

A SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF GENDER VIOLENCE IN NAWAL EL-SADAAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

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Abstract

In all ramifications, El-Sadaawi's work, *Woman at point Zero* cries out that the female gender is severely exploited and culturally subjugated in the Arab society of Egypt. The author aesthetically portrays the exploitation, intimidation, domestic aggression, rape, sexual harassment and similar other social vices that man perpetuates against women. Through a sociological study of the text, this essay criticizes the author's projection of the way forward for the Arab women in the face of oppression. The paper specifically argues that the author's approach to resolving the perennial gender violence is undoubtedly radical and scandalous. To large extent, the novel succeeds in terminating the culture of projecting the Arab women as lifeless and insensitive object, yet the narration goes beyond the known liberal approach to conflict resolution in many similar great works of Afro-Arab writers. The writer re-defines the face of feminism in the Arab world in a way that is antithetical to the cherished values of women as compassionate human beings. The author presents a resilient, defiant and evil minded protagonist whose audacious revolt against the oppressive patriarchal culture leaves every reader bewildered.

Introduction

By employing sociological criticism and feminist oriented approach, this research focuses on Arab society and gender violence that precipitated the impetus for the ideological consciousness of Nawal El-Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. An exposition of gender violence in the realm of Afro-Arab environment requires an understanding of the cultural matrix which involves the synthesis of Islam and indigenous culture as well as the hybridity brought to the convergence by the harsh reality of modernity. Nwapa (p.532) posits rightly that women's movement inside and outside Africa as well as the various women's study programmes in Africa, North America and European universities have created awareness among African writers and critics. The voice of the African women writers is being heard, though, somewhat inaudibly. Since feminist politics in Afro-Arab literature is gaining contemporary academic interest, the new insights and perspectives promise by this essay will be of immeasurable value to scholars and academia interested in contemporary Arab literature.

Historically, Arabs have had a strong literary tradition evident in the Nobel winning Prize of Naguib Mahfouz in 1988; such works are rarely studied in most non-Arabic speaking universities and colleges in Nigeria. It is incumbent upon those who teach courses in Afro-Arab literature to present Arab authors to their students. Professor Ahmad Majdoubehi re-echoes in his foreword to *Arab World English Journal* (AWEJ Special Issue on Literature, no.2, October 2014) that Arab literature is still under-represented at the moment not because it is less interesting or engaging than other world literature, far from it, but because scholars and researchers in the subject have not paid it the attention it merits.

Sociological Criticism

Sociological criticism is based on the idea that social contexts serve as the material with which literary works are constructed. It studies the relationship between a literary text and the social institutions that it reflects. Literature is never conceivable outside a cultural or historical context. And it is this social institution and realities that this essay examines. Literary works are usually the products of a definite aesthetic milieu. The writer belongs to the society and writes to mirror its activities. Welleck and Warren cited in Orjinta (2013.18) contend that:

The analysis of literary works as social documents or as presumable image of a social reality is the most frequently used method in drawing the relationship between literature and society. There is no doubt, however, that any image in the society can be conceptualized from literature. This was even more the first method which the systematic scholars adopted in exploiting literature. Thomas Warton, the first actual English literary historian, said that 'literature has the special function of reproducing the features of the times faithfully as well as preserving the picturesque and expressive presentation of the customs'

From the foregoing, literature is an invaluable repository of traditions and customs. Writers are the mouth piece for their societies. Through historical context and inclination, El-Sadaawi records Arab's perception of women in the Arab world. This essay thus adopts sociological criticism to analyze *Woman at Point Zero* from the point of view of an ideologically feminist oriented perspective. It examines the frequent changes in fortune of women on whom their society has imposed a culture of silence and show how this has been transferred into fiction. The history of women has been universally subjected to constant interrogation vis-a vis a patriarchal culture of domination. Akorede cited in Oluwayemi (2012. 150) affirms that:

Gender stereotype and gender discrimination are closely tied to the issue of sexuality. There are barriers to women's positive sense of worth and achievements. They affect women's progress and

advancement, so that pre-designed roles assigned by culture and tradition limit the women from attaining possible self-fulfilment.

This accusation has some negative implication against women as is evident in El-Sadaawi's novel. The Muslim society of Cairo is not left out when it comes to relegating women to the background in social and political climate. The author under study is a Muslim writer from Egypt. She challenges humanity on the way her society is treating women. The gender violence, according to her, is fallout of social arrangement called patriarchy. While citing El-Sadaawi, Alkali (2012.14) notes that "Nawal El-sadaawi confesses to the initial purpose for her writing as inspired by anger. She claims to write in order to release her anger. What angered me most", she writes, 'were oppression; oppression of women and oppression of the poor". In her fiction, El-Sadaawi's men characters are not only heartless, cruel and selfish; they are morally decayed and oppressive. From the ground so far cleared in this essay, it is obvious that the novelist is conscious of the sexual bias and discrimination against women. She exposes the unwholesome patriarchal practice of rejection, denigration, violation and rape.

Nawal El-Sadaawi (2003) in her much cited essay 'The Heroine in Arab Literature posits that:

Among the male authors I have ever read, both in the West and in the Arab world, irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free himself from this age-long image of women handed down to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defence of human rights, human values and justice, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form. (p. 520)

She unambiguously further declares that Arab literary tradition is littered with deplorable image of women right from the classic 'A Thousand and One Night' to the contemporary literature. El-Sadaawi (p. 523) maintains that:

Women continues to appear on the scene as a capricious vamp, a playful and beautiful slave, a she-devil imbued with cunning and capable of a thousand artifices, an explosive danger versed in all arts of deceit and conspiracy, an evil spirit, wherever matters of sex and love are concerned.

She does not spare contemporary Arab writers. She contends that the image of women still remains ingrained in the mind and emotions of the Arab people. For instance, she cited Tewfik Al-Hakim's *The Sacred Bond* as a text which portrays its protagonist as a woman who bears no loyalty or fidelity except to her baser instinct and physical desires, and who behaves very much like Akkad's heroine, Sarah, talking not the slightest account of religious, intellectual or social value. (p.522). She affirms that Naguib Mahfouz seems to be the most progressive so far among Arab writers of notable

accomplishment in so far as his views of social justice are concerned. In most of his works, he promotes the right of women to education and to earn income in support of her family. The weaknesses he attributed to women are largely due to poverty and economic reason. However, he denies his female character personal freedom. Woman's success and achievement can only be meaningful within the context and limitation of patriarchal dictate. She is condemned if she oversteps the limit of morals and religion. In this case, Naguib's attitude and concept in relation to women do not substantially differ from those of his predecessors.

Gender violence has been portrayed and addressed in many novels in line with the writer's purpose. Each writer endows his character with varying degrees of consciousness. Historically, human societies share certain similar characteristics regardless of the arbitrary boundaries established by colonial masters. Many works of literature have, therefore, shown women in similar conditions, facing similar problems, and differing only in their individual reactions according to the characteristics with which they may have been endowed by their authors. From sociological point of view, several writers have treated the issue of gender violence with varying degree of emphasis.

Critical Review

El-Sadaawi is an Islamic feminist. Her novel tells the story of a Muslim-woman character, Fridaus who is awaiting death row in Cairo prison for murdering a pimp. She confesses her crime without an iota of remorse or shame. Critics have described the novel as a product of a medical research undertaken by El-Sadaawi on the effect of neurosis on female prisoners in Egypt. The protagonist, Fridaus narrates her tragic life history to a woman psychologist. It is a story of lifetime oppression, abuse of right, abandonment and exploitation at all fronts. The novel unravels a series of bitter experiences of constant rejection by nearly every human being that the protagonist encounters from childhood to adulthood. When Fridaus refers to all men as devilish individuals, she includes her father and uncles. She bitterly remarks that:

My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read nor write, knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemies before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time. How to beat his wife and makes her bite the dust each night. (p. 12)

The oppressive attitude of men against women in the Arab society of Egypt forms the plot structure of the novel. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the Arab world is masculine, women are just appendage. The women in the novel do all the work, satisfy their husbands' urge, sleep without food, wash their husbands' feet and get beaten when a son or domestic animal dies. In this pattern, Fridaus reveals her precarious childhood experience. She uncovers the abuse of her mother by her father. She tells about her mysterious circumcision and the twisted molestation by her uncle. She narrates her betrayal by a lover. She is subsequently maltreated through sexual abuse by a pimp. She strives to live a responsible adult life but lacks the training with which to accomplish this.

Throughout the narration, she lives and survives as a pariah. She is condemned to a woman of low reputation regardless of how much she makes from prostitution. Though she struggles to move up beyond her socio-economic background, she perennially ends up in prostitution. She is rarely treated beyond a dreg in the society. According to Malie Tou (2013. 3) "Fridau's world as portrayed by Sadaawi in the mid-1970s had its political root in the hundred years of Egyptian society preceding the story." From childhood, the girl-child is morally decayed largely because the patriarchal society is prone to sexual assault and abuse. This instance is apparent from how Fridaus was sexually abused by her uncle who always pretends to be reading when the girl is sweating over some dough. This sexual abuse continues even while her uncle gets married because Fridaus later sojourns with him in the city.

Woman at Point Zero critically raises the moral question of women's liberation in Egypt as Arab women saw their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere in western societies being educated and played significant roles in social and political affairs. The novel depicts a clear devaluation of the female gender. For instance, the hectic dough kneeling work that Fridaus is apportioned to do as a routine rather than schooling appears too belabouring for a girl-child of her age. When she reaches her breaking point, she laments thus 'who was I? Who was my father? Was I going to spend my life sweeping the dug out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough and baking bread? (p. 16) This outburst is a pointer to the denial of right to self-determination. Fridaus, like her male siblings, desires to enjoy some degree of liberty, recognition and attention.

Historically, as far as 1919, Egyptian women demonstrated on the street of Cairo chanting nationalist slogans behind their veils. Three years after, Egypt won her independence from Britain. Then the street demonstration in which women participated paved way for the emergence of a political movement that eventually recognized the right of women. Several women writers emerged as touch bearers for women liberation. Borrowing leaf from her predecessors, Nawal El-Sadaawi openly begins to publish novels on gender violence in Egypt. She has undoubtedly contributed to re-surgence of women-right movements by creating a platform through her fiction to voice their demand for greater equality and to be heard. Definitely, El-Sadaawi is on war path to redeem and reclaim the pride of women. She writes to reorder the trend that perpetuates oppression of women. She employs education as a motif to provide Fridaus a vintage position to view her society. Education affords her the platform to develop her curious mind and ultimately sharpens her worldview. She discovers through her reading that women oppression is a common phenomenon in the world. She posits that "all rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power".

In most societies, women are treated as second class citizens. Their status is always inferior to that of men. This is the position in which women find themselves in a male-dominated society. In almost all fields of human endeavour, women are discriminated against and are not given equal opportunities with their male counterparts. Stereotyping is common where women are concerned. Their position is always seen as that within the family and taking care of the home. In numerous cultures, status and

personality are strictly based on gender role. Male sexes control the society and had the higher status while the female sexes have less and are expected to be submissive and obedient. In addition, the cultural ethics that are embedded within patriarchy supports and perpetuates female discrimination. This gives a picture of the female gender in male dominated society. Many writers reflect the plight of female gender in various societies. They depict the wars waged by the female gender in order to overcome the sexist and patriarchal system existing in different places.

The issue of marriage constitutes one of the concerns raised by El-Sadaawi in respect of the rights of women. Fridaus is forced into marriage like every girl-child in patriarchal society of Africa. Her sufferings in the matrimonial home of Sheikh further resonates the daily incident of domestic violence that women encounter everywhere. On several occasions, her husband hits her all over with his shoe. Her face and body become swollen and bruised (p. 44). When she reported the assaults to her uncle, she was told that all husbands beat their wives. This is an indication that the society has enslaved women through the dictates of culture, tradition and norm. Fridaus later divorced the husband and took to prostitution.

The novelist renders an account of a harrowing experience of Arab women who suffer under the oppression of religion and class. She reveals that marriage and family are institutions through which women are oppressed and relegated. The institution of marriage specifically engendered a master-slave relationship between husband and wife. The novel thus creates a character who defies the social institution of marriage, a character who expresses extreme hatred for all men. For instance, Fridaus declares that “of all men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with but one desire to lift up my hand and bring it smashing down on his face”(p.6). Indeed, the miseries of Fridaus from childhood culminated into her severe anger against all men. The men are not only portrayed heartless, wicked and selfish but also morally depraved. She sees all men in the same light of devilish character. Every man that has crossed her path and also contributed to her travails belongs to one highly respected status. She subsequently becomes one of the uptown prostitutes who dictate price and whose pimps are sons of wealthy Egyptian politicians and even career men. With persistent one form of dejection or the other, Fridaus asserts that:

I became aware of the fact that I hated all men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully. Men that I hate most of all were those who tried to give me advice, or told me that they wanted to rescue me from the life I was leading. I used to hate them more than the others because they thought they were better than I and could help me change my life. (p88)

From this pent up anger and emotional hatred, she ends up murdering one of his pimps, Marzouk as a result of which she had to be killed. El-Sadaawi’s reaction to gender violence in *Woman at Point Zero* appears too radical and scandalous. To eliminate men as agents of oppression, she creates Fridaus as an avenger, as killer of the wicked men in her row. According to Nnolim (2010. 201) women nurtured in Islamic religion should not contemplate murder as a way of resolving issues of any kind. When a woman goes

beyond decent outrage under Islam because her husband is a polygamist neither the religion nor society will come to her sympathy. In fact, such an act cannot change what Islam considers legitimate. Murdering a man who under Islam takes a second wife in fulfillment of his religion obligation is scandalously unjustifiable.

For whatever reason, women liberation should not be pursued through criminality and murder. Fridaus knows the gravity of the crime she committed. She had earlier narrated in the novel that her father admonished that under Islamic religion “stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin” (p.7). When eventually she murders Marzouk, her pride of having defeated one of her oppressors is misplaced. To destroy a fellow human being negates a true principle of agitation for freedom. Murder is scandalous and it is certainly a criminal act in all civilized human societies. Many critics of feminist inclination are not comfortable with El-Sadaawi’s approach to women’s empowerment. Many of them were shocked and disturbed by the extreme radicalism that *Women at Point Zero* raises. Such an approach to women liberation, according to critics, is a misplaced aggression that calls for condemnation. For instance, Malie (2003. 3) opines that “El- Sadaawi’s rebellious writing on women’s oppression in cultural and religious tradition brings about sharp criticism by many who claim she is a trouble-maker who becomes famous by siding the Westerners in their prejudices against Arab and Islamic culture”. Certainly, the novel sets its protagonist in a path of destruction. Rather than promote aggressive tendencies, El-Sadaawi should have strived to bridge the gap between genders through a positive atmosphere of self-actualization and non-violence approach.

Feminist writers should canvass equal treatment for men and women through unrestricted access to education and economic independence. Literary feminism should promote a positive inclination of self-respect, harmony and progressive economic empowerment for women. It should refrain from promoting unwholesome freedom that could lead to crime, murder or immorality. Feminism, in all its phases, must take cognizance of the environment and religion into consideration. Nnolim (2010. 202) remarks that it must be admitted that feminism has enriched African literature and given that literature a sense of balance. That balance can only be promoted and enhanced where and when feminist writers create a positive atmosphere of collective self-definition and self-actualization. In fact, in all fairness, feminism has done mankind a lot of good.

Conclusion

El-Sadaawi gives an account of women experience in Egypt. She considers women as victims of triple oppression of religion, patriarchy and class. Her novel raises the question about the right of women in society. Her feminist agitation involves the conception of women as agents in human society.- her condition, her roles and stance, her recognition and acknowledgements. Dramatically, feminism has engendered an artistic re-configuration of traditionally male-dominated literary practice. It is certainly the case that feminism has revolutionized the fiction of the Arab literature. El-Sadaawi takes a subjective look into the intrinsic underdevelopment of marginalized citizens, how the absence of justice permeates through Egyptian politics, economics and society. Fridaus is

one of these citizens that have been oppressed. One disturbing dimension of the novel is its portrayal of murder and criminality as a way of redressing gender oppression. Fridaus is denied any hope of being desired for than sexual tool. She thus ends up tragically in a distorted state of happiness at the prospect of having been liberated. This perspective is a wrong revolutionary move which stands at variance with the true empowerment of women. Feminism, in all its phases, must take cognizance of the environment and religion into consideration. This is why Nnolim remarks as earlier mentioned that it must be admitted that feminism has enriched African literature and given that literature a sense of balance. That balance can only be promoted and enhanced where and when feminist writers create positive atmosphere of collective self-definition and self-actualization. El Sadaawi's character is deviant woman with an extremely scandalous understanding of self-freedom.

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