



Research Article

Behind the Hidden Face of Eve: Alifa Rifaat's Distant View of a Minaret as a Metaphor

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is an imaginative flight, with Alifa Rifaat as guide, to the closed world of the typical Muslim woman living in a patriarchal Muslim society. Behind her veil of invisibility lie her silent pains, sexual dissatisfaction and emotional anguish which are often male-inflicted in their chauvinistic ambition to continue to oil the machinery of patriarchy; an institution that has attracted many unislamic accretions and man made oppressive anti-woman practices over the years. Her reflection of the women as voiceless and powerless in deference to the status quo notwithstanding, the paper contends that by "daring" to portray many of the norms and attitudes related to women in her society, Rifaat has contributed in no small measure to widening the frontiers of women liberation struggle all over the world.

Keywords:

*Patriarchal, Muslim, Society,
Feminism, Veil, Metaphor,
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INTRODUCTION

Most African female writers create out of the necessity to tell their own stories in thin-veiled fictional forms; seeing themselves as representatives of African women and correctors of certain well-worn prejudices concerning African women. In short, they tell it as it is. (Adebayo, 1996:39)

One of the most enduring criticisms of male writers by feminists has been the tendency of the former to regard their creative works as patriarchal templates for entrenching phallogocentric domination. Feminists (hard core or liberal, capital "F" or small "f") are essentially united by their claim that in most masculine fiction, representative male characters are presented as vigorous, realistic and complex while female characters are made complaisant, objectified and oversimplified; who not only lack the humanism of their male counterparts but also come across to the readers as undeveloped simpletons. According to Flora Nwapa (1998:90),

Nigerian males have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men. Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* is a prostitute, Wole Soyinka's *Amope* is a ceaselessly nagging woman who makes life intolerable for her husband. Achebe's *Miss Mark* does not hesitate to put her sex appeal to work in order to attain desired objectives. J.P Clark's *Ebiere* entices her husband's younger brother into sexual relationship. The focus has always been on the physical, prurient, negative nature of women.

Nawal El Saadawi (1980) the radical feminist from Egypt is even more trenchant in her denunciation of most male writers who rarely find any redeeming grace in female characters in their works. She asserts that Tolstoy, for example, in spite of his towering literary talent, when speaking of women, he found nothing better than "woman is the instrument of the devil" whom Satan often "lends his head when she acts under his orders" (2007:521). Arab literature, Saadawi says, "is littered with the image of the she-devil possessed of many faces" (521). In *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), Sadaawi presents a gallery of Arab literary icons – Akkad, Tewfik El Hakin, Taha Hassan and Naguib Mafouz, who are seemingly united by their deliberate negative portrayal of female characters. For Florence Stratton (2009), this penchant for deliberate promotion of patriarchal ascendancy by male writers often finds expression in their presentation of female characters as either "mother-Africa figures, symbols of a fecund and untainted tradition or prostitutes, figures of a corrupted modernity and through a set of close reading puts her figure on the pulse of masculine literary responses to colonization via the discourse of tradition" (2009:191-192).

The above criticisms notwithstanding, many male writers have never pretended or even regarded it as their literary duty to write about women in their works in order to please the fairer sex. Excusing imperfections that sometimes rear their ugly heads in the guise of snippets of male chauvinism or prejudice,

realism is, after all, colour and gender blind. In an interview with Mary David, Soyinka (1995:212) says: But that is the role of women. I can't enter into the mind and body of a woman. No, but women should write about themselves, why should they ask me to do that?

The implication of Soyinka's submission is that possibly, only women are in a better position to write about women in a more realistic fashion. Stretched further, that it is only women who are better placed as "co-insiders", to tear off the veil of invisibility that the oppressive patriarchal system has dressed the typical African woman for years. Without possibly meaning to, Soyinka may have opened the floodgates of controversy here as we may not all necessarily be female psychologists in order to understand female psychology. Whatever the case, it is no gainsaying that surely, Soyinka's point is quite germane in the closed world of the Muslim woman. The "purdah" system in many Muslim and Hindu Societies where women are kept from public view by keeping them in a separate room in the house, or special clothing like the "hijab" to wear when they go outside testifies to this assertion.

The metaphor of the hidden face of Eve aptly describes the traditional Muslim woman living in a patriarchal Muslim society. Possibly, only another female insider can tell us realistically what exactly lies behind this hidden face. She may be better placed to be our guide in our imaginative voyage to the silent and anonymous world of the typical Muslim woman, for wearing the same shoe; she more than any other person, knows where it pinches. This paper, therefore, focuses on the realities of life of the traditional Muslim woman in a patriarchal Muslim society from the standpoint of another Muslim woman, Alifa Rifaat in her *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983).

The theoretical underpinning for this paper is understandably feminist. This is not to imply that everybody automatically knows and agrees with a common definition of the term feminism. In her *introduction to Third World Women and Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty (1991) admits the complexity inherent in defining feminism. This paper, however, subscribes to Adebayo (1996) who sees feminism, among other things as connoting the rights and privileges of women as well as challenging male hegemony in order to change the former's consciousness and recreate a positive self-perception to embrace progress.

Alifa Rifaat and the Silent Plight of Women in Patriarchal Muslim Society

Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983) consists of fifteen short stories which are set in provincial Egypt. These stories admit the reader into a hidden private world of the typical Muslim woman, a world not only daily regulated by the call of the Muezzin but which is often characterized by profound anguish and personal isolation. The collection of stories therefore, becomes a haunting metaphor for the unenviable lot of the

traditional Muslim woman living in a patriarchal Muslim society.

In the first story which gives the collection its title, Rifaat presents men as callous, selfish and highly insensitive to the feelings of their marital partners. Sexual intercourse between husband and wife that is meant to be enjoyed thereby cementing the marital bond of love between the two has become a veritable ticket to the island of isolation and sexual disconnect for the woman. The husband in this story is only concerned about his own sexual urges and pleasures. To him, the wife's sexual satisfaction is simply out of the question. Attempts by the long-suffering wife in the past to express her desire for sexual satisfaction to her husband had been met with denial and anger. In his chauvinistic cockiness, the husband had even insinuated that he had had sexual experiences with other women. Little wonder that the wife has grown used to being uninterested, with deep-seated feelings of estrangement each time her husband makes love to her. To him, she is more or less a slave rather than a life partner.

In her autobiography, Rifaat advocates the need for man and woman to only participate in sexual intercourse when they are in a serene state, so that orgasm can be achieved, which she says acts to strengthen faith in God. Orgasm with its consequent benefits can hardly take place in the scene described in this story. And since sexual matters are not subjects for open discussion in this kind of society, we are forced to understand the silent pains and anguish of a woman whose silent cries for help are likely to remain unanswered until the grim reaper, death, intervenes. Solace of a sort for her therefore, comes in the daily call to prayers, ablutions and making tea, a ritual in which she feels more in touch with than the relationship with her husband. The lone minaret, therefore, stands for the solitude that the female protagonist experiences having resigned to this role. More importantly, it represents how far the men have distanced themselves from the ideals of Islam which protects and praises the status of women by recommending that they enjoy equal rights to those of men in everything; they stand on equal footing with men. (Qur'an Nadvi:11)

If the wife in "Distant View of a Minaret" complains of little sex from her husband, Badriyya in "Badriyya and Her Husband" has no sex at all with Omar, her worthless and lying husband. Badriyya has become a laughing stock in the neighbourhood on account of her husband's shameless philandering antics. As usual, the wife is the last to know of her husband's extra-marital affairs. This is why until concerned wives start asking her to wake up to her husband's shameless acts, she was still in a dream world where the first article in the marriage creed is faithfulness to one's wife.

Almost every night, Omar comes home in a state of exhaustion from drink and drugs. The few days he stays at home, Badriyya is made to buy him expensive Malboro cigarettes which he smokes with relish. His careless attitude towards the sexual needs of his wife has made the latter to be the equivalent of "a piece of land that has been prepared for sowing and

suddenly left" (39). Virtually all the men in the collection are selfish and indulge in adultery. In "The Long Night of Winter", Zennouba recalls how her husband, on one occasion, had left her sexually high and dry in their bed only to find him making love to their servant girl on the stone bench above the oven. In the evening of that same day, she had discussed the matter with her mother who later replied calmly that "All men are like that" (57). Her mother, like many experienced women, has learnt over the years to take her husband's infidelity for granted. Rather than marry his own wife, Saleh in "The Flat in Nakshabandi Street" enjoys having a secret love affair with the Greek wife of one of his colleagues who inexplicably turns a blind eye to his wife's wayward behaviour. It is the lecherous advances of the adulterous Hindawi that drive the poor Mansoura with the rusted bangles to her death in the Canal in the short story bearing her name; Of course, Hindawi pays with his life later while hauling pipes from a bulldozer.

In virtually all the stories in the collection, all the wives have no option than to submit to the tyranny of their husbands. While this is unfortunately understandable in a typical patriarchal Muslim household, it is highly unsettling to know that this tyranny does not "proceed on leave", even for a few minutes during sexual intercourse. In the "Distant View of a Minaret" and "The Long Night of Winter", both husbands are disgusting and animal-like while having sex. Rifaat shows us the picture of a monster of a husband in "Distant View of a Minaret" during lovemaking.

His eyes were tight closed, his lips drawn down in an ugly contortion and the veins on his neck stood out (2). His counterpart, Hagg Hamdan, in "The Long Night of Winter" is even worse. Each time he makes love to his wife, it is with "violence and pain utterly unrelated to any previous experience she had had" (57). Rifaat tells us the silent pain and endurance of Zennouba, Hamdan's wife:

Since then it had been repeated hundred of times with the element of pain replaced by that of repugnance at the rough hands that kneaded her body and the evil-smelling breath and spittle of a habitu  of the Blue smoke of hashish (56).

Hamdan's urge for sex knows no bounds as he does not care to sleep with all the girl servants that come and go in the house. In all of this, the hapless wife has no choice than to swallow her bitterness, hatred and anger, for according to tradition, "the husband was the master of the house" (57). Divorce being untraditional is simply out of the question. So also is single-parenting; and so, like Angelou Maya's caged bird, she must learn the traditional injunction which orders wives to obey your husband; make his happiness your main concern; on him your fate and especially that of your children depends. If you carry out all his wishes, you will have worthy and deserving children. But if you don't, then you must expect curses from heaven and the shame of giving birth to children who will turn out failures. (Aminata Sow Fall, 1979:27)

Thus, caught in this blackmailing crucible of an oppressive injunction, the woman finds herself between the desire to keep her home and to assert her

own individuality. This precarious position of the woman is akin to being between a stone and a hard place. In this situation where marriage is like a continuous hellish nightmare Rifaat, like other progressive women writers like Mariama Bá challenges “the living-happily-ever-after myth of marriage” (Adebayo, 1996:45).

Hedged in by the unforgiving circumstances created by the oppressive patriarchy, the women in Rifaat’s collection are forced to endure many restrictions. Their freedom and power only come at the sacrifice of their life, marriage and honesty. In “Mansoura”, the only time Mansoura successfully fends off the lecherous Hindawi’s sexual advances is when she falls into a canal and drowns. After her death, she attains a supernatural power and she crushes Hindawi beneath the arm of the bulldozer. True, Mansoura succeeds in getting her revenge but only at the cost of her own life. In “The Incident in the Ghobashi Household”, the only choice open to Zeinat is to lie in order to protect her pregnant unmarried daughter and the family honour, and the money she gave to her daughter was the money she had kept secret from her husband. In “The Flat in Nakshabandi Street”, Aziza controls the household and its finances but she has never had a husband, and she had never really explored her “freedom” as she leaves her apartment only for funerals.

Girls are strictly restricted from marrying young men of their choice as they are forced into marriage by their parents. In “The Kite” Widad is forced into marrying Ahmed rather than Mitwali, her childhood sweetheart. In “The long Night of Winter”, Zennouba is married to her cousin Hagg Hamdan, “so that the land might stay in the family” (56). Love hardly thrives in arranged marriages. Little wonder, therefore, that many women endure rather than enjoy their marriage. The institution of marriage in this connection becomes an enslaving factor in many women’s experience which they have to be with as it is a veritable means of self-definition for women.

Gender discrimination which tilts the scale in women’s disfavour dominates “Bahiyya’s Eyes” which is told from the perspective of an old woman speaking to her daughter after visiting a doctor about her loss of sight. The story deals with the painful matrices that characterize the lives of women. “Girl children”, says Buchi Emecheta in *The Slave Girl* (1977), are not usually particularly prized creatures (18). In most patriarchal homes, the preference of male children to female children is often taken for granted. Contrary to the doctor’s diagnosis about her loss of sight, Bahiyya, armed with patriarchal hindsight, tells us that her blindness “comes from the tears I shed since my mother first bore me and they ... found I was a girl” (57). She goes on to relate how as a girl child, her brother was given preferential treatment only because of his sex. The lives of other girls in the village were not better, but she discovered that “they were able to take it and not care a hang and just laughed it off” (8), while for her, her response to the gender discrimination “wasn’t the same and the tears were always running down my cheeks” (8).

The most tragic aspect of a woman’s life, Bahiyya says, is that she has no control over her destiny. She says:

The fact is there’s no joy for a girl in growing up, its just one disaster after another till you end up an old woman who’s good for nothing and who’s really lucky if she finds someone to feel sorry for her (8).

Through this story, Rifaat shows us the powerlessness of women as exemplified in the experience of Bahiyya. As a young girl, she was forcefully circumcised by tradition-wielding old women. Ever since, this painful act of genital mutilation otherwise called clitoridectomy has left a deep wound inside her; a silent pain she has learnt to endure. The politics of clitoridectomy has long assumed an international dimension. Suffice it to say however, that it is male-inspired women’s inability to control their bodies that is not country-specific. Nnaemeka (2007:575) says that “abuse of the female body is global and should be studied and interpreted within the context of oppressive conditions under patriarchy”. Sanusi and Olayinka (2012) have likened clitoridectomy and infibulations to female castration that render women perpetually and psychologically inferior to men:

If one should want to be fair, one should compare an excised and infibulated woman to a castrated male. A castrated male is one without the ability to express his masculine sexuality... porloined of his self-esteem. He is mere statistic and such is the woman who has been artificially deprived of her sexuality. Excision and infibulations ensure the subtraction of vital organs of self-expression from a woman’s body that make her feel incomplete and unable to compete with men... This artificial recreation of the woman’s physiognomy is done in order to enforce the myth that woman is less than man in every sense as preached by Aristotle, Plato, Darwin and Rousseau (199-200).

Men’s control over Bahiyya continued when her father made her to marry a man she never loved. As she says, “who was I to say I wanted this man and not that man” (10). Marriage is seen here, not as an escape from andocentric oppression because she has just replaced one oppressor (her father) with another (her husband). No doubt, echoes of Florence Stratton’s metaphor of the shallow grave as archetype of the African female experience reverberate here. According to her, African female characters are enclosed in the restricted sphere of behaviour of the stereotypes of a male tradition, their human potential buried in shallow definition of their sex-silence, like the slave woman, by blows, either to their bodies is psyches – they are forced to submit to the necessity of conforming to the extremely-imposed requirements of their masculine societies. (1988:147).

The phallogocentric constructs which form the very basis of the patriarchal society in which the collection is based is one that makes the female child to realize that her life is one of service to the ambitions of men. Ojebeta, Emecheta’s mouthpiece in *The Slave Girl* shares her deep-seated thoughts:

Every woman, whether slave or free belonged to some male. At birth, you were owned by your people, and when you were sold you belonged to a new master; when you grew up your new master would control you (167).

A woman's place in the society, Rifaat asserts, is that of an anonymous servant. She lives in a closeted world where she is expected to be silent, dumb and completely accommodating and malleable forever in the service of men. The society-inflicted loneliness and anonymity become worse when she either becomes old or becomes a widow. In "Thursday Lunch," the protagonist and narrator who is fifty years old contemplates her failing marriage and her inability to communicate her marital woes to others. Her husband has become distant from her since she is now "old" and "clearly past her best" (27) after three children. Her children and the house servant live in a different world from hers. So, abandoned, she finds solace in crying all the time as a kind of catharsis or emotional purgation. Her mother, though a widow for the past twenty-four years, seems to have succeeded in managing her loneliness by living a detached existence that has no provision for feeling alienated. How successfully she has been in this can be seen in the fact that it is her daughter (the narrator) with a husband, children and a servant who ironically, experiences loneliness. When she waxes philosophical about old age and loneliness, we come face to face with the indispensability of creative communication in marriage.

One could approach the end of life and find that for all the people who were around him, there was not in fact anyone to whom one could go in for in time of crisis and unburden oneself; that instead of building up relationships with an increasing number of friends as time went by, we find ourselves collecting around us a small number of acquaintance some of whom we positively dislike, and at the same time make barriers between ourselves and those nearest to us, who was there to whom I could talk frankly about my problems? (17-18).

Alifa Rifaat's unusualness among Arab women writers among other things, arises from her exceptional artistic courage in writing this collection which "lifts the veil on what it means to be a woman living within a traditional Muslim society" (Johnson – Davies, 1987: VII). In this collection Rifaat destroys the myth of the silent suffering Muslim woman and in its place creates the image of a thinking woman whose frankness and intelligent observation remain with the reader long after reading. Since many of the marriages in these stories are arranged marriages where husband and wife are not in love before marriage, the feelings and desires of the latter are hardly considered by the former. Through her silently protesting female characters, Rifaat asserts that love should be the basis of marriage and that husbands should meet the emotional and sexual needs of their wives. But until this comes to pass, Rifaat shows us how the women in her stories cope with their silent pains and emotional anguish.

Managing Pains and Emotional Anguish

As deduced so far, marriage obscures a woman's self-identity and by her unobtrusive acquiescence, she unwittingly becomes an accomplice of the stultifying system. But even unobtrusive submission has its limits. The heroine in Nwapa's *One is Enough* bitterly declares, after her failed marriage, that she does not want to be a wife again. Similarly, in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Adaku says that she is not prepared to remain in her marriage because she is not "prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman" (169). Maria Miles (1980:25) has averred that it is only when there is "a rupture in the normal life of a woman i.e. a crisis such as divorce, the end of a relationship etc. is there a chance for her to become conscious of her true condition".

Unlike the artistic world of West African female writers, divorce is simply out of the question with Rifaat's female characters as it is highly untraditional and unislamic. Many of the frustrated wives therefore, find emotional outlet in the daily religious rites like the call to prayer and other sundry religious practices that permeate the entire collection. In "Distant View of a Minaret", for example, the daily prayers are described as being like punctuation marks that give life its meaning. Many of the widows find solace in taking care of their children, a labour of love that constitutes a necessary distraction from brooding too much on the loneliness resulting from the death of their husbands. But then, the children soon get married and their mothers are back in the valley of loneliness and despair, for the children must grow up to live their own lives. This is the fate of the female characters in "Bahiyya's Eyes", "Telephone Call" and "Just Another Day". Not every woman is as lucky as the mother of the narrator, / protagonist in "Thursday Lunch" who, though still thinks of her dead husband, has managed to evince a creatively detached and unemotional life for herself. The widow in "The Kite", having realized that she is as defenceless and vulnerable as her chick decides to eschew arrogance to marry her childhood beau.

The experience of some of the women who are not actually widows but who lead lonely lives that resemble those of the widows is even more pathetic. In "Badriyya and Her Husband", Badriyya is married to a selfish womanizer and has not even had sex with her. Zennouba is worried about how to deal with her husband's constant affair with the servant girls in "The Long Night of Winter" while in "At the Time of the Jasmine" Hassan's wife has left him and now lives in her homeland of Turkey, and she basically leads a widow's life. Many wives, like the narrator in "Thursday Lunch" resort to crying as a therapy to maintain their emotional balance.

The sex-starved narrator/wife in "My World of the Unknown" finds sexual fulfillment in a fantasy world where she establishes a relationship with a snake. The snake tells her that their affair is not shameful because in the eyes of Allah the two of them are now married. In this connection, the snake represents what seems to be lacking in her marriage with her husband. Even so, the snakes shape renders it a phallic symbol and it indeed brings the narrator sexual pleasure. The narrator falls in love with the snake to the extent that

she is willing to give up her husband in exchange for this single representation of sexual organ. By killing the snake, the husband of the narrator becomes the destroyer of beauty, for "perfect beauty is to be found only in a woman" (95). By equating the snake with the bringer of everything good to the narrator's life. Rifaat turns the myth of the snake as the bringer of man and woman's downfall in the Garden of Eden on its head. Rifaat's point in this short story is unmistakable: sexual pleasure and satisfaction are indispensable for a successful marriage. In Rifaat's estimation, since "all men seek is, pleasure" which ever way the women decide to take in order to ease their burden of frustration and emotional anguish in order to get some pleasure is all right provided" it remains within a strictly religious, even orthodox framework" (Johnson-Davies, (1983:VIII).

CONCLUSION

Rifaat's collection is highly significant in the history of feminist writings from North Africa. This is not only because of the boldness of the writer in thematising issues that are almost forbidden in her society but also because of the range of her thematic concerns. From her early preoccupation with romance (*Eve Returns to Adam* (1975), *The Prayer of Love*, 1983 etc.), Rifaat later graduated to the level where art becomes for her a means of "revolting against many of the norms and attitudes, particularly those related to woman and her place in society" (Johnson-Davies, 1983: VII). Her revolt however, is conducted strictly in an orthodox Muslim manner which does not advocate the rise of women against patriarchy. Her female characters do not quarrel with the Quranic precept that "men should be in charge of women". All that the women ask for is that the men should exercise their headship with a deep sense of responsibility by showing kindness and generosity to the womenfolk as enshrined in the Quran. Rifaat's revolt therefore, is not against Islam as a religion but against man-made interpretations and accretions that have come to be accepted without questioning over the years. In this wise Rifaat is different from other radical apostles of women liberation movement like Laila Baalbaki, Gada Samman, Hanan Shakyth and El Saadawi whose brand of feminism seems west inspired.

As stated earlier, Rifaat does not recommend adultery, divorce or a change of partner as these are considered unislamic. Therefore, her female characters must learn to take a resigned or begrudgingly accepting stance towards whatever hardships they may face in their marriage. Patriarchy must be accepted as a fact of life For these suffering women, she asserts. The snag here however, is that this stance is not likely to help women's cause in Africa because this has often acted as a catalyst in women's oppression by way of making them accomplices to their own oppression by men. All her female characters seem solely trained to focus on marriage, procreation, keep the home, cook family meals and

ensure their husbands sexual satisfaction in order not to rock the family boat of peace in the home.

Peace in the home is good but by immersing all her female characters into patriarchal ethos which dictates voicelessness among women Rifaat places herself among some fellow African women writers like Ka Maiga and Mpoudi-Ngolle often accused of compromising African feminist writing by dwelling in the periphery of African feminist emancipatory struggle. This attitude of voicelessness is rather unsettling.

In her biography, Rifaat relates that she cries out for complete and complimentary role in all her writings since all seek is pleasure. But given the docility of all her female characters, one wonders how this kind of "negotiation" will work in the face of the dominating men. This is the grouse of Awa Thiam (1986:13).

People have often reduced the problem of women to a problem of complementarity. Who defines this complementarity? This complementarity has been systematized, giving excuses for all the forms of oppression and exploitation that the patriarchal system imposes on a woman by virtue of her sex, both in the family and in organized labour. Should this complementarity not only be challenged but also redefined?

The above observations notwithstanding, it is credit to Rifaat's artistic sensibility for, by "daring" to write about women's condition and "the truth about their bodies" in a Sentient fashion as an insider, she contributes in her own way in expanding the frontiers of the women liberation struggle in Africa. In deed, we are grateful for enabling us to have a glimpse at the hidden face of Eve and her painful world with the hope that we might be able to help in making it better for her, for "as long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process" (Gauthier 1981:162).

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