novelists emerged just after the First World War, and their adjustment to the dominant white culture was marked by a conflicting pattern of identification and rejection. They were at the same time alike and different from their white contemporaries. On the one hand, they had to be conversant with western culture, especially with the traditions of English literature. On the other hand, their pride and self-esteem suffered from the unpleasant image of themselves they received from the white people and the black middle class. Thus, after the experience of war, this group of young writers foresaw a different future for the black people.

Their starting point was rebellion against the first generation of educated Negroes. In their rebellion and defiance, the Negro writer of the 1920's aimed at destroying the literary barriers raised by the guardians of the Victorian tradition. They also aimed at giving positive portrayals of black life and black people. They tried to rebuild what had been torn down by the whites and the middle class blacks. The "New" negro soon understood that the (re) construction of his racial identity required the death of the "Old" negro and his rebirth into a new one. "The very idea of the "New Negro" implie[d] an "Old" negro who [was] somehow outdated, inadequate, or insufficient for the new cultural moment; the question of what constitute[d] blackness [had] to be rethought and reasserted". (Favor, 2)

Accordingly, the "New" negro struggled to find a way to paint a more representative and authentic portrait of himself and of Black America than the one painted by the white men centuries before, and that still persisted in the minds. The "Harlem Renaissance" became a logical extension of the "New Negro" movement in the areas of art, music and literature. A remarkable generation of poets, essayists, playwrights, novelists, musicians, and painters collectively created a unique historical opportunity to forge the cultural and intellectual identity of the Black Americans. They experimented in a variety of styles and attempted an objective and effective self - conscious search for identity.

Indeed, freed from the servile imitation of Anglo- Saxon culture by earlier generations, the African American literary production of the Harlem Renaissance witnessed a shift in its

goals. Beginning by attacking the stereotyped image of black life, the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance struggled to define themselves in a white society, trying to describe the reality of black life as experienced by black authors rather than as imagined by white ones. They were encouraged to see themselves through their own eyes and not the contemptuous or hostile eyes of others. The Black authors, as Locke states, “have now stopped speaking for the Negro- They speak as Negroes.” (Locke, 48) Thus, the Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance started by freeing themselves from “the minstrel tradition and the fowling-nets of dialect” that marked white expectations for Black American literature.

This florescence of creative activity was served by magazines and journals black as well as white. Indeed, the twenties witnessed the emergence, in addition to the existing white literary magazines, of black magazines and literary quarterlies such as Fire, Harlem, Stylus, Quill, and Black Opals which encouraged black literary production by publishing articles, short stories, poems and reviews produced by young black writers. Add to that the literary competitions organised by powerful journals such as Crisis, The Messenger and Opportunity. However, a great number of the owners of these journals and magazines tried to direct and influence the orientation of this new literary movement.

Indeed, by the middle of the 1920's, many black intellectuals had become conscious of this literary upsurge and tried to lead and guide the young writers. Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, and W.B. Du Bois, for instance, insisted on the celebration of folk culture with the primacy of Southern rural geography in the discourse of black identity. Baker insisted mainly on the anti-elitist exploration of African American culture. He believed that more importance should be given to the black lower classes where, in his view, the most authentic blackness was to be found.

DuBois, for his part, promoted certain types of experience and cultural practice as more central than others to African American art. In The Soul of Black Folks, DuBois made it clear that specific geographies and historical moments were central to the understanding and production of a new black literature. He insisted that the understanding of the Southern rural folk was the key to gaining a ‘proper’ perspective on Black America. The folk, as seen by DuBois and the black writers of the Harlem Renaissance were primarily black, rural, working class southern families who spoke with a regional dialect. Hazel Carby makes this point when she asserts that “our ideas of an Afro-American literary tradition are dominated by an ideology of the ‘folk’ from fictional representations of sharecroppers.” (Carby, 127)

DuBois used the pages of Crisis to ask writers and publishers to examine the search for self through ancestral means. According to him, black literature, although it had always existed, remained powerless and marginal, and the works of art imitative and thin as long as the blacks turned against themselves and aped white behaviour. Thus, far from becoming mere entertainers, the writers of the ‘Black Renaissance’ were asked to regard literature as a means of seriously examining the problems of the black people, and to explore serious issues involving them. DuBois argued that it was impossible for the Black Americans to know their true capabilities because of the oppressive nature of American slavery. Once they freed themselves from stereotypes and prejudices, the black Americans would discover within themselves their moral strength as a people. Then in 1920, writing again in Crisis, DuBois sharpened his earlier musings: “A Renaissance of American Negro literature is due; the material about us is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart.” (DuBois, 35) Thus, the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance aimed at serving as spoke persons for their race and urged the young novelists and poets to do the same.

However, one should not ignore the perplexity of the situation of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. They lived in a culture that denied them the very authority they sought to attain as authors. The search for an identity for the New Negro necessitated the rediscovery of his heritage. This heritage was to serve as a justification for the new vision of the self. The Harlem Renaissance reflected the belief of a group of young African American writers in the creation of distinctly African American forms of expression to encapsulate a respect and recovery of African and Black American history as a source for pride and self-esteem. Their task was to delineate Negro character and personality in the American context. As Robert Bone wrote, "The Negro Renaissance was essentially a period of self-discovery, marked by a sudden growth of interest in things Negro." (Bone, 45) The quest for Negro identity, then, was to find one's roots in the homeland, the South, without fear or shame and to claim it as one's own.

In the case of Algeria, the best way to eradicate the existing culture had been through the process of assimilation and the imposition of French as the only language to be studied at schools. Algerian children who came from privileged families and who were fortunate enough to attend these French schools claimed the benefits of French culture and achievements. They were keen to consider themselves as French and to advocate the total integration of Algeria into France . Most of them became teachers or doctors, and their parents were either rich people, army officers or civil servants. When they started writing, they aimed first at praising French values and benefits. Thus, a generation of novelists emerged, all promoting the presence of France in Algeria as the best possible thing that could happen to their country and their countrymen.

Mohammed Ould Cheikh, one of the novelists of that period, claimed that under the leadership of France, Algerians could become enlightened and achieve tremendous progress. He went as far as to consider the French occupation of Algeria as a golden opportunity for the Algerian people.

La cause est entendue. Le pays a trouvé , sous l'égide française , la paix et le bien- être...il n'est pas un indigène qui n'ait de la reconnaissance à la Mère patrie pour les bienfaits qu'elle lui a prodiguée, et plus particulièrement pour l'avoir tiré des ténèbres, pour le faire percer dans la lumière, la vie et le bonheur...nous étions morts et nous sommes ressuscités... (Ould Cheikh, 1934)

Women writers, despite their small number, were also attracted by the policy of assimilation and the adoption of French ways of living and thinking. As an illustration, we can refer to the novel of Djamila Debèche, Leila, jeune fille d'Algerie (1947). Leila, the heroine of the novel went to French schools and adopted French habits and views. At one stage of her evolution, we find her criticizing her family for refusing to let her give up the veil, symbol of Algerian women's identity, and adopt French clothing. "Je ne puis en vouloir a ma famille(...) Elle croit être dans le vrai, tout le mal vient du fait que j'ai évolué alors qu'elle est en marge de la civilisation."(Debèche, 30)

Djamila Debèche was very explicit in her support of the assimilationist policy and her desire to « free » Algerian women from the constraints of traditions and patriarchy. Djamila Debèche went as far as to dedicate her book to the emancipated French women who were models to be followed by Algerian women.

C'est en pensant à vous, femmes de France, que j'ai écrit ces pages. Dans la métropole, comme dans la France d'outre Mer, un magnifique effort est fait par L'élément féminin (...)

En Algérie, bien des choses restent à faire dans le domaine culturel (...)  
Je souhaite qu'à la faveur de ces lignes puisse apparaître plus nettement la situation de la musulmane algérienne qui se trouve elle aussi à un tournant de sa destinée...

For the Algerian masses, however, these new ideas coming from this emergent group of writers were simply spurred by western propaganda which was designed to destroy the integrity of the Algerian culture and identity. A woman's wearing of the veil, for the Algerian people, was an indication of her patriotism and dedication to her culture and religion; to give it up was a way of accepting the colonizer's presence. Frantz Fanon developed this idea of the veil and explained that,

The decisive battle was launched before 1954, more precisely during the early 1930's. The officials of the French administration in Algeria, committed to destroying the people's originality, and under instructions to bring about the disintegration, at whatever cost, of forms of existence likely to evoke a national reality directly or indirectly, were to concentrate their efforts on the wearing of the veil, which was looked upon at this juncture as a symbol of the status of the Algerian woman. (Fanon, 37)

Later, he explained that the wearing of the veil at that time was a kind of resistance to the French occupation. It was a way of expressing one's refusal to be assimilated to the foreigner's culture or to be identified with it.

Every veil that fell, everybody that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the haik, every face that offered itself to the bold and impatient glance of the occupier, was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself, and was accepting the rape of the colonizer. (Fanon, 42)

As the loss of cultural memory would lead to a loss of the colonized's identity, a whole generation of young writers became involved in the movement of developing the discourse of 'littérature de combat' as a reaction against the previous generation. Their aim was to provide a means by which identities detached from French stereotypes might be formed. Their works became a response to the colonial repression. "La littérature qui voit le jour va devenir bientôt une littérature de combat au service de la nation." (Dejeux, 25)

Indeed, the total integration or assimilation advocated by most writers of the first period had never gained mass support from indigenous people, and started being significantly questioned by a new generation of writers who described themselves as experiencing the 'malaise', the exclusion and the injustice that most of the indigenous population continuously encountered because of the difference in status and rights between Algerians and Europeans. Writers who belonged to this new wave started raising and questioning the issue of Algerian identity, difference, rights and status.

Thus, the writers who emerged during the colonial period in Algeria were driven mainly by a continuous search for an identity, and a desire to claim a land, a name and a culture while at the same time rejecting the values imposed by the French occupation. In fact, the second generation of Algerian writers claimed independence and different values from those of the colonizer. They set out to reveal to France and the world the real conditions in which Algerians were living. At the same time, they rejected the French values and beliefs. This second wave of writers began to emerge in 1945, after the end of the Second World War and the frustration of the people at seeing more justice prevailing in the country after the success of the Allies. Indeed, it had been expected that the victory of the Allies and the liberation of France, to which a large number of Algerians had contributed, would bring

justice and more rights to the Algerians. On VE day, 1945, instead of having more rights, more than forty five thousand Algerians were killed.

This event, which is associated with the emergence of a more militant and radical nationalism in Algeria marked the second wave of Algerian literature. Most of these writers were poor or came from impoverished families.” Nous sommes pour la plupart de pauvres gens sortis des douars et de familles modestes pour devenir des bacheliers, on ne sait comment.” (Abbas, 132) The writers of that period were seen as militants fighting in their way for a new political alternative. Their writings were essentially drawn from their own experience, and they presented themselves as witnesses of the misery of the Algerian people. For Mostefa Lacheraf, this literature provided an excellent image of Algerian reality. “ Cette littérature va refléter pour la première fois dans les lettres françaises une réalité algérienne qu’aucun écrivain, même Camus, n’avait le courage de traduire.” (Lacheraf, 223)

All the writers expressed in one way or another injustice, racism, misery and frustration in which the Algerian people suffered. They also expressed the Algerian people’s desire to claim a land, a culture, and an identity, all of which had become unclear because of colonization. Thus, their works were a rejection of the ‘mimetism’ era and a refusal to identify with the colonizer.

In addition to the problems of poverty, culture and identity, the second generation of Algerian novelists had to settle the problem of language. Being the only language allowed at school, French was considered as the only language to be used. The objective, as argued by Mouloud Mammeri at a conference on African literature in Sweden, was to let the outside world know about the ‘malaise’ and what was happening in African countries under foreign occupation.

Nous avons voulu faire comprendre aux européens ce qu’est l’Afrique sentie de l’intérieur. S’il n’y a pas beaucoup de lecteurs africains parce qu’il y a des problèmes d’alphabétisation, nous sommes condamnés à nous faire connaître, à faire connaître notre pays. Donc, nous sommes obligés d’écrire pour les étrangers. ( Mammeri, 1967)

These writers, in fact, regarded the use of French as an effective means of liberation . It was considered very important to speak the same language as the enemy.

Thus, both the Black Renaissance in America and the emergence of a new generation of young writers in Algeria during the Algerian Revolution amounted to a denunciation of the White /colonial repression and of the injustice experienced, describing from the inside cultural attitudes and events which had previously been ignored or misrepresented by White/European writers. It also stirred the people to continue the struggle started by the forefathers. By depicting their societies under racism/colonialism, the emergent writers of both Black America and Algeria wanted to expose the injustice endured, and at the same time, induce their readers, who were mostly White/European, to change the situation.

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