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Prostitution as Resistance to Human and Societal Brutalities

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Abstract

A reading of modern African novels reveals that some female heroines are presented as prostitutes. Prominent among them are Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Mara in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, Jagua Nana and Filia in Cyprain Ekensis *Jaygua Nana* and *People of the City* respectively, Wanja in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* to mention but a few. The truth is that some of these heroines take to prostitution as an easy way to escape poverty and life in the rural villages. However, others become prostitutes because they are victims of human and societal brutalities. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the heroines in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* as women in their struggle against human and societal brutalities. These writers in their novels shed some light on the power of women in resistance against oppression at the hands of men and establish that women can resist these brutalities.

Introduction

It has been observed that women all over the world are perceived from their roles as wife and mother. Traditional images focus more on the woman's domestic and sexual roles rather than on the part she plays in the society. Nawal El Saadawi and

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Amma Darko therefore see it as a duty to speak out in condemnation of the abuse of these sexual rights of women which often times, leads them into prostitution and reiterate women's power in resistance. The female novelists translate the male romanticized portraits to explore the frustrations of the heroines as women. In her discussion on prostitution in Kenyan woman's writing, Muriungi quotes Florence Stratton as contending that prostitute metaphor has been used by male writers to encode women as agents of moral corruption and contamination in the society. Firdaus and Mara are frustrated as they search for personal fulfillment in societies founded upon role expectation and social taboos. Saadawi for example, reverses the role of women as in the case of Firdaus who does not find fulfillment in marriage.

Writing on the social causes of prostitution, Glenn writes from her experience as a staff of the Charity Organization Society of New York as follows:

- the inability of the family to protect its adventurous members,
- the readiness with which standards of conduct fall under the impress of impersonal contacts,
- the losing struggle of the home to safeguard its young in competition with the paltry offerings of the street,
- the meagreness of the education for home making,
- the difficulties of adjusting people of markedly different racial habits,
- the loss of traditional educational sanctions,
- ignorance of the laws of sex,
- faithlessness to marriage vows,
- demoralizing work conditions
- poor pay,
- the home that is a sham,
- the home that is broken,
- the inability of the feeble-minded to protect themselves,
- the readiness with which both city and open country stagnate centres of pauperism and crime are allowed to breed their kind...

The conclusion one draws from this is that the causes of prostitution for Africa and the Western world are the same except for patriarchy which is predominant in Africa.

The Influence of Human Brutalities on the Predicaments of Firdaus and Mara

A prostitute as defined by *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language College Edition* (1200) is "A woman given to sexual intercourse for gain or hire; a harlot..." Prostitution therefore is the act or practice of prostituting; the business of a prostitute. The heroines in the novels under study are portrayed as prostitutes. They are what is called "Commercial sex workers".

Firdaus, an Egyptian, sees prostitution as the only job she can do and be satisfied. This is because the society to which she is born has so brutalized her that the only option left for her is prostitution. In the same way, Mara, the timid young girl from Naka goes to Germany to join her husband Akobi, only to be forced into prostitution to earn money for her husband. The issue is not whether these women are prostitutes or not, rather why are they into that business. The answer is simply- societal brutalities.

The story of Firdaus reveals from the beginning to the end of the novel that she is subdued by men. At a very young age, her playmate Mohammadain, abuses her sexually. She is a subject of abuse by her father and uncle. Much later, after her secondary education, the situation worsens in the hand of her husband, Bayoumi, Ibrahim, and her pimp Marzouk.

Firdaus' predicament as a woman in an African society, as the novel, reveals, started even when she is still a young girl. Her playmate Mohammadain, with whom she plays "bride and bridegroom," (14) molests her and she willingly allows him have sexual intercourse with her, without understanding the meaning of the game. One may overlook Mohammedain's sexual abuses on Firdaus but not that of her uncle who is an adult. This uncle presses Firdaus' tigh whenever she kneads dough and stops when someone is coming into the house. While living with this uncle in Cairo, he takes her to the Cinema and makes her watch blue films (22). On graduation from secondary school, at the age of 19, Firdaus' uncle conspires with his wife and forces her to marry Sheikh Mahmoud – a man three times older than she (43). Their reason for giving her to this sexagerian is because he would be able to pay a high dowry which her uncle would use to settle his debts. Surprisingly, Sheikh Mohmoud treats her like a slave. He rapes, beats and keeps her uncomfortable by finding fault with whatever she does (43-5).

In fact, Firdaus suffers from physical, psychological and emotional abuses in the hands of her husband. She laments as follows:

One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears (45). On one occasion, he hits me all over with his shoes. My face and body became swollen and bruised, so I left the house and went to my uncle (44).

Bayoumi the owner of a coffee-house, who offers her shelter after leaving her husband, is not different from the other men. He abuses her sexually daily and makes her do his domestic chores without paying her. Firdaus is more like a sex slave to Bayoumi and his friends. Having gone through these ordeals, Firdaus decides to run away and subsequently becomes a prostitute. Prostitution makes Firdaus free. She "sells her body" to men for a fee which enables her become rich and comfortable. She chooses

her men and rejects those she does not want, even kings, princes and government officials. She believes that if men can take advantage of her gender, she can as well make a living out of what they take from her without charges. No wonder Firdaus in her encounter with the Prince at the end of the novel tells him, “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” (99).

Similarly, Mara in Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* becomes a prostitute because her husband forces her to become one. When Mara joins her husband in the city, she is perplexed by his poorly furnished two-by-four room with a leaking roof and an only grass mattress for a bed (8). It did not take her long to discover that Akobi is very stingy. He beats her at the slightest provocation and subjects her to emptying refuse for families within the neighbourhood for a pay.

Amidst all those suffering, Mara has no option because her mother taught her that, “a wife was there for a man for one thing, and that was to ensure his well-being, which included his pleasure, even if momentarily...” (13). Despite all these, Mara still loves her husband and does her duty to him, including waiting outside while he bathed to attend to him while in the bathroom if need be, and to take the towel, bucket and soap dish to their room when he finishes bathing (12). Naka tradition demands that the man cares for his wife in return for respect and pleasure but Akobi does not care for Mara. He cheats on her, and spends his salary the way he likes while Mara takes care of their feeding. Their sexual relationship is more or less rape, because Akobi never cares about Mara’s mood, but is only interested in satisfying his urge. This he does on the grass mattress and orders her back to her mat on the floor where she sleeps, the moment he is done with her.

Barely three years after their marriage, Akobi leaves for Germany. He invites his girlfriend Comfort, after three months and Mara after two years of his stay there. There, he subjects Mara to prostitution having been married to Gritte, a German lady. Worse still, Akobi keeps Comfort in Germany and takes care of her bills. This he does through the money Mara realizes from prostitution. Events in Germany shows that Akobi invited Mara to Germany for the purpose of helping him raise enough money to maintain Comfort. This is why he blackmails her into working at Peepy – a sex-club after showing her the video coverage on how different men took turns to have sex with her (115). Worse still, Mara’s earning from prostitution is paid into Akobi’s bank account after Pumpy, the owner of the nightclub, has taken his share of the money. Some other African girls are in the same trade as Mara. Vivian for example, is Osey’s wife and is befallen by the same fate. Kaye Pumpy’s wife faces the same fate from her boyfriend until Pumpy marries and liberates her from his clutches.

Influence of the Society on the Predicaments of Firdaus and Mara

Firdaus' culture makes the woman a tool in the hands of men. In her family, a woman has no say. Only the man matters and should be cared for even when the woman is incapable of doing so. Firdaus' mother dishes out her husband's food before hers and her children's. Whenever there is no food in the house, she must provide food for her husband while her children go hungry. This is why she and all her children except Firdaus died in the novel. The society is responsible for this because it is bridled with poverty which leads to lack of food in many families. In the same way, Naka, Mara's village is *Beyon the Horizon* is a farming community where virtually everybody is poor. There, only children of the rich go to school so people like Mara have no such privilege. On the other hand, Mara's father is descended as a selfish man who only occupies himself with taking a new wife rather than training his children. In choosing husbands for her daughter, what matters to him is the number of cows the suitor brings as dowry instead of his character.

Accad as reported by Nwahunanya (341) in her study of prostitutes in Arab and North African fiction noted that "imbalance in sexual privileges which Koranic law allows man promotes prostitution. Koran allows men to marry up to four wives and have as many concubines as long as they are legally engaged in such activities. Note that the same Koran is against prostitution. Again, the African society in which both heroines come from teaches the girl child that she should adore and revere her husband and ensure his well-being. In the first place, marriage is a fact of African culture which a girl must get into whether she likes it or not.

Still in that study, Accad notes that the reasons why prostitution flourishes in Arab-Islamic societies is their sexually regressive nature; its provision of a way out for men who cannot pay for the legal forms of sexuality (-a wife or for concubines), and the fact that prostitution takes charge of the sexual life of young Arab males. The reasons above imply that prostitution in Arab societies has social acceptance so the societies promote and sustain it.

Secondly, the girl does not choose who she marries but such is the reserve of her father or uncle, if her father is no more. In Mara's case, her father contracted the marriage and only told Mara's mother when the suitor and his family arrived his compound for the negotiation. Mara's mother relays the news to her, "Your father has found a husband for you," she gasped, 'a good man' (4). Firdaus' marriage is also arranged by her uncle. Infact, when she learns she was going to be married off to Sheikh Mahmoud, she runs away from the house only to go back on discovering that the streets only exposes her to greater danger. Firdaus' uncle knows that her niece is only 19 years old while the suitor is above sixty years. The choice is proper to him because Sheikh can pay him a high dowry, up to a hundred pounds, or perhaps even two hundred, which he would use to solve some of his financial problems. In his discussion with his wife,

he says, "If he accepts to pay one hundred pounds, that will be sufficient blessing from Allah, I will be able to pay my debts..." (37).

The society in which both Mara and Firdaus live in is such that when a girl gets married, her family hardly listens to any complaint she gives against her husband. Her family expects her to bear every burden from her marriage without complaining. Firdaus once ran away from her husbands' house to her uncle's. Evidences from the novel indicate that her husband and her uncle see her as a liability. When she finally returns to her husbands' house, his outburst is as follows:

Why did you come back from your uncles' house? Couldn't he bear to feed you for a few days? Now you will realize I'm the only person who can put up with you, and who is prepared to feed you. (46)

Firdaus on her return is reminded that all husbands beat their wives and that it is men well versed in their religion that beat their wives. Her uncle's wife reminds her that, "a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (44).

The same kind of response comes from Maras' family when she once ran home to her parents in the village. She leaves her husband because her egg business was no longer thriving due to her fight with Esiania (27). On complaining to her husband, he threatens her and she runs home to her parents. She planned to tell her father to return her dowry of two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloth, beads, gold jewellery and two bottles of London Dry Gin. However, on getting home she discovers that nobody sympathizes with her. Her sister told her she needed not to have minded if people laughed at her and so should not have fought Esiamama that nicknamed her "bone shaker", because of her tyre slippers. On the other hand, her father had just married another wife with the dowry she hoped to be returned to Akobi.

It is surprising that a society that nurtures a girl to "obey and worship her husband (13) gives no such training to the boy who must love and care for his wife. In other words, the man is free to behave the way he likes, while the woman tolerates and bears it all. Mara succinctly remarks that her parents and family elders stringently repeated to her at the end of her marriage rites to "obey and worship your husband" (13).

The experiences of both Firdaus and Mara indicate that marriage has failed in its primary function to them. Both are battered by their husbands and the society that instituted marriage pretends not to notice the anomalies in their marriages. Marriage according to Olufunwa,

Is a state in which men and women are able to fully realize themselves because they have transcended the restrictiveness of social and cultural beliefs which warp the marital relationship. Though there may be

difficulties and challenges in marriage, but the couples have faith in its underlying strengths. They support each other and collectively weather the storm (105)

Contrary to this belief and principle about marriage, Firdaus and Mara are faced with a type of marriage where the man serves as lord and dishes out instructions for the woman. The husbands in these novels have little or no regard for their wives. The women's position in the homes are equivalent to those of maids. There is no husband and wife relationship. Even sexual relationship that ought to level the interdependence of men and woman to one another does not exist in the proper way. While Firdaus' husband more or less rapes her, so Akobi does to Mara. Marriage does not confer enhanced social and sexual status on the women.

Marriage has the basic function of regulating sexual relations and building families which are the basic unit of society without which society ceases to exist. This notwithstanding, none of the marriages discussed in these novels produced children yet nobody raises an eye brow. Akobi for example, feels that children are added burden to his family. He therefore beats up Mara when she reports to him that she is pregnant. He tactfully avoids contributing anything in the raising of the child from conception to delivery, even till he leaves for Germany. Mama Kiosk asks, "What African man got angry because his wife was carrying a baby?" (17). Firdaus' case is no different since her husband is equally stingy. He does not care whether their marriage results in procreation or not. All he is interested in while mating his wife is to satisfy his sexual urge. It should be noted that the society does not frown at Firdaus' childlessness throughout her stay with Sheikh Mahmoud. Writing about motherhood in Africa, Bungaro notes that "in most African societies, women are still defined by their ability to procreate and maternity is supposed to occupy a woman's perpetual interest" (68). This is exemplified by Buchi Emecheta through Nnu-Ego's devotion to the construction of her self as a mother. The story of Nnu Ego shows that in Africa, motherhood is portrayed as the means for female identity formation. Childlessness is a condition that handicaps the woman in Africa. On the part of Mara, the society seems not to be bothered that she had to care for her pregnancy and the newly born child without her husband's help. She like a typical African woman assume the role of father and mother to her sons. Even as a prostitute in Germany, she sends money to her brother for the up-keep of her children. Ngcobo (540) observes that "all these crimes against women stem from one fundamental principle - the social and sexual subordination of women" (540).

The heroines in these novels *Woman at Point Zero* and *Beyond the Horizon* are victims of society. Firdaus for example, would not have been married off to Sheikh Mahmoud if she got the job after leaving school. Her uncle gave her out for marriage because, he needed somebody to relieve him of the burden of catering for her. Mara on

her own part is not educated and does not have a skill. It is expected that a society that encourages early marriage should at least provide training for the girl child before marriage. The only training provided for the girl child is how to care for and obey her husband. In situations of this nature, the man looks down on the girl and subsequently brutalizes her without being challenged, owing to the girl's timidity.

The society is to blame for Akobis' quest for materialism. This is not to justify his action for other civil servants like him live and work in Africa and are able to carter for their families. The society as the novels reveals places wealth and travel abroad above all other things. In an attempt to gain recognition, people throw morals to the dog. The society therefore encourages the people to value wealth and things associated with western culture such as car, modern building, household equipment like television, radio, carpet etc more than any other thing, even children. Akobi has a Form Four General Certificate and rather than work in his father's farm, he goes to the city and picks up a job as messenger clerk at the Ministries. He, with his meager salary, keeps and maintains high class girls. When he realizes that his pay cannot maintain such type of girls he wants, he then opts to travel to Europe, work in the factories and earn huge amount of money. He is prepared to do anything in order to fulfill his dream. He first saves all his money for the trip, borrows money from his father, urges him to sell a piece of land and give him the proceeds, for his trip. He sells all Maras' jewellery, cloths and makes her work hard and earn more money for his travel. Akobi even subjects her to becoming a prostitute in order to enjoy himself. It is obvious that Akobi has no regard for Mara and had made up his mind on what she would do in Europe before inviting her. This is why he paid only part of the money to Osey, the agent that led her to Hamburg and expected him to receive the balance in kind from Mara. In order to survive in Germany and save herself from being blackmailed with the obscene video coverage, Mara accepts to become a prostitute. Firdaus, at the same time suffers so much from men and is forced into prostitution. It is not surprising that Firdaus and Mara become assertive and aggressive after they have been brutalized or betrayed by their men.

A reading through other Africa Literature shows that this has been the tradition. Rose and Dora in *Flora Nwapa's Women are Different* gained new consciousness after they had been victimized and betrayed by their men. This accounts for Nwahunanyas' observation about the image of the prostitute in post-colonial African literature when he writes:

...inspite of negative portraiture of the prostitute by writers, the prostitute is largely a misunderstood and misinterpreted person; not only in literatures from other parts of the world where the image of the prostitute first began to appear. It is prominently so also in post-colonial African literature. (339)

Nwahunanya further calls for more sympathy and understanding in appraising prostitutes bearing in mind the social structures which created her in the first place and still sustains her.

Conclusion

Firdaus and Mara belong to a society characterized by well-articulated and defined sexual roles. The novelists pursue their concern with the fate of women. They demonstrate that women in the African society remain poor, oppressed and sexually manipulated. The society equally recognizes male supremacy over the female from whatever angle one looks at it. Marzouk the pimp, tells Firdaus, “there are only two categories of people, masters and slaves” (95). Firdaus and Mara do not see their femininity as consisting of accepting and fulfilling their traditional obligations. They challenge the stereotypical ideas by becoming prostitutes. Through these characters, the novelists call upon society to review existing notions about female dependency. They also make it clear through their heroines that African women are not happy in their bondage but can revolt when pushed to the wall. The African woman after all, is a symbol of peace, respect and industry. Chukwukere describes the African mother in fiction as a symbol of love, security and serenity” (192).

Two things, however, are common to Firdaus and Mara – revolt and revenge. Firdaus revenges against male subjugation by stabbing and killing Marzouk her pimp, while Mara takes revenge on Akobi and Comfort by sponsoring their investigation and reporting them to the police. This results to Comfort’s deportation and Akobi’s imprisonment. For the heroines, just as Firdaus rightly pointed out, “A successful prostitute is better than a misled saint” (86).

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