

THE AESTHETICS OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *GOD DIES BY THE NILE*

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ABSTRACT

The concern for social equality was not a priority for contemporary black women as “womanhood” was not the main facet of their identity. For them, “sexism was insignificant in the light of the harsher reality of racism” (Hooks, 1). The theories of intersectionality prominently by Kimberle Crenshaw addressed these concerns and advocated for inclusive feminism. They exposed how the interlocking systems of race, class, gender, ability, sex, nationality, religion and citizenship combined to define the women's lives. Patricia Hill Collins reconceptualized the social relations of domination as forming a “matrix” and expanded it beyond the disciplines of Black feminism so that it no longer pertains to any particular group or social identity. In this context, Saadawi's novel *God Dies by the Nile*, exposes the subjugation of women in Middle Eastern societies where women experience discrete forms of discrimination due to the intersection of sex with factors such as class and religion. In such societies, gender-based violence is widespread and generally considered a private matter where even the law is discriminatory as it is governed by the Sharia. This paper will therefore analyse these intersections as experienced by these women and how they raise their voices and resist violence and tyranny.

KEYWORDS: sexism, racism, intersectionality, inclusive feminism, gender, oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Up to the first half of the 20th century, feminism mainly catered to the experiences of middle-and upper-class heterosexual white women. It considered women as a homogeneous category who experienced life similarly and was therefore largely concerned with the demand for their social equality and the impact of sexism on their social status. However, this concern was not a priority for contemporary black women as “womanhood” was not the main facet of their identity. They believed that “sexism was insignificant in the light of a harsher, brutal reality of racism” (Hooks, 1) and that liberation from racial oppression was necessary for them to be free. These concerns that women of color and other minority groups faced, were overshadowed by the ongoing struggle for equality. A movement that could bring forth the unique experiences of black women was thus felt like a dire need. Black feminist scholar-activists such as Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, from the 1830s to the 1930s highlighted the need to address issues related to race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity. Many theoretical frameworks were developed and many seminal works were published by these women activists, to broaden feminism's definition and scope. In doing so, they exposed how the interlocking systems of race, class, gender, ability, sex, nationality, religion and citizenship combined to define women's

lives. The concept of intersectionality intends to elucidate these dynamics that had hitherto been neglected by feminist movements.

The theory of intersectionality was popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in her paper, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, in which she discusses how the unique experiences of Black women were neglected within both anti-racist, as well as feminist movements. While laws about race were framed to protect black men, laws about sexism protected only white women. So simply combining racism and sexism did not, therefore, protect black women. She believes that since non-white women are present within discourses that address either race or sex—but not both at the same time—black women get marginalized within both of these systems of oppression as a result. In another landmark essay, “Mapping the Margins” (1991), Crenshaw foregrounds how contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider the intersections of racism and patriarchy. In this essay, she explores the “various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural and political aspects of violence against women of color” (Crenshaw, 1224), although admitting that other factors “such as class and sexuality” are equally important in shaping the experiences of women of color.

The concept of “intersectionality” was not only furthered but also reconceptualized as a “matrix of domination” by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought – Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). According to her, the absence of black women's propositions within conventional discourses and the knowledge gained at the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender, provided the impetus for Black women's critical social theory. Drawing on works of African-American scholars, Collins brings forth the notion that social relations of domination form a “matrix” of domination and are “organised via four interrelated domains of power, namely, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains” (294), regardless of the particular intersections involved. She believes that each of them serves a particular purpose:

The structural domain organises oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experiences and the individual consciousness that ensues (Collins, 294).

Shifting from a methodological and political monism to an integrative perspective, she emphasizes that Black women's experience of racial, class, and gender oppression constitute a unique and historically determined system. All forms of oppression are not equivalent or “interchangeable” and are not similarly perceived by all beings, rather, they constitute different “dimensions” of the “social relations of domination” (Collins, 226). These social relations of domination form a distinctive “matrix” for distinctive groups, for example, “race, class and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterise Black women's experiences,” while “other groups may encounter different dimensions of the matrix, such as sexual orientation, religion, and age” (Collins, 226). She further says that axes that confer a privilege to one group, subordinate the other. The tendency is to relegate those axes on which a group is privileged to lesser theoretical and political importance than the ones on which the group is oppressed (Collins, 229). As such,

any group's or community's nexus of oppression can be analysed by placing them within their specific matrix of oppression.

With the works of transnational feminists such as Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, the concept of intersectionality has now expanded beyond the disciplines of Black feminism and even sociology, it no longer pertains to any specific group or social identity. It is now defined as, "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall, 1771) or "the interaction [among] categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 68). With these definitions, the concept of intersectionality expanded beyond race, class, and gender to include other factors such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation and many others. With the expansion of the definitional scope of intersectionality to include all social identity structures, everyone's unique social advantages and disadvantages could be subject to scrutiny.

Keeping the above observations in view, this study considers intersectionality as a research paradigm and takes into consideration three intersecting categories of class, gender and religion in Nawal El Saadawi's novel *God Dies by the Nile*. Emphasizing the need to broaden the scope of feminism, Saadawi believes that Western feminist movements should "understand the specific aspects of the situation in underdeveloped countries" (*Hiddenix*) while working for women's liberation. Acknowledging the fact that although there are certain common characteristics to these movements worldwide, there are fundamental differences when we are dealing with underdeveloped countries. The cultural differences between the Western capitalist societies and Arab Islamic countries should also be taken into consideration. If these differences are not taken into account, feminist movements may not only jeopardize the struggle for women's emancipation but will also participate in holding back the process of freedom and progress in such countries.

Since this study will analyse the predicament of the Islamic women, therefore religion as an intersecting category holds an important place in the lived experiences of these women as apart from the various state apparatuses of the society, women in the Islamic world are also oppressed by the dogmatic religious structures. As Saadawi points out:

Women constitute more than one half of humanity. They are the poorest and the most oppressed and exploited, especially when class, colour, race and religion intersect. Women are the people who suffer the most from neocolonialism and patriarchal structures; they are the people who need solidarity the most in the struggle for their rights." (qtd in Newson- Horst, 68)

A powerful feminist voice in the Arab world, Nawal El Saadawi's writing explores the predicament of the Middle-Eastern women whose subjugation is not only culturally sanctioned but also approved by the dogmatic religious structures of the society. Her work---both fiction and non-fiction---is an avid account of the atrocities related to women in Egypt. Her writing emanates from her experience of the suffering of impoverished families of the society she belonged to and as a critic of the oppressive state regime of her country. Egyptian women faced oppression due to its complicated and multifarious patriarchal history. Coming from a poor peasant family, enduring

gendered oppression right from her childhood, and later her experiences as a rural physician and a psychiatrist, during which she could closely perceive Muslim woman's body and sexuality, prompted her to voice the poor Arab woman's predicament in her writing.

God Dies by the Nile is the story of Zakeya and her niece Zainab who are driven by desperation to the darkest of ends. The novel narrates the perpetual struggles of the peasant class of Kafr El Teen, represented by Zakeya and her family in the hands of a village mayor and his three sycophants -- Sheikh Zahran, the Chief of the Guard, Sheikh Hamzawi, the Imam of the village and Haj Ismail, the village barber. The novel depicts the story of the oppression of poor peasants by the privileged ruling class of the village. The text will be analysed through Collins' paradigm of intersectionality (2000) as discussed above, and see how the matrix of domination in this novel is organised into four interrelated domains of power that dominate women: the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. These four domains play a large role in oppressing the female characters. All four domains of power are interconnected and have an impact on the oppressed in one way or the other.

THE STRUCTURAL DOMAIN

The structural domain portrays mainly through politics, patriarchy, capitalism, and class. The novel *God Dies by the Nile* was written and published during the rule of Abdul Nasser and Anwer Saadat respectively. In Saadat's regime, the conservative Islamic movements got strengthened and sharia law was introduced into the constitution. Women were encouraged to wear veils and remain within the four walls of their houses. These rulers who are usually ignorant of the real tenants of Islam thus became a source of exerting various oppressions on women. The female characters of the novel are also oppressed by the political regimes of the state. In the novel, women are victims of the patriarchal class system fortified by religion, politics and social customs. The Mayor who is "the representative of government in Kafr El Teen" (GDN, 13), is symbolically the god of patriarchy. "People like him who live on top of the world, don't know the word impossible. They walk over the earth like Gods" (GDN, 54). Sheikh Zahran once says "we are God's slaves when it's time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time" (GDN, 53). Governments represented by the likes of the Mayor are based on a crude display of brute force and used only for personal gains. "The Mayor was using his position to exploit the peasants, 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." (GDN, 13). In other words, the Mayor exploits poor people economically, psychologically and sexually by taking advantage of his position.

In the novel, it is the Mayor who dictates the laws to his people, "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. 'Either pay or your land will be confiscated'" (GDN, 106). The novel puts forth a horrendous picture of how poor women are employed by upper-class people as servants at shamefully low salaries and are frequently sexually abused by their masters and their sons. In this regard, Heidi Hartmann attributes women's underpayment and oppression of women to "men's desire to control women is at least as strong as capital's desire to control workers. Capitalism and patriarchy are two different beasts, each of which must be fought with different weapons." (Hartmann, 23). Tariq, the Mayor's son also uses his

class status to assault the female servants in the Mayor's household. Regarding the female servants working in upper-class homes, El Saadawi opines that they are particularly prone to sexual assault as a result of class differences:

The small maidservant . . . is the only remaining “sex avenue” for the hungry males that are panting with thirst of sexual frustration, and lying-in wait for any chance of hope of satisfying it...The boys are less liable to feel guilty if sex is practiced with a servant girl, and in addition they are not doing wrong to somebody of their own class, but to a creature who is socially very much their inferior. (23)

Hence, by violating and molesting these powerless women, upper-class and powerful people depict that the values of greed, lust, extravagance and pleasure are allowed to flourish on the misery of the toiling masses. This depicts that the lives of lower-class people are controlled by the Mayor both economically as well as psychologically.

THE DISCIPLINARY DOMAIN

The main purpose of the disciplinary domain is to ensure that the rules of the structural domain are followed and also to manage power relations by employing various techniques, such as surveillance. Foucault (187) argues that disciplinary power is exercised “through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility.” In a patriarchal society, women and men tend to conform to these subject positions, and if they do not, they are judged according to these norms. The patriarchal/male surveillance is dominant everywhere in the novel and haunts Zainab throughout the novel. Men in such a society seem to interfere in every move she makes and try to judge her. The Mayor and his sycophants would sit on the terrace of his house and would gaze at her while she fetched water from the river: “His eyes followed the tall lithe figure of Zeinab as she walked along the river bank. He could see her firm, rounded buttocks pressing up against the long *galabeya* from behind” (GDN, 14). Zeinab is conscious of the gaze and would either hasten her pace or cover her body with a shawl as she passes in front of Haj Ismail's shop. The male gaze and the eyes symbolize how men believe they possess women. Women in the novel are beaten or raped to conform to the patriarchal wishes and demands. Be it Zainab and her sister Nafissa's denial to work in the Mayor's house or Fatheya's forceful marriage to Sheikh Hamzawi, all meet the same fate. When they refuse to conform, they are beaten as, “girls and women are only convinced if they receive a good hiding” (GDN, 31). By marrying Sheikh Hamzawi, an impotent man, Fatheya is condemned to a never-ending state of misery and virginity. He controls her by telling her that she was the wife of a religious head and was supposed to remain within the four walls of her house.

THE HEGEMONIC DOMAIN

The hegemonic domain of power justifies practices in the other domains and validates oppression; it deals with ideology, culture, and consciousness. The hegemonic domain can be illustrated through religion, gender, and sexuality. Patriarchy and capitalism are not just systems of relationships; they are also systems of values and beliefs (Landry, 6-7). The ruling classes manipulate their societies politically through cultural hegemony. For patriarchy to survive as an

institution, it has to be fortified by religion, politics, and social customs. In *God Dies by the Nile*, we notice that the Mayor, a symbol of patriarchy, strengthens his nexus by three interrelated forces. The religious ideology that is represented by Sheikh Hamzawi, the Imam of the Mosque, local and cultural traditions symbolized by the local healer, Haj Ismail, and the coercive power of the political establishment personified by the Head of the Village Guard, Sheikh Zahran. “They were his instruments, his aides and his means for administering the affairs of the village” (*GDN*, 98). It is with help of these three tools of oppression, that the Mayor could establish his supremacy.

In such societies, it is not only women who are raped and destroyed for being women but even men are victimized for failing to support the patriarchal class domination. It is observed that for patriarchy to survive as an oppressive system; its ideology must be incorporated into the society. If that ideology has not fully been imbibed; force has been used to implement it. In the novel, we see how force is used on the lower-class people like Kafrawi and Masoud who are reminded that their patriarchal authority and manhood is at stake if they do not resort to the use of force to get their daughters to comply with their orders. On two different occasions, when both Kafrawi and Masoud ask what they are to do when their daughters refuse to comply, Sheikh Zahran retorts by challenging their manhood. “What can you do?! Is that a question for a man to ask?” responded Sheikh Zahran, even more heatedly. ‘Beat her. Don’t you know that girls and women never do what they’re told unless you beat them?’” (*GDN*, 21). Hence, one may argue that in patriarchy, even the victim plays the role of the victimizer. We can see that even the most powerless man is led to believe that he has the right to beat his wife and daughters and accept the idea that his women like everything in his peasant life belong to the patriarchal ruling class. Again, with regard to patriarchy being fortified by the religious ideology, the marriage of Sheikh Hamazwi and Fatheya stands as an example. Sheikh Hamzawi’s position as a religious leader of the community “responsible for upholding the teachings of Allah, and keeping the morals and piety of the village intact” (*GDN*, 30) enables him to force Fatheya to marry him against her will.

In this regard, Antonio Gramsci comments on how ideology is forcibly implemented and argues that patriarchy is “a repressive system that can be maintained only by the sheer force of coercion.” (12). For Gramsci, the hegemony of an oppressive system is possible to achieve only when the victims, through a process of cultural and religious socialization, become alienated and imbibe the views of their oppressors. Therefore, the oppressive nature of the patriarchal class order can be explicitly seen through the incarceration of Kafrawi and Galal, the rape and disappearance of both Nefissa and Zeinab and the murder of Elwau, Fatheya, and her adopted child.

THE INTERPERSONAL DOMAIN AND SOLIDARITY

The interpersonal domain manifests itself in the way people treat each other. It is not only the men, but women also participate in upholding the patriarchal values by the way they treat each other. In the novel, this domain is represented by the Mayor’s wife and Om Saber, the *daya* who uphold and consolidate the patriarchal image of women. The Mayor’s wife is fully aware of her husband’s and son’s lustful and immoral nature. However, she not only merely witnesses the exploitation of the maid servants in her house but also abets them whenever the need arises. She asks her son, Tariq, “Where was your virtue last year when you assaulted Saadia, the servant, and

obliged me to throw her out in order to avoid a scandal? And where does your virtue disappear to every time you pounce on one of the servant girls in our house?" (*GDN*, 39).

The Daya performs various functions which show how women play a large role in perpetuating patriarchy and oppressing one another. Such women by performing functions like female genital mutilation, defloration, abortion and exorcism try to keep other females in place to preserve patriarchy. Through these functions, she is simply reinforcing the patriarchal value placed on the sanctity of the hymen in the life of a woman to preserve the sense of honour of men in the patriarchal family. Within this context, Gordon-Chipembere argues that "maintenance of one's virginity ensured a good marriage, which created the possibility of moving the family out of economic hardship, or into another class"(3). Since her childhood, Fatheya is conditioned by the culture that she has something impure about her and needs to be cut. "Then one day Om Saber came to their house, and she was told that the old woman was going to cut the bad, unclean part off" (*GDN*, 32). By shedding light on genital mutilation, Saadawi tries to expose the inhuman crime and the patriarchal mentality behind such practice; a practice which is meant to dominate women and consolidate the patriarchal image of women as sexual objects.

CONCLUSION

Thus, in this novel, Saadawi depicts how Arab women are oppressed by various factors like age, gender, religion and class. However, all women do not experience oppression in the same way. Although they all live in the same place, gender stratification affects them differently. The protagonist as well as other women in this novel are not only oppressed by different forces of oppression but also sometimes participate in the oppression of other women.

The novel ends with scenes symbolic of resistance against the patriarchal class system in which Zakeya whose whole family is destroyed by the Mayor, sees counter-violence as her final resort to revenge the oppression meted out against her family in general and women in particular. She takes hold of a hoe and walks towards the Mayor's house, "He did not feel the hoe land on his head and crush it at one blow. For a moment before, he had looked into her eyes, just once. And from that moment he was destined never to see, or feel, or know anything more" (*GDN*, 137). By killing the Mayor, El Saadawi through her character of Zakeya conveys a message to all the women in the world that resistance is the only option left for them if they want to eradicate oppression meted against them.

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