

**THE ENTRAPPED FEMALES OF NAWAL EL
SAADAWI'S *GOD DIES BY THE NILE***

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Abstract

Fictional texts have gone far beyond the portrayal of authors' concerns. They are viable sites for academic research. An aspect of these concerns worth being researched into focuses on increasing number of issues about the female members of society: the young and the old, the educated and the uneducated. Growing up in a society rooted in patriarchal norms, some female characters in Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* go through devastating experiences. Employing the psychoanalytic theory, this study examines the nature of the struggles of these female characters, their various forms of entrapment as portrayed in the selected text and what informs their behavior in relation to their social, cultural, political and economic contexts. The study finds out the devastating traumatic effects of these experiences on the minds of the female characters, the emergence of various personalities and the aftermath behavioural output. The female characters' emotional and mental disconnections with themselves and with society as a result of their traumatic experiences are equally highlighted thereby creating awareness about the complex nature of life.

Keywords: Trauma, Patriarchy, Psychoanalytical Theory

Introduction

The history of the African female who has gone through patriarchy, colonization and racism is that of the subjugated; pushed into a certain class and position. She is therefore entrapped, faced with fragmentation, alienation, filled with despair and these adversely affect her personality. As such, entrapment as a result of patriarchal oppression and gender discrimination produce unhealthy environment which leads to psychological and emotional trauma for the female. These are evident in the novel under study. Trauma is as a wound upon the mind caused by a painful experience like loss of a loved one, rejection, and racial discrimination. Therefore, this paper focuses on the sufferings of the black female as portrayed in the selected novel and the adverse effects on her psyche. The novel selected portrays what Laura Brown calls the “private, secret, insidious traumas” (102) “that are often experienced by women, girls, and people of color and which result from ongoing humiliation and degradation in interpersonal relationships rather than from a single extraordinary event” (Kennedy 89). In this study some characters and socio-cultural factors are examined to see their responses to traumatic experiences. Some of the traumatic experiences portrayed in the selected novel take place in childhood. According to Judith Herman “repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms personality . . .” (96) as such there is the need to examine the nature of the trauma the victims go through in order to evaluate the impact on their personality. This paper discusses patriarchy as a relevant concept and trauma as resultant effect of patriarchal entrapment.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy literally means the role of the father and it is derived from the Greek word “patriarkhes” meaning “father of a race.” Patriarchy therefore refers to rulership by the male head of the family. It is male dominance by any means necessary. Hooks Bell defines patriarchy as a “political – social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (1). Similarly, Rubaya and Gonye are of the view that patriarchy “is the manner in which men as a social group exploit, dominate and oppress women as a social group (61).” In *Things Fall Apart* which is considered the beginning of African Literature, Achebe portrays this patriarchal society. Okonkwo rules like a god in his home and no one dares to talk or express personal feelings. A patriarchal society is “male-centred and – controlled; organised and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains . . .” (Abrahams and Harpharm 125). The entrenchment of patriarchal norms into the fabrics of some African communities creates the impression of patriarchy as a religion. Over the years, patriarchy has become a system in which males hold primary power in political leadership, social, cultural and religious spheres; where fathers exercise authority over women and children. Any society that upholds the rule or governance of males alone is patriarchal. In African setting, fathers and brothers are the custodians of the females’ personality and sexuality. This male-dominated socio-cultural life entraps the protagonist and some other female characters in the novel under study leading to psychological trauma and some behavioural problems.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Prior to the 19th century, Aristotle evolved a theoretical stand that art, especially tragedy, has the ability to affect the emotion of the reader. He argues that the action to be imitated should be such that can elicit the feelings of pity and fear which lead to catharsis – the purgation of the emotion (1449). Aristotle's theory can be considered a psychological one because it indicates an effect on the emotion.

However in 19th century, Sigmund Freud proposed his psychoanalytic theory which increased the understanding of human personality. In two of his books: *Studies in Hysteria* co-authored with Joseph Breuer (1895) and *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud put forth his theories about the working of the human psyche, causes of hysteria, the effect of traumatic experiences and the concept of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis was coined in 1896 by Freud and it refers to a body of ideas he developed in the 1890s in the course of treating his patients. It is a branch of psychology which deals with the investigation and treatment of emotional and behavioural problems through interviews that bring to light events in the patient's early life. He believes that many of his patients' problems like anxiety, depression and sexual dysfunction are the results of painful experiences they had gone through, especially as children. He uses psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method for treating mental disorders. This he does by looking into the relationship between conscious and unconscious elements in the patient's mind thereby bringing into consciousness repressed fears and conflicts through the method of free association and dream interpretation (Freud 57).

Psychoanalytic theory is the theory of personality development and its dynamics. In literature, psychoanalytic criticism is “. . . the study of the psychological types and principles present within works of literature . . .” (Wellek and Warren 81). It is a

theory that brings to light hidden aspects of human life and behaviour which writers explore in the characters they create. Psychoanalytic theory is used to study characters and societies in a work of art. The critic applying this theory is “interested in the psychological drives of a character and what makes a character to act in certain ways he/she does” (Asika 308). Thus, psychoanalytic theory is used in the study of the selected novel to examine the subconscious and unconscious elements that motivate some of the female characters. Also the repressed memories which psychologically affect some of the female characters are equally examined.

Patriarchal Entrapment in Saadawi’s *God Dies by the Nile*

Saadawi portrays the difficult life of the female in a typical patriarchal African society. Patriarchy in this novel is consolidated by the cultural, political and religious forces represented by some male characters in the novel. Kafr El Teen is a village where the majority of the people are peasants exploited by the Mayor. The people labor tirelessly to meet the demands of the Mayor and in addition to this the women are oppressed by the men in the family and society.

The females in *God dies by the Nile* are entrapped by patriarchal laws. They have no voice of their own but only do what the men require willingly or by force: “don’t you know that girls and women never do what they’re told unless you beat them?”(Saadawi 27) The patriarchal system constitutes identity crisis for the females who are turned from being individuals who have a mind of their own to robots who do as they are told without reasoning or questioning: “So Kafrawi called unto her in a firm voice, ‘you, Nefissa, come down here at once’ but Nefissa showed no signs of doing what he told her, so he clambered to the top of the oven, struck her several times and tugged at her hair until she was obliged to come down. He handed her over to

Sheikh Zahran in silence” (Saadawi 28). The fear of the mayor has traumatised twelve year old Nefissa right from childhood such that the mere mention of his name sends a shiver through her body and on sighting him in the village, she runs away and hides. When her father tells her she will be taken to the Mayor’s house “that night, she could not sleep a wink” (Saadawi 26). She is forced into the Mayor’s house where she is raped and gets pregnant. Trauma here is depicted as a forceful invasion into the personal and emotional life of young Nefissa who becomes devastated and in reaction abandons her baby and runs away. Such an action is expected because according to psychoanalytic theory certain devastating experiences which are repressed can influence a bizarre action. One imagines what the life of a young girl without a sense of belonging, a family to run to, a means of livelihood, a shattered identity and in a strange land will look like.

Nefissa’s younger sister Zeinab is also caught in this wave of patriarchal entrapment fortified by religion and politics. Initially, she keeps her shoulders high and fights against oppression by the Mayor but later comes to a zero point when her husband is unjustly sent to prison. The trauma of her sister’s disappearance, her father’s imprisonment and aunt’s failing health render her a prey to religious deception. Haj Ismail, one of the Mayor’s oppressive tools convinces Zeinab through an arranged prophecy with a holy man at “Sayeda Zeinab” (a mosque) that working in the Mayor’s house is God’s requirement for her aunt’s cure and she agrees to this. Adrienne Rich as quoted by Shihada Isam states that “Patriarchy is the power of ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under

the male” (167). The outcome for Zeinab is that she is raped and repeatedly exploited sexually by the Mayor. She like her sister goes through distorted identity; torn between being herself and being the Mayor’s plaything and sexual object. Like her sister, she runs away from Kafr El Teen to Bab El Hadeed where she frantically searches for permission to visit her husband. When she exhausts all possibilities, she goes into prostitution. Her identity changes from that of a well mannered hardworking girl with a sense of good judgment to a cheap prostitute. The decisions and actions of these two sisters are the resultant effects of their gruesome experiences.

All this while, Zakeya keenly observes the trend of events as a little girl growing up in her father’s house. She watches as her mother was maltreated and mourns from the time “her father struck her mother on the head because she had not borne him the son he expected” (Saadawi 95) to the time “she developed two breasts which the menfolk would pinch when there was nobody around to prevent them” (Saadawi 95). As a married woman she has gone through the trauma of patriarchal oppression at the family and social levels. She is physically and emotionally battered by her husband and experienced the trauma of losing fifteen children: “. . . for it was like that. Every time a son of hers died he would strike out at her blindly, and beat her up with anything he could lay his hands on. And the same thing would happen whenever she gave birth to a daughter. She had given birth to ten sons and six daughters – but the only child who had lived to grow up is Galal” (Saadawi 89). She further says that “. . . her husband Abdel Moneim would beat her with a stick, then climb on her and bear down on her chest with all his weight (Saadawi 95).

Zakeya watches as her son and only hope is abducted into the army. She endures as her niece Nefissa, is forcefully taken by

the Mayor. She is helpless when the Mayor takes Zienab, her remaining niece and again she could do nothing to stop him. Zakeya is one female with too many troubles and traumas in the novel.

The effects of trauma and pain reflect in her strides and physical outlook. Saadawi describes her thus: “a tall upright shadow slipped through and advanced on two legs with a powerful steady stride The lips were tightly closed, resolute, as though no word could pass through them. The large, wide-open eyes fixed on the horizon expressed an angry defiance” (1). Almost consumed by anger which is an effect of trauma Zakeya pours her strength into her farm work:

And the blows of her hoe seemed to echo with an anger buried deep down as she lifted it high up in the air and swung it down with all her might into the soil They went on with a steady thud, thud, thud, echoing in the neighbouring fields throughout the day almost inhuman, relentless, and frightening in the fury of their power. Even at midday, when the men broke off for a meal and an hour of rest, they went on without a stop (Saadawi 3).

She works furiously from dawn to dusk yet the pain and anger in her do not go away.

According to Sigmund Freud “symptoms of hysteria are the result of unresolved but forgotten traumas from childhood” (quoted in Dobbie 51). The traumatic experiences of the past which are stored in her unconscious return to haunt her in form of nightmares. In the novel are dreams that expressed her childhood memories of the iron gate (a symbol of oppression), her marital experiences and the memories of her son. According to psychoanalytic theory, nightmarish dreams are expected in the life of a traumatized person: “the traumatic moment becomes

encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (Herman 37).

Furthermore, her repressed memories bounce back and affect her behaviour. Zakeya’s behaviour becomes strange. She “still squatted on the ground, in the same place. She would close her eyes, then open them, then close them again . . . she would open her eyes in terror, and look at faces gathered around her” (Saadawi 90). Her niece frantically calls for exorcism through religious rituals and prayers “but the devil refused to leave Zakeya’s body” (Saadawi 97) because it is not the devil after all. It is what psychoanalytic theory call dissociation, an altered state of consciousness induced by trauma. Zakeya has witnessed a lot of violence and “in each instance, the salient characteristic of the traumatic event is its power to inspire helplessness and terror” (Herman 34). These are evident in Zakeya’s behavior: “her eyes kept turning this way and that with a frightened look. ‘Zeinab, my child, do not leave me alone. I am frightened. The devils are looking at me from behind the bars of the window’. Zakeya would catch the hold of Zeinab’s galabeya. ‘No, Zeinab, don’t leave me alone” (Saadawi 98). This behavior is recognized in trauma as hyperarousal, a symptom of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Sometimes when an individual goes through a traumatic experience “the human system of self preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment The traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to smell, provocations, and sleeps poorly” (Herman 35). Zakeya is therefore in a state of constant vigilance for the return of danger.

Later, Zakeya is forced into constriction by religion. Constriction is a consequence of trauma; a state of surrender,

complete powerlessness where “the system of self-defense shuts down entirely. [It is] paradoxically a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage and pain dissolve” (Herman 42). Zeinab and Zakeya are forced by religion to believe that Zakeya’s healing will only come by their surrender to the oppressive demands of the Mayor. As such, Zeinab is raped by the Mayor and is sexually exploited repeatedly yet she and Zakeya, her aunt accept it as the only way by which Zakeya will be healed. Herman further explains that in the state of constriction, “events continue to register in awareness, but it is as though these events have been disconnected from their ordinary meanings” (42-43). The meaning of what would have otherwise been a grievous crime changes to a saving/healing tool. In this state, there is a “feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle” (Herman 43). One could say that Zakeya and Zeinab were more or less hypnotized. On the surface they appear calm and detached from the oppressive environment and activities but underlying in them are the unforgotten traumatic experiences and hurts.

When Galal, Zakeya’s son returns from the army Zakeya seems to springs back to life and in a short while narrates all the ordeals to her son. According to psychoanalytic theory, bringing into consciousness certain repressed fears, conflicts and experiences through talking about them is a big tool for healing the hurt. The power of healing lies in speaking the unspeakable. Galal, the “healing balm” marries Zainab and brings back love and security for his wife and mother. However, this is short-lived as the Mayor’s ruthless and oppressive hand falls on Galal. Like Kafrawi, his uncle he is framed-up for theft and sent to prison. According to Sigmund Freud “symptoms of hysteria are the result of unresolved but forgotten traumas from childhood”

(quoted in Dobbie 51). This means that certain painful and threatening experiences can be repressed in the unconscious but not forgiven and sooner or later they inform an action. At this point all the traumatic experiences and hurts which were repressed into the unconscious memories of Zakeya during the constriction period bounce back. She waits for the emergence of the Mayor through the iron gate. When he does, she murders him in a rage. He who destroyed her entire family does not deserve to live. The word “god” in the title of the novel symbolizes owner of all; the one who decides if you will live or die: “. . . the Mayor is a god and no one could punish him” (Saadawi vii) so Zakeya ensures she dethrones the god of Kafr El Teen.

Conclusion

The analysis above establishes that memory and the way we account for our experiences go a long way to influence our behaviour. Although at early childhood the child may seem to be untouched by the grief and pains of negative experiences, as time goes on their effects begin to emerge through the behaviour of the child. Bearing this in mind the question is: who decides what is befitting for the girl-child who eventually becomes the mother tomorrow?

In explaining the dynamics of her protagonist’s psyche Head portrays domestic violence in the novels which eventually leads to psychological trauma. The psychological and behavioural problems as a result of the oppression of the female examined in this paper should alert society, parents and care-givers to give room for equal opportunities, self expression and peaceful co-existence of male and female children. This will enhance the journey towards discovering one’s authentic self (personality) and when this is achieved, one becomes confident and bold enough to face life.

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