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Fawziya Rašīd's Collection of Short Stories *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* ("Mirrors of Light and Shade") as an Affirmation of Personalistic Values

Abstract

In the collection of short stories *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* ("Mirrors of Light and Shade") the question of man and his place in reality runs through in various forms. It is just such an internal inscrutable world that Fawziya Rašīd[1] attempts to sketch for us in her short stories. This is far from being a world that is clear and lucid, in the way that our thoughts and desires are not totally clear. The author often ventures blindfold into the depths of her heroes', reality, slowly discovering their true features. The reader can easily lose himself in this jumble of feelings and events. This, however, encourages him all the more to reflection. Fawziya Rašīd's man stimulates us to search for meaning, purpose, motive, forces us to ask constant questions. He does not allow us to pass by with indifference. The heroes of the short stories from the collection *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* are the people we meet in the street, people so different from us and yet so similar. Questions about them are questions about us. Their failure tastes as bitter as our own. Their life is as alarmingly real as our own.

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Emmanuel Mounier, the creator of the monthly "Esprit" and the author of *A Personalistic Manifesto* presented in 1936, said recapitulating his ideas: "An individual is not even a social cell, but constitutes the peak from which all the roads of the world diverge"[2].

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[1] Fawziya Rašīd, (born 1954), contemporary Bahraini writer. She is the author of the following collections of short stories: *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ*, *Imra'a wa-raǧul*, *Kayfa ṣāra al-aḥḍaru ḥaǧaran*, *Taḥawwulāt al-fāris al-ǧarīb* and novels: *Al-Ḥiṣār*, *Al-Qalaq as-sirrī*.

[2] E. Mounier, *Co to jest personalizm*, in: T. Terlecki, *Krytyka personalistyczna*, Warszawa 1987, p. 27.

Mounier's concepts are certainly not new in the history of philosophical or social thought. Man as a concrete individual with his unique story had previously inspired chiefly Pascal and Kierkegaard. The latter placed particular emphasis on personal existence, on its intensity and truth. According to him only a life that is real and perceptible is an apt and worthy subject for investigation. For Kierkegaard, acquaintance with the world is an acquaintance with a concrete individual, the one experiencing his own singular internal life. This uniqueness of the individual is the greatest value, yet it simultaneously constitutes the source of conflicts. Kierkegaard writes of *the tragic sense of life*. "Tragic", for it is never totally fulfilled[3]. The world of human desires is often a world of defeats and disillusionment. It seems that man's greatest misfortune is his loneliness, the limits of which are impassable, from which there is no exit in any direction. Kierkegaard sees man's salvation only in God. This question is, however, perceived in a different way by his heirs. For French existentialist Gabriel Marcel, a way out from the circle of loneliness is achievable through the help of another man. In his play *The Destroyed World* (*Le monde casse*) of 1933 he writes: "We are not alone, nobody is alone. There exists a community of sinners. There exists a community of saints"[4]. The *apostle of despair*, Jean Paul Sartre, perceives reality somewhat differently. He writes: "Existence exists without justification, without causes and without need, the world is a whirl of nonsense and man a vessel of damnation"[5].

Mounier's personalism combines in itself various concepts of the existentialists, yet in contrast to the ideas of the philosophers quoted above it does not make a certain systematic whole; rather, it provides a perspective, a method to evaluate facts and phenomena. One could say it is a living philosophy, the one developing with life itself and impinging on it. Its aim is the revealing of the world pervaded thoroughly by man, to the most mysterious depths of existence, a world of the fullest flowering and the greatest volume of all personalities[6].

Such personalistic ideas find their full confirmation in the short stories by Fawziya Rašīd selected by me from the collection *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* ("Mirrors of Light and Shade").

In her analysis of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's short stories, Helena Zaworska, writes that in real life we are never able to totally get to know human nature, its desires and aspirations. According to her there exists, however, a reality of imagination and art within which the artist is able to comprehend a range of experiences which are on a daily basis inscrutable[7]. It is just such an internal inscrutable world that Fawziya Rašīd attempts to sketch for us in her short stories. This is far from being a world that is clear and lucid, in the way that our thoughts and desires are not totally clear. The author often ventures

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[3] Cf. S. Kirkegaard, *Choroba na śmierć*, Warszawa, 1966, p. 5.

[4] G. Marcel, *Le monde casse*, in: T. Terlecki, op. cit., p. 34.

[5] J.P. Sartre, *L'être et le neant*, in: T. Terlecki, op. cit., p. 64.

[6] Cf. T. Terlecki, *Krytyka personalistyczna*, p. 32.

[7] Cf. H. Zaworska, *Opowiadania Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, Warszawa 1985, p. 12.

blindfold into the depths of her heroes' reality slowly discovering their true features. The reader can easily lose himself in this jumble of feelings and events. However, this encourages him all the more to reflection. Fawziya Rašīd's man stimulates us to search for meaning, purpose, motive, forces us to ask constant questions. He does not allow us to pass by indifferently. The heroes of the short stories from the collection *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* are the people we meet in the street, people so different from us and yet so similar. Questions about them are questions about us. Their failure tastes are as bitter as our own. Their life is as alarmingly real as our own. The simplicity and commonplaceness of the events described by Fawziya Rašīd is striking. Beyond that commonplaceness, however, one can reiterate Helena Zaworska's writing about Iwaszkiewicz: "danger peeps out, beyond commonness the macabre, beyond the realistic, sensory detail – metaphysics"[8].

The hero of the short story *Lawḥa ġayr muktamala* ("The Unfinished Picture") is a painter. His problems begin when he is detained by the police without any documents. Shocked by the arrest and plagued by constant summons to the police station, he is unable to create freely. Unceasing tension and fear paralyze him so much that he almost stops painting. The constant police intrusion leads him to a gradual nervous breakdown. His relationship with his beloved woman collapses. All the time he feels he is being followed. Despite this, the immense desire to create allows him to survive the moment of crisis and face up his internal problems. However, at the very moment when, for the first time after many months, he reaches for his brush, the police arrive to arrest him. In this short story Fawziya Rašīd exposes for us the functioning of the human psyche in a state of extreme nervous tension. The events are related by a narrator in the third person, although most of the story consists of the hero's monologue. It is from this that we learn what the artist feels. We discover that he suffers the most from creative impotence which he himself is not able to understand and which causes him immense pain. He repeats many times that "If I only could... (...) I would never have thought that something like this could have happened to me"[9].

The world of the story is presented from the perspective of the hero. Recollections are intertwined here with fragments of conversation and the narrator's commentary. This kind of expression on the part of the author is difficult for the recipient, yet superbly reflects the reality of human perception and of our psyche. Fear, in the shadow of which the hero lives, plays an important role in the work. The feeling of constant threat and the tormenting memories of arrest do not allow him to live normally, not to mention his artistic activity. When finally he is able to pull himself together sufficiently enough to take a brush in hand, he says: "I will start from my own tragedy... I will transfer that world to canvas"[10].

In accordance with the spirit of Mounier's *tragic optimism*, the artist after months of struggle with himself finally starts to paint. This immense strength of constantly raising oneself above one's own weaknesses and defeats that is so strongly emphasized by the

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[8] Ibid., p. 14.

[9] Fawziya Rašīd, *Lawḥa ġayr muktamala*, in: *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ*, Beirut 1983, pp. 13–14.

[10] Ibid., p. 20.

creator of *A Personalistic Manifesto* becomes almost also the magical strength of the hero of Fawziya Rašīd's short story *Lawḥa ǧayr muktamala*. To be, as uttered by the above mentioned Marcel, means to be on the way, to become, to exceed oneself, to constantly strive further[11]. Such an attitude also characterizes the hero created by the author in the story *Lawḥa ǧayr muktamala* from the collection *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ*. Despite victory over himself the artist is finally arrested. In considering his lot further we become simultaneously aware of how correct another existentialist, Karl Jaspers, was in saying that "the source of our actions and our self-consciousness is freedom"[12].

'Adnān Šarīf, the hero of another short story *Al-Waǧḥ al-aḫar* (Another Face) finds himself in a similar situation. An active student activist when young, he is made to pay heavily for overly brave viewpoints. At present, as a man 'with a past' he is faced with a difficult choice, to support the striking workers or to hand over the names of the main activists to the management by which he can be promoted and sent abroad. We equally become in this case acquainted with the hero from, as if, the inside. We follow his struggle with himself from the very beginning. Personal problems influence his perception of reality. We can note that the whole image of the world that surrounds him is to a large degree distorted, pervaded with a certain indeterminacy and fear of what will occur. 'Adnān Šarīf's insomnia is the consequence of a life led under constant stress. It is for this reason that he goes to a clinic although he is not really seeking help there. He only wants to be given sleeping tablets. When asked by a doctor for the symptoms of his illness, he says to himself: "There was no point in coming here... I should have tried to get my hands on the tablets some other way"[13].

We can clearly notice in this short story a fear of others, and particularly the conviction that another person will never totally understand us. This belief gives rise to a sense of solitude constituting an element of the Sartre-like wall which always will divide us from both the world and another man.

The author does not evaluate her hero. She presents his story while remaining impartial to the end. 'Adnān Šarīf constitutes the centre of reality, he directs himself by his own reason and, possibly, just like Mounier's man, remains the only measure of the absolute.

The subject of alienation and loneliness is also undertaken by the title story *Lu'bat laylat al-ǧum'a* ("The Friday Do"). The heroine, who is also the narrator of events, relates them addressing the reader directly. She recounts how she spends Friday evenings together with a group of friends. Deep inside, she has had enough of the repetitive cycle of the party ritual, occurring at a table laden with food and the stuffy atmosphere fanned by dancing, wine and cards. She turns to herself: "I don't know why I came here"[14]. She feels that really nothing connects her with the people she meets. She does not participate in their conversation or games. She shuts herself off in her reality so different from the turmoil

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[11] Cf. T. Terlecki, op. cit., p. 43.

[12] K. Jaspers, *Filozofia egzystencji*, Warszawa 1990, p. 36.

[13] Fawziya Rašīd, *Al-Waǧḥ al-aḫar*, in: *Marāyā...*, op. cit., p. 28.

[14] Fawziya Rašīd, *Lu'bat laylat al-ǧum'a*, in: *Marāyā...*, op. cit., p. 51.

that from surrounds her. But the heroine does not disclose what she desires. We do not know what she actually wants from life. The only thing that we clearly perceive is the dissonance between her and the group of people enjoying themselves: "You sit amongst them and you wonder what the reason is you spend every Friday evening with them"[15].

Besides the heroine's extremely Sartre-like standpoint, one close to repeating the 'philosopher of despairs' words that hell is different, Fawziya Rašīd gives us examples of a complete stance. One of the characters in the course of conversation says: "This world is a prison... we are its windows..." after a moment the personage adds "Love is its only window"[16].

Once again the author provokes the reader to take the appropriate stand in the questions raised in her work, but what needs to be emphasized is that she herself does not evaluate the stances of her heroes. Her philosophy is shaped by definite events and the psyche of a concrete individual.

The next two short stories *Min aršīf al-waḥda* ("From the Archive of Loneliness") and *Šay' mā* ("Something") are written in the form of recollections or confessions that concern the intimate spheres of human life, i.e. love and the need for acceptance. The heroines of these stories have much in common. Both feel that love is for them something unusually important, something that brings into their lives completely new values. However, in both cases the women's dreams are shattered by reality. They quickly become aware that their conceptions regarding feelings and life as a pair do not fit the images of their fiancés. We do not learn much from the works about the two women's stories. The author presents us the world of their thoughts and feelings. We detect how strong their desires to open up to another human being are, to get to know him and simultaneously to be known. It appears that their striving to meet others is internal coercion. They discover the truth about themselves only through contact with the reality of people met. Undoubtedly the full realization of an individual in the world depends to a great degree on being open to another person. Connecting with the 'other' however, is not easy and does not always end successfully. Circumstances make Fawziya Rašīd's heroines face many unknowns. The girl from the short story *Šay' mā*, after breaking up with her fiancé, asks herself the apparently trivial question: "Will anyone want me now for his wife?"[17]

Romantic experiences expose to the women some obvious truths that they will have to, however, arrive at on their own. The heroine of the work *Min aršīf al-waḥda* says at the end: "I realized that it is still along way from dreams to reality"[18].

In the collection of short stories *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* the question of man and his place in reality runs through in various forms. Such is the case of the short story *Ḥikāya lam tantahi* ("The Unfinished Story") where events are related by a narrator in the first person. We get to know the lot of Layla from his perspective as well. We learn

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[15] Ibid., p. 49.
[16] Ibid., p. 53.
[17] Fawziya Rašīd, *Šay' mā*, in: *Marāyā...*, op. cit., p. 71.
[18] Fawziya Raṣīd, *Min aršīf al-waḥda*, in: *Marāyā...*, op. cit., p. 24.

that the girl, following unsuccessful attempts to study, takes up a job in the local factory thereby helping to keep the family. She gets to know new people, starts to meet with friends. Day by day she becomes more and more independent, something which does not please her father who had wished for something more from his eldest daughter. He had wanted her to become a teacher. He shuts out the idea that she could get married and leave his house. It is certainly not insignificant that the girl contributes every month to the family budget. In a conversation where the mother is touching on the subject of marrying the daughter off, the father clearly says: "Do you really understand? How are we going to live without her working?"[19] The young girl is unable to agree with her father's decision and places him before a fait accompli. After Laylā's suspected ill health it turns out that the girl is pregnant and in order to avoid embarrassment she is forced to get married.

Fawziya Rašīd here confronts two different worlds. The life and dreams of the young girl are contrasted with the world's reality and ambitions of the father. This collision of two different dimentions can be interpreted in many ways. Undoubtedly the presentation of the conflict between generations and the family's difficult financial situation is important. Equally significant seem to be the presentation of the contrasting personalities of the father and daughter. Within this context it appears that the hero of the 'unfinished story' is man who in contacts with others is constantly faced with a choice, who finds himself somewhere at the crossroads between his own priorities and compromise and a sense of responsibility in the face of those who are closest. On the one hand he does not want to give up on his own values, while on the other he does not see how often his desires differ from those of people close to him. Laylā can not count upon understanding on the part of her father. For him it was important to keep his daughter at home as long as possible. He did not think sensibly about her happiness, for he realized that when the girl gets married she will stop bringing him the money she earns. When she is bored of waiting for her father's permission to get married she says to her mother: "I can't continue to carry on as helplessly as an oxen"[20] making it clear that she does not intend to delay with getting married. The author, this time too, leaves evaluation of the heroes' approach to the reader. And so the reader decides upon the perception of Laylā and he evaluates what she does.

Fawziya Rašīd's world of stories is one shown from the human side. Emmanuel Mounier says: "The human person is the only reality that we know and that we create at the same time"[21]. And just such a reality is extremely close to the author of the collection *Marāyā aẓ-ẓill wa-al-faraḥ* who advances on the first plane of things first and foremost man. It is not easy to reflect human thoughts and desires, it is also not easy to read the short stories of Fawziya Rašīd. Often following a hero's single thought, we find in it relations with many varied and at times contradictory truths. But is that not the case of our own life? The author takes us upon a real journey through the recesses of the

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[19] Fawziya Rašīd, *Ḥikāya lam tantahi*, in: *Marāyā...*, op. cit., p. 73.

[20] Ibid., p. 73.

[21] E. Mounier, *Co to jest personalizm*, op. cit., p. 27.

human consciousness. She allows one to discover the richness of the characters of individuals personages and to muse about the motives for their actions. We are, however, unsure to the end. Many questions remain unresolved. Just as if the truth about the man was constantly eluding us. Maybe the fact that we are constantly changing and missing things means that its is not possible to discern such a truth. That said however I feel that Fawziya Rašīd through her subtle descriptions and analysis of her heroes' feelings, endeavours to reach the general common situation of the human being. One that Gabriel Marcel encapsulates in the words: "We exist separately, each in his own way, yet the basis and sense of existence is common to us all"[22].

The man remains, in the above-discussed short stories by Fawziya Rašīd, in the spirit of personalism, the most important subject. One that appears to have been only superficially considered by us. There always remains for us some mystery about others and we ourselves for "without this mystery life would be unbearable"[23].

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[22] G. Marcel, *Le monde cassę*, in: T. Terlecki, op. cit., p. 73.
[23] Ibid., p. 70.