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## Woman Hero of the Arab World

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### ABSTRACT

History and myth have dominantly projected images which render women secondary and which depict them in restricted role models, reinforce inequalities and discriminations. Women have been alienated from their own bodies by patriarchal domination and decision-making. Women who reject traditional female roles have been stigmatized as deviants rather than viewed as innovators or pioneers, carving out additional options and possibilities. Such exceptions and deviations from this trend are few and far between. Yet it needs to be recognized that there is an innate split even in the projected conventional images. Rebelliousness is present in their attitudes and few women have adopted it in the past. Nawal El Saadawi, in her portrayal of her grandmother in *A daughter of Isis*, shows how a woman emerges out of the designated position and exhibits the courage to rise against the brutality which the male world perpetrates against the female world. She asks relevant questions in this regard and interrogates the human situation.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Individualism, Freedom.

Traditionally women have been coerced to accept others' definitions of situations. They have not been given socially acceptable options beyond strict conformity to patriarchal values. History and myth have dominantly projected images which render women secondary and which depict them in restricted role models, thus reinforcing inequalities and discriminations. Women have been alienated from their own bodies by patriarchal domination and decision-making. Women who reject traditional female roles have been stigmatized as deviants rather than viewed as innovators or pioneers carving out additional options and possibilities. Such exceptions and deviations from this trend are few and far between. Yet it needs to be recognized that there is an innate split even in the projected conventional

images. Rebelliousness is present in their attitudes and few women have adopted it in the past.

Women have risen above their limitations in various ways by deconstructing patriarchal structures through individual questionings. Women have a primary responsibility to be true to themselves and assist other women in that task. Identity awareness and identity empowerment are mechanisms that contribute towards this ideal. The past cannot be rejected. Through a process of reinterpretation and interrogation, new images need to be created and new histories need to be written. The search for a new image/identity has brought another side of the female identity to the fore and highlighted the moral superiority of feminine qualities amidst female aggression. If women change

their direction in life, the very foundation of a society is expected to undergo the crucial transformation. Relationships and social structures become balanced, as the total life satisfaction is being increased for all. Women's commitments and behaviour generate new patterns of gender egalitarianism and individual and social fulfillment.

Women feel confident of their own values and judgements and exploit their own gifts instead of trying to emulate the masculine mind, which has treated women as inferior and unequal.

Womanpower means the self-determination of women, and that means that the baggage of paternalist society will have to be thrown overboard. Woman must have room and scope to devise a morality which does not disqualify her from excellence, and a psychology which does not condemn her to a status of a spiritual cripple. The penalties of delinquency may be terrible for she must explore the dark without any guide..... (Greer 130-131)

Nawal El Saadawi, the Egyptian writer, doctor, feminist and social activist as she is known today, in her portrayal of her grandmother in *A Daughter of Isis*, shows how a woman emerges out of the designated position and exhibits the courage to rise against the brutality which the male world poses against the female world. She asks questions and interrogates the human situation.

Saadawi learnt her first lessons in philosophy, religion and politics from her paternal grandmother, called Sittal Hajja, who inspired her. Sittal Hajja had not read *The Quran* and had not been to school, but she said "we are not slaves and Allah is justice. People have come to know that through reason" (DI 7). Her son, Saadawi's father, used to repeat what his mother said.

Sittal Hajja was only ten when she was married to Habash. Every husband had to beat his bride on the wedding night. This was the custom in the village. "She had to try the taste of the stick before she could sample the taste of his food so that she would know that Allah was above and her husband below and she should be ready for a beating if she did not do as she was told" (DI 31). She lay on a mat and the blows of the cane rained on her.

"...man demands in his arrogance to be loved as he is, and refuses even to prevent the development of the sadder distortions of the human body which might offend the aesthetic sensibilities of his woman. Woman, on the other hand, cannot be content with health and agility: she must make exorbitant efforts to appear something that never could exist without a diligent perversion of nature. It is too much to ask that women be spared the daily struggle for superhuman beauty" (Greer 293).

After three or four years she gave birth to her first child- a male- Saadawi's father. Sittal Hajja lived with Habbash for eighteen years and gave birth to fifteen children out of which only six survived. She had become a widow at twenty eight. But she did not shed a tear for her husband. After the funeral she knelt down to thank Allah for ridding her of her husband. She then swore that till her death she would not allow any man to come near her because since her wedding night she had hated all men. She was a tall figure, who held her head upright as she walked through the village. She would shout at the village headman, supposed to be powerful, to "come out and speak to me. I am Mebrouka, the daughter of the woman from Gaza and my head can reach as high as the head of any man in this village" (DI 34). The open rebuke and challenge is the emergence of ineradicable grief that evolves into rebelliousness. Such rebelliousness is not that which would dissolve after the heat of provocation is over. But it is that which would withstand over- testing times till the agony and pain of women's suffering is abated and cleansed absolutely out of the mind- not by any tentative relief for it had seeped into the social system over the years. But by such solutions as the 'upbringing of her daughters/children' here as in the case of Hajja which is a pivoted move towards a crowning victory for Islamic feminists and their likes, the author upholds female freedom.

Sittal Hajja owned a piece of land, which she had inherited from her mother, the woman from Gaza. After her husband's death, she became fully responsible for her family. She laboured on her piece of land alone from sunrise to sunset, for twenty long years. With this earning she managed to educate her son. The money could have fetched her another piece of land, but she said "... the miserable life of a peasant does not change. Education is the sweetest of all things. It

opens the door to a job in the Government and helps a man to become full in his clothes" (DI 73). She was an illiterate peasant woman. Throughout her life she had not read a single book, not even *the Quran*. But she had the strength which seemed to be inborn. She once told the village headman, "I know God better than you, Omda. God is justice, and people have come to know that by using their reason" (DI 72). There were many widows in the village but she was much stronger than any of them. The women have to work through crises to move further or they have to go through suffering and death to come to a new life, a resurrection which may require a rebellion or revolution in order to give form to that new life. As Germaine Greer points out, "Perhaps the plight of our society has become so desperate and so apparent that women can no longer be content to leave it to other people. The enemies of women have blamed such circumstances for female discontent. Women must prize this discontent as the first stirring for the demand for life; they have begun to speak out and to speak to each other" (Greer 15). One day, the chief of the village guards beat her two year old son who came home bleeding from his nose. On seeing this, Sittal Hajja rushed out of the house like an angry tigress. "She found the chief of guards. She lifted her rough hand high up in the air and shouted 'The one who can beat my son has not yet been created' then brought it down on his face with all her force" (DI 74). The little gestures of rebellion, of defiance become gestures of strength. Humanism or the supreme interest of man is the central motive. What is also implicit in their writings are the sacrifices and selflessness which form an integral part of a woman's make-up.

Sittal Hajja proves herself to be a heroic woman who commanded respect. For it is at such instances the seething rebelliousness takes its physical manifestation which is strange and yet unknown to the world of men. The assault is not merely a retaliation of the pain it inflicted on the child, but more a reaction to the underestimation that men usually have about women that she is incapable of physical assault as the society has so groomed her and firmly believes that the woman would dare not step beyond the usual expected retaliatory forms, for, if that is the case, then, that too becomes a subject of criticism against women. Hajja swims against the current and it is a noticeable 'trend-setter' in a highly conservative Islamic world.

Nawal El Saadawi, through her writings questions and resists the gender-specific diaspora. Her writings themselves are a type of audible silence in the sense that silence is broken by the presentation of silence. With such presentations the silent women, engaged in the inner bitterness, wage protests and challenges their marginal position against the trendy culture. When the sufferings of the silent women are articulated, more listeners are attracted and the silence is accordingly changed into utterances. Interests of the woman and her welfare have drawn international attention and a new feminist chorus is audible worldwide. New chores (writing, for instance) are self- designed by her to draw herself a prominent and competent identity that was denied to her. This is done at a progressive pace that seems to need no rest till the goal is achieved. This in fact is a chain reaction which now reverberates from nation to nation unshackling the women who were bound by the sick sense of dominance that men were pervaded within a desperate move to oppress all that defies his supremacy.

As Gerda Lerner, in *The Female Experience* rightly observes thus:

"This process of creating feminist consciousness has something, but by no means everything to do so with the quest for women's rights, equality and justice – it has a great deal to do with the search for autonomy. Autonomy means moving out from a world in which one is born to marginality, by others – into a world in which one acts and chooses, aware of a meaningful past and free to shape one's future"(14).

They are expressions of the aspirations of the poor, the exploited and the dominated in their long march towards freedom, justice and the humanization of all women.

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