

Mortality As Liberator Of Victimised Womanhood In Selected Works Of Nawal El-

Saadawi And Sofola

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Abstract

Humans generally desire to live and to enjoy life to its fullest. No normal person wants to die, even in the face of debilitating challenges. To think of freedom as being possible only at death is superfluous and can only provide temporal feeling of relief not supported by empirical evidence. This paper examines the feminist ideals in the works of El Saadawi and Sofola, particularly, of the protagonist and the heroine belief in death as the best way out of the problems of patriarchy and matriarchy. The theoretical thrust is to deconstruct this line of belief and discourage further thinking along this direction. The paper adopts an analytical content approach to unveil the idea that, that many families fail in their responsibilities of providing the basic needs for human survival, love, adequate education, and security, which are the ties for harmonious up-bringing of female children. It further discovers that forced marriages depress and destroy the woman, and may cause the woman to wish away the marriage even by death either of her husband or of

herself. The study recommends that female children should allowed to grow to full maturity before they go into a complex issue such as marriage.

Keywords: Mortality, Victimised Womanhood, *Woman At Point Zero*, *Wedlock of the Gods*

Introduction

Death as a universal phenomenon, proposes a philosophical, literary and or sociological investigation within the paradigm of discourse. Death as an ideology always centers around undesirability or transformation. A close assessment of Nietzsche's (1882) work titled "Death of God" examines the utter decay of moral and religious fundamentals in the universal cultures. Death as posited by the philosopher, also examines a paradigm shift from the traditional obscured mundane to the contemporary events. Jacques Derrida (1976, P. 85), in his deconstructionist viewpoint examine death as cultural shift and societal alterations to accept new trends means to each individual depends on a number of things among which is the social status of such an individual. For instance, to the rich, death is inconsiderate because it stops him from enjoying his wealth. To the poor, death is a transition to rest and freedom from all the struggles of life and to the valiant woman, death is a necessary evil that frees the woman from earthly woes, oppression and suppression from patriarchy. Thus, age, sex, religion and social class affect an individual's perception of death.

All living beings move towards death on daily basis. Death is often regarded as an unwanted but unavoidable enemy. The thought of death spells fear: fear of seizure of an enjoyable and fruitful life; fear of the unknown about things that may await them at the other side and fear of what becomes of their estate here. Death brings with it losses, sorrow, burden and loneliness to family and friends of the deceased. It is neither a peculiar occurrence in traditional society dominated by the old and the illiterates nor it an exclusive preserve of the contemporary society occupied by modern and civilized people. Rather, it is experience in all cultures, races and at all times. It is only the nature or type of death in a particular tradition that makes the difference.

What is Death?

Literature is replete with definitions of death. From biological perspective, death is conceived in relation to a living organism; all organisms live and die. In this view 'death' is "the permanent cessation of function of the organism as a whole." (Culver and Benard, 1982, P.35). Supporting this view, *Encyclopedia Britannica Volume 7* (1970, P.129) describes biological death as "the absence of potential life." And *Reasoning From The Scriptures* (1989, P. 98) asserts death as "the ceasing of all functions of life", adding that "after breathing, heart beat and brain activity stops; the life-force gradually ceases to

function in body cells.” It is generally believed that the inevitable catastrophe called death will come upon every human being only on the appointed time God Almighty, The Supreme Creator, has destined upon for individuals on earth. No matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end, if only to prove that one is not immortal. This philosophical inevitable knowledge, death, gives certain exceptional valiant women some joy that one day, their oppressors would equally die and so, it is of little consequence whether they themselves die now or latter.

The Terminality of Death

Terminality has to do with the finality of death, the notion that death brings the end to living things. Death by nature appears terminal. *The Holy Bible* (1998) states: “... the dead know nothing... For the memory of them is forgotten.” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). It however leaves the hope that the dead in Christ only shall live again. But to some authors this is different. Abimbola (1971:74) claims: “... death is viewed among the traditional Yoruba’ as a medium for the transformation of human beings from one level of existence in ‘aye’ (earth) to another in ‘orun’ (heaven).” Thus to him, death is not the end of a man’s life but only a passage leading to another life. It is the end at the same time. The beginning of another life. “Death”, Balogun (2005:154) observes is “...a paradox among the traditional Yoruba” to African traditional religion, death is a tradition: it is only a mean of passing from the world of humans to the world of spirits (Amponsah,1974:36). Put simply, death is a mere transposition; a passage and departure of some other worlds form which there is no return.

The above traditional Yoruba beliefs about death agree with the beliefs of the Annang/Ibibios and even those of the major religions of the world. The belief is that man is a composite being, made of matter and the mind. As a concept in non- religious spheres, “death’ is the total disintegration of the matter and mind components that make up man. Umotong (2004:78) disagrees with this view by noting, like most religions, the demarcation between the first component of man, matter, and the second, the mind. He explains that while the first death is the condemnation mostly of the mind of spirit part of the man, to torture and / or misery. This association of death with “matter” and “mind” (body and soul) recognises what Christ states in *The Holy Bible*: Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul: but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10: 29)

Balogun (2005) does not only accept Umotong’s proposition but adds that in the conceptual scheme of a traditional Yoruba man, *eniyman*-man, is made up of three essential elements: *Ara* (Body) the physical frame, which houses the spirit; *Emi* (Spirit) which is better interpreted as the live giving entity, and *Ori* (Inner Head), which is being regarded as the bearer of human destiny. He observes further that, at death, the physical frame, which is the body, is buried and it rots in the earth: but the essential element of

man which is *emi*, the life giving force or what Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) call “personality soul,” survives death and returns to *Elemii* (the giver of the spirit) or the source of being from whom it comes. Like Christians, the Yoruba construe death as a mere separation of an individual’s soul from the body; and to them, the soul lives on.

Working on the context of death as a separation of the body (the physical form of man) from the soul (his spirit), the existentialists’ reasoning posited by Heidegger (1962:272) depicts that it is only man that exists:

The being that exists is man, Man alone exists. Trees are, but they do not exist. Houses are, but they do not exist. Angels are but they do not exist, God is, but he does not exist,

The major point Heidegger is making is the distinction between “existence” and “real being” His submission is that, while all things including man being and real, it is man alone that exists”. Existence here means “life, substances, survival.’ To him at death his reality is done away with, but he exists in the supernatural.

Another great existentialist, Satre (1957:533) rejects the views of Heidegger and points out that, “... death is the annihilation of existence, it is a meaningless absurdity, which removes all meaning from human existence. To be born is absurd and to die is meaningless”. The absurdity and meaninglessness of death affirms Solomon’s position that “there is no work, or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave” (*The Holy Bible*, Ecclesiastes 9:10).

The existentialist’s argument is that man is free to create his essence in whatever way he deems fit, but this freedom is not without responsibility. Man must assume responsibility for all his choices and actions. He must therefore, commit himself to his choices and actions (man’s freedom, commitment and responsibility) are inseparable. It is in this regard that Sartre identifies freedom with the very being of man and maintains that “to be is to act and to cease to act is to cease to be...” (Sartre, 1957:P 51).

In African literature, Nawal El-Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) and Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), women freedom fighters, unlike the existentialist, do not conceive death to be a meaningless phenomenon. Rather they attach much more meanings to death. To them, death results in the total freedom of the woman from all forms of oppression and exploitation. They believe that at death the evolution of the female person into the realm of emancipation and liberty is unimaginable. It is therefore a welcome phenomenon because it frees the woman from the world’s endless predicament and launches her into a more fulfilled life.

However, concerning the extent of liberty at death, some questions must be answered by these women, and the answers are of interest to this study. The questions are: What situation has a woman found herself in that will make herself opt for death to free herself?" Who are the oppressors of the woman? Will the situation change or be aggravated at death? These and other questions are examined in this study.

Women's Struggle and Liberation- An Analysis

El Sadaawi is an Egyptian feminist who champions the course of the freedom of women from societal oppression. She is an ardent believer in the enlightenment of the woman folk toward s the determination of their self-worth. Sofola, on the other hand, is a Nigerian playwright who also leads the advocacy of the education and freedom of the girl children. She believes that the woman's happiness and freedom should not be exchanged for money in the platform of tradition. The two writers are relevant to this study on the grounds of their thematic preoccupations. They are feminist albeit from different cultures, who expose the harshness of the male dominated African traditions cum the hard-heartedness of matriarchy on the average woman in African. How is the struggle against women oppression?

Feminism and Struggles against Oppression

That African societies regard women as second-class citizen is no news. The women are made to work for the training, health care, and upkeep of the male children, they are also considered as source only of bride-wealth for parents. This is in spite of religion and the growing responsibility of women in family/ public circles and in traditional/ modern societies. The women bear the children; some engage in careers as good as those of men; they keep the kitchen, harbor the pleasure of men. If women possess the capacity for such services to the society, why does the society discriminate against them? Why are they oppressed, exploited and marginalised in African societies where they expectedly are co-builders?

Feminism is one of the several ways women have reacted against the oppressive gender relations in many societies of the world. Feminism focuses on the position of women in society and the roles they play (Sargent, 2009:159). Feminism in the views of Acholonu (1995:7) is at once a doctrine, an ideology, a theory, a method, a technique, a movement, and a call to action.

Dobie (2009) posits that feminist critics are united on the assumption that western culture is fundamentally 'patriarchal', creating imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work. Chukwuma (1994:10) also asserts that "feminism is a core programme that

adequately synthesizes women's experiences worldwide in some way as Marxism - a core ideology has been domesticated".

Kate Millet (1970:15) sees feminism as "...power relations that exist between men and women, that men tend to have the power and that sexuality; but how brilliantly male homosexuals have critiqued gender roles. Feminism operates under two critical axes: as a belief and as a social movement. Feminism emphasizes equality for both men and women in all fields-legal, political, economic and social. What that connotes is that there should be no preferential treatment of one gender over the other. Every person whether man or woman should be given equal opportunity to practice, serve and deliver in the society.

de Beauvoir (1949) records women's challenges since existence. It provides the details of the evolution of women in Europe before the eighteenth century. Women, the study reveals, have always been significant to the existence and development of human kind. The analysis and interpretation of the development of matriarchal family is given closer attention by Engel (1972:71). His general position is that:

(T)he determining factor in history... is the production and reproduction of the immediate life. This ... is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence On the other... the production of human beings.

These efforts are coordinated by the family, which Annette Kuhn (1978:44) refers to "as the crucial site of the subordination of women". Little wonder it is the women folk that are burdened with domestic works, childbirth, childcare, and the responsibility of reproducing the working population. (Hearn 1987:138).

Beauvoir in her opposition to the image of the woman created at home and in relation to men, provides an existentialist dimension to feminism with the publication of *The Second Sex* (1953:75), which epitomises the implicit inferiority of women. She proceeds to posit that a woman is always perceived as the "Other" in the male dominated society. She adds that a "woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her." She furthermore examines that "...one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman," that is through the various biological processes that happen in the body and through what she makes of herself. Supporting this view, Moi (2000:103) states that "A woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world.... Through the way she makes something of what the world makes of her".

Feminists make the call that women should regain their freedom through escape from the myth of perpetual confinement' by their oppressors. Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2006), advises that, women should use manipulative methods to get what they want. She argues for women to be "duly prepared by education to be the

companions that their abilities are equal to those of men. She moreover implores them to define their identities for themselves and to carve out their own roles in society.

Extract from the proceedings of the July 1848 Falls, convention confirms that women had been economically, psychological and socially oppressed for a long time; before they organised to free themselves from men's "jokey pleasures of insulting women" (Segal, 2000:83). The scope of the Twentieth century focuses on women's right to serve on juries, the right to retain earnings and property after marriage, the right to retain citizenship after marriage to an alien, and the right to equal pay and equal job opportunity, albeit not in Africa. Women also reasoned along the line of governance and were able to secure the rights to vote virtually everywhere in the world, except for a few Muslim countries. Women also are gradually given the right to attain national leadership position in modern times.

Feminist Vision of Emancipation at Death

On the struggle for women liberation, El Saadawi's novel and Sofola's play are tragic narratives that point to several injustices that women suffer in African societies. The term "tragedy" according to Perrine (1974:1082) is "a serious play or work of art with a sad ending, especially one in which the main character dies". The tragic narrative created pity and fear, and these writers have produced by their works, what Baldick (2001, P.260) describes as "imitation of action that is serious and complete, achieving a catharsis... through incidents, arousing pity and terror.... El Saadawi and Sofola include the cause of such tragic flaws in their stories. These narratives are thematically preoccupied with issues on the phenomenon of death. The theme is encompassing because it embraces sub-themes such as hunger, sexual, violence/harassment, incest, prostitution, divorce, brutality/battery, killing, death sentence, black magic/ African charm, wife inheritance, hatred, force-marriage and mourning.

The themes of *Woman At Point Zero* (1983) and *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) are built round Firdaus and Ogwoma. It is from their experiences that readers learn about the hurts, exploitation and disappointment as well as injustices against woman in Africa and how the Adams (2018) posit that "African's as well as Western Scholars have attempted to access the effects of this terrible conflict (presentation) often including the smallest details of the various.... Critical perspective accompanying incidents of Firdaus' death and Ogwoma's death accorded them some measure of emancipation. There is however, no empirical evidence that these women achieved the bliss expected at death and this work is just an exploration of the beliefs of the protagonist and the heroine.

In the case of El Saadawi's protagonist the causes of Firdaus' problems and terror are men (El Saadawi, 1983), described as the son of bitches and dogs (El Saadawi, 1983:52),

‘family (El Saadawi, 1983:12, 14) Marriage (El Saadawi, 1983:12, 18, 44-45) and society (El Saadawi 1983:72-85, 91-94).

Secondly, in Sofola’s case, Ogwoma’s enemies are: Odibei, (Adigwu’s mother- her mothers-in-law (Sofola, 1972:6-7); traditions (Sofola, 1972:8), forced marriage (Sofola, 1972:9) and parental belief on daughter as potential wealth (Sofola, 1972:9, 18). A close look at the view of Awogu-Maduagwu *et.al* (2018:9) negates the initial positions of El Saadawi and Sofola, in their works.

The novel *Woman At Point Zero* (1983) centers around “a real woman’s (1) Firdaus in the Quantir prison, who has killed a man and is therefore sentence to death by hanging. It is after she is forced behind the black iron-metal of the prison that she recounts “the whole terrible yet wonderful story of her life” to El Saadawi, the Psychiatry doctor who gives her life.’ The novelist reflects:

I met her in the quantir prison. Firdaus however remained a woman apart. She stood out amongst the others. (Her story) vibrated within me... until the day when I put her down in ink on paper and gave her life after she had died...(El Saadawi, 1983:iii).

El-Saadawi develops the protagonist with the detailed information of all forms of horrible exploitation she experiences. Beginning from her father (El Saadawi, 1983:12) to uncle, (El Saadawi, 1983:14, 21) husband, (El Saadawi, 1983:43-45) and Pimps (El Saadawi, 1983:47). Then her exposure to a uniquely liberated woman named Sharifa el Dine (El Saadawi, 1983:P.53) who leads her to discover the value worth of her body and introduces her into prostitution. Sharifa states:

A man does not know a woman’s value. Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means of his disposal. And if he has no means he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand (El Saadawi,1983:55).

To make Firdaus successful in the trade, she impacts a life surviving philosophy: “You must be harder than life, Firdaus. Life is very hard. The only people who really live are those who are harder than life itself.” (El Saadawi, 1983:54) Sharifa leads her to discover that all men are the same; “it doesn’t make difference. They’re the same, all sons of dogs... “(El Saadawi, 1983:52). Firdaus’ encounter with Sharifa does not end in the introduction, it continues unto sherifa’s exploits from making Firdaus sleep around with men of all sorts while Sharifa collects the money from them (El Saadawi, 1983:56,57). Sense that she assumes that the absence of the “men folk as the socially ordained

‘protectors’ exposes women to grave forms of harassment and abuse. This implies that the sector men Firdaus and Ogwoma encounter are worthless predators who destroy ‘The women rather than protect them.’

Firdaus untold sufferings and the familiar weight of men on her, ceased on the day Fawzy (Sharifa’s man friend) opens her eyes to one truth: “Sharifa’s fooling you and making money out of you, while all you get out of it is the pain... (El Saadawi, 1983:58). Firdaus liberates herself by taking a decision to operate on her own (El Saadawi, 1983:64) she takes charge of herself by bargaining with men for her services.

A quarter of a century had passed for I was twenty-five years old when I first started to have a clean apartment of my own.... Employ someone to arrange for my appointments at hours which suited me in accordance with the terms which I considered acceptable. My bank account kept mounting all the time. I now had a free time in which I could relate... (El Saadawi, 1983:68-69)

Firdaus questions the roles of religion and Allah in allowing the sufferings through incest, rape, wife battery, sexual violence, sexual exploitation to come on a lowly helpless woman who belongs to the dreg of the society. Here, El Sadawi is doubting the sanctity of religion which crucial role is the creation of communal feelings and communal existence as Africans. That, religion and family which are the primary cord which tie people together has failed in Firdaus’s case, because it has not provided that nucleus of protection necessary for the well-being of Firdaus.

El-Saadawi continues this tradition of Firdaus oppression in the hands of men till Di’aa- a journalist challenges her trade. This happens on a certain occasion when he Di’aa decides to spend leisure time with her on bed but he changes his mind from taling sex to taking policies with her. Firdaus get irritated and warns him that with her, every minute is money. (El Saadawi, 1983:70). Di’ aa replies sarcastically and advises her “to hang up a price list in the waiting room”, as it is obtained in the medical profession. He goes ahead to inform her that “... a doctor while carrying out his duties feels he’s worthy of respect... (but) you are not respectable.” Firdaus resents Di’aa’s negative assessment of her. Her active mind interprets the statement in an unpleasant manner. Di’aa’s condemnation of her profession buries itself in her head like a body as sharp as the edge of a knife which cuts its way through the bones of her head to the brain inside.

El-Saadawi deliberately fills her with anger and frustration which show in many ways: she experiences oppression of the girl-child early in life, being subordinated by her father who was always eating all the food that could have been given to her and other children (El Saadawi, 1983:18) beating her mother (El Saadawi, 1983:12): her uncle noted for putting his hand in between her thighs (El Saadawi, 1983:14, 19, 21, 22) the internalized anger fueling her determination to give up prostitute on and to settle for a job in one of

the big industries (El Saadawi, 1983:73); Firdaus is not a prostitute because she enjoys it, after all, on several occasions she presents her primary and secondary school certificates for just any employment (El Saadawi, 1983:47,49,73) but none materialized. She only takes the trade (prostitution) temporarily as a means of survival to keep body and soul together. ;it this were not true. Firdaus would not have felt bad about Di'aa's reproachful assessment of her. The interaction between Di'aa and Firdaus depicts one truth however, and this is the fact that not all men are out to exploit and subjugate unnecessarily. Some are sensible. In this case, it is a woman, sherifa, that oppresses Firdaus while it takes Di'aa, the journalist to speak sense into her.

In the secular job Firdaus is introduced to love relationship as a severe oppressive force which reduces her into subservient and inferior psychological trauma she would never gone; through in life. She realizes that a man, be it her father, her husband or her lover, hurts, disappoints, exploits and frustrates the woman. She reflects again.

I have never experienced suffering such as this.... as a prostitute, I had known so deep a humiliation that nothing really counted.... But I expected something from love. With love I began to imagine that I had become a human being. When I was a prostitute I never gave anything for nothing, but always took something in return. But in love I gave my body and my soul, my mind and all the effort I could muster freely.... I had abandoned myself totally, dropped all my weapons and lowered all my defenses and bared my flesh. (El Saadawi, 1983:85)

When El Saadawi realises that it will become impossible for Firdaus to free herself from every emotion and passion that could continue to enslave her irrespective of her economic independence, she dismisses a man's love as absurd, full of destructive venoms that kill a woman who is not on guard. The inhumane challenges that Firdaus met at job causes her to regret: "I was not destined to achieve what I had hoped for. For no matter how hard I tried or what sacrifices I had made. I still remained a poor insignificant employee" (El Saadawi, 1983:86).

Yet, the supposedly civilised normal way of living does not offer an improved change in condition for her. Firdaus's life becomes even worse than that of a slave. She suffers as a woman in a man's world. When she discovers that she is living in illusion, she asserts: "A successful prostitute is better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on woman and punish them for being deceived. Forces them to the lowest level" (El Saadawi, 1983:86). If Firdaus had still remained in her secular job and accepted every vile condition of service that comes her way as is always the case in real life, she would not have realized her vision of achieving her liberation as quickly as she does at the end. She would have been languishing under the heavy "with of sexual" harassment from all sorts of men. This understanding becomes the only content experience that betters her life on daily basis (El Saadawi, 1983:21; 42-43; 50;56-57; 62-

63;78;97). So, she decides that “the least deluded of all women is the prostitute; that marriage is a system built on the cruel suffering for women.’ (El Saadawi, 1983:86-87).

The notion that most feminist are men-haters comes as a result of some terrible deadly experience they go through with men partly in the course of seeking for a job, proposing to get married or even in marriage contract itself. In the case of Firdaus, she develops an undesirable hatred for men over the years because of the series of bitter experiences of hunger, homelessness, sexual violence, wife battering, rejection, open confrontation, imprisonment, disappointment, constant pressure of carrying men weight at sexual intercourse’s, fowl sweat running copiously with fetid smell like stagnant water filling her nostrils in a sectional male dominated Arab world. She posits:

I became aware of the fact that I hated men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully. The man I hated most of all were those who tried to give me advice or told me that they wanted to rescue me from the life I was leading. I used to have them more than the others because they thought they were better than I was and could help me change my life.... That I had some freedom at least the freedom to live a situation better than that of other women. (El Saadawi, 1983:88- 89)

The sequence of event that leads to Firdaus emancipation happens shortly after she quits job and returns to her former profession-prostitution. She states that men have invented her profession, and that men are in control of both worlds – the one on earth, and the one in heaven. She argues that men induce women to sell their bodies at a price and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. She adds that all women are prostitutes of one kind or the other and that because she is intelligent, she prefers to be a free prostitute than enslaved wife. (El Saadawi, 1983:91). This is not necessarily correct. By nature, women were created to play their role in marriage, which is cultural universal. It is generally accepted, the author’s views notwithstanding. A woman in marriage, sticking to her husband is not a prostitute.

In pursuing her career, she meets a certain man who “practice(s) a well-known male profession - he was a pimp.” (El Saadawi, 1983:72). He approaches her and insists on “sharing my earnings” He informs her that “Every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police. That is what I’m going to do” (El Saadawi, 1983:92). Firdaus rejection of the pimp’s offer brings all horrible threats. She takes recourse in the police and the law to seek for justice. The step reveals to her “that the law punishes women like me, but turns a blind eye to what men do”. She encounters more embarrassment because Marzouk clearly informs her that in his kind of business, that his capital is women’s bodies and that he does not mix work with love together (El Saadawi, 1983:93). Marzouk so frustrates life out of Firdaus by his incessant monopoly of her that

the familiar weight of sexual harassment of which she has once been freed suddenly returns. She laments:

I realized that I was not nearly as free as I had ever imagined myself to be, I was nothing but a body of machine working day and night so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at my expense I was no longer even mistress of the house for which I had paid with my effort and sweat... (El Saadawi, 1983:94).

El Saadawi does not wait for the wheel of fortune or natural disaster to carry out the work of women's liberation. She is of the view that women should start the fight against patriarchy, in the quest for emancipation, early in life. Firdaus' ability to go through bitter lessons in life and society; is what gives her the courage and strength to renegade Marzouk. A representative of the men folk, of all the hard horrible ordeals she has suffered in the hand of men. If she were to have had such a revelation earlier, all the exploitation and oppressions she suffered from patriarchy would not have been in the first place. She achieves her liberty from men's enslavement by herself without any assistance from anybody. She proclaims triumphantly:

I walked on the street, my head held high... with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden behind. My footsteps We neither fast as though I was hurrying away from something in fear, nor were they slow they were the footsteps to a woman who believed in herself knew where she was going and could see her goal.... (El Saadawi, 1983:96 – 97)

El Saadawi is angry at the inhumane treatment women received and seemingly, she takes Firdaus beyond the level where men constantly subjugate her in order to maintain their status quo. She empowers her with strong determination and encourages her to liberate herself from the age long exploitation and denial of her rights. The novelist equips the woman more by educating and socialising her about the deplorable conditions into which patriarchy has put her. She sums up in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980:20).

The emancipation of Arab women cannot be achieved unless the root cause of the conditions leading to oppression is swept away. Real emancipation can only mean freedom from all forms of exploitation where the economic, sexual or cultural.

El Saadawi allows Firdaus to continue to soar higher in her new self-actualisation bid by challenging and molesting any man that crosses her path. For instance, she tears into piece with a pent-up fury, the three thousand piaster that the Arab Prince gives to her after having set with her. She vies him as an insect that collects and spends the hard earned thousands he forcefully extorts from his starving people on prostitutes:

...I tore the money into pieces, tore off the last remaining veil from my eyes to reveal the whole enigma, which had puzzled me... throughout my life... it

was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held my father's piaster, my uncle's piaster... and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known one after the other in row: my uncle, my husband, my father. Marzouk and Bayoumi, Di'aa, Ibrahim, and tearing them all into pieces one after the other (El Saadawi, 1983:98)

Firdaus locates the source of her age long sufferings and refutes the Prince's condemnation of her as a prostitute: "I am not a prostitute, but right from my early days, my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up ;as a prostitute." (El Saadawi, 1983:99) she affirms that though her father never teaches her to kill he leaves her "to learn it alone as she goes through life "(El Saadawi, 1983:99) in this, El Saadawi, without saying, teaches that the school of life is probably the best school. It exposes one to the realities of life. One gets hardened to everything. Nothing supervises one anymore, not even a man's most contradictory behavior. Firdaus continues to boast that by killing a man, her emancipation was drawing closer even if it means death. She proves this further to the doubting Prince, when she lifts her hands high up above her head and lands it violently on his face. She knows that since she has slapped him, burying a knife in his neck is just as easy, and requires exactly the same movement.

El Saadawi sets out to mould the character of the kind of a woman needed to bring about the change in the "native and passive wives" status of women in Firdaus. Since the movement from her uncle to sheik Mahmoud-her husband's house could not help her out-grow the traditional docile views imposed on her (Firdaus) by society; the novelist starts a new life for her in an urban environment (the Nile) with Sharifa el-Dine and end it as a successful metropolitan prostitute (El Saadawi, 1983:89).

Fidau's mother lived and died with a bundle of men's yoke and burden, of caring for and spending all her resources to feed her father (El Saadawi, 1983:13). Yet her mother like Sharifa, the liberated woman, was a woman with conservative views about women as wives and mothers. She was a full-time house wife who cooked, fed her father with much food always even when the children had gone to bed with empty stomachs (El Saadawi, 1983:18), washed her husband's feet and also kept him warm. (El Saadawi, 1983:17). Unlike Firdaus' uncle's wife and Sharifa who were pampered by their fathers (El Saadawi, 1983:23, 53), El-Saadawi gives Firdaus, a bitter childhood- she is taught by her mother to carry a heavy earthenware jar full of water with its weight on her neck (El Saadawi, 1983:13). The novelist seems to imply that it is the way Firdaus was treated in her family and in the society that made it possible for her to think of freeing herself from the conservative ideal. She decides, therefore, to work hard, to attain her goals in life. The process of her struggles and defense against oppressions. By the patriarchal family and society gives her the moral strength to achieves self- actualisation.

Patriarchy has uncanny ways of victimizing the woman and punishing her for an offence which is not hers. The Arab Prince out of fear of Firdaus alerts the police that she is a criminal to which she responds:

I am a killer, but I've committed no crime-like you. I kill only criminals. No woman can be a man.... I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions... I am speaking the truth. And truth is savage and dangerous (El Saadawi, 1983:100).

Firdaus does not dwell in self-pity. She stands up to face the reality of the deplorable situation of a typical woman in real life; just as Emecheta (1974:5) succinctly puts: "an aggrieved female need shed no tears but must work out a strategy for survival and recognition". Firdaus works out her emancipation by asserting a high class scene which accords her respect and honour. She states:

...I was the only woman who had torn the mask away and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man but because they are afraid to let me live. They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life, I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope nothing, I fear nothing... tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here.... this journey to an unknown destination, to a place: unknown to all those who live on this earth., be they king or prince or ruler, fills me with pride. All my life I was looking for something that would make me hold my head high, higher than the heads of everyone else... I only arrived at the savage primitive truths of life after years of struggle... and truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth... It is my truth, which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger or nakedness or destruction. (El Saadawi, 1983:101-102).

El Saadawi seems to suggest that for a woman to arrive at her full self actualisation in a male dominated society, her conception of death must not align with the universal notion of death as the end of life, rather as the inauguration of life of freedom from violence, sexual harassment, hunger, pain, perils, exploitation and all forms of oppression. Firdaus refuses to accept the inferior position into which the society tries to bring her. Hear her. "Sometimes ago one of them came to me and said there is hope for your release if you send an appeal to the President asking him to pardon you for the crime you committed," (El Saadawi, 1983:101). The internalized anger, as a frustrated adult, fuels

her determination to accept the death sentence passed on her instead of seeing miserable 'release from prison, pardon for my crime and death. (El Saadawi, 1983:102).

El Saadawi's position on death is that, it is not the end to Firdaus' life but instead an episode that "acts as gate way" to freedom (Awolalu and Dopamu,1979:25).

Sofola's preoccupation in *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) on the other hand, is the opposition of the ways society and tradition afflict and oppress women for what they know little about. She shows that in many African matriarchal communities all kinds of havoc are often perpetrated because of power, just like their male counterparts in patriarchal societies.

The term 'matriarch' according to *Merriam-Webster Online* (2 April, 2024). "is a social unit governed by a woman or group of women". Odibei, Ogwoma's mother-in-law, is a matriarch and she is an influential woman who has the financial and cultural resources to contend within her society. She makes her late son Adigwu marry Ogwoma because she is wealthy and can afford the bride wealth dictated by Ogwoma's father, Ibekwe:

So I gave my daughter away against my wish and hers to the man from whom I could get enough money to add to what I had to save my son's life (Sofola,1972:30). The aim of such a bride wealth is to enable him pay for the treatment of his son who was very ill.

My son, Edozie, was nearly dead when the oracle stated very clearly that a seven years old ram had to be sacrificed to Ikenga, our family god.... He must be initiated immediately into manhood before he could recover. (Sofola,1972:29-30).

Ogwoma has her childhood lover, Uloko. She loves him with all her heart (Sofola,1972:14, 35) and, because of him, violates the tradition of her people by breaking the three months duration by allowing Uloko to impregnate her (Sofola,1972:8) while still in mourning of her late husband, Adigwu:

... a woman who loses her husband must not be visited by any other man until he has been cleansed. Any action against this is an abomination and our gods deal very severely with such offenders (Sofola 1972, P. 36).

Ogwoma commits such a forbidden act because of her intense hatred for her deceased husband and his mother. Her words: "It was I hated you and your son" (Sofola,1972:16).

She allows Uloko to impregnate her as a reaction in resentment against her mother-in-law and her community and traditions that believe that "a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him" that it is only a female child that can also be an escape goat in sourcing for funds for healing and treatment for her family whenever they are in need: to amass wealth and bring progress to the family through bride prizing. Anwasia states "... your parents needed the money for a very expensive sacrifice for your brother whom sickness

almost killed. You should have been happy your money saved the life of your own brother (Sofola, 1972:9).

Zulu Sofola, her creator, seems to resent the tradition that does not accept that the girl child has an opinion of her own; that, she is free to exercise self-will and be in charge of herself. Through the character of Ogwoma she rejects forced marriage in African societies. She states "Ogwoma... You do not understand how my heart beats, because you were not tied like a goat and whipped along the road to a man you hated, you are not able to understand what my heart tells me... (Sofola,1972:9).

Again, Sofola condemns the attitude of African parents who always expect a daughter to condescend to the wish of her parents' choice in marriage outside her own decision and free will. This, of course, tends to destroy the girl's future ambition, happiness and fulfillment in life, Ogwoma is forced into marriage with Adigwu: " ...so I gave my daughter away against my wish and hers to the man whom I could get enough money to add to what I had to save ;my son's life" (Sofola,1972:30) when she already had her lover, Uloko (Sofola,1972:35). Instead of giving true love to Adigwu she substitutes hatred for him and his mother, since it is not in her will or interest to go into marriage. Adigwu, on the other hand is quickly terminated out of the scene in dead; partly by Ogwoma's prayer:"... I prayed for the past three years for God to deliver me from this marriage..." (Sofola,1972:9), and partly, by divine providence so that Ogwoma may be freed and liberated from the tradition and customs of her community. She states emphatically:

My prayer was answered and nothing can stop me this time. Let the moon turn into blood: let the rain become fire Ogwoma loves and Ogwoma will do it again (Sofola 1972, Pp. 9-10).

Sofola refuses to allow natural event to take its toll, which could be slowed down Ogwoma's vision of this desired emancipation. She clothes her character (Ogwoma) with such boldness to defy tradition and human condemnation... she works her way into her liberation single handedly.

Ogwoma..... I could not have waited for another day to pass before letting him in. I was not going to wait for another blink of the eye this time do you hear? ... I am not mourning... (Sofola,1972:9-10).

Ogwoma presents a symbol of revolution against the traditional values and beliefs on the role of woman as widow. Sofola is not the only African feminist that hates force marriage and so points out the destructive nature of it. El- Saadawi equally registers her feelings against it. Directly after Firdaus' secondary school education, she is taken to her uncle's place to live temporarily with him and his wife until she finds a job. Her uncle's wife not being in agreement with such a task of accommodating and feeding an extra mouth, quickly puts up a proposal to give Firdaus, out in marriage to her own uncle, a widower

sheikh Mahmoud, a man well over sixty- years of age, whose wife died without children. (Sofola,1972:36-43) Here, Firdaus begins afresh the course of suffering in sheikh's house.

While Firdaus goes through physical molestation in her forced marriage Ogwoma suffers psychological and spiritual traumatization on her own forced marriage. First, her husband Adigwu dies within a very short while, secondly, her mother-in-law, Odibei prepares ritual death for her as a means of avenging her son whom she believes is intentionally kill so that the lovers might have their way.

Odibei.... I suspected this dog when her people were hawking her for any available man, I protested enough but my husband saw her as Adigwu's wife. So we took her in and took upon us a curse... I suspected this dog a long time ago, it is now clear that my son died as a result of the taboos that harlot broke (Sofola,1972:16).

Odibei does not stop at verbal torture of Ogwoma; she proceeds to bring ritual charms (Sofola,1972:45-50) to thwart the new self- freedom of the newly evolved woman.

Sofola and El-Saadawi abhor the hard-heartedness of patriarchy and the lack of sympathy in matriarchy in recent times. They see matriarchy as secondary source of oppression of the women folk.

Matriarchy, like its primary source patriarchy, thwarts the vision of a modern woman's emancipation. They cooperate with other sources of women oppression- religion (Islamic religion as is pointed out by El-Saadawi) to inflict untold sufferings on womanhood. Firdaus uncle's wife insists that she should cease from complaining and go back to Sheikh's house since she is not the only one beaten by a husband. She boasts:

... it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience. (El-Saadawi, 1983:44).

To sum up the before that tradition, custom, religion and patriarchy oppress and exploit the woman physically, psychologically, spiritually and otherwise, Fall (1981:27) registers that the sources of oppression believed that a wife (or a daughter, or a woman) must not grumble but must understand that she belongs to her alone. Rather, as a wife, she owes him respect, obedience and submission. "A wife's sole lot is patience: get that into your head if you want to be a worthy wife."

Odibei and Firdaus uncle's wife operate on the same way as oppressors of low and helpless women, who lack the means of survival. Odibei has not only hated Ogwoma with passion, but she proceeds to poison Ogwoma's water pot with medicinal object

prepared out of snail shell and feathers. She furthermore conjures Ogwoma's soul to drink from the prepared portion and murders her afterwards (45-53).

... Odibei... if she didn't why she is not here in those ashes? My son cannot die a shameful death... she must not go free... Ogwoma, your soul is wanted (6-7, 52-53).

Firdaus uncle's wife on the other hand destroys Firdaus psychologically and physically when she refuse to accommodate her (39). Instead she suggests a forced marriage (38) of Firdaus to her own aged uncle sheikh Mahmoud (42). Every other problem and woes that befall Firdaus such as incessant bettering, (44-45).

Homelessness, (46) and so on, from sheikh himself and other men whom she latter associates herself with (50,62, 63) all result from the singular act of matriarchal unkindness.

In effect, in El Saadawi's novel and Sofola's play – deliberately allow the men, the “gods” of their wives, to be separated from their supposed dependents (Firdaus by divorce, Ogwoma by death), to see if they (the wives) cannot survive on their own when the male protection is removed. These women never did badly after those incidents. With their men (Sheikh Mahmoud and Adigwu) gone, they face the challenges of life and forge ahead. After the death of Adigwu, Ogwoma in *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972, shows herself as a strong, independent and vibrant woman, who is able to sustain herself until Odibei steps into frustrate her creative life.

Despite what one may feel or think, the issue of the total liberation of African women especially as wives has not been fully achieved. The question one need to ask at this point is: can married women in Africa be really free if they are relieved of their marriages? One way or the other, one still finds them being enslaved by men or other women in future relationships they keep such as work, business, academic and so on.

Research Findings, Summary and Recommendations

The role of the family in the formation of communities with humane communal feelings and mutual coexistence cannot be overemphasized. If the family had played its role, the cases we find here would not have emanated. Wife battery and women oppression must stop. In Firdaus's case in *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), and Ogwoma's case in *Wed Lock of the Gods* (1972), their families fail in providing that ingredient that makes us Africans. Instead of the protection, security and love that the family is noted for universally, the protagonists get hatred, resentment, frustration and other dirty experiences from their families. Both Firdaus and Ogwoma enter the family on wrong contract. Firdaus's marriage is arranged by her uncle's wife while Ogwoma's is out of necessity. Bride prize is paid for both and this practice is a good example of what Osita Ezenwanebe (2000: 355)

asserts to be "...a bond or oath which chains them to their husbands." It is certainly the family that oppresses, subjugates and marginalizes Firdaus and Ogwoma respectively. These women's families fail to provide them proper education and the economic independence which could have prevented them from societal and cultural evils that destroy them at the end. Death is not a guarantee of freedom for the woman. No one has come back from the dead to tell of the degree of emancipation that awaits one at the other side of life. One might end up in much more suffering at death.

Secondly, the death of the man is equally not a guarantee of freedom. The death of Ugoma's husband which granted her the liberty to marry her childhood lover, Uloko, is short-lived as the freedom was truncated by the forced death imposed on her by the mother-in-law. Wishing your enemy dead is not a guarantee of a safe future. More enemies can be created as one enemy exits. Hence, better ways should be explored.

The study recommends a gentle but resolute insistence on what is fair, just and right by the woman; engagement in productive efforts leading to economic independence and stable mindset and the acquisition of adequate educating will go a long way to give a woman freedom and development.. it is not until the man is dead before the woman can attain her liberation. She can work her way into freedom through patience, tolerance and understanding.

The findings have been partly supported by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:21) which advocates that the African women should not expect freedom without sharing in the financial responsibility of the family. Educated women should champion the course of charting new paths and bringing up daughters who are confident in choosing and making the type of families they desire. Educated women should reject forced marriages, and unnecessary tolerance of violence in the society. The paper agrees with Ezewanebe (2000) that women should introduce some forms of organised or unified force capable of pushing the just cause further. Finally, every woman should acquire the spirit of handwork and industry to make her to survive in a complex world like ours. The religious and societal groups should live their moral and doctrinal values to break away incessant and harmonisation in contemporary societies.

Conclusion

African women must be 'free', and freedom here means the total elimination of sexual harassment and violence of all sorts. Society and culture should ensure mutual co-existence of women and men, where everyone is recognized and valued for his/her valid contributions towards building a dynamic family and society. By so doing, there will be love and understanding where women and daughters and every other person will be happy and free from institutional oppressions.

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