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## Matrices of Violence: A Post-Structural Feminist Rendering of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Lola Soneyin's *The Secrets of Baba Segi's Wives*

Uzma Shafi<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India. E-mail: [uzmashafi26@gmail.com](mailto:uzmashafi26@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

There is a quite significant discourse on patriarchy and women identity in neo-colonial states. These studies border on dehumanization, victimization, and discrimination against women. Gender activists and women right advocates have been in the forefront of calls for recognition and protection of the rights of women in the African patriarchal society. The interventions recognize the African patriarchal structure, but the advocacy emphasizes the need to accord the female gender a pride of place in the sociocultural milieu. This study identified and analyzed lopsided societal treatment of the female gender in literary works of two African writers of different sociocultural backgrounds using Poststructuralist feminist theory. The study identified the societies reflected in the literary writings as representations of patriarchal societies that place the female gender in less favorable conditions; thus, making it subservient to the male gender. The study concluded that the female gender is disadvantaged in some African societies. The study recommends that all patriarchal societies need to accord the female gender respect and recognition in order to enhance their contribution to social and economic development of the society.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender, Society, Development, African segregation, Oppression, Victimization

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### Introduction

Right from traditional society to the modern, gender plays essential role in forging relationships in the Neo-colonial societies. The social and political spheres since antiquity have been segregated along gender classification of male and female with the former dominating the latter. Writers have tried to adequately represent this categorization in their literary writings to reveal that gender variations have brought about inequality and hindered development of their societies. The contention of these writers' border on the refusal of the societies to profit from an inherent amity among the genders. Hence, the persistent stagnation of the society in the social, economic, and political spheres.

Nawal El Saadawi and Lola Shoneyin, in their novels, *Woman at Point Zero* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* represent gender discrimination, in a way that reflects how African patriarchal societies share common characteristics in their perception and treatment of the females. The former set in the Arabian society of Egypt and the latter in Yoruba

\*Corresponding author: Uzma Shafi, Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India.  
E-mail: [uzmashafi26@gmail.com](mailto:uzmashafi26@gmail.com)

society at Nigeria reveal similar patriarchal disposition to the female gender in neo colonial states. Despite the different cultural affiliations, the novelists demonstrate the female gender experience—dehumanization and deprivation on account of their sex in the patriarchal societies. At every stage of their development, the female gender is placed at a disadvantaged position due to entrenched cultural belief that, she is inferior to the male gender, hence must play a subservient role.

The novelists through their characters' experiences portray that the female gender is subjected to various forms of discriminations in all facets of the society. The characters in the novels are representation of the various forms of oppression which the female gender endures and experiences, which the patriarchal structure of the society justifies. This unjust treatment of the female gender is reflected in several ways in the select literary works.

Writers are the product of the society; therefore, it is convenient to posit that the character experiences in the novels are vivid representation of gender inequality. The disparity in the handling of the gender issues is identified and analyzed in the plots of the novels with a view to reveal the ideological standpoints of the novelists.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Poststructuralist feminist theory was developed as a hybrid feminist theory that attempts to interpret relation of the gender as a social construct and a non-purist which is to be discussed along the spheres of subjectivity, sexuality, and language. The theory focuses on 'man' and 'woman' within the subject of language position. It is not entirely focused on women but the relationship between 'man' and 'woman': Poststructuralist feminist theory sees the category or position 'woman' as a part of a binary opposition, 'man/woman,' in which 'man' is the favored term. Feminist theories deconstruct that binary, and the other binaries which emphasize and maintain it, including masculine/feminine, good/evil, light/dark, positive/negative, culture/nature, etc.

Poststructuralist feminist theory investigates how, and with what consequences, 'woman' is constructed as other, as non-being, as something outside of and dangerous to consciousness, rationality, presence, and all those other nice things that Western humanist metaphysics values (Klages, 2011).

The Poststructuralist feminist, Judith Butler, conceived the idea of gender as performance, or the result of reiterated acting, and proposed the term Gender Performativity. Gender performativity as a concept reiterates that being born male or female does not in any way determine behavior and that people behave in particular ways to fit into the dictates of the society. Butler stresses that gender is an act, or performance. With the poststructuralist belief in constructionism, femineity or gender is understood as a process of "Becoming" and not as "Being." The poststructuralist feminist theory is adopted for the analysis of the gender inequality as portrayed in the texts.

## 3. Patriarchy in Some African Societies

Developing countries of the world such as Africa build their social relations on patriarchy which is a system that prioritizes the males over females. It emphasizes the superiority of the male gender over the females and ascribe certain responsibilities to the male gender because of their biological construct. In a patriarchal society, recognition is given to sex over any other beneficial characteristics like intelligence, charisma, agility, and industry. The male gender is accorded more respect than the female due to the belief that the latter is inferior to the former. This postulation is in line with Okwechime and Ofuani's position that

“...patriarchy seeks to take away women's voices... This practice of male authority and control has always been blamed for the continuing denigration women suffer especially in African societies”.

Patriarchy deprives the girl child or women their rights and subjects them to harrowing experiences on account of their sex. In a number of patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl child is not celebrated as that of the boy child. Similarly, certain privileges are given to the boy child and in fact the opportunity of western education is for the boy child because of the belief that education of the girl child ends in the kitchen. Whenever a girl child is to get married, she may not have a voice in who becomes her husband, as it is the prerogative of the father to determine. Hence, in most instances, when the proposed groom is not acceptable to the girl child, she has to forcefully accept it otherwise, she would be seen as being disobedient to the father and consequently exposing him to ridicule. In some instances, no recognition is given to the happiness of the girl child in her proposed matrimonial home, what matters in patriarchy is the authority of the father to give out his daughter in marriage. Sultana accesses the impact of patriarchy on gender relation in societies and submits that:

Patriarchy, which pre-supposes the natural superiority of male over female, shamelessly upholds women's dependence on, and subordination to, man in all spheres of life. Consequently, all the power and authority within the family, the society and the state remain entirely in the hands of men. So, due to patriarchy, women were

deprived of their legal rights and opportunities. Patriarchal values restrict women's mobility, reject their freedom over themselves as well as their property.

The relegation of the female gender continues in her womanhood as women are not deemed to have a voice. Hence, in most instances, they are not expected to be in societal meetings even when such meetings are meant to decide their affairs. Patriarchy assigns roles depending on their sex which has a significant impact on gender relations and consequently on the development of the society.

The novelists, Nawal El Sadawi and Lola Soneyin explicate patriarchy induced gender disparity in their novels, which can be considered as reflections of the societies. Both settings reveal the extent at which the female gender is maligned in family and social relationships. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus, the protagonist, reveals the lopsided treatment of the children in her house such that the boy child is given preferential treatment over girl child. The situation is so appalling that reception of her father to news of the death of the girl child does not indicate a sense of loss. Firdaus submits that:

When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep. (El Saadawi Nawal, 2007)

In patriarchy, the boy child is raised above the girl child, as the little girl's experience testifies. The parents instill in the girl child the expectations that she is to play a second fiddle role in the home, thus impinging on her psychological well-being. It is this state of being that makes Firdaus doubt the status of her parents, that is, whether they are truly her parents. This is borne out of the fact that she did not receive the desired care in her teenage years. Due to gender inequality, Firdaus' situation is all too prevalent in patriarchy. The bias manifests in virtually all facets of the girl child's developmental years and all these deprivations are wantonly justified. Soneyin reveals that in a patriarchy, a girl child is unqualified to inherit her parents' wealth because she will be married off, hence, it is abnormal for her to lay claim to her father's estate. This tradition has exposed a girl child to maltreatment in the event of her parents' death because she has nothing with which she can start her life, hence aggravating her sorrow. One of the characters in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Iya Femi shows that her life took a turn for the worse upon the demise of her parents as she is denied inheritance of her parents. This is so because patriarchy prevents her from inheriting her parents as her uncle's wife addresses her and reiterates that:

... It has been a month since your parents died. This is not your home and it will never be. A girl cannot inherit her father's house because it is everyone's prayer that she will marry and make her husband's home her own. This house and everything in it now belongs to your uncle. That is the way things are. (Soneyin, 2018)

The patriarchal structure of the society justifies the callousness of Iya Femi's uncle, that is why no one fought for the former and she is thus confined to obscurity. Soneyin's reflection of Iya Femi's predicament is a reiteration of the call for fairness in the handling of the matter affecting the girl child in the society. Both writers' portrayal of the childhood of their characters attest to the claim that the girl child suffers neglect, humiliation, deprivation and victimization early in her life and this upbringing has telling effect on her livelihood. The positions of these writers align with Bungaro's submissions that: "African women have historically interrogated patriarchy, and their stories are the expression of social dissidence".

#### 4. Matrimony and Subjugation of The Girl child

Marriage is an expression of interest and a declaration of love from both parties in a relationship. It is after these salient conditions have been met that third parties play different roles to facilitate the conceptualization of the union. Since the relationship determines the psychological state of both parties, it is without doubt they should be allowed to make decisions on the choice of partner. However, in a patriarchy, the parents, or the guardians, in most instances, choose a partner for the girl child because of the belief that it is the duty of the former to determine who marries the latter. Such interventions are in most instances beneficial to the facilitators and harrowing for the girl child.

In El-Sadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus' disillusionment continues with her uncle marrying her off to an old and partially deformed Sheikh Mahmoud. The decision to send Firdaus to an early marriage is transactional on the part of her uncle and a relief for the uncle's wife. The uncle's wife sees Firdaus as a burden in the house hence, she should be dispensed with while her uncle expects the financial benefit accruable from the relationship. Firdaus' uncle, in assessing the workability of the marriage, says:

"If he accepts to pay one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debts and buy some underwear, as well as a dress or two for Firdaus" (Emphasis mine).

In all these, neither Firdaus' interest nor her happiness is considered. The young girl is, thus, confined to an excruciating marriage that is devoid of affection for her spouse and, in the end, she has to walk out of the relationship when she cannot bear the ceaseless battering from her supposed husband. Iya Tope has somewhat similar experience in Soneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as her marriage to Baba Segi is a product of transaction between her father and her husband. She is married off to please Baba Segi over the poor harvest he suffered in the year. In the transaction, Iya Tope's happiness is out of the question. She is more of a commodity traded off for the joy of one man (Baba Segi) and the succor of an unpaid debt of another (her father). She recounts her ordeal thus:

... I was compensation for the failed crops. I was like the tubers of cassava in the basket. May be something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms and two legs. Without fanfare or elaborate farewells, I packed my bags. I didn't weep for my mother or my father, or even my siblings...

Both Firdaus and Iya Tope in the novels are melancholic representation of the oppression of the girl child in patriarchal societies. In the two instances, the societies keep mute while the dehumanization goes on. Thus, indicating that no one sees anything wrong in the (mis)handling of the affairs of the victims, the societies support the intransigence of the parents in mortgaging the future of the girl child. The two girls do not like the choice of their husband, but they are not in positions to challenge their guardian/parents hence they submit meekly to the traumatic experience. Firdaus walks out of the flawed relationship while Iya Tope must live her entire life in an unhappy marriage.

The novelists' portrayal of the girls' predicament hint at the ways the victims handle their precarious situation. Some call it quit in the relationship while some remain in hellish marriages. Iya Tope has to stay with Baba Segi because she has not lived comfortably in her life, and she does not have the courage to go elsewhere. Hence, such 'fortuitous' husbands like Baba Segi sees their victims like Iya Tope as acquired objects which can be used as they desired. Ogunipe in her assessment of the condition of the oppressed women in marriage offers that:

... since most women spend most of their lives within marriage, they are therefore constructed in the minds of such men as dependents and inferiors who need to listen and follow their spousal leaders.

... most women accept their own natural inferiority from social training, punishments, deprivations or threats thereof.

The resolve of the protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero* to leave her matrimony exposes her to series of sexual assault on the streets and in the abode of men whose only assistance to women is sexual exploitation. Bayoumi, who initially sympathized with Firdaus on the agony she experienced in the home of Sheik Mahmoud, eventually locks her up and turned her to a sex slave. Sadly, lack of compassion from men drives Firdaus to prostitution, where she thinks she has control over her body as she says: "... a woman's life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off...". However, Firdaus' experience with a pimp changes her perception of freedom in prostitution. The pimp tells her in plain terms that she is to be sexually exploited eternally, hence, justifying the earlier submission of Sharifa (the lady she met on the street) on the psychology of men in patriarchy that:

Anyone of them, it doesn't make any difference. They're all the same, all sons of dogs, running around under various names. Mahmoud, Hassanein, Fawzy, Sabri, Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi

The frustration and the need to assert her independence as a woman make Firdaus kill the pimp. The society sees her as a murderer, but she sees herself as a victor who triumphed over oppressors who dehumanize her. This explains why she refuses to appeal for presidential pardon. To her, life is meaningless, and it is preferable to die than to continue to live in the oppressive condition nature has forced on her. El-Sadawi uses the predicament of the protagonist in her novel to advance her rejection of the jaundiced treatment of women in patriarchal societies. Oriaku observes pessimism in El-Sadawi's position in patriarchal societies and submits that, "El-Sadawi has consistently averred in her writings that the world is a paradise in which there is no place for womenfolk because of unrelenting and unjustified male dominance".

## 5. Women and Procreation in Matrimony

The African societies attach great significance to fertility in marriage and in fact what defines marital relationships in several societies is the ability to procreate. Every member of the society, from the immediate family members to the larger society observes the capability of the couples to procreate few months after marriage. This turn of event hinges on the crave for multiplying the progeny for continuity of existence. Ngoobo (2010) observes African prioritization of procreation in marriage and submits that:

"As elsewhere, marriage amongst African is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans

implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group. There is a high premium placed on children and the continuity of each lineage..."

The woman is usually the culprit whenever infertility is noticed in relationships. The anxiety drives the man to exert pressure on his wife in terms of unorthodox treatment (in form of herbal intake) which in most instances put the woman's health in danger. In the supposed healing, the man's fertility is not questioned, he is seen as perfectly in good position to impregnate a woman. Hence, it is the woman who deserves to be treated. With the blame of infertility entirely on the woman and the excruciating treatment carried out on her, she is viewed with disdain as lacking the capability to bring forth children whereas the man may be the one lacking the biological set up to impregnate a woman. Baba Segi in Soneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* sees Bolanle as the barren while he is fertile having been able to 'impregnate' three other women. However, orthodox treatment at the hospital reveals that Baba Segi does not have capability to impregnate any woman. The first wife reveals to the doctors that Baba Segi fathered neither her children nor those of other wives. All the women engaged in extra marital affairs in order to get pregnant, hence Baba Segi does not have any child. This situation points to the biased treatment of women on the issue of procreation and it justifies the position of the Poststructural feminists on jettisoning treatment of the genders on male/female basis rather sex should be handled on equity.

However, Firdaus' case takes a different turn as her supposed husband is a retiree who may not desire raising any more children. In fact, Firdaus sneaks to clean up her body on any slightest contact with Mahmoud, her husband, hence indicating that their relationship is not romantic and cannot lead to procreation. This is an instance when a woman is free of accusation of barrenness, since it is the husband who does not crave for pregnancy otherwise Firdaus could have been stigmatized. These reflections of the lives of Bolanle and Firdaus in the two novels confirm the attitudinal posturing on patriarchal societies in men dominating the women. Fonchingong (2006) observes the focus of African literary writings and submits that "African literature is replete with write-ups that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman".

## 6. Sexual Violation in Patriarchal Society

Rape is a contending discourse in relation to harassment women experience in societies across the world. Most of the discussions bother on rampant cases of the malaise, the societies' indifference to reported incidents of rape, stigmatization of the victims and the insignificant punishment meted on the culprits. In a number of societies, the victims are made to suffer eternal psychological trauma whenever they fall prey to uncouth and barbaric sexual exploitation. They (the rape victims) are considered as wayward for being the target of sexual violation. The victims' understanding of this societal perception of the cases of rape forces most of the victims to sheath the assault from the public and as a result they live with the tragedy for the rest of their lives. Soneyin reflects these submissions through her portrayal of the life of Bolanle, the last wife of Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Bolanle symbolises the predicament of the victims of rape who have to live with the agonies for the rest of their life.

Bolanle's rapists like his ilk does not show remorse for the heinous crime he committed, rather he wants his victim (a virgin) to appreciate him for having made her a woman. Segun addresses Bolanle thus: "I mean it. You should be happy. You are a woman now. You should be thanking me." Such effrontery is usually expressed by rapists since they have observed indifference of the society to their misdemeanour. However, Bolanle's fear of stigmatization makes her refrain from divulging the secret to anyone and eventually forces her to be a fourth wife of an illiterate and infertile Baba Segi.

Firdaus' predicament in *Woman at Point Zero* is so precarious that a policeman takes advantage of her on the street after leaving Sheikh Mahmoud's house. The girl's psychological state is impaired to think that men's interest in her is nothing more than exploitation of her body for sexual satisfaction. From the home to her failed marriage to the street she is more of an object of use and not a respected woman. Nawal El Saadawi hints that quite a number of women in patriarchal societies are subjected to the treatment meted on Firdaus as men exploit every opportunity to abuse women.

## 7. Women's Connivance in the Entrenchment of Patriarchy

Both Lola Soneyin and Nawal El Saadawi do not emphasize the involvement of women in deprivation and victimization of the female gender. They, like other feminist writers, heap all the culpability of mishandling of the girl child or maltreatment of women on men without taking cognizance of the attitude of the female gender in anti-women practices. Firdaus uncle's wife is the architect of the former's predicament. In the first place, she changes her uncle's reception towards her while in secondary school such that she is deprived of any form of affection throughout her stay in secondary school. To such an extent that, there is no one to appreciate her when she wins a price, and she is left dejected at a time she



should be encouraged. Secondly, her uncle's wife suggested that Firdaus should be married off and to Sheikh Mahmoud. Such thought had not crept up in the mind of Firdaus' uncle before then. The woman sees Firdaus and all her husband's family as hindrance in her matrimony hence her resolve to do away with the poor girl. Becker observes such conduct in women and submits that:

Women play a number of important roles in patriarchal culture, though those roles often vary with race, class, and other "differences." Perhaps most basic is the use of women and femininity to define men and masculinity.

In Lola Soneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, two women played negative role in the horrible upbringing of Iya Femi. Her uncle's wife evicted her from her parents' house while Mrs. Ajeigbe subjected her to inhuman and slavish experience as a maid in her house (to the extent that her son, Tunde sexually abuses her). These incidents of women victimizing other women affirm the need for the societies to condemn any form of violation and the writers' to beam their search light on the victimization carried out by women against their gender. There should not be outright exoneration of women in the oppression and denigration of women in patriarchal societies, instances of connivance of women in decimating their kind should not be ignored.

## 8. Conclusion

Patriarchy contributes in no small measure to the relegation of the female gender in African societies. In cultural, social, political, and economic spheres of the continent, Patriarchy is an entrenched system designed to make the male gender superior to the female. The overall existence of the girl child is hindered and determined by the biological consideration of her sex. She is thus disadvantaged in several ways. This situation has not in any way enhanced the development of the society as it has not profited from the inherent benefit of harmonious relationship of the genders. Nawal El Saadawi and Lola Soneyin's reflections of the common affinities of their societies is a confirmation of shared identity of some African societies in beliefs, cultural practices and an affirmation of the negativity of the absurd treatment of the female gender in African society. This study offers that, for African societies to experience commensurate development, there is need to realign patriarchy in order to entrench fairness and equity among the genders.

El-Sadawi (2018) and Soneyin (2007) condemn the infringement on the rights of the girl child and their position is that members of the society should not subject the girl child to abuse on account of patriarchy. The exploitation of the girl child did not stop at infancy. It continues in their adolescent age through the obnoxious practice of forceful or unapproved relationships.

These novelists criticize and condemn the exploitation and misuse of the female gender, which the patriarchal societies justify. They are not comfortable with the societal perception of women as inferior beings that can be subjected to any form of ill-treatment. They are advocating for respect for the female gender and the society to desist from taking advantage of them.

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