Emigration as a social and narrative force in the fictional universe of Mouloud Feraoun

الهجرة كقوة اجتماعية وسردية في العالم التخييلي لمولود فرعون

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This study examines the central role of emigration in the fictional universe of Mouloud Feraoun, particularly in *The Earth and the Blood* and *The Paths That Ascend*. The study shows how emigration functions both as a narrative driver and as a social phenomenon influencing the lives of the Kabyle people, both in their villages and in France. In *The Earth and the Blood*, emigration is depicted as an economic necessity and a means of survival, whereas in *The Paths That Ascend*, it reflects adaptation, political exile, and confrontation with social norms and metropolitan racism. Feraoun analyzes the positive consequences of emigration, such as openness to modernity and exposure to progressive ideas, while also highlighting its negative effects, including acculturation and social marginalization.

***key words**:* emigration; immigrant society; social discourse; the other.

ملخص باللغة العربية:

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بوصفها محرّكًا سرديًّا من جهة، وظاهرة اجتماعية من جهة أخرى، تؤثّر في حياة السكّان الأمازيغ سواء في قراهم أو في فرنسا. ففي «الأرض والدم» تُصوَّر الهجرة باعتبارها ضرورة اقتصادية ووسيلة للبقاء، بينما تعبّر في « الدروب الصاعدة» عن التكيّف والمنفى السياسي ومواجهة الأعراف الاجتماعية والعنصرية في المتروبول. ويحلّل فرعون الآثار الإيجابية للهجرة، مثل الانفتاح على الحداثة والاطلاع على الأفكار التقدّمية، كما يبرز في المقابل آثارها السلبية، بما في ذلك التفكّك الثقافي والتهميش الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهجرة، مجتمع المهجر، الخطاب الاجتماعي، الأخر.

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(Time New Roman: size 12)

Introduction

Migration is a universal phenomenon that compels individuals to leave their native land in search of a new place to settle permanently. It generally arises from economic, political, or religious causes and represents a significant factor that enables migrants to establish genuine connections with the lifestyle and culture of the host country.
In this study, we aim to examine the specific features of the society shaped by migratory movements as depicted in the fictional universe of Mouloud Feraoun—particularly in his diptych *The Earth and the Blood* and *The Paths That Ascend*. Our objective is to highlight, above all, the impact of this social phenomenon on the fate of those who have chosen this path.

1. Emigration in *The Earth and the Blood*

The discourse on emigration is among the most essential narrative threads in *The Earth and the Blood*, as it is omnipresent throughout the novel. It serves as the principal source of inspiration for Feraoun's creative endeavor. In fact, during an interview with Maurice Monnoyer in 1953, Feraoun admitted that the emigration of the Kabyle people constituted the main theme and the foundational material of *The Earth and the Blood*. He stated:
"I thought that Kabyle emigration could provide the material for one or several works of genuine interest. I distinguished two periods: from 1910 to 1930 and from 1930 to the years we are living in. The Earth and the Blood is devoted to the first period."
This first period, as Feraoun explained, concerns the pioneers who paved the way for emigration. Unlike their "contemporaries", these early migrants remained deeply attached to their villages and their land, as they were not well equipped to adapt to the lifestyle of the French metropolis. Emigration was thus perceived as a path to salvation for the impoverished peasants of Kabylia—a destitute region of Algeria particularly affected by this phenomenon.
As Alain Gillette and Abdelmalek Sayad demonstrated in their 1984 study *L'Émigration algérienne en France*, "*until 1918, Algerian emigration was essentially Kabyle*". (Akbal : 2001, 139) According to these authors, the causes were primarily economic. The emigrant did not leave his homeland to make a fortune, to discover France, or to seek freedom, but rather to escape a land that could no longer provide for his most basic needs—or to rescue a family inheritance mortgaged through legal obligation, as was the case with Ramdane, the father of Fouroulou, the protagonist of *The Poor Man's Son*. Ramdane was forced to leave his native soil a few days after signing a debt acknowledgment, solely to save his

house and his field, which he had mortgaged and risked losing forever if he stayed in the village. On this subject, Feraoun wrote:

"Some time later, [...] Ramdane left his village one morning to go and work in France. It was the last resort, the final hope, the only solution. He knew very well that if he stayed in his country, the debt would snowball and soon sweep away, like an avalanche, the modest family inheritance". (PMS : 95)

Through this metaphorical style and the imagery of the snowball turning into an avalanche, the author reveals the misery of Ramdane's condition, burdened by debt and compelled to emigrate to protect his modest family estate. He knew that if he remained in the village, his debts would "snowball"—that is, accumulate successive deficits and interest charges—leading inevitably to the loss of his pledged property. As we will also observe with Amer, departure for France always took place at dawn—not merely for practical reasons, such as the early bus schedule, but because leaving one's family was considered a shameful act, one that could only be done under the cover of morning twilight.

It is through a skillful use of *analepse*—which Gérard Genette defines as "any evocation, after the fact, of an event that occurred prior to the point in the story where one is"(Genette : 1972, 82)—that the narrator recalls Amer's departure for France, accompanied by three of his compatriots, all escorted by their weeping families, as illustrated in the following passage:

"Amer could never forget that departure. The day and the month mattered little. It was in 1910, at the end of winter, one morning. He saw himself again leaving the village with three fellow countrymen, now dead. They had been escorted that far by their tearful parents."(EB, 60)

Following this passage, marked by the lexical field of farewell and memory, the narrator shifts into a digression with a documentary function, where the *referential* dimension prevails over the poetic one. Through this narrative mode, he traces the history of Kabyle peasant migration. The movement initially directed itself toward more hospitable regions such as the plains of Mitidja or Chlef, the cork exploitation sites of Philippeville, and the mines of the Constantinois—before extending to the French metropolis. The evolution of this emigration followed a cyclical pattern: it intensified before the First World War, declined during the conflict, and reached its peak after the liberation of Paris, driven by post-war economic expansion. This post-war period marked the golden age of Kabyle emigration, as reflected in the following excerpt:

"The post-war years were a period of unparalleled prosperity for the Kabyles: people were being hired everywhere, they were no longer turned away, and wages kept rising. Those who became peddlers or engaged in shady dealings quickly managed to acquire small fortunes, which they would spend at home with great ostentation, only to hurry back again." (EB, 82)

According to the narrator, Amer—whose primary concern was not the accumulation of wealth—did not belong to this category of immigrants known as *migrators*, who regarded France not as a permanent refuge but as a means of acquiring material wealth to purchase land, build homes, marry, or save money.

Rather, he belonged to the group of *sedentary* immigrants who, unlike the *migrators*, gave up any notion of returning to their homeland and forgot, in effect, their responsibilities as fathers or family providers. Amer adapted so fully to his new life that he seemed to forget his parents, who believed him lost after so many years without news.

The narrative perspective in *The Earth and the Blood* focuses primarily on the lives of immigrants in France. However, the novel provides no explicit description of the metropolis itself, nor of its society. The narrator merely alludes to a few cities—Paris, Lille, Lyon, Marseille—and to certain streets in Paris and its suburbs.

The social discourse on emigration reveals that the immigrant was confined to subordinate roles and lived on the margins of European society. He failed to establish genuine relationships with the Other and remained, even abroad, a foreigner who felt comfortable only among his own people. The narrator of *The Earth and the Blood* thus highlights the remarkable reconstitution, within the mines of northern France, of small Kabyle communities that strikingly resembled those of their original villages.

From a narratological standpoint, emigration in the novel takes the form of an extensive *external analepsis*, since it transports the reader far beyond the primary temporal field of the narrative. The narrator first recounts the couple's return and settlement in the village, before moving backward to evoke Amer's memories and to explain his estrangement from his family.

The discourse on emigration illuminates a socio-political reality that shaped an important chapter in Algerian history—the struggle of a people for survival. Feraoun approaches this phenomenon with the rigor of an ethnographer, emphasizing its positive aspects. Emigration, according to his portrayal, contributed to improving the living conditions of the villagers and to opening the closed Kabyle world to modernity. Through migration, village life became oriented toward change and toward the pursuit of civic emancipation, as emigrants were exposed for the first time to progressive ideas within trade unions and workers' movements.

Nevertheless, the narrator also underscores the negative dimensions of emigration, particularly social inequality. He highlights the insurmountable difficulties faced by immigrants in adapting to the lifestyle imposed by the host society. Emigration is also portrayed as the principal source of *acculturation*, especially among young Kabyles, whose moral decay was manifested through the violation of Islamic law and the abandonment—or even disdain—of religious practices.

Finally, *The Earth and the Blood* also stages a reverse case of migration: that of Marie, the French woman who accompanies her husband Amer in his permanent return to Ighil-Nezman after fifteen years of absence. The narrator describes in detail the couple's arrival in the village, focusing particularly on "the foreign woman," who appears to the villagers as a mysterious revelation, intriguing men, women, and children alike. The villagers seem less concerned with Amer's long-awaited return; indeed,

"It was the Parisian woman who threw the entire village into turmoil." (EB, 12)
The narrator notes that Marie quickly adapts to her new environment and ultimately assumes the identity of a Kabyle woman of Ighil-Nezman. She remains there until her death, never contemplating a return to France, even after her husband's premature passing. Beyond a simple case of a mixed marriage between Amer and Marie, one can easily perceive in their union an allegory of the encounter between Algerians and French—an encounter first born of colonization and later reinforced by the waves of emigration to France, leading to profound cultural crossovers. Through this successful example of integration, Feraoun suggests that such encounters are inevitable, but for them to be meaningful, they must be grounded in mutual respect and genuine acceptance of the Other, free from domination or dependency.

2. Emigration in *The Paths That Ascend*

The theme of emigration strongly shapes the narrative fabric of *The Paths That Ascend*, as it constitutes both its principal source of inspiration and its driving force, as evidenced by the following passage from Feraoun's interview with Maurice Monnoyer, previously cited:
"I thought that Kabyle emigration could provide the material for one or several works of genuine interest. I distinguished two periods: from 1910 to 1930 and from 1930 to the years we are living in. *The Earth and the Blood* is devoted to the first period. I will write another novel about the second."
The Paths That Ascend thus represents the literary project through which Feraoun sought to explore the second phase of Kabyle emigration announced in that interview—a period that differs entirely from the first. As he remarked, "The Kabyles of 1953 are better equipped than their predecessors, because they adapt more easily to the ways of life in the metropolis."(PA, 48) Unlike the earlier emigrants, who remained profoundly attached to their land and traditions and whose primary concern was to save money and return home to improve their condition in the village, this new generation displays a different mindset and motivation.
The narrator underscores that the reasons for exile are not necessarily material. Through the case of the main protagonist, Amer n'Amer, he depicts a man who, despite his attachment to his village and his good relations with his peers, shows deep resistance toward the ancestral norms of his community. Amer enters into direct conflict with what he calls *"the old beards"*—the conservative faction of the village represented by the members of the *djamaâ*. They reproach him, on the one hand, for the impurity of his blood due to his half-French origin, and on the other, for his overt opposition to the religious and social rules of the community.
As a result of this serious disagreement with his "unfortunates", Amer and a group of young villagers establish a small communist cell aimed at creating an egalitarian society free from dogma:

"Since then, I've made up my mind: I never fast, and I have disciples—like the devil—and together we mock them all, and I alone reap their hatred." (PA, 136)

This rebellious attitude disrupts the moral and social order of the village. In other words, it constitutes a form of insolent defiance and an affront to the village's elders, notables, and *Amins*—the true beneficiaries of the ancestral order. These authorities act swiftly to suppress the clandestine and subversive activities of the cell: two militants are arrested, while Amer, the leader, is spared because of his mixed origins:

"Amer n'Amer was harshly reprimanded by the hakem, but considering his illegitimate birth and despite his heavy past as a student, he was able to avoid Colomb-Béchar. In her panic, my mother preferred to send me to France." (PA, 200)

For Amer, emigration is therefore not a means of earning a living, as it was for his father, but rather a form of exile—an escape from potential judicial prosecution due to his political activism and communist sympathies.

Amer recounts in detail, on the ninth day of his journal, the journey to France that would become a classic motif in Maghrebi literature. He leaves Ighil-Nezman early in the morning to take the bus to Algiers, boards a ship bound for Marseille, and from there travels to Paris, where he stays for four years among the North Africans—the "*Norafs*." The narrative does not dwell on a detailed depiction of this much-desired universe of the hero; rather, it focuses on his psychological state in the face of the hatred and intolerance of the host society.

It is through emigration that Amer discovers the racism of the French, in whose eyes "the *Noraf* is beneath everything." (PA, 137) Maghrebians are thus regarded as an inferior race to be despised and rejected, and entire generations of emigrants suffer from this chronic wound, born of unjust hostility. Amer reports:

"At Ighil-Nezman, at Taguemount or at Taourirt—it's all the same. Everywhere there are young people like me who make fun of those who came back from France with broken hearts, because they had to go there to understand. Oh! It isn't easy to understand." (PA, 138)

Indeed, the young people in the novel's society, who fail to grasp or pay sufficient attention to this pervasive hostility, continue to "depart en masse toward luxury and ease." (PA, 200) They are fascinated by "the excellent news about the mountaineers who, in Paris or Lille, had made millions, owned buildings, cafés, restaurants, and shops." (PA, 200)

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the theme of emigration lies at the very heart of all conflicts in Mouloud Feraoun's fictional universe. The author devoted particular attention to this theme, undoubtedly to convey certain aspects of his own ideology. As a *normalien* and an advocate of assimilation, deeply committed to humanist ideals such as universal fraternity and the equality of races and beliefs, Feraoun believed that emigration could serve as a means of bringing together the Arab and

French communities. However, he ultimately realized that this ambition was nothing more than an illusion, owing to the racial segregation policy implemented by the French administration—a policy that relegated the native Algerian to the status of a third-class citizen.

This idea of unequal opportunity is explicitly expressed in *The Paths That Ascend* through the words of the protagonist, Amer n'Amer:

"The people who come to our land are not to be pitied: they occupy the best positions, all positions, and always end up becoming wealthy. As for us, nothing remains. So, in turn, we go to their land. But not to occupy positions or to become rich—only to tear off a piece of bread: to earn it, to beg for it, or to steal it. That is what we do." (PA, 234)

In this passage, the expression *"*the people who come to our land*"* refers to the colonists who monopolize all power and seize fertile lands, pushing the indigenous population into barren regions. This dispossession forces them to leave their homeland in search of survival for themselves and their families.

Feraoun's conviction is further embodied in another passage of the same novel, where a secondary character shows affection for the homeless people of Paris, whom he calls *"Zami."* He liked to wake them up on their benches and say, with bitter irony:

"Do you want some advice, my Zami? […] Yes, my Zami. Go to Algeria, Allah is great! In the next elections, you'll be mayor. I know what I'm saying. Go to Algeria, my Zami." (PA, 234)

From this perspective, Feraoun's writings can be considered profoundly subversive. Through them, he seeks to denounce the discrimination perpetuated by the colonial system.

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