

Woman in the Works of Ben Jelloun

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ABSTRACT

Tahar Ben Jelloun, French writer of African origin is one of the acclaimed and innovative figures of the modern literature. A quick glance at his story works indicates that the approach to woman's culture was considered as a part of world outlook at the time of his activity. "Woman" appears with a different image in his outstanding works. In other words, his story works reflect the image of woman in traditional communities like a mirror. Women of his stories, who live in male-dominant community, are divided in two groups: Most of them ignore their existence and accept men's superiority over them. They are under men's lingual influence and overcome by their husbands' criteria and values. The second group not only rejects the male-dominant society and gender inequality but stands up against men's violence and despotism. The authors of this article try to analyze the reaction of these two groups of women in two of the famous works of Ben Jelloun titled, "With Shameful Eyes", and "Child of Soil."

KEYWORDS: woman, authority, culture, traditional society, Morocco

INTRODUCTION

Literature is the clear mirror of the thoughts and beliefs that exist in society and this is an undeniable principle. Thus, one of the manifest issues in literature is the issue of women who have always been the symbol of innocence in traditional societies.

Woman and her role were among the hot issues during mid 20th century and a notable notion in the works of Ben Jelloun. He wrote works such as *Tired Man*, *With Shameful Eyes*, *Wreaths of Misery* and *Child of Soil* all of which have been awarded several times. Most of his works including *Child of Soil* and *With Shameful Eyes* portray a society in which men marginalize women with the slogan of "misogyny".

<< The novel genre has always provided the best ground for dealing with social problems of communities but in the 20th century some writers have realized its necessity more than ever; for it has a much deeper indirect impact due to creating fictional atmosphere on the one hand and the number of audience on the other hand. This is the very thing needed by the world of literature: an arousal for the wrong social actions.>> Ben Jelloun, as a realist writer, seeks to portray the realities of the Moroccan society in the atmosphere of story. << The realist writer tries to transmit real experience to the reader; so he embarks on the exact description of details, humans and conducts. >> (Dad 155). In his works Ben Jelloun, too, tries to somehow recreate the ailed system ruling over the African society.

If we have a close look at the contents of Ben Jelloun's literary works we will find that the historical, social and cultural realities are manifested in the form of the works that, besides having artistic and literary bases, enjoy contents and concepts that indicate many socio-cultural features of the historical eras of African countries. Ben Jelloun's take of his surrounding issues urged him to create his works and made him choose notions that are always thought-provoking for all.

His story works, which have a very plain base, are social and critical stories with ample implications of interrelations among individuals in the African society. The writer, in his works, depicts a violent society in which the only important phenomenon is the material and economic progress of men. Humiliation, hypocrisy, misogyny and the rigid system of male chauvinism are among the main characteristics of his works which are analyzed with a critical approach by the writer through the story.

DISCUSSION AND STUDY

Outstanding Notions of Ben Jelloun's Works:

It can be said that during the 1980s there emerged a literature in France by the name of literature of migration. Some of the writers immigrating to France (like Ben Jelloun) point to the cultural problems of their homeland via broaching on the issues such as tradition, male chauvinism and lack of formation of women's identity.

The 20th century was regarded as the century of a lot of great events and chaos in the history of Africa which were accompanied by great literary victories, too. Following the migration of many Africans to European countries

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like France, a new generation of writers entered the domain of the European literature. The main issue of the works of these writers was a new perception of life. In other words, the literary works of this period can be put in a movement titled: "Literature of Migration". The works of this period mainly deal with the positive and negative points of living in their ancestral land or the differences between the life style of their birthplace and the foreign land. Ben Jelloun's stories are about the traditional people of Morocco who flee the closed cultural atmosphere their country and take refuge in another country. His characters, like he himself, always try to rise against the wrong systems of the society such as male-dominance, gender discrimination, and so on; but they often face failure and being bored and tired of the closed climate of their surroundings they migrate to another country. These people, who are bored of their mother land, face a lot of problems by fleeing their country and migrating to another land. The first and the foremost of these problems is the alteration of their human "I" and "identity".

Most of Ben Jelloun's works in directly and symbolically portray the not-so- much pleasant realities of the life of his fellow countrymen. These include both those who stay in their country and grapple with numerous cultural problems like male-dominance and those who migrate to other countries suffer from loneliness and isolation and lose part of their identity.

One of his well-known works is called "Child of Soil" and portrays this very social problem. This is the story of a girl narrated by seven narrators. She is the eighth daughter of a family and her father, being ashamed that his child is a girl, names her "Ahmad" to insinuate that she is a boy. But Ahmad "is a boy with a girl's face" (Ben Jelloun 31). Thus she comes across a lot of problems in life and before the death of her father fights with her double identity and personality. In another novel of Ben Jelloun titled "Holy Night" (*La Nuit Sacree*), which is the continuation of this story, once her father dies "Ahmad" chooses the name of "Zahra" for herself and reveals her true identity.

The main character of this story has a mask on her face since birth and as per her father this mask, that changes her identity, enhances her value in the society. He believes "being a woman is a natural weakness that all women have got used to it and being a man is an illusion and violence that justifies any action." Zahra's father, relying on his wrong beliefs that stem from his traditional vision, makes a sinister fate for her daughter by choosing a male name and identity for her. Many of the traditional families like to have sons. They believe that a son will preserve their family name and generation while a daughter will take their hereditary roots and name by marriage and leaving her paternal home.

In the middle of the story we read about the life of "Ahmad-Zahra" who not only does not suffer from her fake identity but also has got accustomed to this bogus identity due to domineering over others though being a man; and as CannePierro the French critic puts it, "She has made a different self for herself." (CannePierro 49). But as soon as she reaches puberty and the emergence of numerous problems in the society, she becomes very upset with her father and his silly decisions and hates him.

It can be said that accepting her father's lie and imposed despotism leads her toward a mire of lies and hypocrisy in the society. "Once she finds out her true identity, i.e. womanhood, she tries to preserve the privileges that can't be enjoyed." (Ben Jelloun 50)

Social concepts like "woman" and "marriage", that have special value almost all over the world, have lost their importance and value due to misconceptions, superstitions and despotism of the father in family. The family organizes the relations of its members with hypocrisy and lie. Zahra's sisters have to accept her as their brother and obey her unconditionally. Zahra's "marriage" with her cousin in the form of a man is also false and untrue.

Another character of the story is Zahra's mother. She thinks herself in the margin of life in a society that is male-dominated or male-oriented. Her image is unknown for the reader because she denies being a "person" or having a natural "self." Her entity and identity has meaning only beside her husband and she is under the influence of her husband's tongue and dominated by his criteria and values: "You are a good wife because you are obedient and subservient; but you have given birth to seven daughters. For sure you have a defect. Your being cannot accept a son. You can't do anything." (Ben Jelloun 21-22). "If you are able to give birth to a son you'll be a real mother, a princess... Of course if our child will be a daughter again, it will be a son. I have talked to the midwife, too. I'll give her some money to keep our secret. (The same, 22)

Studying the characteristics through "What he says, how he acts, what others say about him, and how he is behaved", (Pavis 251) in the "Child of Soil" is the despotic personality of Ahmad-Zahra's father who keeps on insisting on his beliefs and attaches importance to the opinion of others and the view of people. Before her child's birth he announces, "The child that is going to be born will be a boy even if it is a girl." (Ben Jelloun 21)

By accepting her husband's adamant and egoistic decision, Zahra's mother not only gives in to his false beliefs and values but also cannot disclose her inner secret and expose the real elements and segments of her personality; for, her thought is based on the shaky patterns of the society.

It can be said that this work depicts the contemptuous vision of the Moroccan and many oriental societies to "woman" and "womanhood" from the birth till becoming a mother and portrays its deviations critically. Although Ben Jelloun focuses his attacks to the despotic men and, by changing the gender identity of the hero of the story to a man, pictures the problems and weird vision of the society to her; an exact contemplation will reveal more depths of his work. In this symbolic story the role of the writer is to guide a movement against misogyny. He makes complete

and ultimate use of all aspects of discourse and literary techniques to portray women's problems and the consequences of misogyny in the society. Therefore, this work recounts the obvious realities of society which are at times blemished with the writer's imagination.

Ben Jelloun, who hates loss of identity and exposure in the form and role of others, tries to correct the criteria and values ruling over the false society and introduce his ideal society through the story. Thus this literary work of his portrays the protest against suchlike values that are manifested symbolically. The writer depicts a horrible environment of ugliness and vice and dramatizes Zahra's defiance against it. By reading some of the horrific scenes of the story we can consider it an example of dystopian literature. "The dystopian literature, which is the opposite of utopian literature, portrays a future for its society that is sinister, ailed and full of vices.... Pure human merits become base and mean and are replaced by abjectness so vices and evilness dominate the society." (Mir Sadeqi 7-8) This kind of literature can be traced in Ben Jelloun's critical look at his society.

Another work of this writer which is a picture of the sick condition of women in the traditional Moroccan society is titled, "With Shameful Eyes." Unlike "Child of Soil" the women of this story not only reject male-dominated society but rise against men's violence and despotism and, in case of failure, they escape from the traditional society and take refuge in a modern society.

The main personage of the story is a Moroccan girl who relates the account of her life in two parts: before migration and after that. So, this story takes place in two different worlds: the traditional world of Morocco and the modern world of France. The writer tries to write the first part as a description of the traditional climate ruling over Morocco and dedicate the second part to describing the modern world of the west.

The characters of "With Shameful Eyes" are not merely women but, like in other works of Ben Jelloun, they are the first victims of wrong beliefs and customs of the society and they are somehow the first violators of customs and traditions, too. In sum, the characters of this work can be divided in a few groups: father of family who is chauvinist, cautious, loving and concerned about his children's future, paternal aunt who disturbs others with her sick and despotic personality, and the main personage of the story is a fearless girl who can be considered as the core of action in the story because it is on her devilments at childhood and brave actions in adulthood that the plot of the story is extended and shaped: "I've caught some rats. I put them in the cage to become wild.... it was a dusty night. There were favorite conditions. I hid behind a tree near the stable. My aunt entered the toilet. I rushed, shut the door and freed the rats inside the toilet." (Ben Jelloun 38)

Women in "With Shameful Eyes" live in a closed rural climate under the dominance of despotic men while they are denied of their primary human right of "education." The phrases expressing this issue are several times said by the narrator: "In our village girls were not allowed to study and couldn't go to the classes of Qur'an and learn to read and write." (the same, 76) But she does not see any contradiction between her gender and her presence in the society; so despite humiliating looks of the people around her she breaches the tradition and puts herself among the rows of men: "Girls have the right to study. My brother took the animal to the desert and I took his tablet and attended the class like other boys." (the same, 25)

There is always a course of depiction of gender inequalities in the works of Ben Jelloun. Therefore, concepts like woman/man are an important collection that, not only in this work but in almost all of his stories, comply with the concept of captivity/freedom. Women in "With Shameful Eyes" are incessantly forced to stay in the closed environment of home. "Despite the definition of home in the dictionary of symbols, a home is a female symbol with the sense of haven, mother, supporter or mother's bosom." (Bashlar, 36, quoted from the research on foreign languages, 25) Home in this work reminds us of a prison for the character of the story. She always tries to find an excuse to escape from the closed and evil space of home and the unpleasant conduct of the aunt. Her disgust toward the repressive climate of the house and her longing for freedom are expressed with numerous phrases:

"I would like to leave this sinister house and district and escape from this devil." (Ben Jelloun 24) "I found a cozy spot between the stones, a place like a small cave. I considered it a haven from the house, a place of refuge for me." (the same, 28) In her view the only way for getting rid of the boring environment of home and reaching freedom is either to escape from home and choosing loneliness or escaping from the limitations and defiance against all discriminatory and illogical systems dictated by the society. So, she openly expresses her defiance by attending the society. In her view, as a free-thinking and freedom-seeking girl, concepts of "staying at home/attending the society" become synonymous with concepts of "captivity/freedom." She believes that in Morocco "being a woman is a natural weakness that all women have got accustomed to it and being a man is an illusion and violence that justifies every action." (Cannes Pierro, 94)

Having migrated to France, she goes to school and easily attends the society. She suffers from being far from her homeland and living in a foreign land but she feels that she has gained freedom in the modern society of France and that "learning to read and write is like the first victory over captivity and backwardness." (Ben Jelloun, 80)

In the chapters that portray the [main] character's life after migration to France, we face the notion of "identity crisis" more than ever. In chapter 6 of the story, in which the events of the character's migration with her family are recounted, we come across their personal analyses each of which is worth pondering upon: "I felt this journey is not a journey. It is an escape, escape from one's roots." (Ben Jelloun, 70)

Conclusion

The issue of woman has a very long history in literature. In many story works woman appears with an innocent and oppressed image recounting a male-dominated society.

By reading Ben Jelloun's works the first thing that draws the attention of every reader is the gender of the character of his story. "Woman in literature is the 'other' and at the margin." (Meqdadi, 305) But in all works of Ben Jelloun woman are always the pivotal characters of the story. They are the symbol of the oppressed class of the Moroccan society who are humiliated and easily abide by the despotism of the society (like Zahra in the story of Child of Soil) and sometimes they rebel against the ruling despotism and rise against corruption and inequalities inside the society and show their courage in one way or another. They want the progress and self-perception of the society against despotism and intellectual regression (like the character of Wreaths of Misery and With Shameful Eyes). Such women can be regarded as the symbol of the contemporary woman's prudence and might who play an effective role in directing modern thoughts and removing obstacles through their wisdom and sagacity.

Women have been victims of men's dominance throughout history and this can be the reason for choosing women as the symbol of each Moroccan individual by the writer.

Examining the concept of woman and her identity in the works of Ben Jelloun, the writer of the article concludes that not recognizing women as half of the population in traditional communities not only causes frustration, indolence, independence and lack of identity among them; it also creates an ailed society leaving no sound and human bond between the two groups of men and women.

What makes Ben Jelloun's novels valuable is the fact that they spring from the real ground of his life and are mixed with the imaginations and mentalities of the writer. In other words, his works are a blend of his birthplace and imaginations.

By analyzing his works one can conclude that realism is the fundamental basis of Ben Jelloun's story telling because we can find the like of the characters of his stories in the real world of traditional societies. He suffers from suppression of freedom-seeking sentiments, despotism in family, patriarchy and killing of daughters and displays his pain in a black picture of his country's society. He knows well the traditional society, lifestyle, false beliefs of some of them, superstition and many other aspects of it. So, he lambastes them in his story works.

Most of his works speak of a disaster that is closely connected with social realities, family life and human psyche and spirit.

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