

CHAPTER V

Fanon and A Dying Colonialism***Introduction***

Fanon's second book emerges in the heat of the battle. In Tunisia where he worked for the *Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne* he wrote his analysis of the process of revolutionary change, particularly of consciousness as he saw it unfolding. Written in one month, *L'An Cinq de la Révolution Algérienne* was published in 1959. It was translated into English as A Dying Colonialism in 1965.¹

Originally entitled 'The Reality of a Nation' Fanon examines how values change as part of revolutionary praxis. To a friend Fanon wrote 'this book is the illustration of a principle: action is incoherent agitation if it does not serve to reconstruct the consciousness of an individual' (Geismar 1971: 125). He takes up again more clearly the third, revolutionary response to racism, mentioned in the previous chapter, and develops it empirically. He looks at the veil, the radio, patriarchal family relations, colonial medicine and the attitudes of the European minority in Algeria and shows how these might be changed by a revolutionary struggle. Six months after publication it was banned in France and further printing was prohibited.

Outline of A Dying Colonialism

The aim of the book according to Fanon is to show 'that on Algerian soil a new society has come to birth.' The focus is on the transformations of consciousness undergone by Algerians. It also aims to find the person behind the coloniser 'who is both the organiser and the victim of a system that has choked him and reduced him to silence' (Fanon 1965a: 27-32). In 1958 the French, and particularly the army, went on a campaign to win over the women of Algeria by encouraging their emancipation by having them shed the veil. In the dramatic days of May 1958 in which the *colons* rose up against the French republic, French women lifted the veils from a number of Muslim women who gratefully smiled at the cameras while crowds applauded. Behind this effort were the wives of the top officers of the French army. It was in this context that Fanon's essays were written.

In the first chapter 'Algeria Unveiled' Fanon begins by noting that in Algeria it is the veiled woman who is seen as distinctive and particularly representative of Arab society and its backwardness. This made the veil a target of French colonialism and its civilising mission. French sociological 'studies' understood that the veil was not simply patriarchal. If the female part of the population could be detached from it then the colonisation of the country would be further advanced. The *colons* viewed unveiled women as 'converts', liberated women held up as examples of the beneficence of their rule.

Algerian women sensing the underlying theme retreated, clinging to the veil as a 'tradition'; as a bulwark against the assault on her society. Fanon elaborates the dialectics of this cultural change:

¹ In some earlier versions it is given as Studies in a Dying Colonialism.

In an initial phase, it is the action, the plans of the occupier that determine the centres of resistance around which a people's will to survive becomes organised. It is the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates *Negritude*. To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonised opposes the cult of the veil (1965a: 47).

French sociology, according to Fanon, recognised the centrality of women to Algerian patriarchy. "Let's win over the women and the rest will follow" sociological pundits argued. Women like the soil would serve to sow seeds of colonialism through the country. One of the key strategies was the deployment of French 'feminism':

Mutual aid societies and societies to promote solidarity with Algerian women sprang up in great number. Lamentations were organised. 'We want to make the Algerian ashamed of the treatment he metes out to women.' This was a period of effervescence, of putting into application a whole technique of infiltration, in the course of which droves of social workers and women directing charitable works descended on the Arab quarters. The indigent and famished women were the first to be besieged. Every kilo of semolina distributed was accompanied by a dose of indignation against the veil and the cloister. The indignation was followed up by practical advice. Algerian women were invited to play a "functional, capital role" in the transformation of their lot. They were pressed to say no to a centuries-old subjection' (pp. 38-9)

The poverty of men was ignored. The cause of the poverty of women was located in patriarchal traditions of the veil and the cloister. Colonialism, as espoused by French women bent on destroying Algerian culture, was transformed into a liberation movement. Sharply-Whiting (1998: 67-8) gives the case of Suzanne Massu, a colonial 'feminist' and wife of General Jacques Massu, who was responsible for the torture of thousands of Algerians. In 1958 Suzanne Massu established '*Le Mouvement de Solidarité Féminine*' that aimed to establish solidarity between the two communities of women. She and her husband adopted two Muslim children as a 'symbol of integration.'

Fanon notes that while decrying the veil as patriarchal this campaign to remove the veil reveals the patriarchal unconscious in operation. The baring of the flesh implied in unveiling reflects the coloniser's desire not to liberate but to rape:

The rape of the Algerian woman in the dream of a European is always preceded by the rending of the veil...With an Algerian woman, there is no progressive conquest, no mutual revelation, there is possession, rape, near murder. The act assumes a para-neurotic brutality and sadism, even in a normal European. This brutality and this sadism are in fact emphasised by the frightened attitude of the Algerian woman. In the dream the woman-victim screams, struggles like a doe, and as she weakens and faints, is penetrated, martyred, ripped apart...The Europeans aggressiveness will express itself likewise in contemplation of the Algerian women's morality. Her timidity and her reserve are transformed in accordance with the commonplace laws of conflictual psychology into their opposite, and the Algerian woman becomes hypocritical, perverse, and even a veritable nymphomaniac (p. 46).

Fanon argues that during the struggle it was necessary to rely on women in front-line roles. It was not an easy decision to make as it exposed more of the population to the violence of the coloniser. It was thought that women would find it difficult to adapt to a new public and dangerous role. Such proved not to be the case, women took to the role 'instinctively'. Initially within the Kasbah but later they went unveiled - 'naked' - into the European sections of the city. Looking as Europeanised as possible was necessary and difficult whilst carrying plans, money or weapons. As guides they

carried the weapons of the male veterans who had to come to the city for meetings. Moving stealthily through the city, surrendering your arms to a female guide was revolutionary, but proved its worth in practice.

Later it was decided to move to acts of terrorism, to counter the rising tide of French settler confidence when they could seemingly massacre with impunity. Men and women worked as a unit: she as Europeanised gun-carrier leading him to the target, he as assassin. This changed their relations even if they did not know each other. Later as the French police became more vigilant, checking all parcels, the veil became a useful way to hide weapons. This meant learning again how to move, how to keep one's hands free and how to look unencumbered.

Fanon provides a mixture here of argument and phenomenological description of the experience of the body associated with the changes of veiling and unveiling. 'Removed and reassumed again and again, the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle' (p. 61). There is a historical dynamic born of the struggle for national liberation. First the veil is a mechanism of resistance. In the second phase the veil was abandoned or re-donned as part of the struggle.

In the chapter 'The Algerian family' he continues the theme of women's liberation. This time in relation to the particular institution of the family and the transformations it has undergone due to the war of liberation. The key change, Fanon argues, has been that the monolithic and patriarchal structure has broken into separate elements. Tradition was challenged by an increasing sense of individuality. Before 1954 even militants did not challenge the father's authority. With the outbreak of armed struggle: 'every Algerian faced with a new system of values introduced by the Revolution is compelled to define himself [sic], to take a position, to choose' (p. 102).

Fanon looks at the various internal relations: father/son, husband/wife and so on. Beginning with father and son, in terms of national consciousness, the son is ahead of the father, who typically represents a certain fatalism. When the struggle comes into the open, the son sought to convert the family and indoctrinate the father. As the level of the people's commitment becomes clear, the father buries the old values. He still buttressed his authority though the basis was different - he challenged his militant son to be disciplined, to recognise his responsibilities to the family as well as to the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*).

The problem is that like most agricultural society's girls are not highly valued. They are sheltered and protected, then married early to a man of their father's choosing. Unless this occurs, she remains a minor indefinitely. All this is challenged, Fanon argues, by the national liberation struggle. As in the discussion of the veil, women in Algeria enter into history as they take up more and more responsibility in the struggle. In destroying colonialism they give birth to a new woman. The 'woman-for-marriage' becomes the 'woman-for-action.' 'The young girl is replaced by the militant, the woman by the *sister*.' Going out late, giving up the veil, wearing make-up, all eventually unchallenged by the parents, were accepted as part of the struggle. If she went to the mountains, this meant months alone, living and fighting alongside the men. The fathers came to see daughters differently, 'The men's words were no longer law. The women were no longer silent.' If she returned home - they met eye-to-eye neither embarrassed nor ashamed. No questions were asked of her morals, not because of lack of interest or resignation but because the force of events rendered such questions inappropriate. 'To ask of a woman who was daily risking her life whether she was serious became grotesque and absurd' (pp. 102-10).

Traditionally the eldest brother was marked as the inheritor of the father's throne, but again the circumstances dictated that each choose their own values and work together as men. The husband and wife could not remain unaffected. Once women found a voice men were bound to change for example when young women declared that they would only marry militants. Often the wife was excluded from the struggle but as it hotted up she increasingly demanded to be kept informed. Questions like who she should contact if he was taken could be justified because this was necessary for security. Increasingly the struggle drew them together. If she was active herself she would carry out tasks without reference to him. Among the guerillas, when the issue of marriage arose, a series of registry offices was organised. This put the whole process outside the control of the family and tradition more generally. Marriages were for love and usually sanctioned by the father later. Divorce had to be justified, no longer could the wife be set aside; reconciliation was attempted. Relations among women changed too. The French program of 'regroupment centres' which re-settled the population, overturned the world of women whose routine was circumscribed by the family, custom and routine. Deprived of husband and relations, often with children to support, old patterns changed.

This transformation of women in struggle had profound repercussions on the Algerian family. The war killed many fathers and brothers and drew women into the struggle. Traditional ideas that proved a barrier to struggle were counter-revolutionary and were abandoned. Fanon describes the traditional role of girls:

In the Algerian family, the girl is always one notch behind the boy. As in all societies in which work on the land represents the main source of the means of subsistence, the male, who is the privileged producer, enjoys an almost lordly status. The birth of the boy is greeted with greater enthusiasm than that of the girl...The girl has no opportunity, all things considered, to develop her personality or to take any initiative (p. 105).

He describes their minor status as 'childwomen' and their fear of divorce. Fanon locates the problem in illiteracy and poverty and the unemployment, made worse by colonialism, as leaving her little option but to acquiesce (pp. 106-7).

The struggle for national liberation opens the possibility for the emergence of women-as-revolutionary agent to liberate herself from the veil, relearn her body and develop her personality.

As Fanon put it:

The unveiled Algerian woman, who assumed an increasingly important place in revolutionary action, developed her personality, discovered the exalting realm of responsibility. The freedom of the Algerian people from then on became identified with women's liberation, with her entry into history. This women, who in the avenues of Algiers or of Constantine, would carry the grenades or submachine gun charges, this women who tomorrow would be outraged, violated, tortured, could not put herself back into her former state of mind and relive her behaviour of the past...was at the same time participating in struggle against colonialism and birth of the new women (pp. 107-9).

Fanon recognises her marginalisation but in his account she emerges as an actor liberating herself. Women challenged their tradition roles and thus could not go back to their silent existence; instead they created a new place in history. In sum he says that '*she literally forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength*' (p. 109).

Other efforts towards ‘liberating’ Algerian women, apart from lifting veils with the chant ‘*Kif Kif Les Françaises*’ [Let us be like French-women], included a push to increase education. Radio Algeria broadcast a show on women’s rights and the *Cinquième Bureau* whose main task was propaganda also provided medical care to rural areas (Gordon 1968: 57).

Fanon also addresses these tactics in Chapter Two of the book, entitled ‘This is the Voice of Algeria’ and in Chapter Three: ‘Medicine and Colonialism.’ The first of these charts the changes in the attitudes of Algerians to the radio during the struggle. Before 1945 radio technology was seen by Europeans as ‘their’ radio and those in rural areas as a lifeline to civilisation and an assurance that they were still in control. For Algerians it was the opposite. Without organising, radios were banned both because it represented the oppressor, it was ‘Frenchmen speaking to Frenchmen’ and offended the traditional families’ norms that made group listening to it unpalatable.

After 1945, widespread repression and some measure of Arab liberation brought an increasing interest in international events. In 1947-48, radio sales increased in an effort to pick up Arab broadcasts. French wholesalers sought Arab retailers to penetrate the market. In 1951-52, as Arab countries like Tunisia and Morocco began to break free, the need for news saw sales explode. The French settler’s attitude changed, they had reported constantly on the ‘elimination of rebels’ but now the radio gave conflicting stories. There was no longer one ‘French’ truth. Europeans, too, now knew that they were not getting the full story. Natives were no longer a passive mass but were alive with stories and information.

In the cities it was more complex. ‘Natives’ turned to the French dailies for information. This became a sign of sympathy for the revolution so children were sent to buy it, but before long it was not available to minors. The local press accused the French press of collaborating; the FLN for its part called for a ban on the local press. This left the radio as the key means of information. In less than three weeks the whole national stock of radios was sold. Batteries were in short supply, but this became the way of living with the revolution. The old concerns vanished as the family sought information - jokes or sexual innuendo went unremarked. The nation had found a voice. The French forces began by banning the purchase of radios without a permit, confiscating them in raids and jamming the broadcasts. The latter had the effect then of forcing audiences to search for information, piece it together from the garbled transmissions or to invent it. Psychiatric symptoms of ‘voices like the radio’ went from being persecuting to comforting.

In ‘Medicine and Colonialism’, Fanon (p. 121) notes that ‘Western medical science, being part of the oppressive system, has always provoked in the native an ambivalent attitude.’ Whilst Western medicine could bring undoubted benefits it is one of the tragedies that this is perverted by the colonial situation. The native perceived the doctor as part of the colonial apparatus; and in many cases they were, for example, when village health checks were organised by police. The subduing of disease was part of the subduing of the country, and it was difficult for natives to acknowledge the benefits for fear of acknowledging that they are dependent upon the coloniser. Thus the whole apparatus was rejected. Apart from the racism of doctors directed at patients, there are stories of the unexplained deaths of Algerians in hospitals and the hostility of doctors towards traditional healers made the whole situation divisive.

Even in visiting the doctor the patient resists the treatment - not returning for follow-up, taking medicines in a single dose. The doctors show their racism and their frustration with the patient’s lack of cooperation by attributing this to Arab fatalism. Often native doctors represent the

coloniser, even if they were more sympathetic, their technique and hostility to tradition are still 'European'. The European doctor is a settler, often he owns land and has an interest as part of the settler community; even if his politics are democratic. The law requires him to report suspicious wounds, despite the protests of his French colleagues. Strict orders are given to pharmacists not to give out bandages and tetanus shots without a prescription, though in practice this does not apply to Europeans. Doctors are a part of the 'interrogation' of prisoners - providing dangerous 'truth serum' and heart stimulants to prolong life under torture. Few will testify against the state when torture allegations are made.

With the war all this had begun to change. From early on the FLN issued directives that were followed. 'All wounds get a tetanus shot', the beneficial effects became clear to all. The withdrawal of vaccines by the French concretised the effects - many saw others die from tetanus. The FLN set up hospitals in liberated areas. Meetings of political leaders and health technicians led to the education of people's delegates to supervise community health. Latrines previously resisted sprung up everywhere and schools were opened for nurses. Similarly the old superstitions began to change. 'No water for fighters with stomach wounds' and the 'strict diet for typhus' were followed in revolutionary spirit. Instead of being seen as part of the colonial apparatus, some new form of torture, instructions were followed to the letter, as part of the healing of the body of the nation.

In the final chapter Fanon deals with 'Algeria's European Minority'. This essay was first published in *Les Temps Modernes* in June 1959. In this piece Fanon notes that, despite criticism of Algeria's European population, it is 'far from being the monolithic block one imagines' (p. 148).

Increasingly the nationalists have contacts with sympathetic settlers. The problem of Algerian democrats was the same as that of the French Left and that is '*the Left has done nothing for a long time in France*'. In Algeria they did not exist and in France, the PCF and its Algerian equivalent had a reformist position supporting French Union and condemning the FLN as 'terrorists'.

Algeria's European democrats had served the resistance in clandestine ways. The Jewish minority was divided. The Jewish civil servants and tradesmen support the colonial power. The majority of Jews were Arabised and poor; for themselves they are Algerians and support national liberation. Even the settlers were not unanimously opposed to independence. Some provided safe passage through the countryside and provide intelligence, weapons and food. In the cities Europeans worked in cells, for example obtaining medical supplies banned to 'natives' and training hospital staff, hiding leaders and serving as drivers.

Summary

The last three chapters have outlined all but one of Fanon's major works. The theme that links them is the colonial situation, which he will later term 'Manichean', and the psychological and sociological patterns that develop in situations and how these change. The theme of Self and Other being constructed in relation to one another is explored in more detail in this context. In a Manichean situation there are three responses played out, though in A Dying Colonialism he is focused on the retreatist phase and fighting phase. Black Skin White Masks dealt with assimilationism in detail (although he did not use that term then). Initially everything about French colonisation is rejected because they are imposed as part of the colonial project. Fanon argues that self-liberation is necessary and that things with the potential to liberate like feminism and medicine are corrupted in the colonial milieu. The three responses to oppression are also evident in his clinical work with phobic patients in hospital.

He shows how oppression creates forms of resistance - in this case 'the cult of the veil' - and illustrates the 'historical dynamism' of what appear to be fixed traditions. With the outbreak of armed struggle the old structures break down and things take on new meanings. The radio and medicine are no longer simply tools of the enemy but weapons in the struggle. What stands out is the way in which the oppressed are seen as agents of the struggle, this is particularly striking in regard to women. Fanon makes clear throughout that the only way to an authentic existence for the colonised is revolutionary praxis and the change in consciousness that it provokes.