

Nawal El Saadawi and the Woman Question

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Abstract- *The society is a unit. The literature of any people reflects this reality. To an extent, Saadawi tries to do this in presenting the woman question in her two fictions here considered. It is however observed that she fails to reflect the truth holistically in her one dimensional characterization structure. She whole-heartedly condemns the male characters and brazenly justifies the female ones. This paper is therefore a critique of her anti-sexist sexism. Not overlooking the fact that Saadawi's concerns are real, the paper tries to show that the unit, which the society represents, consists of more than one sex. It thus calls for the mobilization of such instruction avenues while not leaving the re-orientation of the whole social structure towards the equality of the sexes.*

Keywords- *Nawal El Saadawi; The woman question; Gender equality; Prostitution; Anti-sexist sexism; One dimensional characterization*

INTRODUCTION

*"So God created man in His own image
... male and female created He them
..." (Gen. 1.27)*

Literature has been described as the most powerful expression of cultural (ideological) identity (Kunene, 1981:431). Kolawole (1992:93) equally declares that "culture shapes literature as much as socio-political background." In this paper, literature is conceived as a tool for the articulation of a people's deepest feelings, perception of life and attitudes to others. This ideological bias tends to succinctly describe the attitude of many writers with feminist sympathies who take up their pens to portray the woman as they perceive her. Some other female writers go beyond mere glorification of womanhood. They portray, with a high sense of objectivity, the positive and negative experiences of the woman in the African social environment. Other writers bemoan the marginalisation of women in the scheme of things. Their only solution to this problem is the extermination of the male.

The melodrama that can result from the gender war could have been funny if it were not so pathetic. It makes one wonder at times if it is for real or a mere comedy, especially when one considers the fact that the sexes have existed side by side for centuries. The advent of the so-called civilization of the modern world has brought with it new gains, new pains, new responsibilities and new problems, the war of the sexes, ethnic groups that are marginalised. The reality of this is with us in Nigeria as is seen in the persistent internal insurgence as exemplified by the Niger-Delta crisis and the Boko Haram guerrilla warfare on the Nigerian state.

Children are being abused and now, women are having their own unfair (?) share of the treatment. This seems to

be what informed the women's liberation movement and the Beijing Agenda: setting women free from the masculine oppression. But the questions are: Are women truly oppressed? Are they marginalised? Are they in need of liberation?

There are two perspectives to the appreciation of the women issue. The first is Saadawi's (1980:8) contention that "... women have no problem ... for after all, they have acquired education and gained employment as professors, government ministers, doctors, engineers. So, then, what can the problem be?" This represents the patriarchal status quo perception of the woman.

The opposing view is McLaren's (1988:6) observation that men have dominated women and have judged them according to "male normative standards" for years. It cannot be denied that the two positions are still obtainable in the African society of today. Thus, it becomes obvious that it is time the questions are objectively addressed.

This paper attempts to examine the woman question based on the views previously noted. It seeks to look into the extent to which women have been conditioned by the patriarchal society to have lower expectations (Lakoff, 1973; McLaren, 1988:5; Spender, 1985; Yusuf, 2006), to fall in line with the standards of decorum set by men (Saadawi, 1980; Adesina-Uthman, 2013). The paper examines the feminist attitude to the perceived discriminatory social structure. It highlights the functional inter-dependence of the sexes with a view to promote positive co-existence for the maximum benefit of the society.

Based on this preamble, the paper examines two of the fictional works of Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist writer, to see how much she has used her works to promote the feminist ideology. Taking a critical look at her novel, *Woman at Point Zero* and collection of short stories, *She*

has no Place in Paradise, the paper looks at how she has gone beyond mere feminist concerns to contribute in a worthwhile manner to the society at large through her works.

WOMAN AT POINT ZERO AND SHE HAS NO PLACE IN PARADISE

The very titles given to the two works seem to reflect the writer's position and immediately give away her preoccupation. The negative connotation of such phrases such as 'point zero' and 'no place' in opposition to 'paradise' reveals to us the situation in which 'woman' or 'she' – representative of the female gender – has found herself. The bodies of the stories attest to this. We will consider *Woman at Point Zero* along with the relevant stories in *She has no Place in Paradise* to demonstrate this. Ursula Eimands (1984) compares the African women's writing to protest literature as it obtains in Southern Africa. This cannot be said to be far from the truth as far as Nawal El Saadawi is concerned. She did not hide her ideological partisanship in the two works under consideration. The militancy with which she presents her heroine in *Woman at Point Zero* is almost stultifying. Bits and pieces of this attitude, though in a more subdued manner, are perceived in *She has no Place in Paradise*. *Woman at Point Zero* is a biography. It is experience based on the real life woman that Saadawi met in prison. In the course of doing an investigation on "Women and Neurosis in Egypt" in the mid-70s, Saadawi came in contact with this woman upon whose story the book is based.

The book is written in the biographical technique. It has an introductory phase during which the psychiatrist, Saadawi, is trying to get personal contact with Firdaus, the state prisoner, through the prison officials. The story then goes into a series of flashbacks to tell the life story of Firdaus. Firdaus grew up, like any other girl, with hopes and expectations. However, she learnt early about poverty and the subjugation of the female. Her father left them in hunger more often than not. At his death, her uncle in Cairo, who became her guardian, sold her to the rich Sheik Mahmoud who abused her and used her. He made her pay for every dime he spent on her. The suffering finally drove her out of the marriage.

She took up residence with Bayoumi whom she met at a café. He was nice to her at the start but finally failed her. She later met with Sherifa Dine who introduced her to prostitution. She became quite comfortable financially. Her contact with Di'aa, a friend she made in the course of her new profession led her to reconsider her position. He accused her of lacking respectability. She then got an office job where she met Ibrahim. They fell in love but he also left her to marry their boss' daughter who was rich and well-educated. Firdaus realisation that all the other girls in their office had to sleep with the men there to gain favours made her decide to go back to her profession (prostitution).

Marzouk (her pimp) exploited her and had to die at her hand for this. She went out on her own and met a rich a customer that wanted to use her for nothing again. It

was in the attempt to kill this man that she was arrested and tried by the state. She was convicted. But she had no regrets for her action because she believed the man deserved it. She was ready to be hanged.

The preface sets the tone for the story and Saadawi's celebration of womanhood. She writes of Firdaus "... absolute refusal to live ... absolute fearlessness of death" (Saadawi, 1983:iii). This observation of Firdaus' "She (Firdaus) even refused to sign an appeal to the president so that her sentence be committed to imprisonment for life." This tone introduces us to the enigma that is Firdaus.

We see an attempt on the part of Saadawi to reject the sociological normative standard set by men in the story. From the opening point of the story proper, Firdaus declares, without any qualms: "I am only a successful prostitute" (pg. ii). This kind of bold declaration of what many may consider a shameful profession is a direct challenge to the status quo. This is confirmed in Saadawi's epilogic declaration: "The woman sitting in front of me is a real woman" (pg. 105). This attitude, to Kolawole (1992:94) calls to question the didactic influence of literature in the society (cf. Daniel, 2008 position too on this).

Despite this, the highly partisan nature of Saadawi's feminist imagination cannot be ignored. This is mirrored in Firdaus' description of her father's attitude to the children's death. He usually beats her mother if a son dies but never seemed too bothered if it is a daughter. This reveals how deeply entrenched in the society the discrimination against the female is (cf. Emecheta, 1974). Through Firdaus' contact with the different males in the story, we are made to see them as callous and unfeeling. The father allowed them, especially the females, to go hungry while the uncle was ready to get sexual thrills from her young body. The over-frugal Sheik Mahmoud, even though a rich man, is another male that could have been positive in her life. Instead, he starved her; Bayoumi, who started as a protector to her, ended up an enemy. Ibrahim, a co-worker and seeming socialist, betrayed her love and dumped her for the boss' daughter. Thus, Saadawi reveals men here as an unending line of vampires, intent on sucking women dry. The self-appointed mentor of Firdaus, Marzouk (the pimp) symbolizes them all in the worst form. The women, on the other hand, are presented as victims who are used and imprisoned by the men. The veil is highly symbolic in that it represents this incarceration. Anytime a revelation seems to come to Firdaus in terms of a social awareness, she always has the veil removed from her eyes. Her eyes were opened to the potential economic power that her body could get for her after it had been veiled for the greater part of her life. The whole social structure is a super structure of deception to veil the woman's mind. This is represented by the veil worn by the women. She declares:

All women are victims of deception...
(pg. 86)

This makes it even more ironic that when Firdaus attempted to turn 'respectable' by taking a paid office job

after Di'aa accused her of not being respectable as a prostitute that she discovers that many of the girls have to yield their bodies to the men in her place of work. This and Ibrahim's betrayal finally disillusioned her about the society. She thus sets a moral code of conduct for herself (Kolawole, 1992:94).

On marriage, Saadawi seems to be pessimistic about the male-female relationship. She appears separatist in her advocacy concerning the female-male relationship by comparing Firdaus' hatred of Marzouk before stabbing him to death as the only way "a woman can hate a man." Her mouth piece in the story exults in her freedom as no man's wife.

***But my firm, confident steps resounding
on the pavement proved that I was
nobody's wife (pg. 96).***

Because to her, wives are the lowest paid prostitutes. All women are prostitutes of one kind or the other. She thus concludes that it is better to be a prostitute than a misled saint.

This attitude is carried further by the writer into *She has no Place in Paradise*. In 'The Picture', the man of the house, Nirji's father, uses Nabawiya, the maid as sex butt. Saadawi (1980:6) decried this practice, which is condoned in the Egyptian households. Husbands and sons of the household make use of these village girls, serving as maids, to gratify their sexual urges.

***... an intercourse they were forced to
accept as a result of the situation into
which they had been cornered by the
inhuman structure of class society built
on the patriarchal family unit.***

These girls, she claims, sometimes get pregnant and get thrust out of the family. She will then have to take care of herself which, Saadawi contends, often leads to greater complications.

'She was the Weaker' reveals how a young man exploited the subjugation of the woman's voice in the society to cover up his impotence. The nameless protagonist decided to cover up his inability to make love to a girl by making it seem that the girl-bride is no longer a virgin. Of course, being aware of the premium placed by the society on the hymen of girls and how little attention will be paid to her prostitution of innocence, if he should state otherwise, he exploited the situation to the maximum.

***No one knew the truth ... except her.
But there she was in front of him
exposing his impotence.***

He then took the unstained handkerchief and showed that despite his own weakness, the weaker one is the culprit, by societal standard, not him.

In the story that gives its title to the collection of short stories, 'She has no Place in Paradise', the writer tries to show the weakness of the woman against an inhuman society. Zeinab, the heroine, was made to go through hunger, deprivation, sexual abuse and frustration by the code of societal conduct. She hoped that on dying, she would have a place in paradise beside her husband to make

up for all her deprivation. In the course of fulfilling these codes, she had to finally die. It is ironic that on dying, the two men carrying her soul to paradise were arguing over such trivial things like whether any part of her hair or feet was ever exposed to tempt men in her lifetime. But more poignant is that when she finally gained access to paradise, she discovered her hope had been a fluke. She came to the realisation on seeing her husband with two other women that "there is no place in paradise for a black woman" (pg. 156).

This story is suggestive of the fact that even religion, which seems to be the only possible solace for the suffering woman, is not taken seriously. In her article, 'Fundamentalism: A Universal Phenomenon', Saadawi accuses men of using religion to hold women in perpetual bondage. This is fully demonstrated, in short, in how Zeinab died, trying to keep up with religion, even then she did not get the due reward.

Saadawi's two fictional works here considered seem to be one-dimensional. They portray men in a very terrible light in opposition to the women. This attitude on the part of the author tends to be suggestive of active gender partisanship. Through the mouth of Sherifa Dine, we observe the novelist's conviction that:

***They (men) are sons of dogs running
around under various names,
Mahmoud, Hassanein, Fawzy, Sabri,
Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi***

She does not hide on which side of the divide she belongs (compare Captain Ara Sharp in Oyedepo, 2002). As was earlier pointed out, the paper is of the opinion that the sexes have co-existed for centuries and are complementary to each other. Saadawi has tried to show that marriage is a system that is built on the cruellest suffering for women. She demonstrated this in *Women at Point Zero* through the experiences of Firdaus with Sheikh Mahmoud and in *She has no Place in Paradise* through the girl-bride and Zeinab. But the question still remains whether the men must be destroyed for the women to live. If we will take Firdaus' declaration:

***They do not fear my knife. It is my truth
which frightened them. This fearful
truth gives me great strength (pg. 102).***

At face value, then we can deduce that physical death to the men is not what the author advocates but destruction of the patriarchal social structure.

This paper supports the view that the truth needs be made known, the women economically empowered (Wetzel, 1993:159; Dennis, 1991). In doing this, however, care needs to be taken. As Eichler (1988:33) warns, gender partisanship may end up becoming what it purports to fight against. This, gynocentric structure may replace an androcentric one, which will be a sexist sexism (cf. Daniel, 2012), but only in reverse direction. This attitude is also described by Abati (1997), in commenting on the attitude of some African Americans to the race question as fighting "racism with racism".

The level of authorial intrusion in *Woman at Point Zero*, particularly, can only be fully appreciated by reading her collection of essays, *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Whatever approach is employed in literature, commitment to one ideology or the other cannot be ruled out. Saadawi's feminist sympathies are not hidden. Her tone, language and characterization portray a vehement advocacy for social justice for women and the 'terribleness' of men.

Arab men, and for that matter, all men, cannot stand an experienced and intelligent woman. It would seem as though the man is afraid of her because of her capability to understand him and see through his failure, or weakness, if necessary (Saadawi, 1981:68).

This she successfully demonstrates in 'She was the Weaker', 'Beautiful', and Firdaus contact with Bayoumi when she said she wanted to look for a job.

But this super-imposition of her personality on the characters makes Saadawi's view of the society questionable. She seems to exalt prostitution as a thing that is good and healthy for the society. Despite Firdaus' claims, this paper contends that a woman still has the choice.

An example is Paulina Sebeso in *When Rain Clouds Gather* who refuses this option when she was deserted by her Zimbabwean husband. She proves that a woman has the choice. Paulina

Sebeso takes the path of dignity, hard labour and honour above cheap sexual pleasure.

The novelist's contention with religion as a useless exercise in 'She has no Place in Paradise' is also questionable. It is not all religions that excuse men to subjugate women. This is proved by such scriptures like the one quoted above and Gal. 3.28 which says "... there is neither Greek nor Jew, neither MALE nor FEMALE but all are one in Christ ..." and "... are heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Pet 3:7). Dake (2011) affirms that class, race and gender equality is a benefit of the Christian life. Recognising this fact, Wetzel (1993: 157) opines that "Religious values can be a rich source of support if the original scriptures are used as references. Most advocate an equal partnership between women and men, as opposed to those that are reinterpreted to render women inferior". Even Saadawi declares this to be so in Islam concerning family planning in the original interpretation of the Islamic scriptures (Saadawi, 1980:66). Adesina-Uthman (2013) agrees with this position as she asserts that the issue of restrictive purdah for women is a male creation as women were encouraged by Islamic scriptures to be modest and choose their purdah wears based on their personal preferences, while at the same time being active in the public space without being restricted to the inner rooms of a man's harem as presently practised in some Islamic communities.

CONCLUSION

It is the submission of this paper that a woman's dignity is not in dancing to the tune of such male invented 'professions' like 'prostitution', nor in taking lives, but in sensitising the society to the awareness of its shortcomings. This, to an extent, Saadawi has succeeded in doing with her works. But the treatment of her heroine as being liberated by her dying may be symbolic only in so far as she knows she is due for death for murdering a fellow human being, however despicable he appears to be. Saadawi nonetheless fails in her one-dimensional characterisation structure in that not all men are as terrible as she seems to want us to believe. This fact she acknowledges in another collection of essays, edited by Nahil Toubia, *Women of the Arab World: The Coming Challenge*, where one of the contributors is a man. In her introduction to the *The Hidden Face of Eve*, she also enjoins women to adopt flexible attitudes and be prepared to work with those she tags "progressive elements" (Saadawi, 1980:77).

This being so, this paper hopes she will look into her over-militant and venom-charged attitude to males in her feminist campaigns. We do not lose sight of the initial questions but rather advocate for a more balanced attitude to move the society forward as a whole. If Ibrahim's rejection of Firdaus is not based strictly on her being a woman (seeing he chose another woman over her) but her class background, then the sociological question confronting us goes beyond the woman question.

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