

Religion, Trauma and the Index of ‘Madness’ in Nawal El Saadawi’s *God Dies by the Nile*

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Abstract

In Africa, there are many societal factors that tend to enfeeble the woman. The text *God Dies by the Nile* projects religion as one such factor that is used to weaken the psychological universe of the female gender, for whereas the man is the overlord who receives the divine mandate and deviously interprets it to suit his whims and purposes, the woman conferred an inferiority status is conned into passive obedience. This paper, therefore, exploring the trauma and post-colonial theories interrogates the nexus between religion as a debilitating societal construct and the attendant psychological injury that often results in creating mental incontinence for the woman. The paper concludes that religion should be more liberal and ‘wear a human face’ in advancing its practices in order not to push one beyond the edges.

Keywords: Religion, Trauma, Female Gender, Psychological Universe, Religion

Introduction

Despite the surge of awareness raised concerning the relations of power between African men and women, one discovers that the African woman is still held in bondage by structures put in place by a society that favours, fosters and maintains male domination. In line with this view, Ayo Kehinde avers that, ‘to a great extent, African women are relegated to the background in the social, political and economic arenas of their societies’ (169). To him, African women are, ‘. . . relegated to a position from which they function as mere appendages to men’ (169). In traditional, as well as non-traditional societies, the woman is an archetype of injustice, inequality and subjugation upheld in many institutions of the African society.

Although almost every institution of the African continent manifests female suppression and domination, the religious institution records by far the worst kind of domination against women. Corroborating this claim, Attoh Franca purports that, ‘religion is an instrument of female

oppression and marginalization ... and [that] entrenched male domination into the social structure of society ... enforce patriarchy' (159). In Africa, the dominant religions are Christianity and Islam. In the Christian religion, the Holy Bible charges women to be submissive to the man. Oftentimes, this scripture is quoted without recourse to the follow up injunction to men to love their wives. The point here is that a man that loves his wife will not resort to either physical or psychological battery of the woman. When the man loves the woman, there will be understanding, mutuality and trust. But the alternative is the case as men often cite the submissive/docility verse as an excuse for cruelty and tyranny. In Islam, the woman does not fare any better as religious norms are held onto as justification to keep the woman physically, psychologically and mentally oppressed.

In the ubiquitous field of trauma hermeneutics, one finds that trauma is often associated with breathtaking experiences that threaten individual well being, as well as that of the larger community. However, Sadiya Abubakar contends that it equally involves, 'day-to-day experiences or activities that can lead to mental frailties' (122). Trauma refers to a deep searing mental wound that overwhelms its victim emotionally, mentally and psychologically. While Negin Heidarizadeh purports that it is a 'state of mind which results from an injury . . . a devastating and damaging experience' (789), Inette Swart claims that trauma, '. . . brings to mind associations of pain, shock, disillusionment, life altering experiences, human aggression and betrayal . . .' (194). Trauma defines a horrific distress that leaves a mental imprint that destabilizes the self and the mind, sometimes resulting in neurosis. Neurosis refers to a mental impairment that involves systems of stress like fears, worries and anxieties plaguing the victim but without a radical loss of touch of reality. It is a malaise caused by unpleasant experiences that distort the victim's quality of life. Olley B argues that 'neurosis is basically psychogenic, that is, they are largely determined more by happenings in the individual's environment and past experience ... It could be a learned response to certain traumatic situations' (317).

Thus, Saadawi's fiction uses the life, psychology and mental dissonance of Zakeya; the protagonist of the story to chronicle the dilemma rampant in the lives of many African women. The text, *God dies by the Nile* foregrounds symptoms of mental impairment that materializes when religion is used as an oppressive tool to continuously subjugate the woman subjecting her to intense pain and aggravation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is trauma theory as exemplified by Cathy Caruth. It is adopted here to explore trauma as a wound with an intense pain, not on the body but on the mind. Building on Freud's ideas as suggested in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth purports that trauma is a '. . . wound inflicted . . . upon the mind . . . [a] breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world . . .' (3-4). At the core of Caruth's trauma theory is the issue of delay

and belatedness. Drawing from the Freudian model, Caruth views trauma as an emotional response that is often delayed. This delayed response is categorized as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association. Caruth defines PTSD as,

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event. . . the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly . . . to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (4).

Hence, Caruth contends that the victim of a shocking event is thrown off balance by the intensity of the shock that the individual is unable to come to terms immediately with the happenings of that unexpected event. But with its return, the individual is haunted by such occurrence. Again, working at the intersection of trauma and literature, Caruth views literary texts as a repository whereby the nature of trauma is revealed by its victims. As such, trauma theory often deals with narratives that tell the agonies and sorrows of either the author like in narratives about the holocaust for instance or it tells the agonizing experiences of characters within the trauma novel, thus capturing the core essence of literature as an avenue that, ‘. . . offers its readers a clearer, deeper understanding of the opaque events being reported in the press and on TV, whose shadowed truths the half-light of journalism fails to illumine’ (Rushdie, 338).

On the other hand, with religion used as a construct that imposes an inferior status on the woman, she is likened to the Postcolonial ‘other’. Although the concept of ‘other’ was conceived by Emmanuel Levinas, Edward Said in his text *Orientalism*, expounded on the term. For Said, ‘other’ represents a predisposed image that the West harbours towards the Orient, that is, Africa and countries of the Middle East. Lois Tyson claims that ‘Othering’ is a practice used to belittle others aside from one self seeing them as inferior; ‘it divides the world between ‘us’, the ‘civilized’ and ‘them’- the ‘others’- the ‘savages’. The ‘savage’ is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the demonic *other*)’ (366). ‘Othering’ establishes the master - servant dialectic through opposition, domination and frequent vilification of this ‘other’. It views in the marginalized groups a perception of weakness and minority in order to pursue selfish interests. However, although the concept of ‘othering’ is used basically in the study of the relations between the West and Third or developing world, it can also be found in groups or categories of people in relations to race, gender, ethnics or religion.

Thus, the emphasis in this paper is that in the text, the author views religion as a tool of othering that bridges gender relations in Zakeya’s *Kafr-el-Teen* into ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. While the men are regarded as recipients, interpreters and transmitters of divine will and messages, women are seen as passive receptors and practitioners of this divine will. It is no wonder then that some religious teachings and dictates are false and hypocritical, tilted and twisted to suit men’s patriarchal purposes. In essence, viewpoints revolving around patriarchal interpretations of religious creeds define and shape the individual and socio-cultural context of the woman, constantly suppressing her into silence and in its belated return, drives the woman into a state of mental impairment.

Religion, Trauma and ‘Madness’ In *God Dies by the Nile*

God Dies by the Nile is set in the village of Kafr El Teen in rural Egypt where the Mayor is God, his word is law, and his passions reign supreme. His reign of terror is made possible by his minions- Sheikh Hamzawi, Sheikh Zahran and Haj Ismail- who, seeking to be in favour with their Lord, exert and enforce his ‘divine will’ on the natives who have been silenced and robbed of their own will with the mere mention/ inclusion of ‘Allah’ to some dubiously devised scheme.

Most importantly, El Saadawi’s *God Dies by the Nile* captures the devastating effects of this patriarchal instigated religion on the mind and psyche of the womenfolk centring on the character of Zakeya. A powerfully built woman, she is industrious and enterprising, rising, ‘...before the crimson rays of dawn ... before the cry of the cock, the bark of a dog ...’ (1) to attend to her business. The strike of her hoe as it hits the earth shows that she is physically strong and even when the men take a break for a midday meal, she does not. Notwithstanding, Zakeya is an inwardly broken woman. She has been weakened by events and circumstances around her and the memories that often return to haunt her. She carries about her a deep sense of loss and pain, constantly squatting in the dust at the entrance of their home, morosely watching the world and quietly accepting her fate. This act of constantly squatting in the dust on the front porch denotes a crushed entity; a woman who cannot reconcile her image of a peaceful and loving God with the ‘God’ who takes and takes from them; a ‘God [who] wants [them] to pay Him something. Yet He knows [they] own nothing . . .’ (100). Thus, Zakeya is inwardly confused, seeking to believe but not wanting to believe. Her traumatic situation stems from the fact that she is overshadowed by patriarchal figures that assume divinity status in her community and forcefully drain her existence. This hostile social and religious climate subdues and renders her mute.

Postcolonial studies acknowledge that lines are often drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘the saints and the devils’. In the novel, El Saadawi highlights these divides between the Mayor as nobility, the one who was, ‘... above suspicion, above the law and above the moral rules which governed ordinary people’s behaviour’ (124); the one who the natives in their hearts fear and not really God. He is their God, for, ‘He holds their daily bread in his hands and if he wants, he can deprive them of it. If he gets angry their debts double, and the government keeps sending them one summons after the other ...’(134). As a representative of government, he uses his position to exploit and to, ‘. . . spend the money he squeezed out of them on his extravagant way of living, and his extravagant tastes in food, tobacco, wine and women’ (17). The Mayor as the ‘God’ of Kafr-el- Teen can make people in his bad books disappear and those who stand in his way are silenced forever. By reason of their association with the Mayor, Sheikh Hamzawi, Zahran and

Haj Ismail are equally elevated to a 'God' status. Together, they epitomize the oppressive recipients and enforcers of divine will. They in the name of 'God' mete out untold hardship to the people. They impose unjust taxes and confiscate their land when they cannot pay. On account of this, the people get, '. . . more and more hungry. All they have to eat is some dry bread and wormy salted cheese. . .' (160).

Similarly in the novel, divides exist between alpha males and weakened females. These alpha males are the Godhead, making rules that suit their whims and caprices and ensuring that their laws are obeyed. By this means, Nawal El Saadawi demystifies the mystery of the alpha male. She elucidates that the intent for this gender based master-servant dichotomy is to pursue selfish purposes, thereby fostering wickedness and injustice on the perceived weaker sex. In the novel, the amorous Mayor having set his eyes on Zakeya's twelve year old niece, Nefissa, sent Sheikh Zahran to acquire her for him. At the young girl's refusal, Zahran began preaching,

You people are free to do what you like. It looks as though you are fated not to enjoy *all the good which Allah wants to bestow on you*. There are hundreds of girls who would jump at a chance to work in the Mayor's house. But he chose your daughter (27).
(emphasis mine)

'All the good which Allah wants to bestow on you' unfortunately begins with a beating, 'Beat her. Don't you know that girls and women never do what they're told unless you beat them?' (27). 'Allah's goodness' then extended to an unwanted pregnancy and to the young girl's disappearance from town. On being accosted, the Mayor in all sainthood replied, 'Girls and women have lost all morality . . . men have always been immoral. But now the women are throwing virtue overboard ...' (51). This is to say that it is acceptable for men to be immoral while the same standard is not applicable to the women. Here, El Saadawi foregrounds the hypocrisy prevalent in human relationships even in this religious community.

To the African, family is everything. As against the individualism of the Western world, communalism is deeply entrenched in the heart of the African. This is probably best captured in the African philosophy, 'Ubuntu'. Ubuntu is an African philosophical thought that accentuates 'being self through others' (Jacob and Andrew, 82). It emphasizes the importance of empathy, interconnectedness and the achievement of a sense of self through others or reliance on the strength of others. In Igbo, the phrases 'igwebuike' or 'mmadu ka eji aka' succinctly puts ubuntu in perspective. Based on the foregoing, it becomes understandable that even though a physically dependent woman, Zakeya relies on the strength of her family for her complete wholeness. This experience was denied her; for she suffered loss when Nefissa disappeared from the village. To heighten her pain, Kafrawi her brother and Nefissa's father is equally taken away to gaol for killing Elwau, an unsuspecting victim that bore the blame for impregnating Nefissa. Needless to say, all these were frame ups by Sheikh Zahran in order to cover the Mayor's tracks and preserve

his 'sainthood'. In a meeting with Haj Ismail, Sheikh Zahran acknowledged that, 'Kafrawi is not capable of killing a chicken, and you know that very well . . . We are God's slaves when it's time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time' (68/69). Albeit an indirect acknowledgment, Zahran still pointed to the Mayor as the killer of Elwau.

Kayode Ogunfolabi argues that what makes up the traumatic is the constant return of the lacuna that engineered the event of which the victim or trauma survivor is unable to account for. In Zakeya's situation, she has been deeply scarred by the many forceful departures from her family. First of all, her son Galal was conscripted into the war and while others returned, he did not. Secondly, Nefissa, then her brother Kafrawi. She carries about her a deep sense of loss with its attendant anxiety and pain. She mournfully laments;

I wonder where you are, Galal my son. I wonder whether you are alive or dead. . . And now Kafrawi has also been taken away. Who knows if he'll ever come back. O God, were not Galal and Nefissa enough? Did you have to take Kafrawi also? We no longer have anyone left, and the house is empty . . . (85)

Alongside Zakeya's dilemma, the constant return of the lacuna of her traumatic situation is her persistent worry and panic over the return of the ones who went away. It does not help that in her mind 'God' is responsible for all her predicament. With a profound angst in her voice, she says to Zeinab, 'Those who go never come back . . .' (85). As against Zeinab's optimism and belief that God will help vindicate her father and bring back their loved ones, Zakeya was not so sure, her belief in a 'God' who is gracious, merciful and good has been grossly marred and she is now uncertain of this 'God'. Wanting to believe but not seeing enough of this 'God's' goodness to believe, she voices her inner anguish to her little niece, '. . . Allah alone is not enough' (86). Continuing she retorts,

I have not ceased praying and begging God to help us. And yet every day our misery becomes greater, and we are afflicted with a new suffering . . . Many a time have I prayed to God, called upon him, beseeched Him to have mercy on us, but He never seemed to hear me, or to respond (86/89).

Here, the pronoun 'He' and 'Him' used in qualifying 'God' shows a belief that God is male and his refusal to help shows that he is merciless as against what Zakeya has been brought up to believe. Her doubts, pessimism and loss of faith thus signify her emotional response to her dilemma.

The mind is, indeed, a reservoir of memories, and in trauma narratives, memories are important; for memories trigger testimony. Felman and Laub in Ogunfolabi explains that the objective of testimony in trauma narratives is to empower the trauma victim to bear witness to the past, '. . . in order to undermine the tyranny of the past' (43). For Zakeya, her account of pain follows an

unusual structure. Her descent into neurosis unearthed her deep seethed pain and fears. Neurosis has been defined earlier as a mental disorder that involves obsessive thoughts, anxieties and systems of stress. At the root of neurosis is apprehension and phobias. According to Olley, past happenings and experiences in the individual's environment are identified as causative factors. In Zakeya's case, the reader comes in contact with a catalogue of repressed ill addressed woes. Hence;

She was lying on a mat with her husband Abdel Moneim . . . but he got up at once and started to hit her on her head, and chest. Then he kicked her in her belly which was pregnant with child . . . she could feel his fingers around her breasts, feel them creep down to her belly and between her thighs. His heavy body bore down upon her with all its strength, pressing harder and harder down on her flesh . . . he started to beat her again. For it was like that. Every time a son of hers dies 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 (88/89).

Secondly, the 'hearer' bears witness to the testimony of big/huge Iron Gate or big iron bars. We would recall that Zakeya constantly squats in the dust in her front porch facing the huge iron gate of the Mayor's exquisite house. This obsessive anxiety with the big Iron Gate seems to be the 'Genesis' and 'Revelation' of her trauma. In a conversation, she says to Zeinab, 'The devils are looking at me from behind the bars of the window' (98). To allay her fears, Zeinab replied, 'it's the door of the *Mayor's house* . . . (98) (emphasis mine). Thus, the Mayor here is the devil and the originator of Zakeya's troubles. On the other hand, the big Iron Gate symbolizes something insurmountable, perhaps, the religious nature of her community that places a limitation on the womenfolk. It suffocates and chokes life from them and cuts off any aspiration for liberation. In this little community, silence is the order of the day and any attempt to find voice is cruelly muted.

Thirdly, we witness an inner longing for companionship and its denial. Zakeya relates that she had, '. . . given birth to ten sons and six daughters- but the only child who had lived to grow up was Galal. All the others have died at different ages, for life was like that. One never knew when a child would die . . .' (89). Continuing in a low voice, she whispers, 'Galal is the only one that grew up to live. But now he has gone and will not return. Kafrawi also is gone, and Nefissa. The house is empty, and Zeinab is young. And I am too old to be of much use . . .' (89)

Fourth is other inexpressible laments and pain that has no end. For her, '... all the pain in life ... seemed to be as long as the length of her life, as long as the long hours of her days and night' (96). Moreover, Zakeya's continuous hallucinations with a 'stranger dripping blood' and 'cutting off her head' reveals a PTSD involving a gruesome, bloody female circumcision. Perhaps the most horrible blow that 'God' dealt Zakeya is the design to and the acquisition of Zeinab; the only remaining support system that Zakeya had and the unjust capture and confinement of Galal who miraculously returns from Sinai to claim and marry Zeinab. Haj Ismail and Zahran confirm

that the 'God' of Kafr El Teen, '... burned with such a desire for Zeinab that only death could put an end to it. Sooner or later he was going to lay his hands on her, for like all Gods he believed that the impossible did not exist' (70). The Mayor himself acknowledged that the, '... youngest is always the most tasty' (18). He lecherously admires 'her firm rounded buttocks [and] . . . her pointed breasts [moving] up and down with each step' (18). Even the smaller god- Haj Ismail- burnt in wanton sexual lust and desire for this young girl. The narrator again recounts that the eyes of Haj Ismail, '... gazed at her fixedly, inflexibly, cruelly cutting through her dress, feeding on the beauty of her legs, on the curving flesh, on the fullness of her thighs and belly, on the petal-like skin and the waist narrow and slender, on her back rising up like a powerful stem' (84).

To acquire Zeinab, Haj Ismail used the one means he knows would not fail. He used religion to exploit Zakeya's pain, further poking into a mental wound that had begun to fester. He says to Zeinab, 'your aunt Zakeya is sick. She is sick because you have continued to disobey Allah, and she has encouraged you to do that. But Allah is all merciful, and kind, and he will forgive both of you on the condition that you obey, and do what He asks of you . . . (115). Continuing with this charade, he commands;

Zeinab is to take another bath with clean water from the Nile . . . then do her prayers at the crack of dawn. Once this is over, she is to open the door of your house before sunrise, stand on the threshold facing its direction and recite the first verse of the Koran ten times. In front of her she will see a big iron gate. She is to walk towards it, open it and walk in. She must never walk out of it again until the owner of the house orders her to do so. He is a noble and great man, born of a noble and great father, and he belongs to a good and devout family blessed by Allah and his Prophet (116).

While this is going on, Zakeya would remain alone at home, work on the fields and pray for forgiveness in order to drown her pain of loneliness. To highlight this deplorable situation, one would ask, what exactly does Zakeya need forgiveness for? For being a woman or for being a tormented woman by the pain and trauma she had borne within her bosom for a long time. To this, Karl Marx avers that religion is the opium of the masses. He believes that religion is used to make people feel better about the distress they experience when being exploited and deceived. Consequently, 'God' is used to make Zakeya and Zeinab feel better even when they are being brainwashed, deceived, exploited, ravished, rampaged and laid naked to the bones by a male dominated oppressive syndicate. The Mayor however knows the truth and the game that was played as, 'laughter was welling up inside him. Speaking to himself in an undertone, he said, 'Devil, son of a devil. What a cunning rogue you are, Haj Ismail' (119).

Zakeya's final action in the selected text has been touted as murder, for at the end, instead of squatting at the threshold overlooking the Mayor's big building; Zakeya actually crossed the threshold and struck a hoe on the Mayor's head. Perhaps this assertion is true, for murder is murder and the killing of another human being is unjustifiable but then again, as stated earlier, trauma is caused by deep psychological scar that 'distorts an individual's sense of self and

standards by which one evaluates society' (Michelle Balaev, 2008). Based on this view, it is inferred that Zakeya's sense of self and society have been distorted; she is now a psychological wreck that is prone to abnormal behaviours. The call here therefore is that, in order not to blow to full psychotic states; religion should be more liberal and empathetic. Furthermore, it is imperative that Zakeya's action is not considered a personal vendetta against the Mayor for Zakeya is an embodiment of all female suppression in an oppressive socio- cultural and religious setting and there has to be a definite move to unseat structures that threaten the complete wholeness and wellbeing of femalehood.

Conclusion

The African is naturally predisposed to religion and a belief in the divine. Unfortunately, religion in Africa has been the preserve of men. In the Holy Bible for instance, St. Paul in 1st Timothy 2:12-14 and 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 forbade women to talk because she is blamed for man's fall from grace. This unfortunate state of affairs has made women more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression from the male folk. El Saadawi's *God dies by the Nile* projects a discourse that traces a trajectory between religion and female oppression. Her treatise buttresses that religion is a man-made construct and being forcibly pushed into silence in the face of oppression tells on the psyche and unnerves the victim. In essence, Zakeya's anxieties, pain and trauma can be said to be a metaphor for the oppressive situation that most African women go through. However, pain forges a new perspective and understanding of the self. It, therefore, behoves African women to take decisive actions and initiatives, seeking solutions to their problems and challenges, for no one should be made to remain silent and dormant in the face of inhumanity and injustice.

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