

Portrayal of Women as Construct of Culture in Alifa Rifaat's Distant View of a Minaret

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Abstract

The notion play of culture in reinforcing relegate depiction and perception of women in most African societies, embedded in patriarchal domination and rulership have been a prevailing unacceptable yet reversible phenomenon which had increasingly proven detrimental to societal progress and prosperity. More than ever before, it has become quite expedient for women to assume recognized noble roles detached from existent and inherent vague cultural dogmas, in harnessing their profound potentials and making significant contributions. Drawing on these postulations, this paper examines the multi-faceted portrayal of women within such entangled context in Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret*. Feminism proves a compelling engaged theoretical approach for the critical deduction of the multi-dimensional portrayal of women in the text under discourse. As clearly revealed, the existent trends are indicative of gendered relations of power and reinforced by the forces of patriarchal dominance and supremacy entrenched within the Egyptian Muslim African society. Also, strongly underpinned and demonstrated in the text, such appropriations and manifestations conveyed in the instrumentality of culture unarguably distort and inhibit remarkable prospects for women.

Keywords: *Culture, Dilemma, Patriarchy, Portrayal, Women.*

INTRODUCTION

The woman gender like the man resonates within an inherent biological configuration bequeathed with dignified inalienable status. In this regard, the identity, personality, functionality, relevance, perception and representation of this gendered entity are therefore understood and expected to be intrinsically embedded and expressed in a neutrally objective form with no underlying relegating cultural coloration.

However, as observed, women particularly in African societies have long assumed a stark epitome of an imposed culturally defined existence with conceivable loss of their ideal outlook, (Adichie, 2012) and virtually revolving constrainedly around the dynamics, understandings, meanings, and interpretations of an overly cultural framework purveyed by a prevailing patriarchal domination and rulership. For Uchem and Ngwa, women subordination and oppression is fuelled by the claims projected by men to maintain cultural heritage (2014:145). The authors draw parallel between women oppression and slavery. Further, they affirm that culture has become a cloak for the oppression and subjugation of women (145). Consequently, Adeyemi and Ajibade discover that, the nature of African culture is such that no woman can stop her husband from marrying another wife (2009:113). Moreover, Uchem

and Ngwa (2014), spell out the manifestations of this oppression, which include preference of boys to girls, sexual exploitation and obnoxious widowhood practices. Notably, the gruesome experiences of widows in Africa attest to the suppression and discrimination of women.

Adeyemi and Ajibade (2009), further submit that women are victims of discrimination in education which is a demonstration of irrational judgment and bias displayed by patriarchy (112-113). In a similar vein, Uchem and Ngwa (2014), agree that the gap between boys and girls in education is due to biased cultural religious beliefs that place preeminence of the former over the latter (145). Irrespective of the United Nations millennium development goals (MDGs) to bridge this gap, it has remained unachieved (145). Apparently, the authors contend that culture is a perpetrator of oppression against women.

Markedly, Mohammed (2018) in a study of Alifa Rifaat's *Distant view of a minaret and other stories*, contends that both speaking and silence can be utilized by women as means of resistance against the domineering works of men. Moreover, Mohammed opines that silence employed by Alifa Rifaat's protagonist alters the prior knowledge about silence which is afore believed to be passive (269). Silence here disrupts the social norms which expects a woman to weep at the husband's death. Mohammed submits that the silence of the protagonist is "pregnant with a multiplicity of possibilities about her building as a character, who goes through a transformation to become a non-conformist and unexpected individual" (2018: 269). Also, through speaking the character Bahiyya, tackles her former unsettled issues thus, making a new discourse that counters the popular demeaning one (Mohammed: 2018). Apparently, Bahiyya's speaking is aimed at saving both her daughter and the upcoming generation. Danso (2023) corroborates that women in the society explored in Alifa's *Distant view of a minaret*, manifest fear and silence placed on them by men as well as man-made customs.

According to Jegede and Jegede (2023), they affirm that Alifa Rifaat's method of presenting the ordeals of women in African society is non-confrontational, they support the culture of silence, and their position also aligns with that of Mohammed (2018) on silence. Similarly, Ogbeide (2012) avers that Alifa Rifaat does not instigate women against patriarchy rather she combats "man-made interpretations and accretions that have come to be accepted without questioning over the years" (2012: 27).

Following on these rallying thoughts about women, this paper examines the portrayal of African women as manipulative construct of culture in Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret*. As demonstrated, feminism proves a compelling engaged theoretical approach to critically deduce the multi-dimensional portrayal as well as predicament of women in the text under discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This work draws on feminism as a literary-philosophical doctrine and maintains that its trends strongly emanate from a historical tradition of male exploitation of women, mainly stemming from the sexual differences which led to a division of labour and assignment of roles (Robertson, 2004). According to the feminist school of thought, gender is the 'process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female, become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally-defined attributes of masculinity and femininity...the possibility of transforming gender roles is thus established, for the gendered division of labour and power is revealed as constructed rather than natural part of life' (Marchand & Parpart, 1995). Alausa (2012) reiterates that the relegate position

occupied by women in patriarchal milieu is a product of culture facilitated by masculine gender rather than a biological configuration.

Instructively, Social and Marxist feminists posit that social existence determines consciousness. For them, the seeming indispensability of women created an impression on the women folk which would not have been, if their roles in family and society did not place them socially and economically subordinate to men (Tong, 2009).

Development revolved around male domination and structures, gender-motivated and constructed. Meanwhile class and women's subordination were of equal importance and had to be challenged simultaneously. Patriarchy meant a set of hierarchical relations with a material base in men's control over women's sexuality, procreation, and labour power. In addition, it is held that it exists in different forms in different historical periods (Pati, 2006).

The major concern was that women were being overlooked or marginalized in four crucial areas, namely political rights, legal rights, access to education and training, and their working lives (De Beer & Swanepoel, 2000). Generally, women were discursively created, separate and distant from the historical, socio-political and lived material realities of their existence.

Hence, these proponents contend that women could only develop outside patriarchal power and structure, and advocated self-reliance free from patriarchy and male hegemony. They further regarded women as agents of change, rather than recipients, and emphasized the need for women to be organized and build up more for effective political representation (Wilson-More, 1996; Aguinaga, Lang, Mokrani & Santillana, 2013).

Significantly, Feminism refutes imaginaries that refer to women as the other as well as second class citizens (Alausa, 2012). It challenges masculine orientations which have reduced womenfolk to a silent entity (Alausa, 2012). In all, feminism is an ideology targeted at liberating women from oppressive cultural traditions. It equally gives women opportunity and platform to make meaningful contribution to societies. This contrasts with the practice in history. Accordingly, Sotunsa opines that:

Feminist literary criticism confronts patriarchal values. It attempts to unveil the prejudices embedded in the appreciation of arts and cultural artifacts. It also exposes how linguistic medium promotes and transmits the values of male domination. Feminism's major aim is to combat female oppression and repression in all forms (2008: 5).

Portrayal of Women

Alifa portrays women in diverse ways through the instrumentality of the African culture. The patriarchal nature of Africa is vividly explored here, as different experiences of women in an Egyptian male dominated world are uncovered.

The first story titled 'Distant view of a minaret' gives insight into the sexual and emotional exploitation suffered by women through an unnamed archetype female character. Through her, the readers understand the cultural placement of women in the sexual act. During *cotius*, she is forbidden to express desire for more instead her husband initiates and controls the act; whether she achieves orgasm or not is never put into consideration. Moreover, being conscious of the conventions around her, she decides not "to express such wishes openly" (Alfia, 1983:1). Sotunsa (2008) reiterates that it is a taboo in Africa for a woman to request for sex (90). Uchem and Ngwa (2014), corroborate this relegation and treatment of women as objects for the satisfaction of men's sexual appetite (145). Ogbuide (2012) validates that the

women in this cultural society exhibit consciousness of both conventions and religion. Apparently, this woman is trapped in the dilemma of revolting against her unsatisfied sexual life and keeping mute.

However, her desire for more during the sexual act results to rebuke by her husband, who accuses her of wanting to kill him. This experience makes an impression of shame on her; hence, she willingly accepts her passive role and subordination during the act. This incident conflicts with the position of Sotunsa (2008), who posits that the woman's male counterpart, "must learn to see the woman as co-partner, not the mule" (139).

Therefore, this situation disposes her to an unsatisfied sexual life, which results in masturbation in her first years in marriage as she resorts to completing the act with herself (Alfia, 1983: 2). This vividly ascertains that the sexual needs of women in this context are never considered. This woman is invariably made to suffer emotionally whereas her husband seems to be insensitive to the fact that his wife needs sexual fulfillment, consequently she resigns her sexual life to fate. Ramzi (1991) avers that this woman discovers that the only comfort she has is in her religion and in the distant minaret (111), which she can barely see from her balcony, and her prayers which become the "punctuation marks that divided up and gave meaning to her life" (Alifa, 1983: 3). Danso (2023) corroborates the influence of religion in the lives of women in this milieu, they resort to religion for comfort and solace. Furthermore, her choice to remain in her marriage reflects the stance of womanism an African variant of feminism that upholds the sanctity of marriage. Her decision differs from Adaku's in Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of motherhood* who revolts and deserts her marriage against the 'conventional' African practice of female subjugation (Adam 2012: 157).

This experience clearly reflects male exploitation and control over women's sexuality which feminism seeks to combat. Therefore, such a woman who suffers emotionally and devoid of sexual fulfillment, with no voice of decision in the family sphere has little or no courage to assume a leadership position in the society. Emphatically, the inner courage and solidarity that will ensure an emotionally balanced individual is first gotten from the home. Hence, in a situation where none of these exist, it becomes difficult for the expression of a woman's opinions.

Markedly, women by configuration of this culture are victims of emotional exploitation. In the story 'Me and my sister', Dalal's father leaves his family for a second wife because his first wife has no son. He only visits them one night every week. His selfish decision towards his wife portends to health implications thus, her doctor instructs her children that they must not contradict her. She withdraws and spends most of her time in her bedroom and only comes out to eat with her daughters. Consequently, this incident validates the assertion of Adeyemi and Ajibade (2009), that women are sufferers in polygamous marriages (113).

Moreover, the story 'Bahiyya's Eyes' reveals that from childhood, the girl child is informed of her relegate status as a second-class citizen. Bahiyya's childhood experience validates this assertion. She recalls that her brother on return from the fields exhibits the autocratic patriarchal attitude of issuing orders for food to be served like their father. Similarly, women are projected as dependent on men with no significant role to play. Uchem and Ngwa (2014: 146), confirm the existence of this unbalanced practice.

Additionally, a woman character, in the story 'telephone call,' whose husband is dead wishes that he is alive as the telephone rings from a nearby flat; she recalls when her husband used to ring her but with his death, "the telephone has been silent" (Alfia, 1983:15). The death

of her husband puts her in a situation that she expects nobody to call her on telephone and to her, life has come to a halt. Therefore, she finds herself living an inverted lifestyle, as she stays awake all through the night, waiting for the call to dawn prayers after which she sleeps for a few hours. This type of lifestyle becomes the only option for her as she captures it thus:

This is the only way to live at present, to turn life upside down, to sleep, with the aid of sleeping pills, during the hours when life is being led, and to be awake with my thoughts of him when the world around me is sleeping: to turn life upside down and thus to be partly dead to it (Alifa, 1983:14).

This attests to the fact that this culture perceives women to be in Siamese relationship with their husbands. Therefore, high premium is attached to the presence of a man in this society. Invariably, it implies that a woman in such a context cannot live a fulfilled life devoid of her husband. Instead, depreciation and retrogression are the outcomes. Moreover, this cultural misnomer is further explored in the case of Muntaha, who at the death of her husband, hands over the keys to the cupboard to Hassan the first son of the family.

In a similar vein, Widad, a widow in 'the kite', had enjoyed the privilege of standing behind her husband Ahmed during prayers, but with his death she is done with prayers. According to her, she is shy "to ask one of the neighbors if she could join his family in their prayers" (Alifa 1983:109). Although the call to prayers continues every day, she tries to occupy herself with certain domestic chores. The cultural norm of women dependence on men is foregrounded in the incident of Mitawalli's proposal to Widad, his childhood sweetheart. Though Widad refuses Mitawalli's proposal, yet she dreams of him praying and she is standing behind him contented. This further justifies the cultural construction of women dependence on men, which becomes etched and plays out in the subconscious mind.

In the meantime, the premium value attached to men in this culture is further explicated. In 'Me and my sister', Dalal's mother disapproves her going out for a birthday party and according to her: "what will people say about us when we're on our own without a man in the house?" (Alifa, 1983:39). This society is structured in a manner such that the absence of a man in a home is an aberration. Strikingly, this perception by this African society further disposes a woman to having a man in her life by all means. The betrothal of Dalal's younger sister impacts negatively on Dalal; consequently, she becomes easily irritated and beats up her younger sisters at any slightest provocation. Her younger sister captures it thus: "From the moment that Sahar had got engaged before her she used to hit me and Nagwa and the servants for the slightest thing" (Alifa, 1983: 40).

Further, Dalal has been in school, but quits and stays home in anticipation of a prospective suitor. Instance such as this, contrasts with the goal of feminism, which advocates for self-reliance and empowerment. This jettisons the fact that women need to be developed, instead this practice depreciates and makes women redundant. Whereas they ought to develop themselves and in turn be a solution in and to their respective societies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the varying dimensions of portrayal of African women as construct of a prevailing relegating cultural order have been examined. Within this entangled context, African women play the second fiddle and are constantly recipients of humiliation, abuse, exploitation, and suffering from the men, seen as controllers, and occupants of the highest societal echelon. Moreover, these humiliating and unjustifiable treatments meted out on

African women go as far as affecting the values and perceptions of the children in the family. As clearly revealed, the existent trends are indicative of gendered relations of power and reinforced by the forces of patriarchal dominance and supremacy entrenched within these African societies.

Finally, although the text under discourse adopts a ‘mild model of feminism’, it unequivocally expresses the fact that there is need to challenge and abolish dogmas, traditions, and norms of culture which in any way accept, endorse, condone and advocate the maltreatment and subjugation of the women gender.

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