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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
HUM2015-1648**

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Contemporary Egyptian Drama.
"Women Jail" as an Example**

**Hany Sallam
Assistant Professor
Theater Department
Faculty of Arts
Alexandria University
Egypt**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Sallam, H. (2015). "The Image of Woman in Contemporary Egyptian Drama. 'Women Jail' as an Example", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: HUM2015-1648.

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN: 2241-2891

18/10/2015

The Image of Woman in Contemporary Egyptian Drama. "Women Jail" as an Example

Hany Sallam
Assistant Professor
Theater Department
Faculty of Arts
Alexandria University
Egypt

Abstract

Most of the Women characters in contemporary Egyptian drama are portrayed as victims of the inherited traditions and misconceptions that prevailed in the Egyptian society.

These women characters consider life a big prison, because male powers and authorities are mostly against women at large, in spite of the important roles they play as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters or even mistresses. Powers and authorities are social, political or religious ones.

The Emancipation of the Women Movement started in Egypt during the Twentieth Century and reached its climax during the 1919 Revolution against British colonialism. The feminist liberal movement stressed the necessity of paying attention to women by giving them the right to vote and treating them as equals to men. Women have begun to establish feminist non-governmental associations in order to play a positive role and share in the building of the Egyptian Society. But practically women have continued to be treated more or less as minor subjects in society in comparison to men.

With the advent of the 1952 Revolution, some political, cultural and social rights were granted to women, indicating a crucial social change in the Egyptian Society. Nevertheless, Egyptian Women have been asking for more rights to remove the fetters enchaining them and preventing them from playing their expected roles in the political and social fields. Freedom of expression and more equal rights are the main demands among women until today.

This paper deals with the controversial relationship between men and women in contemporary Egyptian Drama as manifested in Fathia El-Assaal's dramatic text produced on stage, and presented by the National Theater of Egypt in the Seventies of the twentieth Century and on the Egyptian Television Screen as daily serials.

Feminist Approach means: "paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some invisible mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body".¹

¹Lizabeth Goodman, Jane de Gay, *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, (Routledge, London, 1998), p.136.

Feminism divisions: liberal, cultural and materialist. Liberal feminism developed from liberal humanism, it stresses women's parity with men, and is based on universal values. Cultural feminism stresses that women are both different and superior to men, and often advocates expressing this through female cultural forms and figures. The radical feminist point of view frequently addressed the question of a 'female aesthetic' as well as the desirability of a separate female culture.

While the TV series demonstrate the model of the oppressed woman who cannot survive in society until she becomes a prisoner in it; the original theatrical text demonstrates another model beside those previously mentioned, where woman is the political activist prisoner. On the other hand, the theatrical text refers to a different political era (the end of seventies), when many protesters were captured during demonstrations against raising prices in Egypt through the Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat's Regime.

According to the feminist point of view; Man is an active element of time, and woman is just an element of place.

Woman is a prisoner to her husband, society, poorness and politics.

According to the TV Series, men are evil; they commit various forms of injustices against women, till the latter ones become criminals.

According to theatrical texts, women perform the revolutionary image that defends their own rights against man's injustice.

Keywords:

Introduction

Most of Women characters in contemporary Egyptian drama are portrayed as victims of inherited traditions and misconceptions prevailing in the Egyptian society.

For these women characters life is considered a prison in spite of the important roles they play in real life as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters or even mistresses, because male powers and authorities are mostly against women at large. Powers and authorities are social, political or religious ones.

The Emancipation of the Women Movement has started in Egypt during Century and reached its climax during the 1919 Revolution against British colonialism. The feminist liberal movement stressed the necessity of paying attention to women by giving them the right to vote and treating them as equals with men. Women have begun to establish feminist non-governmental associations to play a positive role and share in the building of the Egyptian Society. But practically women have continued to be treated more or less as minor subjects in society in comparison to men.

With the advent of the 1952 Revolution, some political, cultural and social rights were granted to women to indicate the crucial social change in the Egyptian Society. Nevertheless, Egyptian Women have been asking for more rights to remove the fetters enchaining them and to prevent themselves from playing their expected roles in the political and social fields. Freedom of expression and more equal rights are the main demands among women until today.

Feminist Approach means: "paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some invisible mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body".¹

There are three main divisions of feminism, liberal, cultural and materialist. Liberal feminism developed from liberal humanism, stressing women's parity with men, based on universal values. Cultural feminism stresses that women are both different from and superior to men and often advocates expressing this fact through female forms of culture. The radical feminist point of view frequently addressed the question of a 'female aesthetic' as well as the desirability of a separate female culture. There is an absolute 'essence' of 'woman' and the most important difference between women and men is their biological makeup.²

Though how far the woman image goes further to the imagined worlds that male central authority goes with it?

¹Lizabeth Goodman, Jane de Gay, *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, (Routledge, London, 1998), p.136.

²Gayle Austin, *Feminist theories of dramatic criticism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990)

A Status Report of Egyptian Women 2013

Thompson Reuter's report, pointed to Egypt, the country that represents the spirit of the revolution, as the worst country for women today among the 22 countries of the Arab league that the survey covered. The experts said that in these countries, the revolution has fully failed to meet the expectations of women. The same women who stood by men demanding social change in Tahrir Square are supposed to withdraw and play their traditional roles as mothers and wives right after the end of the revolution. And the worst part is that they are suffering from more violations in the streets than the violations that they suffered before the revolution.¹

Monique Villa Thomson the Reuters Foundation CEO supports that the impact of the January 2011 uprising on women's rights was bad because "The rise of political Islam in Egypt has had a real impact on secularism. Most political gains for women have been lost. Women are struggling to preserve their dignity, and are far from progressing; they are now fighting to preserve some of the rights they had before the Arab Spring. Despite hopes that women would be one of the main beneficiaries of the Arab Spring, they have been among the biggest losers. The revolts have brought violence, instability, and displacement in some cases. Women were better off in Egypt under Mubarak than they are today, almost three years after his fall!"²

All these violations of women's rights as citizens and humans drove women to 'get out' in an unprecedented manner against the Muslim Brotherhood and the ousted president.

Even though this 'mass protest' of the Egyptian Women did not result to a direct impact on the Egyptian women, it is expected that a radical change will happen in the near future. Egypt ranks 125th out of 136 countries according to the Gender Gap Index report that is published by the World Economic Forum of 2013. Egypt was ranked 126th last year. Which means that Egypt's ranking has experienced a slight improvement; however, the other indicators (about Egypt) of the global gender gap index are generally decreasing. In terms of the number of women in the parliament, Egypt ranks 129th out of 132 ranks, Egypt ranked 128 last year.³

After Sisi was elected as the current Egyptian president of 2014-2018; a national project was launched to confront and deter organized campaigns to kidnap and rape women, especially what they experience in the fields of the revolution in order to intimidate them and prevent them from political participation.

¹Karrie Kehoe, Factbox: Women's rights in the Arab world, Reuters, 11 Nov 2013 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/12/us-arab-women-factbox-idUSBRE9AB00I20131112>)

²Tony Gabriel, Egyptian women losing rights at a fast pace: Thomson Reuters Foundation CEO, (Cairo, Al-Ahram weekly Newspaper, 12 Nov. 2013).

³<http://ecwronline.org/blog/2013/12/31/out-of-a-gunpowder-barrel/>

Feminist Consciousness

How does O'Neill treat women? Suzanne Burr proposes that the work of O'Neill does not reflect misogyny but "feminist consciousness." She mentions that a remarkable empathy with women's social entrapment, psychic, and disenfranchisement were expressed by O'Neill through the characters of Mary Tyrone in "A Long Day's Journey into Night" and Mrs. Keeney in "Ile".

"Although the role of women in the theatrical field has received attention recently, the researchers ignored the battles that those ladies had been through in the theater field and neglected the victories they achieved".

While feminist theatrical creative writings are rare in the Arab theater; Fathia El-Assaal seems to be a Feminism star in Egypt and Melha El-Abdallah in Saudi Arabia, as the feminist attributes in dramatic writings for theater and TV appears in a female writing of herself, from a feminist point of view and feminist experience, that has a contradictive opinion to men dealing with women's cases. Her image that was made by male creative writings looks contemptuously to the woman and represents the woman as a fragile hopeless human without external male help.

Women's Jail, the Feminist Theatrical text by Fathia El-Assaal, explores the deep injustice of the political authority against women in the 70's of the Sadat's Regime, and how the 'consciousness of feminism' leads them to protest against the raising prices, tell the extend that going to jail instead of lifting the poor facing their destiny and going home safe.

Woman Representing Woman

In a theatrical experience Fathia El-Assaal showed the subjective arrest experience for her political position as a socialistic dramatic author, since she represented real problems of the Egyptian women from labor and lower classes. These problems that came to light showing the absence of national security, freedom of opinion and social injustice, resulting deviation, corruption, robbery, murder and breaking the law. She did this through criticizing, the male society for being responsible for all that is happening to women.

Fathia represented the woman's image with feminine feelings to convict the male society for deforming the woman's image, and to justify her revenge from the man.

Woman as a Theatrical Space

The most important switch from the Arena theater in the ancient ages to the caddy theater is the renaissance, and the ages after which many theatrical space developments came out. Instead of presenting these scenes in uncovered spaces in front of palaces and in the squares and streets, it transferred the

presentation into halls, rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, thing which led to the discussion of the privacy of intimate relations. Contemporary theater authors go far to re-deconstruct natural space to create a new non-realistic or abstract space.¹

As a feminist point of view; expressing theatrical space carries expression for women and their position in society. In realistic societies women are isolated into home borders, and men carry all outside worries. Though man is an active element of time, and woman is just an element of place.

So the Women's Prison Theatrical text ² and TV Series ³ are spaces that carry women as an element of place and depict life for women in the Egyptian Society as a big prison. Here women are prisoners inside jail prisoners inside their community, prisoners of their husband, poverty, environment, or even fear. The series depicts men as the reason for physical and moral jailing of the women, because they prison women in their home as a wife, exploit their right to live, or make them pay for their own mistakes, and go to jail instead of men.

Woman as a Political Prisoner

While the TV series demonstrates the model of the oppressed woman that cannot survive in the society till she becomes a prisoner in it; the original theatrical text demonstrates another model beside those previously mentioned, where she is the political activist prisoner. The theatrical text refers to a different political era by the end of the seventies, as many protesters were captured during demonstrations against the raising prices in Egypt through Sadat Regime.

The journalist Salwa, appeared with her husband as activists against the regime's corruption, and went to jail as a political prisoner to start a new episode in the known prisoner women's stories. She meets Mona, the young political prisoner, representing the university students:

Mona: you are more concerned about woman rights, and I don't believe that there is something called woman's rights, the true rights are the right of society and people as a whole.

Salwa: yes Mona, this is true. But there are rights particularity for women.

Mona: What particularity? Women take all their rights, the important thing is to exercise these rights and go with it, but there is no particularity in that case.

Salwa: why... isn't there any particularity when the woman is sitting home and her divorce announcement delivers by mail? When

¹Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²Fathia El-Assaal, *Women's Jail*, (The Egyptian General Organization of book, Cairo, 1993).

³Women's Jail, TV Series, written by Mariam Naom, Directed by Kamla Abo Zekry, (July 2014).

her husband gets married with another woman while he is still married to her, and he tells her if she likes to stay or go and destroys her home. Isn't there any particularity in this?

Mona: But there are many oppressed and tired men.

Laila: damn on men! They have never been oppressed... they only oppress.

Mona: No one could oppress another unless that other surrenders to oppression.

The contradiction appears in Salwa's personality through another chat with Mona, where Salwa gets an ambiguous call telling her that her daughter Hoda is at one of her colleagues, she goes there running and starts shouting in her daughter's face. Then she discovers that the guy is not alone and his mother lives at the same place, so his mother tells Salwa that the daughter is seeking tenderness in their home cause Salwa is busy.

The Contradictory Model and Virginit

"Mona: you are living a strange contradiction, you are an activist woman, fighting for a better home country, and living in a great contradiction at the same time, aren't you a truly liberal lady or are you still looking at your daughter Hoda as a girl and you are afraid about losing her virginity?"

Salwa: her virginity?! Who did talk about her virginity now?

Mona: If you ask yourself frankly, you'll realize that this is the real hidden subject in you, and you never face it. By the way liberty is not a word to say Madam Salwa, it is a matter to do, and of course you know that.

Salwa: My husband Kamal told me that before, but I refused to listen."

Society is a Rotten Prison

As long as the characters live in their feminist idea, they compare the tragedy of being alive in the male world outside and the prison world inside to the extent that the prison world may be better than outside.

In another point of the text Salwa describes prison:

"Salwa: Before I came to prison I thought that we knew everything and we could see everything, but now that I am in prison I feel that we must review our calculations about many things. We must put our hands on the mold that we don't see that leaks around us, and the fear that after a while we will get used to it till it poisons us. Since I've been here, I started to feel that the

ship is drowning and we are getting drowning as well as long as we stay... we are drowning as long as we stay".

Revolutionary Feminism

The play ends on an important monologue that came with the wind of change, when Laila says:

"Laila: I lived blind while I have eyes, deaf while I have ears and dumb while I have tongue... if the coincidence made me a prisoner this time; next time I will get into prison because I'm not going to be dumb again, I will speak about every kind of injustice, mockery and lay that made me a blonde wig to be into the form.. That is the wig, and this is my original black hair that I will never give up".

She sings, "My heart is a white dove flying in a clear sky... flying in a wide world that was lost for me and I was lost for it".

Elements of Prison

The theatrical text demonstrates a group of prisoners as victims sacrificing their society and poorness through an interview with the journalist, Salwa, when Shafika - one of the prisoners that killed her husband because he betrayed her- says: "I felt in love, I've been betrayed, I murdered and I rested".

Shafika mentions that when she killed her husband, she got her salvation, rested from her pain and got out of prison! Though Laila asks how she got out of prison while she is still there.

At this point the feminist message comes out in the text, as Shafika describes the real prison:

"Shafika: no my dear, no, this is not the prison darling, the prison is the darkness the woman stays in, the prison is the heart-breaking and treacherous time, the prison is confusion and oppression. But when you can see everything with your own eyes uncovered, you become free and released. And after I grew older and my body sagged, I can feel my erratic eyes. I lived deadly jealousy in the prison, but after revenging him I rest".

The TV series Women's Prison model has several characters that are prisoners of materialism sides and morals as well. The presentation of an overview of many types of injustice and oppression of women makes the viewer sympathize with them, despite the fact they has committed a crime,

because even if they were a prisoner and a criminal by law, they were oppressed in an unjust society and paid for the crime.

The main character was called "Ghalia" she was a wardress in the Women's Prison, she fell in love with a guy, but he left her to marry another woman and then went back to her after his wife died. She agreed to marry him because she couldn't forget her first love. This started a new suffering. He was such an irresponsible guy that he used her to get money for him and his mistress, the neighbor of "Ghalia".

Saber, continues to deceive her, while she believes him and waits for his baby to be delivered. He wastes the money he took from his ex-father-in-law but when he comes to ask for his money the crisis happens. Saber and Ghalia start fighting, and he stabs a knife in her face. When the ex-father-in-law tries to save her from him the knife goes directly to his chest and he dies. Ghalia tries to takeout the knife to save him and her finger prints stamp on the evidence. Of course she was convicted for murder after Saber escaped with his mistress.

Her tragedy starts when she goes to jail instead of him. She delivers her baby into jail, and calls him hoping to bring joy and happiness. But the boy dies by a disease, which makes a significant shift in her character; she becomes aggressive, a smoker and begins thinking of revenge, until she kills him by the end of the series.

The Secondary character of the series is called "Hayah", she is married and she has two kids, she is a prisoner to fear, for her kids because of society and pollution. When she hears about incidents of rape of children in schools she locks her kids at home and prevents them from going to school. When she reads the news about carcinogenic pesticides in fruits and vegetables she stops feeding them to her kids. And even when she sees a thief stealing her bag she can't say anything. Her fear grows till she finally poisons herself and her children and husband when he tries taking the kids back to school. The doctors can only save her, she goes to jail charged for murderer.

Summary

There are three divisions of feminism:

1. Liberal:

- a) *Minimizes differences between men and women.*
- b) *Works for success within the system; reform, not revolt*
- c) *The individual is more important than the group.*

2. Radical: (Cultural)

- a) *Stressed superiority of female attributes and difference between male and female modes.*
- b) *Favors separate female systems*
- c) *Individual more important than the group*

3. Materialist:

- a. *Minimizes biological differences between men and women*
- b. *Stresses material conditions of production such as history, race, class, gender*
- c. *The group is more important than the individual*

According to the feminist point of view; Man is an active element of time, and woman is just an element of place.

Woman is a prisoner to her husband, society, poorness and politics.

According to the TV Series, man is = evil and practices various forms of injustice against women until she become a true criminal.

According to the theatrical text, the women perform the revolutionary image that defends their own rights against man's injustice.

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