

BEYOND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF SAFIYA ISMAIL YERO'S NAJA

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Abstract

The growing interest in the ways of sustaining cultural identity has attracted diverse approaches in scholarship. This is not unconnected with the discoveries on the vital roles culture performs in the society. One of these functions is exhibiting some patterns of behaviours that favours one gender over the other. Most people have become so overwhelmed by these behaviours that they hardly draw a boundary between culturally oriented practices from those of religion. However, at the receiving end of most of these practices are the women. Thus, the need to identify the boundary between the two becomes vital so that the society can redirect its behavioural patterns and thinking towards positive progression. Established women writers from the northern part of Nigeria like Zaynab Alkali, Razinat Mohammed, Balaraba Mohammad and the emerging voices of the likes Aziza Idris, Safiya Ismaila Yero, Aaisha Abdulkareem have tilted their focus on such issues in their works to enlighten the society. This paper focuses on examining how Yero's *Naja* explores culture from an Islamic-oriented environment. The study, through African feminist theory and hermeneutic approach finds that Yero's *Naja* richly depicts those traditional practices that have aided or averted the empowerment of (rural) woman especially due to their strong connection Islamic practices. The study concludes that the contemporary voices, just like their predecessors, are concerned with unveiling the cultural hurdles that hinder the progress of women and redefining the roles of these women for the betterment of women and the well-being society at large.

Keywords: *culture, women, society, writers, feminist*

Introduction

Naja by Safiya Ismail Yero is a contemporary fiction that has its context in the patriarchal African society where women are faced with challenges defined by the social, cultural and economic forces surrounding them. It is set in a rural community where gender roles are rigidly defined by the existing powers established over a long period of time. Besides, cultural practices, rather than financial constraints, have restricted women's access to education and jobs. These are vital in addressing the challenges faced by women. The study, therefore, examines Safiya Ismail Yero's novel *Naja*, with specific attention on the depiction of women's representation in their struggles to achieve livelihood and empowerment potentials. It looks at the struggles of the female characters in the novel and also the privileges enjoyed by the male folks in their community, whose span of influence includes allocating rights to their female counterparts whether as wives, daughters, or siblings. Central to the analysis is the examination of the life of the eponymous heroine, *Naja*, around whom nearly all characters evolve. It is primarily her courageous pursuit of liberty that the analysis centres on, but with some level of exploration of how the other women and girls in the story negotiate their own struggles for survival and dignity.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Feminist theory as developed by Elaine Showalter, which is broadly a kind of conflict theory that examines literary representations of inequalities in gender-related issues. The study takes up Feminism as theoretical framework because of the conviction that no struggle carried out by women anywhere pertaining the rights of women and girls as a group can operate outside the key philosophical aspirations of Feminism. The study further situates its choice under African feminist discourse, leaning on Oyewumi's (2003) assertion of Feminism been "primarily concerned with the liberation of women" (p. 2.). Gender hierarchies have existed in African societies and the subsequent

power inequities were established by patriarchy, hence. *African Feminism* is taken here to mean any context-specific attempt to dismantle the fake structures of power within African cultures established by patriarchy to subjugate women perpetually.

Hermeneutics as a Method

A hermeneutic approach is employed to read the text beyond its surface narrative. It is an approach to interpreting texts using contextual background of the reader and as well that of the author. Culler (2019), in “Hermeneutics and Literature,” considers the relation between hermeneutics and literary studies, arguing that literature presents the paradigmatic case for hermeneutics. As the form of writing that most requires interpretation, he argues, literature is also the form where the claim of the past on the present is most fully experienced (p. 304). This approach enables an engagement with how Yero uses literary representation to critique harmful cultural norms, interrogate religious misinterpretations, and foreground women’s agency.

Education and Empowerment as Gateway to Success

Yero presents education as the definitive solution to the problem of female oppression, and that when women get empowered with livelihood means; they are able to gain immunity from the oppressive disposition of the men in their lives and society. Throughout the novel, the single most important task that the girl Naja sets her eyes on is that of getting educated. Even when circumstances turn against her, and Naja finds herself in a forced marriage situation with a man older than her father, it is education that Naja recoils to as a coping mechanism: she starts a school. From an African feminist’s standpoint, women been educated indicate resistance against patriarchal domination as patriarchy paves it way through denying women education and every means of economic empowerment.

This emphasis aligns with Islamic teaching. Particularly, the first verses of the Qur’an that were reported to the Prophet

Muhammad (SAW) urging him and every Muslim to get educated. In this direction, in *Naja*, Safiya Ismail Yero makes a loud statement in certain terms that the most important path for women to end their oppression by men is for them to achieve adequate education and engage in sustainable livelihood pursuits. Yero therefore, reiterates that women's liberation is not antithetical to Islam but rooted in its foundational principles instead. Early in the novel, we are shown how the wives of Mallum Ilu ply different trades to support themselves by supplementing their household income, since their husband is busy marrying more wives and having uncontrolled children by them despite his inadequate resources. Through engaging their children in the hawking of various commodities, the women are able to supplement the family income. Yero writes about Daada, Naja's mother:

Daada, Naja's mother decided to spread her tentacles in the business industry by producing a host of other hawkable edibles for her children aside the fresh yoghurt and millet balls they were used to selling, hoping for greater sales and greater income. So, when Daada started making *danwake*, she entrusted the new product to Naja, while her younger ones hawked the *nono*. (12)

Through this, Yero projects the idea that one must start from somewhere. Sometimes, empowerment is inter-generational, hence the process of growth for the women in any given family may take a gradual advancement across generations of family members. This representation agrees with the feminist thinking that buttresses systemic, community-based empowerment. Education here can be seen as a culturally grounded feminist tool that challenges any male domination that is devoid of religious or communal values.

Forced Marriage and Its Tragic Consequences

Similarly, the opening sentence of Safiya Yero's *Naja* features a forceful memory crying for help: "Naja watched in silence as her family made preparations to bury her alive" (p. 1). In *Naja*, Yero draws urgent attention to a problem facing Northern Nigerian society: the commoditisation of women and girls. Naja's husband

was selected for her “by her father for a debt settlement” (5). The marriage therefore is a loveless one from the start, and not surprisingly, remains not consummated until a long time later when Ilu rapes Naja and before long, she escapes to Abuja with a benefactor, Auntie Zarah. In any case, society doesn’t appear to care about a woman’s need for love. Naja is told by the women on the day she is conveyed to Ilu’s house:

Please *Amarya*, your husband henceforth, shall be your father, your mother, your teacher, your boss, *kin jiko? mhm!* We are not telling you that that is going to be all nice and sweet, no. But you have to make an effort to make it worthwhile, you hear? *Ehen!* Be patient! Have patience! Drink patience and eat patience, do you understand? *Toh*. You must be obedient to your husband in everything henceforth – *inyinai, barinabari, kinjiko?*

First, we are presented with a rather dim view of marriage in these words, at least for the bride. The institution of marriage is represented as being starkly designed to favour the whims of men and women are enjoined to simply accept without question whatever is thrown at them. Just as a girl has absolutely no say in deciding who or when she would marry, likewise she has absolutely no voice in determining how the life of marriage is run. She is just advised to develop the highest imaginable level of docility and receptiveness to anything her husband turns out to be – monster or friend, criminal or honest, infantile or mature. To make matters worse, we are not presented with any episode where the husband is similarly enjoined to be good to his wife: the monologue about patience is therefore what it is – a monologue. It is directed, therefore, solely to the weakened sex: the female. The woman is simply tasked to do as she is told without question. From the African feminist’s perspective, marriage is a strong tradition that has existed from time immemorial. However, forced marriage is seen as a manifestation of women’s commodification within patriarchal systems, with women been exchanged for debt, alliance or man’s honour. Besides, one can interpret the idea of Naja been

'buried alive' in the opening lines of the novel as symbolic of the social death tied around women through forced marriage.

Women are reminded that they may not encounter the mercy of God in this life and the next if they fall out of the span of control of their husbands. A woman must be clean. She must cook well. She must treat her husband like a precious egg. After all, her access to paradise in the life beyond lies beneath his feet – implying that she must let him trample upon her if she is to make it. To make this work, women are portrayed in male-orchestrated and accepted narratives as weak and inferior-minded. Not surprisingly, a woman is expected to cry on her wedding day, and indeed, "it was a shameful thing for a woman not to cry on her first day in her matrimonial home" (4). Naja indeed does not cry, and this gets Murja, Ilu's senior wife, worried because of all the brides she has commissioned into Ilu's harem, this is a first.

Solidarity among Women

Feminism in Africa encourages female solidarity as a counter-hegemonic response to patriarchy, arguing that women's collective agency is vital in male dominated societies. Another prominent thematic issue highlighted throughout the novel is that since women alone understand the plight of fellow women, there is an inalienable need for women to provide psycho-social support to one another. This support system is shown throughout the story to be of critical significance for women to be able to maintain their sanity in a world where men's sole objective is to satisfy their own selfish needs irrespective of whom they use as tools towards achieving such needs. Naja herself articulates about her mission "I am just trying to help my fellow woman, that's all" (77). In her teaching in the Islamiyya school, she converts the school space into a sort of club where women come with their various traumas and cool off through leaning on one another. Naja uses the school also as a conflict resolution and mediation centre towards fostering unity among married women, especially competing co-wives. In handling the conflict, for instance, between Uwandiya and

Talatuwa, two wives of a man in the community, Yero writes of Naja's approach:

She had admonished the women that they should not see themselves as rivals, but as sisters, citing examples of how much closer they are to each other than even to the husband, without realising it. If one was about to deliver a child for example, who stood by her during labour? Was it not her co-wife first before any other person, including her husband? She had revealed to them that men enjoyed it when their wives were not at peace with each other, because it gave them a feeling of superiority and importance. She taught them to work together as sisters. If one was brought *suya* at night, she should stand up quietly and proceed to invite the other woman to join in the meal. There was no need to seek the husband's consent or to even inform him before calling the other sister. That, Naja told them, would solve the problem of one getting what the other did not get (76).

Indeed, when their husband finds that the conflict between his wives seems to have evaporated at once, he digs and discovers the reason behind the sudden peace in his home, and he confronts Malam Ilu, Naja's husband, to send a warning to her to desist from interfering in his domestic issues. In other words, he was indeed benefitting from the conflict and desired to see it perpetually go on. On his part, Malam Ilu tries to take advantage of the conversation to remind Naja of the need for her to acquiesce so that their marriage can be consummated. As usual, man tries to be man. Interestingly, the Islamic school operates beyond its literal function teaching and learning but becomes a feminist hub that encourages healing, resistance and conscious raising. With this, the text shows how cooperation among women dismantles the patriarchal strategies that thrive against women, thus affirming the feminist principle of women's unity destabilising patriarchy.

Eventually, Naja's women's group experience, back in her home town is consolidated at the end of the story as she collaborates with her benefactor and later friend, Aunty Zarah, to found a non-governmental organization (NGO) called Speak Out

Foundation, which is to operate in the thematic area of helping women fight domestic abuse (185).

During her long painful labour, all through which her family led by her father restrict themselves to traditional medicine that has no potency in the circumstances, Hauwa only gets rescued – albeit too late – when her husband's sister who happens to be educated visits and insists that she is taken to the hospital. Hauwa is operated on, she loses the baby, and within a month, she develops VVF just like Bibi in *Cobwebs*. When Hauwa finally experiences the cathartic effects of crying over the trauma caused by the multiple assault meted on her – early marriage, rape by her husband, early pregnancy, sickness throughout pregnancy, complications at birth, denial of medical care, surgery, loss of baby, contraction of VVF, accusation of adultery, stigma, divorce, and further stigma, all after twenty-five years – it is Naja who spurs this catharsis, and who enjoins her to freely let her emotions flow in order to get relief at last.

Violence against Women and Girls

In addition to the daily mental violence that most women and girls are subjected to, there is also widespread physical assault, often by the male folk in their lives – fathers, husbands, brothers. Feminist theory sees violence against women as structural rather than incidental, established in unequal power relations that allows male control over female bodies. The situation of Hauwa, one of Naja's students at the Islamiyya, is a case in point. Married forcefully to a cousin after her grandmother and father connive to trade her out in anticipation that if she behaves well her husband would take her grandmother on Hajj in Saudi Arabia, she is later accused of committing adultery with her father's servant Aminu – by the very grandmother who is desperate to find her guilty of anything. In consequence, her father unleashes violence upon her, as she recounts to Naja many years later:

Not that Aminu had ever done any of the things that grandmother had always insinuated, but I was embarrassed and

disappointed that father could actually believe her and even ask me such an embarrassing question. He took my silence for a yes, and pounced on me, kicking, slapping and hitting. You see, my mother was not supposed to interfere, and she didn't. But just as I raised my hands to protect my face against father's blows, I caught a glimpse of her, standing by the entrance to her hut, watching. Our eyes had met and locked for a split second, but it was enough for me. I saw more pain in her eyes than the pain of the blows I was receiving. I knew that she felt my pain and knowing that had taken the pain of the blows away. (103)

In other words, for each blow sent upon the daughter, the mother was also essentially being beaten and mocked by the disenfranchisement to get involved in a matter that affected her own flesh and blood. Relatively, this act of silence can be seen as a symbolic representation of the cultural reality among the Hausa and Fulani women especially in northern part of Nigeria. The women's silence is given multimodal interpretation that always favours the men. This is an act that the feminist school frowns at.

Violence against women and girls runs through the narrative. When Naja dares to talk back at her husband, Malam Ilu, and doing so especially in front of his other wives, the consequences were dire for her: he physically assaults her. Specifically, what gets him irked the most is when Bara'atu laughs at the ensuing drama. The next thing that followed was not possibly predictable to Naja. Yero writes:

Naja did not see it coming, until the day suddenly turned to a moonless night, accompanied by the peppery sting of the slap that landed across her face and blinded her. She was too shocked to cry. She reached out blindly and groped, until she got hold of his kaftan. She heard him demand that she let go of his sleeve, before the second slap landed on her cheek. (141)

Interestingly, although the assault leaves her face swollen, but it actually reminds her of her self-worth as no sooner afterwards she finds herself in the private meeting room of the Imam, from there to Auntie Zarah's guest house; and in no time, she embarks on a journey to the city – on her path to liberty.

Obviously, the worst instance of violence against a woman in the novel is seen in Mariya's case, one of Aunty Zarah's friends. The late Mariya's gateman visits Aunty Zarah's home and recounts to her what he feared has happened to their friend:

... he has heard Mariya and her husband arguing a few hours before she died. Amidst sobs, he told Aunty Zarah how he had always feared for Mariya, how her husband used to yell and beat her senseless. He knew because he was always the one that took her children to school and back whenever she acquired bruises after being beaten. Sometimes, he helped in buying pain killers for her (183).

For whatever wicked reason, Mariya's husband murders her in cold blood, dumps her body in a well and fabricates the account that she had mistakenly stepped on the lid covering the well and tumbled into it and died. This account by Yero is again an urgent call for action by society to address the problem of domestic violence, especially violence against women. Mariya's killing shows an extreme form of patriarchal violence that exposes the fatal consequences of normalising domestic abuse and silencing women voices. The practice is not welcome in Islam, after all, as the Islamic reformer Usman Dan Fodio states in an argument against oppressive customs of married men:

... they fail to dress, house, and feed their wives adequately, they show favouritism between one wife and another and make unwise and hasty marriages without due thought.... They revile their wives and beat them excessively... they do not educate them and if they divorce them, they spread malicious tales about them thereby ruining their chances of remarriage... others refuse to divorce unhappy wives.... My goodness! All these are evidence of ignorance. (Quoted in Shehu,7).

Clearly, any act of violence against women is unacceptable in Islam. Women on their part are encouraged to speak out about their travails rather than wait until it is too late. Mariya has friends in her life, especially Chinelo and Aunty Zarah, but in spite of their closeness and regular association, she keeps her grafts from them. To

demonstrate how widespread the silence of women on intimate partner violence is, Auntie Zarah herself as a lawyer is not free from it. She is assaulted by her legislator husband but she does not tell her friends about it. It takes enormous courage for her to seek and obtain a divorce from him.

Injustice against Women and Girls in Polygamy

Polygamy as an institution is also depicted as being rife with injustices, as men play around with women, governed purely by personal interest. It is crafted to satisfy the ego and libidinal demands of men; the satisfaction of their desires and caprices rather than the actual provisions of the sharia regarding having more than one wife. Polygamy in this part is fuelled primarily by patriarchal goal which reproduces gender inequality practiced inside ethical and egalitarian frameworks.

Not all daughters are enrolled in school. When Naja gets enrolled in school, it is primarily because her father finds her to be like a boy: “It is a pity that all this intelligence has to go to waste in a girl” (7), he tells Malam Ilu before he hands her to him as debt payment in marriage. Likewise, such is the worth of a male child compared to a female that the Turabe are willing to let their son get a wife from another tribe, but would not let their daughter be married off into other tribes (9). Husbands are portrayed as marrying more wives and having more children than they can fend for, and after this crisis has been created solely by them, they let their wives and children eat inadequate, insufficient, and innutritious food while they themselves go out and eat delicious meals. Malam Ilu is a case in point, who goes out to eat well while leaving the wives and children to struggle with poorly prepared kamu. This criticises the misuse of culture and power which is embedded in the patriarchal African context.

Conclusion

On the whole, the text, Naja, has given a representation of the northern Nigerian society where culturally constructed issues

attached to practices like marriage, polygamy and patriarchy have created obstacles that hinder the rise of women both in the rural and urban areas, thus, undermining their dignity. This in a way, shows how the novel is used as a corrective mechanism for identifying gender injustice created by the male agency. Through the experiences of the female characters, practices as forced marriage, domestic violence and economic deprivation have been identified as mechanisms for sustaining patriarchy. However, the ability of the eponymous heroine to overcome most of the challenges linked to these issues indicates a transformation that gives hope to the empowerment of women and advancement of the society. Naja's commitment to attaining freedom, education and empowerment reveals her ability to negotiate, interrogate and transcends cultural practices disguised as religion.

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