Prostitution and Motherhood as Weapon of Self-Identity in Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero and Emecheta’s the Joys of Motherhood

Agboola, Elizabeth Abiade
Department of English, School of Secondary Education (Language Programmes), Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo.

Abstract
Many scholars have worked on both texts of this study. For instance, Francesca Coin (2006) viewed Woman at point zero by El- Saadawi from the angle of slavery, Munazza Yaqoob and Sonia Irum from feminist ideology, Fwangyil, G. A. (2012) and Balaa, L. (2018) focus on Female Oppression in analysing the text. Also, Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood has been studied through stylistic critical approach, motherhood, and feminism points of view. However, this paper’s focus is on prostitution and motherhood as weapon of self-identity using the two texts for analysis. The paper aims at comparing how women in a patriarchal society chose their weapons of self-identity. Feminism is the theoretical framework used for the study. In this paper the character of Firdaus in Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero and Nnu Ego in Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood is identified as a woman’s struggle to find her identity in the socially and religiously degenerated society.

Keywords: Prostitution, Self-Identity, Motherhood, Feminism, Woman’s Struggle.

Introduction
“Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair to the darkest of ends. This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like me, witnessed the final moments of her life, a need to challenge and to overcome...
The above quotation gives rise to the topic chosen for this work i.e. … “a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprived human beings of their right to live, to love and to real freedom”.

Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian novelist, a doctor and a militant writer on Arab women’s life conditions. Woman at Point Zero is one of Saadawi’s most controversial writings. The book is an allegory for women’s struggle against patriarchy and colonial power in Egypt, an allegory narrated through the life-history of Firdaus, an Egyptian woman convicted for murder and awaiting for execution. Firdaus was met in the Qanatir Prison as stated in the text (El Saadawi 1983, p.3), when the author was doing a research on the personalities of women prisoners and detainees convicted for various offenses. Firdaus didn’t want to meet anybody, especially “one of them”, an individual related to the repressive authorities implicated in her conviction. Saadawi had “given up all hope to meet her” (El Saadawi 1983, p. 4), when one day, as she was leaving the prison, the warder called that Firdaus wanted to see her. The warder also told her that Firdaus had been “sentenced to death for killing a man”. But she is “not like the other murderesses held in the prison”. “You will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison” (El Saadawi 1983, p. 6). Firdaus is “a famous prostitute” that hates men, kings, princes and rulers, gender and class oppressors. (Coin 2006)

In Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood, polygamy and child-bearing are central to the discourse. A woman’s role in traditional Igbo society is to produce children, and in particular, to produce male children. Her value as a woman is dependent on her fertility. In The Joys of Motherhood, motherhood is the only source of Nnu Ego’s greatest joys. As a girl, she is taught that her sole functions are to bear and raise children. The idea of motherhood informs her fantasies and dreams.

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper is a comparative study of the texts Woman at Point Zero by Saadawi and Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood. The research is subjected to qualitative approach for the categorization of events in the two texts to show
how women in a patriarchal society chose their weapons of self-identity. The theoretical framework used for this study is Feminism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
FEMINISM
The first wave of modern western feminism began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and concentrated on women’s right to vote and their participation in the public sphere. The second wave of western feminism commenced in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. This phase of feminism was focused on women’s reproductive rights, and their repression under patriarchal society, and critiqued women’s roles as wives and mothers. The third phase began in the mid-1990s and disrupted the notions of ‘universal womanhood’ ‘gender’ and ‘normative heterosexuality’ and was heavily invested in bisexual and transgender identities. Rebecca Walker (2001) reportedly started this new movement in 1992 when she announced, ‘I am the Third Wave.’ According to R. Claire Snyder, ‘third-wavers depict their version of feminism as more inclusive and racially diverse than the second wave. However, this western feminist ideology does not address the experiences of black women, especially in the context of historical and contemporary racism and imperialism. Elizabeth Stanton, a leading figure in the early women’s rights movement in America, wrote in 1865 as cited by Zulfiqar Chaudhry, Sadia (2014):

The representation of women of the nation have done their uttermost for the last 30 years to secure freedom for the negroes and as long as he was the lowest in the scale of being we were willing to press his claims but now, as the celestial gate to civil rights is slowly moving on its hinges, it becomes a serious question whether we had better stand aside and see ‘sambo’ walk into the kingdom first. According to Davies (2018), African feminism is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain silent aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from generalised oppression of all African peoples. He examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women agendas and looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choices for women.
WHAT LEAD FIRDAUS TO PROSTITUTION

“I was just a pebble thrown into it, battered by the waves, tossed here and there, rolling over and over to be abandoned somewhere on the shore” (P. 60)

Her parents passed away when she was an adolescent, and after their death her uncle took her with him to Cairo. Firdaus stayed with her uncle till he got married and everything changed. She was taking to boarding school with little or no care. Even on her graduation day they were nowhere to be found and she graduated with excellent grades. With this, she could not further her education because she was “just one woman”, and women cannot attend the university. There was no place for Firdaus in society, and there was no place for Firdaus at her uncle’s house. Her uncle’s wife said “The house is small and life is expansive. She eats twice as much as any of our children” (Saadawi 1983, Pp. 46, 47,). As a result, Firdaus was married to Sheikh Mahomoud, over-sixty, retiree, and physically repulsive man with a tumor on his lip in her teen age (p 56-57).

Throughout her marriage, Firdaus was often abused and punished. On many occasions her husband would hit her violently till blood comes out of her nose and ears. One time he punished her for throwing away a little piece of food. Firdaus looked for shelter at her uncle’s house, but there again she was told that “all husbands beat their wives”. Firdaus had no other choice but to leave her husband’s home, and look for shelter on the street even though “no one paid attention” to her. She walked tirelessly until she got to a coffee-house where she met Bayoumi who initially took good care of her and later oppressed and abused her. In short, Bayoumi indirectly introduced her into prostitution by given her to friends. Firdaus challenges the idea of womanhood as set by the patriarchal structure around her. Loss of identity led her into prostitution. “…as I walked along the country road, wondering about myself, as the questions went round in my mind. Who was I?” Who am I? (Pp. 20, 26).

PROSTITUTION AS A WEAPON OF SELF-IDENTITY

“Firdaus, however, remained a woman apart. She stood out amongst others…” (Saadawi 1983, xii)
“All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else,...” (P.13)

Firdaus’ past experience of abuse and oppression from her parents, uncle and his wife, Sheik her husband and Bayoumi had made her lose her pride and she knew it. No wonder from the beginning of her story she said “All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else...” This search led her into prostitution and she introduced herself as a “successful prostitute”. Self-identity means awareness of and identification with oneself as a separate individual. Firdaus, the protagonist of Woman at Point Zero, throughout her life is seen as a ‘sex object’. Like third-wave feminists she moves towards using sexual power as a resistance against oppression. Firdaus starts to see herself differently from the way society views her when she first sees herself in the mirror, later when she was asked of her choice between oranges and tangerines, she was asked to sleep on bed instead of bare floor, and she could eat without anybody looking into her plate. She said, “Never in my life had anyone put me first before himself.” (El Saadawi, 1983, Pp.25, 63-64).

Her encounter with Sharifa finally led her into prostitution as a means of livelihood and a weapon of identity. Sharifa gave her self-worth with material things and Firdaus said:

When I opened my eyes and look into the mirror I realized that now I was being born again with a new body, smooth and tender as a rose petal. My clothes were no longer rough and dirty, but soft and clean. ... I became a young novice in Sharifa’s hands. She opened my eyes to life...making me become aware of them, understand them, see them for the first time (Pp. 71-73)

Sharifa is a prostitute known by “everyone”. She has established herself through it and she is proud to be one, to the extent of introducing it to someone or someone being introduced to it. She coached Firdau not to belittle herself but to be harder than life and that she should value herself highly enough. She in her opinion believed that “a man does not know a woman’s value. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth...” (p. 73). Selling of one’s body at higher price is seen as a means of worth and value. Firdaus had a change of life with Sharifa but when she realized that Sharifa is a pimp through Fawzy she fled.
Her encounter with an elegant man who offered her ten pound note is another opening of eye to how much she can earn from her “job” just like Sharifa. She could buy her own food for the first time and “from that day onwards I ceased to bend my head or to look away. I walked through the streets with my head held high, and my eyes looking straight ahead. … My footsteps on the dark tarmac road struck the ground with force, with a new elation…” (Pp. 91-92).

She started naming her price, choosing the kind of man and friends she wants, and could refuse male authority. But she had to earn her living by selling herself as a prostitute and her “bank account kept mounting all the time”.

In the industry of prostitution, Firdaus met a friend (Di’aa) who told her that her work is not worthy of respect. She sought to work instead of prostitution but she realized after three years that “as a prostitute I (she) had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees” (p 102). She went back to prostitution with the notion that:

A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows. Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. The marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (Pp. 117-118)

Prostitution, she feels, is much better than married life, because there are no expectations and no bondage and no illusions. Firdaus is inhumanly exploited by the men in her society and she realizes that “women confined to the home are women controlled by men”.

Yet not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman. I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, the one on earth and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. Every time I gave my body I charged the highest price… (P. 124).
MOTHERHOOD AS WEAPON OF SELF-IDENTITY IN THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

One of the main themes in the novel which also reflects in the title is motherhood. The novel promises a warm portrait of the joys and rewards of motherhood which later become a form of enslavement. In this novel, the tribal tradition of valuing women according to their ability to have children stands front and center. Nnu Ego is a woman who experience severe stigma for her first failed pregnancies (https://www.gradesaver.com/the-joys-of-motherhood/study-guide/themes). Agunwa the chief wife of Agbadi was said to die “a complete woman” because she had male children and a big cow was sent to her family to announce her death (p. 19).

Ona had chosen not to be a legal wife rather a mistress in her life. She had determined to be in her father’s house no matter how, but being or becoming a mother changed the situation. Her first child, Nnu Ego became ill as a result of a lump in her head, her chi (the dead slave woman) must be appeased and this cannot be done in “a foreign place”. “So Ona finally has to leave her people, not because she allowed her love for Agbadi to rule her actions but because she wanted the safety of her child” (P. 26). Soon after, she became pregnant again and had a premature birth because she was sick throughout her stage of pregnancy. She later died and as she was dying, she said, “… you see I was not destined to live with you (Agbadi). But you are stubborn, my father was stubborn, and I am stubborn too” (P. 26). May be if she does not decide to be a mother or wife she would have live longer but her identifying with motherhood against her and her father’s wish sent her to grave earlier.

In a patriarchal society like Igbo, motherhood is a means of identity for women in particular. For instance, Obi Idayi will always respond with “… My sons, you will all grow to be kings among men. My daughters, you will all grow to rock your children’s children” whenever children say his praise names. Again, when Nnu Ego married as a virgin all were expecting her child in the next ten months but this hope was dashed as months pass without pregnancy. She herself felt “she was failing everybody” and would as well cry (P. 29). Sacrifices were made to appease the slave woman, even the husband is being looked in a strange way too. Childlessness is seen as a failure as she said, “How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed?” (P. 30). This became her personal problem as her husband got married to another woman and had children. Nnu Ego’s position as “senior woman” was taken by the second wife. She in turn
cares for the baby to the extent of breast feeding him, she even thought of running away with the baby. Nnu Ego was desperate to have her own child and this made her remarry to Nnaife. At first she does not like him not until he was able to impregnate her and she gave birth to a boy Ngozi. Yet to her, she failed again as a mother because Ngozi is no more, “but I am not a woman any more. I am not a mother any more” were her statements to announce Ngozi’s death to people around her at the verge of committing suicide (Pp. 64-65). Everybody in a patriarchal society believes that “a woman without a child for her husband is a failed woman” (p 65). During Nnu Ego’s second pregnancy, she did not really work for the fear of miscarried (P. 86). She was happy having children but with suffering because, their poverty was becoming very apparent and Oshia (son) was constantly hungry (P. 114). She had to sell “all her clothes at a fraction of their cost to the Fulani street walkers, telling herself that if her sons should live and grow, they would be all the clothes she would ever need”. The death of Adaku’s new born baby also sent her into deep depression. Instead of an honored and revered figure, Nnu Ego becomes a sacrificial lamb, one who gave to her family selflessly but received nothing in return. She later died “by the roadside with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother” (P. 253). All she got at death was a most costly burial and a shrine made in her name, although many people agreed that she had given all to her children and that the joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children.

CONCLUSION

Firdaus and Nnu Ego suffer physically, emotionally, and psychologically as a result of hegemonic patriarchal power that controls gender, religion, and sexuality. As Firdaus is being brought up in her parents’ house, her uncle’s house, or at school, she is made to feel that she is inferior to boys and worthless. Firdaus is against being objectified as “the Other.” She realizes that she is oppressed. As a mechanism to break out of the confines of oppressed patriarchal structures, Firdaus is presented as a postmodern woman in the Muslim society through the use of her body to control men. She grows up in a dehumanized exploitative patriarchal culture, runs into severe problems in her Muslim society so she has to work her way out with different strategies; certainly not the ones
set by her culture that support patriarchy but strategies borrowed from the West in the theories of third-wave feminism.

Nnu Ego as a woman, her very identity is wrapped up in the concept of motherhood, so she literally has everything to lose if she cannot have children. By the time her four kids mature into adulthood, however, Nnu Ego has major regrets. Her children are not a blessing to her in the least and remain ungrateful and neglectful of her late into her advanced years. In the end, Nnu Ego dies alone, despite having achieved the pinnacle of success for a woman by bearing many children (https://www.gradesaver.com/the-joys-of-motherhood/study-guide/themes). The women in the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* are entirely consumed by the hope of motherhood. They have been taught by their society that they will be most successful when they have children because that is their value to the men. In order to be a good wife, a woman must be first a good mother.

*Woman at Point Zero* and *The Joys of Motherhood* are novels that are not only directed to the Arab and Nigeria (Igbo) world but to the world at large and Africa in particular. In the world, women undergo violence and this is used by bigots to deny them their rights. In many cultures just like these ones, for instance, they are regarded and treated as inferior human beings. The prejudices against them are therefore deeply rooted in the patriarchal systems. Gender based violence in all its forms is a perpetuating problem for women in the world.

**REFERENCES**


