Chapter 6

The Sociological Aspects of Oppression and Resistance

This chapter analyzes how far Fanon has succeeded in his assessment of the sociological impact of the Algerian war of liberation on its people in particular, and on the African people in general. The experience accumulated by Fanon in the very thick of the battle furnished the materials for his book, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, in which he discusses the various ways in which the war of liberation made radical changes in the general outlook on life among the Algerian people at large. As the alternate title, *Year Five of the Algerian Revolution* indicates, Fanon, in this book makes an assessment of the Algerian war which began on 1 November 1954. The entire people of Algeria, with all the resources at their command, have been fighting for five years with admirable fortitude. In spite of this vigorous fight of the Algerian people, the French government did not think of a political change in Algeria. The National Liberation Front (FLN), which spearheaded the Revolution, had given instructions to the people not to indulge in barbarity, and not to violate the international laws of war. The leaders of the rebellion were very well aware that it was a Herculean task to fight against the ferocious French colonizers who have been dominating the Algerian people for one hundred and thirty years.
The French occupation of Algeria began with the surrender of Algiers on 5 July 1830 to the French forces. Immediately after the occupation, through a proclamation, the French made it out that their move was quite benevolent, as they were helping Algeria to liberate herself from the tyrannous oppression of the Turks. It was only 125 years after the French colonization of Algeria, and the consequent assimilation policy, that the people of that country could assert their right through their liberation struggle. The Algerian revolt against French colonization under the leadership of the National Liberation Front (FLN), as already hinted, began on 1 November 1954. On 19 September 1958, the FLN set up the Provisional government of Algeria with Ferhat Abbas as the Prime Minister. In September 1959 General de Gaulle for the first time conceded to the Algerian people their right to self-determination with certain conditions. But the FLN rejected the offer of conditional liberation. Whatever may be Algeria's choice, France wanted to keep control over the Saharan oil, the successful exploration of which had begun as early as 1952. But, by the middle of 1959 the Algerian people had made history by fighting against the French troops in all intensity. By then, hundreds of thousands of people had become victims of the war. People allover the world wondered why the French Government was so obstinate in their decision not to allow the birth of the Algerian nation. The quite positive effect of the war, according to Fanon, is the emergence of "a new humanism" (SDC 28) against the morbid infatuation with war the
French government evinced. The richness of Algeria (the Sahara and its resources) was the only reason why France has been oppressing it. In fact, it was the only real excuse as far as France was concerned for the continuation of the war against Algeria even in 1959. It goes without saying that it is the same oil richness of Iraq which resulted in the American occupation of Iraq today. The people of the world at large today have realized that Saddam Hussein’s ‘despotic rule’ has been a lame excuse for American imperialism to thrive in Iraq. America’s Afghan war was also motivated by a similar objective. In fact, the subjugation of Afghanistan was imperative for laying an oil pipeline through the Caspian Sea as far as America was concerned. In Algeria’s case, the national consciousness and the collective suffering of the people made them take their destiny into their own hands. The Algerian war of liberation which began as a guerilla war, with about three hundred Algerians in 1954, assumed the magnitude of a large scale war by 1959. By the fifth year of the war, about one lakh French soldiers and six lakh Algerians were killed. On 10 November 1959, General de Gaulle extended further invitation to the FLN to accept independence, again with conditions detrimental to the self-determination of the Algerian people. Quite naturally, the FLN rejected that offer too. On 19 December 1960, the U.N. General assembly formally recognized the Algerian people’s right to self-determination and independence. In spite of the fact that the French had five lakh troops and two lakh Algerian auxiliaries, ultimately the collective will
of the people of Algeria got the upper hand by eight years of guerilla warfare. As David and Marina Ottaway observe, "Algeria's attainment of independence in July 1962 was an event of great importance to the Third World, where it was seen as eloquent proof of the ability and determination of colonized peoples to take their fate into their own hands" (Algeria: The Politics of a Socialist Revolution 1).

In the preface to Studies in a Dying Colonialism, Fanon claims that "the thesis that men change at the same time that they change the world has never been manifest as it is now in Algeria" (SDC 30). What we have witnessed in Algeria, Fanon adds, "is man's reassertion of his capacity to progress" (SDC 30). The book, Studies in a Dying Colonialism is divided into five chapters, followed by some concluding remarks. In the first chapter Fanon speaks in detail about the importance attached to the veil by the Algerian woman, and how the colonial master tried to make capital out of it. The most immediately perceptible uniqueness of a particular society is the way in which its people dress. As far as the Arabs are concerned the veil worn by their women is a pointer to the clothing tradition of them. Realizing that the woman constituted the pivot of the Algerian society, the colonial administration tried its best to obtain control over her. Under the pretext of defending the Algerian woman (with the tacit motive of disintegrating the Algerian society at large), who is pictured as humiliated, sequestered, and cloistered, the colonial authorities tried their best to unveil her, hoping that the unveiled woman would aid
and shelter the occupier. In reality what the European evinces in these occasions is his aggressive nature. For, Fanon observes, "unveiling this woman is revealing her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure" (SDC 45). Fanon is of the view that by unveiling the Algerian woman, the colonizer achieved "a double deflowering" (SDC 45). For, the rending of the veil was preceded by the dream rape of the Algerian woman by a European. And by rending the veil the occupier hoped of making the woman an ally in the work of cultural destruction. The reality was that some Algerian women were unveiled by the colonizer without their consent or acceptance. What the European colonizer did is to capitalize on the abject humility and poverty of these Algerian women. But, by and large, the Algerian men took a firm decision not to make their women the preys to, what Fanon calls, "the colonialist hydra" (SDC 40). The strong determination of the Algerian women to resist the cultural war waged by the Europeans in the name of the veil was an instance of Algerian women creating their own history. As the liberation struggle continued, the usual meaning of the veil was transformed, as and when the occasion demanded it.

After speaking about the European attitude to the wearing of the veil, Fanon shows us how the veil was removed and reassumed by the Algerian women on their own according to the exigency of circumstances. Until 1955 the Algerian women were kept in ignorance as to the revolutionary characteristics and the absolute
secrecy of the combat. As the enemy resorted to new forms of combat, the Algerian revolutionaries felt the urgent need to change their tactics too. Women were at first recruited to help the guerillas, principally to help the wounded and convalescent soldiers. The entry of women into the Algerian army lent respect to the revolutionary nature of the war. Later the Algerian woman quite unassumingly went through the streets “with grenades in her handbag, or sometimes the activity report of an area in her bodice” (SDC 50). It may be noted that at first only married women were recruited. Later widows or divorced women were also chosen. When numerous unmarried women volunteered to participate in the battle against French imperialism, the leaders of the rebellion decided to remove all restrictions, and indiscriminately accepted the support of all Algerian women. Even after joining the Revolution, the women used to wear the veil. But when the centre of activity of the National Liberation Army was shifted to the European cities of Algeria, the women withdrew their veils and entered into the conqueror’s city. Lauding the activity of the women of Algeria, Fanon comments: “This revolutionary activity has been carried on by the Algerian woman with exemplary constancy, self-mastery and success” (SDC 54).

By 1956 the Algerian soldiers were forced to resort to certain degree of terror in their fight against colonialism. The massacre of Algerian civilians in the mountains and in the cities prompted them to
adopt such an attitude, hitherto rejected by them. With battling conscience they brought death to the enemy, and thereby gave a new life to the Revolution. The woman who helps the revolutionary has been described as "his woman-arsenal" (SDC 58) by Fanon because she carries revolvers, grenades, hundreds of false identity cards or bombs to help the revolutionaries. Commenting on her endeavour Fanon writes: "the unveiled Algerian woman, moves like a fish in the European waters" (SDC 58). The traditional Algerian society in general and the Algerian woman in particular, looked upon the veil as an object used to discipline and temper the body of women. Without a veil the Algerian woman experienced a sense of incompleteness, with great intensity. But during the Revolution, exigency of circumstances forced her to overcome her timidity and awkwardness. She showed no reluctance to unveil herself. Fanon calls this change as the "new dialectic of the body" (SDC 59) as learned by the Algerian woman in a totally revolutionary fashion. By 1957 the veil reappeared as the enemy learned from some militants under torture that a number of Algerian women, Europeanized in appearance, were playing a decisive role in the battle. Moreover, to their consternation, the French authorities discovered that some European women too were participating in the liberation struggle of the Algerians. The women had to conceal once again the packages of grenades and bombs. Hence, the reassuming the veil by them. "Removed and reassumed again and again," Fanon observes, "the veil has been manipulated,
transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle" (SDC 61). This disclaims the argument of General de Gaulle that the Algerian woman liberated herself at the invitation of France. Fanon’s observation has thus brought out the “historic dynamism of the veil” in Algeria (SDC 63). Fanon is of the strong view that “the veil helped the Algerian woman to meet the new problems created by the struggle” (SDC 63). Fanon’s analysis of the dynamism of the veil, and the role it played in the Algerian Resistance disproves the unfounded notions about the veil expressed by the authors of Occidentalism. That “a veiled woman does not do physical labor”, that “the veil is also a sign of status”, and, moreover, “the veil also sent a signal of Islam-based nationalism”, are far from the truth (Occidentalism 131). Further, it was not because “France represented the West” that “the veil became a symbol of resistance to the West”, as the authors of Occidentalism make it out.

In the second chapter of Studies in a Dying Colonialism, Fanon analyses the radical change that has taken place in the attitude of the Algerian towards the radio, thanks to the Algerian Revolution. Radio-Alger, which has been established in Algeria by the French government, was looked upon by the Algerians as essentially the instrument of the colonial society and its values. Apart from the fact that Radio-Alger was a re-edition of the French National Broadcasting system, there was some kind of irrational cause behind even those Algerians financially sound enough refusing to acquire the radio.
Traditions of respectability, the sex allusions and clownish situations in broadcasting method etc. were said to be the reasons why the Algerian family could not listen to radio programmes. But, Fanon’s analysis of colonialism in Algeria proves these claims to be artificial sociological approach and “a mass of errors” (SDC 71). The outbreak of the rebellion against French domination on 1 November 1954, forced the Algerian to define new attitudes to the radio for the dissemination of news. The Algerian felt the urgent need of a radio set “to oppose the enemy news with his own news” (SDC 76). Moreover, at this juncture the democratic press of Algeria, well-known for its objectivity and traditional honesty till then, was forced to impose ‘self-censorship’ on the local newspapers fearing intimidation from the French authorities.

On the other hand, Radio-Alger “reminds the settler of colonial power” (SDC 71). Fanon further adds that the radio “sustains the occupant’s culture, marks it off from non-culture, from the nature of the occupied” (SDC 71). The European had a fairly good idea of the dangers threatening colonial society through the triple network of the press, the radio, and his travels. In the initial months of the war of liberation, the Algerians would buy newspapers like L’Express, France-Observateur, and Le Monde because they knew that they would have access to objective news as these papers were published by the democratic press of France. As the public criers sell only local newspapers, the Algerians had to buy these newspapers from the
kiosks managed by Europeans. The purchase of such newspapers by Algerians was looked upon as a nationalist act, and so, "a dangerous act" (SDC 81). Moreover in the first months of the revolution, the generally illiterate Algerians viewed everything in the French language as an expression of colonial domination. In such a situation the Algerians had no other option but to buy radio sets so that they could hear the news of the Revolution from non-French sources. The introduction of the radio sets into the houses of the Algerians became very popular with the announcement of the existence of a "Voice of Free Algeria" in 1956. The "Voice of Free Algeria" brought "to all Algeria the great message of the Revolution" (SDC 82). "Since 1956", Fanon observes, "the purchase of a radio in Algeria has meant not the adoption of a new technique for getting news, but the obtaining of access to the only means of entering into communication with the Revolution, of living with it" (SDC 83). Traditions of respectability and resistances broke down, and the entire members of the family sat together and began to "scrutinize the radio dial waiting for the Voice of Algeria" (SDC83). In other words, the decision of the Algerian society to embrace the technique of the new signaling system was guided by the principles of the Revolution. Thereafter, "The radio set was no longer a part of the occupier's arsenal of cultural oppression" (SDC 84).

The French authorities, naturally, could not tolerate the Algerian's new-found love for the radio sets. Legal measures were
initiated and the sale of radios was prohibited. Military officials and police were given the sole authority to issue licenses to own radios. The French authorities began to wage 'sound-wave warfare' and the programmes of the 'Voice of Algeria' were systematically jammed. Broadcasting through different wavelengths at different times, the revolutionaries could circumvent the tactics of the enemy to a certain extent. The same message was transmitted in three languages by the 'Voice of Fighting Algeria' to give it universal dimension.

Fanon further clarifies the new attitude of the Algerian towards the French language: “Expressing oneself in French, understanding French, was no longer tantamount to treason, or to an impoverishing identification with the occupier. Used by the Voice of the Combatants, conveying in a positive way the message of the Revolution, the French language also becomes an instrument of liberation” (SDC 90). I hope that Fanon’s assessment of the use of the colonizer’s language will be an eye opener for those who make a lot of hue and cry against the so called ‘imperial’ languages. By 1959, in Algeria, radio was no longer the voice of the occupier. It was the genuine voice of the Algerians. Hence owning a radio became almost tantamount to going to the battlefield. By 1959 ‘Voice of Algeria’ multiplied its programmes. Programmes organized by the Algerians began to be broadcast to the people of Algeria from Tunis, Damascus, Cairo and elsewhere in the world. Fanon hoped that after the war, ‘Voice of Algeria’ would broadcast “revolutionary instructions on the building of the nation”
(SDC 97). He expresses the strong conviction that "the identification of the voice of the Revolution with the fundamental truth of the nation has opened limitless horizon" (SDC 97).

In the third chapter of *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon traces the evolution of the Algerian family, and the transformation it has undergone during the war of liberation. Fanon’s analysis shows that the individuality of each member of the Algerian family has been developed to a great extent on account of the impact of the war of liberation. Once the Revolution gained intensity, there took place a radical change in the character of every individual. As the Revolution made the people politically mature, one could not see the old stultifying attachment of the son towards his father. All the same, absolute respect towards the father was observed. It may be noted that as far as national consciousness was concerned, "the father lagged far behind the son" (SDC 102). Later, when the son became a militant in every sense of the word, he began to indoctrinate his father. The father would then have no choice but to join his son.

Similarly in the pre-revolutionary Algerian family, the girl had no opportunity to develop her personality as she had to take her place in the domestic tradition of Algerian society. But, the national liberation struggle knocked over all restrictions imposed on her. The unveiled Algerian woman assumed an increasingly significant role in the revolutionary actions, and thereby developed her personality.
Commenting on this development, Fanon observes, “the freedom of the people from then on became identified with woman’s liberation, with her entry into history” (SDC 107). The Algerian woman who carried the grenades or the submachine gun chargers was actually “writing the heroic pages of Algerian history” (SDC 107). By 1955 the female cell of the National Liberation Army received mass memberships. The parents of the girls relinquishing their veils did not raise any protest. The Algerian woman proved to be no longer a mere complement for man. As Fanon emphasizes, *she literally forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength* (SDC 109 Fanon’s emphasis). Fanon’s observations on The Algerian women in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* embody a befitting reply to those critics who accuse him of ‘patriarchal authority’. In fact, to portray “Fanon as a misogynist”, as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting observes, would be “a postmodern mythology” (“Anti-black Femininity and Mixed-race Identity: Engaging Fanon to Reread Capecia”. in Gordon et al ed. *Fanon: A Critical Reader* 155-62).

The radical change that has developed among Algerian brothers too has been worthy of note. The measured and ritual relations of the pre-revolutionary period gave way to totally new relations. The traditional respect for the big brother (eldest brother) did not inhibit the militant chief from carrying out his duties.

The relationship between husband and wife has also been changed a lot during the course of the war of liberation. Sometimes
the wife would find fault with the husband for not joining the revolutionary forces, and for leading a lazy life. To everyone's surprise, young Algerian girls vowed never to let themselves be married to men who were not members of the National Liberation Front. In due course of the war of liberation, one could see the united militant couple participating in the birth of the new Algeria. Applauding this change of outlook, Fanon remarks that "the mingling of fighting experience with conjugal life deepens the relations between husband and wife and cements their union. There is a simultaneous and effervescent emergence of the citizen, the patriot, and the modern spouse" (SDC 114, Fanon's emphasis).

The liberation movement had its impact on the marriage and divorce systems of Algeria. Formerly one could think only of the marriages arranged by the family. But during the revolutionary period, the close contact between unmarried men and women resulted in love marriages 'arranged' by the leadership of the Revolution. As for divorce, the husband must state explicitly the reasons for such a move. This could be done only after reconciliatory attempts failed. Anyhow, the final decision in this regard rested with the local officer of the National Liberation Army.

In short, the attempt of French colonialism to break the will of the Algerian people, and to destroy their resistance, failed due to the radical changes brought about in society by the Algerian liberation movement. Before the unprecedented unity of the Algerian people,
brought about by the suffering they had to undergo, the French imperialists could not make any remarkable inroads.

In the chapter entitled, “Medicine and Colonialism”, Fanon tells the world how western medical science was made use of as one of the repressive measures by the colonial powers. Medical science and medical technology are meant to ease the pain of mankind. But in Algeria these were exploited for negative reaction among the natives. The colonized felt that French medical science in Algeria could not be separated from French colonialism. The lingering doubt as to the real motive and essential humanity of the colonial doctor prompted the Algerian to refuse hospitalization. Fanon is of the view that this attitude of the Algerian patients could be justified to a certain extent, when one takes into consideration the experimentation done on living patients. Consequently the colonized patient who went to consult the doctor was always diffident. The patient had the feeling that he was facing both a technician and a colonizer. The colonized people failed to understand that not all the colonized doctors were abnormal and inhuman. This lack of confidence in the doctor prompted the natives to enforce on the patient who accepted the colonial doctor’s medicine, the traditional methods of treatment prescribed by the healer of a particular village or district.

There was no remarkable change in the ambivalent attitude of the colonized towards modern medical technique even when the doctor belonged to the dominated group. The native doctor, the
colonized thought, was Europeanized, westernized doctor, and so, he was part of the dominated society. Fanon’s further observations justify once again the diffidence of the colonized patient. For, he says that the colonizing doctor, the European doctor, adopted the attitude of his group towards the struggle of the Algerian people. Medical practice in the colonies sometimes became systematic piracy when the doctor gave injections of twice-distilled water, or salt serum and demanded the charges of penicillin or vitamin B-12. The general concept about a doctor is that he is perpetually in contact with the suffering humanity, and that he has a set of values. Quite naturally, such a professional will have a democratic and anti-colonialist bent of mind. But, curiously enough, Fanon says, “the doctor is an integral part of colonization/of domination, of exploitation” (SDC 134). The doctor forgot even the basics of deontology when he delivered to the legal authority a certificate of natural death in the case of an Algerian who had succumbed to torture. Fanon tells us of cases of psychiatrists giving electric shock to numerous prisoners, and questioning them during the waking phase with a view to ‘aid’ the police.

Putting an embargo on the sale of antibiotics, ether, alcohol and anti-tetanus vaccine was another inhuman and unethical gesture on the part of the colonizer. Those Algerians who wanted to buy these medicines were required to give detailed information about themselves and the patients. But the timely help of the Moroccan and Tunisian people, and the combined efforts of the Algerian doctors,
pharmacists and nurses resulted in the steady flow of medical supplies that saved innumerable human lives. What was quite remarkable was that, during this period, evincing unreserved spirit of solidarity, medical students, nurses and doctors joined the National Liberation Front. As the struggle for liberation gained momentum the colonized people had no reluctance to reintegrate the native doctor into their group. The native doctor was no longer “an ambassador of the occupier”; he was the doctor of the oppressed people (SDC 142). Witchcraft and belief in the jinn were swept away by the action and practice initiated by the revolution.

Though the European intellectuals and doctors of Algeria in general have taken over the cause of the colonialist, a redeeming fact was that there were anti-colonialist and altruist Europeans, though a minority, who felt the necessity of armed action as the only means of rescuing Algeria. Surprisingly enough, the French Left and the Algerian Communist Party did not endorse the view of the National Liberation Front that only an armed struggle would bring about the liberation of Algeria. The European democrats of Algeria also helped the FLN, though in a semi-clandestine way. Whenever the Europeans who championed the cause of the Algerians were arrested and tortured, they behaved like authentic revolutionaries and never betrayed the FLN.
Though the Jewish tradesmen of Algeria in general looked upon the prospect of an independent Algeria with consternation (for they feared that the end of colonialism in Algeria would be the end of prosperity), several Jewish tradesmen aided and abetted the Algerian revolutionaries. A section of the Jewish civil servants and Jewish police also did their best to help the FLN. Three fourths of the Jewish population of Algeria was common people. They were in reality authentic ‘natives’. The FLN had more than once asserted that those Jews were in all respects Algerians.

Fanon refutes the argument that Algeria’s settlers were unanimously opposed to the end of colonial domination. In fact, the support given by the European minority of Algeria for the liberation struggle itself falsifies the propaganda of the colonizer. Those Europeans who could not comply with the request for help did not reveal anything against the FLN activists. Fanon gratefully acknowledges the help rendered by certain Europeans in stocking the grains of the Algerian population. Sometimes even weapons of the FLN activists were stored in the farms of the Europeans.

Fanon emphasizes that the launching of a new society is possible only within the framework of national independence. And the five years of struggle for independence waged by the people of Algeria has been successful in resisting oppression at any cost. That any attempt to maintain colonialism in Algeria would be impossible and shocking has been proved by the resistance of the Algerian
population. The Algerian Revolution, like all other genuine revolutions, according to Fanon, "is the oxygen which creates and shapes a new humanity" (SDC 181). But, based on the available information on Algeria today, one can say that Algeria too has become a prey to neo-colonialism, like almost all the Third World countries of the world.