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Family Failure and Orchestrated Agonies in El-Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero and Nurudeen's from a Crooked Rib

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Abstract

The family, as one of the key agencies of socialization, has a pivotal role to play in the character formation of any child. The belief system of any family into which someone is born becomes part of the person's cultural identity. Such system, usually provided by the parents and other persons with whom the youngsters share immediate contact, shapes their ideas about the surrounding world and also gives them certain ideas about themselves. Psychological identification with the groups to which individuals belong (membership groups) or to which they want to belong (reference groups) is another strong force in the personality formation of any child. This paper examines the various ways through which the membership and reference groups (family inclusive) of Firdaus and Ebla combine to offer them the unhealthy cultural/societal disposition, which ultimately result in sheer damage of their personality. From the psychoanalytic approach to literature, this study, therefore, employs the Frustration Aggression theory to examine the causes and consequences of the maladjusted behavior of the protagonists of El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* and Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*. This theory was originally formulated as Frustration Aggression hypothesis by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears in 1939. It states that the occurrence of aggressive behaviour always presupposes the existence of frustration; put the other way, the existence of frustration always leads to some kind of aggression.

Key Words: Family failure, Orchestrated Agonies, Exploitation, Frustration, Maladjustment

Incidentally, El - Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* and Nuruddin Farah's *From A Crooked Rib* are set in two African societies – Egypt and Somalia and on two families that practice the Islamic religion. The two works portray

how the average African society, especially the muslims, would, unfortunately though, stigmatise and confine women to certain roles through the figments of the imagination. By such reasoning, women are not to venture

into areas which are considered masculine because it is thought (though erroneously) that they are inferior to men in intelligence. Firdaus, for instance, earnestly desires to follow his uncle to El Azhar in Cairo for the purpose of acquiring some basic education, but her uncle would explain, as follows, that studying at Cairo was men's exclusive reserve:

"What will you do in Cairo, Firdaus? And I would reply: "I

Will go to El Azhar and study like you". Then he would laugh and explain that El Azhar was only for men. And I would cry, and hold on to his hand, as the train started to move. But he would pull it away with a force and suddenness that made me fall flat on my face (p. 16).

Consequently, Firdaus shrinks into the abyss of loneliness; the outright refusal to grant her request to be educated coupled with the cruel push by someone she considers a cherished uncle makes her wonder a lot about herself while retracing her steps with bent head. So she queries her identity as well as her father's identity and wonders if she would spend her whole life sweeping dung from animals,

carrying manure on her head, kneading dough, and baking bread. Even back in her father's house, she feels strange and stares at the mud walls as though she had never been there. Feeling lonely in the midst of many people, she thinks aloud:

...have I suddenly dropped from the skies or emerged

from somewhere deep down in the earth to find

myself in a place where I did not belong, in a

home which was not mine, born from a father who

was not my father and from a mother who was not

my mother? Was it my uncle's talk of Cairo and the

people who lived there that changed me? Was I really

the daughter of my mother or was my mother

someone else? (P.16).

In this way, the poor Firdaus is surrounded by strange and frustrating experiences that naturally lead to awkward and aggressive behaviour. Though brilliant and very

ambitious to be educationally empowered, she is made to believe that educational empowerment is men's exclusive reserve. From her father to her uncle and finally to all the men she encounters in her public life, she sees human beings who can pass for nothing but cheats, exploiters and, in fact, a terror to her poor life. Similarly, Ebla of *From A crooked Rib* shares a similar pathetic family plight. Being prematurely orphaned, she and her younger brother grew up in the care of their grandfather. She flees from her nomadic encampment rural Somalia when she discovers that her grandfather has secretly given her out in marriage to a very elderly man in exchange for camels. The decision to leave her grandfather and brother is not an easy one. Enveloped in restlessness of mind, she wonders what abandoning her aged grandfather would look like. However, she ends up rationalizing that if her grandfather would exchange her for camels, then she would feel free to run away from him. Hear her thoughts:

...But there is no problem without a solution. Maybe it

Is good that I should stay to take care of my grandfath

er, to see to it that he dies peacefully and is buried peac

efully. But should I think of someone who does not thi

nk of me? It is he who has given my hand to the old

man, exchanging me for camels (p.7).

Underlying the abnormal experiences to which Firdaus and Ebla are exposed is the unexplainable and unhealthy cultural position that women are not meant for educational and political exploits. In fact, they are considered generally too weak for any dignifying or prestigious position in the society. On the contrary, Science has observed that there are no innate biological or psychological reasons why girls or women should not do as well as boys or men if exposed to equal opportuns and equipped with adequate motivation. This is attributed to the well known fact that generally, every human being (male or female) has 42 chromosomes in the gene. Along this line, Osuntokun, therefore, observes:

The apparent inferiority that may be observed in women must be mainly attributed to the environmental manipulation of nursing their intelligence through negative self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotyping and stigmatisation by the society (4).

So, considering their roles as the producers of all human resources in the society, the quality and quantity of children they bear must embrace a wholesome development, which is a pre-requisite for national development and self reliance. Their socialisation roles towards their children require, in effect, that they must have the kind of orientation which prepares them for this unique role. In the same vein, Nwosu – Okoli observes: “when illiteracy is perpetrated among the women folk, the totality of the nation’s offspring will, undoubtedly, exhibit some traits of personality abnormality and imbalance”.

From the father of Firdaus to every other male human being she encounters, she finds an excuse to wonder if it is a crime to be a female human being. For instance, her mother receives a cruel beating from her father at the death of any male child of the family while he is hardly moved by the death of any female child (p. 18). Of course, his children die so frequently due to malnutrition coupled with lack of ventilation in the room where the children are packed; the suffocating environment renders them vulnerable to any infectious diseases. Her father happens to be too irresponsible to provide the basic needs of the family. So Firdaus keeps wondering the reason her father would have for joining the daily

procession of men who go to the mosque to worship the holy Allah. Apart from her father, she finds reasons for dismissing every other male creature she encounters as an exploiter, who would make her serve as a mere tool for one ugly role or the other. For instance, at an early stage, Mohammadain would make her raise her galebeya and engage her in the romantic game of playing as husband and wife whenever she goes to fetch water or work in the fields (14). Still at an early stage of her life, her uncle would touch the sensitive parts of her body, arousing himself and making her feel aroused even though she didn’t know anything about it (14 – 15). Sheikh Mahmoud, her so called husband, uses her as a near slave and is never happy to watch her eat well. Firdaus is given out at the tender age of eighteen to Sheikh Mahmoud, who is already in the sixties, having retired from civil service. She hates her for avoiding the stinking dropping under his chin and almost always raped her to satisfy his sexual urge, disregarding her mood and feelings (43) . According to his Islamic belief, after all, the feeling is his while the obeying is hers.

In the average African, especially Muslim world, generally, the woman has no part to play in decision making, including decisions that affect her. In Alkali’s *Cobwebs & Other*

Stories, for instance, Yabutu, the eldest wife complains (but certainly not aloud) of her husband's insensitiveness in trying to acquire another wife even when he does not have enough resources for fending for the wives and many children he already has. On the other hand, some right-thinking men are able to discover that some women are very useful in decision making as well as general management of human and material resources. In this regard, the then colonial governor-general of Nigeria, Lord Frederick Lugard, according to Azuonye (1992), is forced to make the following observations about the average Igbo (African) woman:

She is ambitious, self-reliant, hard-working and independent"...The women's councils (approved and trusted by men) enact laws for the protection of crops and enforce them by suitable penalties, including ridicule (2).

Mahmoud's insensitiveness is seen reflecting in the way he mistreats Firdaus, giving her the place of a valueless slave. Her so - called marriage is more or less a 'trade by barter' which her uncle's wife lures her uncle to do with her. Her uncle's wife makes her husband

agree to collect a hundred or two hundred pounds from Sheikh Mahmoud for solving their family problems. Rather than ask him for a loan, her uncle's wife suggests the idea of selling Firdaus in exchange for money in the guise of getting her married to Sheikh. Being a bit considerate of the fact that he is the only surviving blood relation and guardian for Firdaus and also appreciative of the fact that Firdaus was a very brilliant student with a bright future, he is reluctant to give her away for a life that would likely spell doom. His wife, on her part, remains so desperately bent on it that she would even make him choose between his niece (Firdaus) and their marriage. At this point, Firdaus' uncle gives in to the satanic plot of disposing of his niece for some material wealth in the pretence of arranging a marriage for her.

Ebla, on her part, is fated to a similar ordeal in the hands of her cousin, Gheddi. Whereas Firdaus' uncle did away with Firdaus to please his wife, Ebla's cousin is rather obsessed with the idea of giving her away to Dirir, a sickly broker just for a thousand shillings. The poor, Ebla learns of it from a widow who lives next to her uncle's house, and, of course, runs for her dear life. Having run away from the village to free herself from such earlier arrangement by her grandfather, she finds it difficult to run back home. So she

ends up eloping with Awill, the widow's nephew. Consequently, she becomes a property in the custody of Awill, who takes her virginity and marries her a day later without paying the waji fur fee to anyone.

Surrounded by frustrating experiences from home and society, Firdaus and Ebla give in to varieties of aggressive behaviour, which expose them to confusion and hopelessness, and invariably lead them into seeing meaninglessness in almost everything about life on earth. In some cases, their aggression is obviously misplaced due to their inability to see the difference between the guilty and the innocent human beings. Being exposed almost always to people who exploit and abuse them in various ways, they tend to regard every other human being as exploitative and generally unkind.

Their reaction and general disposition towards their hostile society is owing to the fact that unjustified frustration produces more hostile aggression than justified frustration. Nevertheless frustration can affect the inclination to act aggressively, even if it is not perceived as arbitrary (Berkowitz, 1988; Dill & Anderson, 1995). A clear instance of this inclination to act aggressively is seen in Ebla's decision to get married to Tiffo, a man who already has a big family

with grown up children. Awill, her husband, leaves Mogadiscio about a week after their marriage for Italy via Rome. The ministry under which he works sends him for a training program that lasts for three months. Though he makes provision for Ebla's upkeep and also entrusts her to the care of Asha, Ebla feels devastated to watch the photograph in which Awill is featured with a white lady.

...although she could not read anything, she opened the envelope.

In the envelope, there was a long letter, which was only black

Strokes, stripes, lines, cross – wise lines and drawings, as far as she

was concerned. But there was a photo; it showed Awill and ano

ther woman. The woman had nothing on except a swimming suit,

her belly was showing, and Awill's hand was resting on her breas

ts (110).

Jama, who brings a letter from Awill forgets to remove the photo before delivering the letter to Ebla. When he realizes his mistake, he winces, looks away and quickly disappears from the scene. Asha, who is to read and interpret the letter for Ebla, appears as Jama turns to leave. She wonders the reason for Jama's sudden disappearance, but

she is yet to hear it all from Ebla (p.110). Ebla's case becomes more complicated by the fact that she can neither read nor write. So she depends on Asha's interpretation of the letter and the photo for her next line of action. Based on Asha's interpretation and advice, she feels betrayed by her newly married husband and also makes herself available for marriage to the already married Tiffo who was also old enough to be her father. Of course, Asha is quick to arrange the second marriage for her because she has the intention of using Ebla to make money from Tiffo, whom she describes as a very wealthy man (111 – 112). While preparing her for going to bed with Tiffo the very first time, Asha tutors her on how to play some smart 'bed game' on Tiffo.

'Uncover your face,
here is the money, said Tiffo. Ebla forgot
that Asha had
instructed her just to uncover a little of her
face so that she could
see if there was money. She uncover
ed her face completely
and Tiffo seized a piece of her cloth
and dragged it towards
himself. Strangely enough, he laugh
ed and laughed and
laughed, pulling Ebla's dress... (115).
In sheer naivety, Ebla loses that game to
Tiffo, who proves too smart for her in such

matters. So she becomes unable to collect a hundred Somali shillings, as instructed by Asha. In any case, he keeps placing Ebla on some money during his subsequent visits.

Ebla's aggressive action against Awill stems, primarily, from her inability to understand the content of the letter which her husband sends to be read and interpreted for her by Asha, a widely exposed woman. This, of course, is explained by the fact that in her Somali world and in fact, in the African world of those days, illiteracy is perpetrated among the women folk, and this makes their women exhibit some traits of personality abnormality and imbalance. Being so crippled intellectually, socially and otherwise, Ebla falls a prey to the mischievous advances of almost everyone that comes into her life. Even Tiffo, who acts another husband in the absence of Awill, refuses to let his wife and grown - up children know that he has another wife (Ebla). Tiffo, therefore, plays a secret game with her, and this complicates her agonies when she finds out that Tiffo has no plan of making her a confirmed member of his family. Little does she know that Asha's insinuation that she is abandoned for a white woman is because Asha intends to use her as a sex tool for

collecting money from any man, like Tiffo, whom she believes has plenty of money. This case of trafficking by an elderly woman and a supposed guide also features in the case of Firdaus. Sharifa of *Woman at Point Zero* unscrupulously uses Firdaus for the same purpose until providence offers the poor Firdaus an escape route out of Sharifa's prison yard. From the time of her escape from Sharifa's sexual terrorism through the period of her lone struggle for survival till the time she ends up in jail, she encounters variety of men of ugly character. So she generalizes that men are a nasty terror, her father, uncle and husband inclusive. In her sheer bitterness with the world of men, she tears the three pound notes she receives from the Arab prince, and declares that she is tearing the ugly world of the mischievous men off her life. This evidence of maladjustment is triggered off by the chains of agonies which she sustains from the bruising relationships with men of various categories. Marzouk, a heartless pimp tries to kill her with a knife, but she outsmarts him and rather kills him with the same knife. When the police ask if she's a criminal as alleged, she answers: "I am a killer, but I have committed no crime; like you, I kill only criminals".

In the case of Firdaus, we have clear instances of retaliatory behaviour, where

aggression is directed towards the source of the frustration as well as displaced aggression, where the aggressive behaviour is directed towards individuals who are not responsible for the interference with the attainment of a goal. For instance, Marzouk, the pimp, infringes grossly on her freedom and also boasts that it is impossible for her to regain freedom. She tries to leave, Marzouk slaps her; with deep – seated aggression, she returns the slap in a more forceful way. Marzouk brings the knife he uses for injuring and killing people; in self defence, she collects his knife and uses it to kill him instead of watching him kill her (95). However, she transfers the aggression of that incidence to the Arab prince whom she encounters on walking away from Marzouk's cage. She collects an agreed pay of three thousand pounds from the Arab prince, after the home service delivery, and to the shock of the prince, she tears all the notes in pieces and explains that she's tearing the world of men off her life. Unaware of her traumatic experiences which gradually culminate in a very passionate hatred for men, the prince mistakes her for a princess who doesn't really need money from strangers. As a way of sounding pleasant, the prince describes her as a gentle lady, but she proves that she's not one by releasing a cruel slap on his face. As

the prince wonders the reality of it all, she tries to release a second one, but he screams and police arrives to his rescue (99-100). His cruelty towards the prince is a clear evidence of misplaced aggression. In fact, her life experiences naturally lead her into some psychological transformation, which defines her new personality. Even the police who arrest and interrogate her seem unable to appreciate that she's battling with unconscious memories and conflicts which she cannot report directly. Hers is a psychological battle against all men because of the ugly and devastating experiences she has been having with men all her life, beginning with her father and her uncle. Therefore, her mental construct of any human being called a man is 'wild animal that must be slain'. Describing how happy she is for killing Marzouk, the pimp and also how available she is to kill more of them, she says:

Sometime ago, one of them came to me and said: "There's

hope for your release if you send an appeal to the presi-

dent, asking him to pardon you for the crime you commi

tted". 'But I don't want to be released', I said 'and I want

no pardon for my crime'....'If I go out once again to the

life which is yours, I will never stop killing (p.101).

CONCLUSION

Since the human behaviour is as a result of various degrees of interaction between genetic and environmental factors, a complete account of any human being should be able to come to terms with social and biological natures. So, the continuity of humanity, as it were, requires that one acquires a specific psycho-social and cultural design for living. In this way, the child learns to function in a pattern which is considered appropriate by the more experienced members of the social group. As evident in this study, the family, which happens to be the basic agent of socialization, fails and tactically pushes Firdaus and Ebla to the vulnerable street. The horrendous street life, with its strange and slave-like relationships, becomes the available means of survival for the poor girls. Incidentally Ebla and Firdaus perceive, in the course of their struggle for survival, some maladjustive forms of behaviour as helpful and become hooked to it. Oddly enough, even the behaviour they consider helpful in their state of utmost

helplessness, turns out more frustrating than ever, and naturally triggers off the aggression that makes them unable to see anyone as reliable in the world of indescribable cruelty which the society, especially the family, offers them. So, the failure of their families naturally comes with disastrous effects on them and the society at large. This work, therefore, advocates healthy parentage and sound family relationships, which naturally protects every family member from all forms of societal abuse.

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