

The Influence of Platonic Dialogues and the Menippean Satire in Kateb Yacine's *La Poudre d'intelligence*

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Introduction

In his book *Le Théâtre en Algérie: Histoire et Enjeux*, Ahmed Cheniki contends that the majority of the Algerian plays including Kateb's are pervaded by both Oriental and Western influences (Cheniki, 2002). He traces the genealogy of the Algerian theatre starting from its birth in 1840s after the literary movement called "La Nahda" the Renaissance which was no more than a timid attempt of some Egyptian and Algerian students to take ownership of European cultural forms of expression. Cheniki explains that these theatrical borrowings found a great opposition from the Algerians who saw them as a way to displace the natives from their own culture and transplant them into the hegemonic colonial one.

It was till the passage of Egyptian theatrical groups in Algeria that the audience legitimated these influences. The majority of Middle East playwrights like Marun Al-Naqqash (1817-1855) were deeply influenced by Molière's plays, for example *L'avare* was translated into Arabic without even referring to the source. Therefore and to believe Cheniki's study, the Algerian theatre emerged with a double influence: the French and the Arab one and the traces of these influences appear in the use of western forms of tragedy and comedy and the oriental elements like the character of Djoha, as inspired from the *Arabian Nights* and then developed to be referred to as "al Gouwal, or al Maddah" (Cheniki, 2002) in Algerian plays. As for the Algerian identity, it is depicted through the use of oral culture and the social characteristics of the Algerian society during and after the French colonialism.

Kateb's play *La Poudre*¹ is a farce written in 1959 as an interlude between two tragedies; *Le Cadavre encerclé* and *Les Ancêtres redoublent de férocité* both included in a collection entitled *Le Cercle des représailles*.

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¹ Abreviation of the complete title of the play *La Poudre d'intelligence*.

In the preface to this collection, Edouard Glissant asserts that Kateb's dramatic art is inscribed in modern tragedies that confront the individual and the collectivity to help him express the sombre part of humanity and find an appropriate remedy to it through reconciliation with the self and then with the other (Kateb, 1959). Thus, besides the deployment of tragedy in his dramatic works, this article contributes in exploring the influence of Greek philosophy, as conveyed in the genre of the Platonic dialogues and the menippean satire in Kateb's farcical play. Supported by Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), that thoroughly discusses these genres, this analysis probes into the dialogues of the characters to dissect the deep sense of their local visions that often relate them to universality. Further, it shows Kateb's way of pinpointing the corruption in the Algerian institutions by mocking the king, his court and the greedy mufti and Ulémas that surround and often misleadingly counsel him.

Kateb Yacine and the genre of the Socratic dialogue

Kateb Yacine started his literary career as a poet influenced by French poetry. His political activism began when he left school to participate in the popular manifestations (May 8th, 1945) in which the Algerians celebrated the victory of the Allies in World War II and asked for the independence promised by the colonizer, which was in fact just a trick to convince them to join the battlefield. However, these celebrations turned out into bloody massacres. Kateb Yacine was arrested and deeply shocked after witnessing the death of his comrades during this aborted revolutionary attempt to voice his people's strife.

To survive despair and depression resulted from his early traumatizing political consciousness, Kateb spent one year confined in his room reading French poets like Rimbaud, de Vigny, Baudelaire and Lautréamont Isidore Ducasse. To save him from this isolation, his father sent him to spend some days with his uncle in Annaba where Kateb fell in love with his cousin who was already married and was ten years older than him. Kateb sublimated and often substituted this forbidden romance by a love for his nation in a passionate poetry. The creative innovations Kateb introduced in his writings and his awareness about the unlimited horizons modern fictional techniques provided resulted in a very complex form of fiction, as Bernard Aresu explains, and the emergence of a new "genre" partaking of all others and more particularly of a close amalgamation of the poetic and fictional genres clearly visible in his theatre (Arisu, 1978).

Kateb Yacine assumed his double culture being an Algerian who attended French school and later on worked as a journalist in Europe. He travelled to France and lived in other European towns like Milano, Brucells, Hambourg, Stockholm, Zagreb, Berlin, Florence, Rome, Trieste, Moscow, calling himself "le Maghrebin errant" (Fauré, 1974), and where he enriched his

readings absorbing, though critically, European fictional techniques and literary references. His encounter with theatre started when he met Jean-Marie Serreau who introduced him to the Brechtian experimental theatre in Paris. Later on, he polemicizes with Brecht himself about the timelessness of tragedy trying to explain that his country Algeria was living one (Aouadi, 2005). Kateb Yacine started writing tragedies like *Le Cadavre encerclé* (1958) and *Les Ancêtres redoublent de férocité* (1967) where he changed the Greek notion of the tragic hero by creating a couple of tragic heroes (Nedjma-Lakhder) instead of the Sophoclean individual tragic hero (Aouadi, 2005).

Soon after, Kateb missed his local popular culture and wanted to speak using his maternal language though he couldn't write in Arabic. His "double exile" from both the country and his language alienated him from his people. He decided to turn to the carnivalesque and popular culture to feel at home again. Therefore, he started to write his first "simple play", as he calls it, and the one he entitled *La Poudre d'intelligence*. This play marked the first step in his homecoming. With this play Kateb Yacine felt at ease with the carnivalesque and the popular laughter. Saddek Aouadi writes that, « avec *La poudre d'intelligence*, Kateb découvre l'efficacité du langage simple et l'utilisation du rire pour plaire, distraire, communiquer et en même temps éduquer » (Aouadi, 2005, p. 149).

Theatre and the carnivalesque are interrelated because the former is the medium that directly addresses the people and is closely related to the notion of the folk culture. Bakhtin is among the critics who argued for this stance because he fervently believes that carnivalization is the condition for the ultimate "structure of life" that is formed by "behaviour and cognition" (Bakhtin, 1984a). Carrying in this position, Bakhtin explains that, "in carnival the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated" (Bakhtin, 1984a). He adds that one aspects of this relation is *unmasking* and *disclosing of the unravished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks*. He repeatedly points to the Socratic dialogue as a prototype of the discursive mechanism for revealing truth. For him dialogue is opposed to the "authoritarian word" in the same way as carnival is opposed to the official culture (Bakhtin, 1984a).

The Socratic dialogue, as Bakhtin defines it in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), is a "serio-comical genre" that has its basis in the folk-carnivalistic tradition. It is the first artistic prose-model in the development of Western literature (Bakhtin, 1981). The most important aspects of these dialogues are: 1) the dialogic nature of truth and human thought about truth, 2) Syncrisis and anacrisis, 3) the dialogue's heroes are ideologists seeking and testing truth, 4) the dialogue on the threshold, and 5) the idea discussed in the dialogue is organically combined with its carrier.

Kateb's *La Poudre* is basically a dialogue between Nuage de Fumée, and his folks. He is portrayed as a philosopher who uses the word to unveil the ignorance, greed and the absurdity of the authorities in his society. In this, Kateb's play recalls Socratic dialogues in all its characteristics as this analysis will show. In his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin explains in a detailed way these characteristics. The first basic characteristic of the genre is the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of the human thinking about truth. This characteristic is important because for Bakhtin it stands against official monologism that pretends to possess a ready-made truth. It counters the naïve self-confidence of people who think that they possess certain truths since "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 109).

The characters in Kateb's *La Poudre* seem to accept a ready-made truth fabricated by "the Sultan, the muftis and the ulemas"; in other words, The king, his counsellors and the society of religious men. They lead a life of accepted discourses that suits the authorities. However, "a man of the people", who is Nuage de Fumée rises doubts and questions their ready-made truth through his dialogues with the Coryphée, Le Cadi (a kind of justice of the peace), and even with his wife Attika. Right at the beginning of the play Nuage de Fumée gets out early in the morning to look for work because they have nothing to eat at home. He meets the royal escort going to hunting. The king, afraid that Nuage will be a bad omen to his hunting, puts him in jail. However, at noon when he comes back home, he asks the officer to liberate him because contrary to what he expected upon seeing Nuage de Fumée, his hunting-time was successful. However, Nuage de Fumée refuses to go out before seeing and speaking to the king himself. This following extract reports their dialogic nature of truth concerning the notions of happiness and sadness as related to omens:

Le Sultan: Tiens prends cette bourse. Ce matin, j'étais inquiet, je ne voulais pas que ma partie de chasse commence par un mauvais présage. Pourtant, Dieu merci, tu ne m'as pas porté malheur.

Nuage de Fumée : Je me demande qui a porté malheur à l'autre! Mais le malheur se transforme toujours en bonheur. C'est ce bonheur qu'il faut craindre car il serra la source du prochain malheur, et ainsi de suite. Il y en a qui ont érigé là-dessus tout un système philosophique. (*Il salue le sultan et s'éloigne*). Par exemple, si un filou s'emparait de ma bourse, ma théorie serait, hélas, confirmée! (Kateb, 1959, p. 76).

Nuage de Fumée questions the sultan's belief concerning good and bad omens and destabilizes the whole system of thoughts. He explains to him that nothing is constant but everything is subject to metamorphoses. Indeed, his happiness will soon be transformed into grief because he will be robbed his golden pieces offered by the king in the market.

The second two basic devices of the Socratic dialogue are anacrisis and anacresis. Syncrisis is the juxtaposition of various points of view on a specific object. The second one, anacresis is understood as the means used to provoke the words of an interlocutor forcing him to express thoroughly his opinion. Socrates is the master of this device (anacresis) because he knew how to force people to speak and unveil their stubborn preconceived opinions, the better to expose their falseness or incompleteness, and to reach the truth. Syncrisis and anacresis dialogize thought; they carry it into the open, turn it into a rejoinder, and attach it to dialogic intercourse among people. Like Socrates, Nuage de Fumée juxtaposes various points of view inspired by both his popular culture and the universal philosophy as noticed in his discourse. He pertains to the mass that supposes his dexterous skills in using its culture to convince the people and at the same time deploys French philosophy when he explains to the chorus that, "j'ai froid donc je suis mort" (Kateb, 1959, p. 80), which recalls Descartes's well-known expression "je pense donc j'existe".

Nuage de Fumée excels in using Anacresis by forcing the people to speak their inner thoughts and depict their falseness. He forces the Cadi to espouse his cause after exposing the absurdity of the chorus's and the Coryphée's interminable and hypocrite salutations. The Cadi who should provide the example of the good citizen is incited to publicly abhor the popular salutations that start each intention to communicate with the other. After being enraged by the Coryphée's interminable salutations, Nuage de Fumée slaps him in the face. Therefore, he was convicted to the court of the Cadi. Instead of explaining his state, he acted as the Coryphée himself as the following passage illustrates:

Le Cadi: Encore toi. Pourquoi as-tu frappé cet homme?

Nuage de Fumée : (s'éloignant) : Salut !

Le Cadi : Où vas-tu ?

Nuage de Fumée : (S'éloignant encore) : Salut !

Le Cadi : Arrêtez-le !

Nuage de Fumée : (S'éloignant toujours) : Salut !

Le Cadi : Je me moque de ton salut. Réponds à ma question !

Nuage de Fumée : Réponds d'abord à la mienne : n'y a-t-il pas de quoi devenir enragé, à entendre les éternelles salutations de tous ces citadins blafards, ces marchands de tout et de rien, ces mouchards calamiteux, ces individus louches qui attendent, avec leur civilité de surface, qu'un innocent,

un philosophe ou un travailleur, tombe dans leurs longs bras pour y perdre la bourse ou la vie... (Il s'éloigne encore.) Salut. Cent fois salut ! Salut à tous les fourbes de la terre ! (Kateb, 1959, p. 78).

After this scene, the Cadi disappears reacting in the same way as Nuage de Fumée. He completely adheres to the position because he understood the feeling of the convicted. Thus, Nuage de Fumée's anacrisis unveils even the Cadi's stubborn ideas by publicly exposing their falseness.

The third characteristic, of the genre is that the heroes of the Socratic dialogue are ideologists seeking and testing truth just like the prime speaker Socrates who incites the others (his pupils, the sophists and simple people) against their own will, to participate in the ideological event he initiated. Bakhtin explains that the dialogue unfolds with a genuine dramatic effect, like the peripetations or multiplicity of creative forces of the idea of immortality of the soul in Plato's *Phaedo*². Thus, the hero-ideologist was first introduced into the history of European literature by the Socratic dialogue. Kateb's Nuage de Fumée is the mistreated philosopher of the play who engages battles of words against the will of the populace to show their ignorance. As a hero-ideologist he challenges the intelligence of the highest authorities of his society. Being the descendent of the oriental Djha, the "goual" or "meddah" of the Algerian market squares, Nuage de Fumée uses words to spread wisdom among the masses that often ignore what really happens in the highest social layers.

The fourth important element of the Socratic dialogue is the dialogue on the threshold, generally provoked by an extraordinary plot situation, a moment of crisis. It is a turning point for the self. It generally happens when a man confronts a death sentence (standing on the threshold) confesses and sums up his life and its final decisions either directly facing the real listeners of his dialogue or in front of the divine judge(s). In Plato's *Gorgias*³, this dialogue is described as the greatest of all contests (agon) awaiting everyone towards the end of his life. This extraordinary stance of looking one's own death directly forces the person to reveal the deepest layers of his personality and thought in a freeway. Nuage de Fumée is the central character who lives liminal position after being recognized by the sultan to be a great philosopher. Therefore, as a reward, he has been selected to educate the prince and accompany him throughout his growing up till his adulthood. This liminal position is a turning point in the life of the philosopher who keeps criticizing the sultan and his court and then becomes one of them. This situation is imposed on him because he is the wisest citizen and the sultan

² Phaedo or Phaidon is a friend and disciple of Socrates, author of dialogues, and prominent participant in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* (on the death of Socrates).

³ *Gorgias* is another Socratic dialogue written by Plato around 380 BC. The dialogue is a conversation between Socrates and a group of sophists about death.

wants him as a teacher to his son. This paradoxical position pushed him to say what follows:

Le Sultan: O profond philosophe, je te dois une récompense. Considère-toi officiellement comme le précepteur unique du prince héritier. Il n'y a pas de fonction plus haute. (*Noir. Coup de gong. Près du berceau repose le bébé royal, Nuage est allongé sur un riche tapis, sa pipe troquée contre un magnifique narguilé, symbole de fortune*).

Nuage de Fumée : Ainsi va la gloire : elle m'a tout bonnement transformé en nourrice. Désormais je suis condamné à vivre jour et nuit au chevet du prince. Il m'est impossible de m'absenter. Et je suis pris à mon propre piège, puisqu'il me faut déceler, chose absurde, les symptômes de l'intelligence dans le crâne de cet avorton qui suce son pouce... (Kateb, 1959, pp. 110-111).

The fifth element in the genre is that the idea is organically combined with the image of a person, its carrier. In the Socratic dialogue the idea of Socrates, the central hero of the genre, wearing the popular mask of the bewildered fool, is combined with the image of the wise man of the most elevated sort, a combination that produces the ambivalent image of wise ignorance (Bakhtin, 1981). The testing of the idea in this genre is at the same time the testing of its exponents all along the dialogue. Nuage de Fumée incarnates the figure of the philosopher/ fool in the play. He carries the people's culture and wisdom and he is often convicted for subversion and telling truth that disturbs the ruling class.

It follows from the above analysis that Kateb Yacine's play is written as a Socratic dialogue in which the hero ideologist, Nuage de Fumée, tests and exposes the falseness of his interlocutor's stubborn beliefs for the sake of correcting them collectively. However, what pervades this dialogue is the element of laughter and satire. This leads us to consider another serio-comical genre that emerges at the point of the disintegration of the Socratic dialogue which is the Menippean satire, as Bakhtin explains in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1981). Therefore, and as we shall argue in the next part of our article, Kateb's play understudy can be considered as a Menippean satire as well.

Kateb Yacine and the Menippean satire

According to Bakhtin, the Menippean satire originates from the philosopher Menippus of Gadara (3rd century B.C.). It was acknowledged as a specific genre by the Roman satirist Varro who was an older contemporary of Horace, and whose works existed only in fragments. Later on, this genre was deployed by Lucian who often used Menippus as a character in his

works. For instance, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) is a full-blown Menippean satire. This genre is close to the carnivalesque because it is one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature.

Menippean satires share fourteen characteristics that we shall summarize according to what is explained by Bakhtin. Thus, a menippean satire, or a menippea is usually more comic than the Socratic dialogue which remains a syncretic philosophical-artistic genre. It is usually free and fantastic and creates extraordinary situations for the purpose of testing philosophical truth especially through the manipulation of perspective. These fantasies and even quasi-religious aspects are often mixed with "crude slum naturalism". It is a genre that combines bold invention with philosophical reflection. It uses "experimental fantasticality" and often represents unusual states of insanity, split personality, dreams, excessive passion, and so on. It is a multi-styled and multi-toned genre that may contain small genres as the diatribe, the soliloquy, and the symposium. It is characterized by scandal, eccentricities, inappropriate speech, violation of politeness and social codes exposing contradictory behaviour. It deploys many genres to parody them (Bakhtin, 1984b). Essentially all of these features are found in Kateb's *La Poudre d'intelligence*. However, this does not mean that Kateb directly and consciously stylize the ancient menippea. Rather, it is the strong impact of this literary genre that permits its existing and absorbing of other genres. This pervading effect makes it possible for our playwright to be influenced by menippea through his reading sources.

La Poudre is a multi-styled play that parodies the other styles it incorporates. With it, Kateb Yacine turns to the carnivalesque but includes inside the script fairy tales (the Golden Ass), soliloquies, poems and folk tales. These genres of which the content drives either from the popular culture or the universal corpus could not escape the satiric verve that is present all along the play. By so doing, he intends to depict a world upside down by debunking the hypocrisy of the sultan and his devotees. For instance the tale of the ass with golden excrements is used to parody the folk tale and at the same time to show the greed of the sultan and his men who accept everything for the sake of becoming richer. Therefore, he puts three golden coins as suppositories for the animal and he succeeds to convince them of the divinity of his donkey that produces gold. The king orders to use his most expensive tapestry to receive all the golden coins as the following passage shows:

Le Sultan: O prodige! O bienfaiteur du royaume!

Nuage de Fumée : Ceci n'est rien...lorsque l'âne divin, dis-je, sera royalement nourri, et qu'il pourra solennellement, en présence de toutes les personnalités civiles, militaires, et religieuses, se soulager sur un tapis

plus riche encore-car il aime les honneurs, et il a sa noblesse à lui-alors, ô sultan, tu ne sauras que faire de l'or miraculeux... (*Nuage de Fumée fait face à l'assemblée et dirige l'opération magique d'un temps devenu impérieux*).

Nuage de Fumée : Eteignez la lumière ! Laissez venir l'inspiration. Lorsque vous entendrez un bruit caractéristique, alors, ô grand mufti, et vous doctes Ulémas, que vos mains s'allongent à l'unisson vers le tapis, et aussitôt vous palperez le salaire de la foi. (*Un temps. On entend les Ulémas et le mufti psalmodier*).

Le Sultan : Alors ?

Le Mufti : Ma foi, je ne touche rien de consistant...

Nuage de Fumée : Ne désespérez pas. Ça commence par l'or liquide.

Le Mufti : Peut-être l'âne est-il malade ? Vous l'avez trop nourri. Nous sommes dans un vrai marécage... et pas la moindre pièce.

Le Sultan : peut-être est-ce l'obscurité qui vous trompe ?

Nuage de Fumée : Eh bien, que la lumière soit ! (*Lumière sur le tapis qui déborde sous un tas de crottin*) (Kateb, 1959, pp. 85-86).

This passage quoted *in extenso* contains all the principles of the menippea. Nuage de Fumée takes an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention. Before narrating his story he says, "je vais immédiatement vérifier ma trouvaille. Car voici le sultan. Motus. Je vais montrer au peuple comment notre sultan conçoit l'économie politique" (Kateb, 1959, p. 83). His *bold* fantastic story is narrated and acted to teach a lesson to the sultan and his devotees. It happens in darkness in the castle of the king. Being scandalous and eccentric, to find gold these stupid noble men believe in the supernatural powers of a donkey and go beyond their ranks to investigate that animal's excrements. This creates an abject situation in the dirtiest spaces to test his idea which stipulates that the sultan lacks three important things to be happy : intelligence, gold, and love. But upon finding gold the two others should systematically follow as he explains to the sultan. To create conflict between the king and his followers Nuage de Fumée unveils their corruption and their secret desire to amass gold for themselves by accusing them of witchcraft to charm and paralyze his animal as he explains in the following passage, which is also the situation that marks the *decrowning of the carnival king* to use Bakhtin's expression (Bakhtin, 1984b).

Nuage de Fumée : Malheur ! Les Ulémas ont ensorcelé mon âne !

Le Sultan : Je n'y comprends rien.

Nuage de Fumée : sultan rend moi justice. Je vais prouver publiquement que ces démons, sans songer qu'ils te ruinaient on me ruinant, et sans songer à tout le bonheur que l'âne magique peut procurer au royaume, nous ont joué ce mauvais tour, pour pouvoir faire de l'or en cachette, comme c'est d'ailleurs leur habitude. Oui, j'ai la preuve. Il suffirait de gaver tous ces Ulémas, mufti en tête, et de les mettre sur le tapis. Tu verras de tes propres yeux, et le peuple pourrait constater, afin qu'il n'y ait plus de doute. (Noir. Lumière. Le chœur est déployé autour de la scène. Au centre, les Ulémas, et le mufti déployé en demi-cercle. A droite, Nuage de Fumée. Le sultan leur fait face. Un temps, Noir.)

Nuage de Fumée : Courage ô sultan. Fouille résolument dans ces ruines saintes. As-tu trouvé ? (Kateb, 1959, pp. 85-86).

Another characteristic of the menippea found in *La Poudre d'intelligence* is the element of laughter. Kateb uses it to be closer to the anonymous mass, his folks for the sake of learning and interpreting the world for them. In depicting social reality, laughter as Bakhtin explains demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it (Bakhtin, 1981). Through Nuage de Fumée, our playwright acts an "inner dialogue", a dialogue with the self in which he tries to appropriate his own culture and a part of his identity. His experimental fantasy and use of laughter and popular sayings though often awkwardly translated into the French language contribute in the creation of a work of art that is a part of an Algerian literary tradition.

Representing the current issues which is also another characteristic of the menippea is also depicted in *La Poudre d'intelligence*. Though it is an experimental fantasy, Kateb's play fundamentally renders the present topics of his society. At the end of the play the prince is killed by the royal guards because they attacked the fighters of the liberation army suspecting them of kidnaping him. Therefore, and more than ever, Kateb Yacine is engaged with the political matters of the Algerian society of the late fifties.

Conclusion

It follows from the above discussion that *La Poudre d'intelligence* is informed by the two serio-comical carnivalesque genres of the Socratic dialogue and the Menippean satire. The deployment of these western genres does not mean that Kateb Yacine directly stylizes them in his work but it shows the influence of the Western literary tradition in his writings. His hybrid culture permits him to import aspects of the Western theatre and a return to his popular culture through approaching the Algerian folklore and identity. Therefore, he uses Western forms of the Socratic dialogue and the menippea to expose the Algerian cultural content that needs political consciousness and voicing in the late fifties, by so doing exposing the dialectic of the local and the universal culture.

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