Feminism as Depicted in Mahfouz's *Palace Walk*, Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, and Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

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Abstract
Feminism is among the common practices in the modern world and aims to proclaim gender equality. Mahfouz, Coetzee, and Gordimer are among the African Nobel laureates who pioneered what could be termed a rebellion toward normality. Amina, a protagonist of *Palace Walk*, presents a character who purposes to challenge the biased and male-centric conventions. For instance, her choice of going to the mosque alone, in the absence of her husband, was a practice that was not acceptable in the Muslim culture; nevertheless, she took the bold step. On the other hand, Lucy is presented as a chain breaker who goes against the system of oppression by choosing a black husband. The choice of Lucy to leave her husband and start living with Rapulana, who was a black man, was a courageous move, and from that angle, she can be depicted as an agent of change. The same character is portrayed in Vera, who betrays her husband for another man, Ben – it is worth noting that Vera chose a black man, thus entering into an interracial relationship as in Lucy’s case. Such characters played a significant role in challenging what has been termed normal. The use of art presents a new perception of fighting for women’s rights non-violently. This study aims at answering questions on what causes gender inequality and how art, such as the use of novels, can be used to end this social issue.

Keywords: changes, equality, disgrace, feminism, gender roles, None to Accompany Me, Palace Walk, and traditions

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Introduction

Background Information

The issue of gender quality is among the debated topics. While various people have initiated demonstrations and movements to fight for the rights of women, some used the arts to serve the same purpose. Through books and novels, such as *Palace Walk*, *Disgrace*, and *None to Accompany Me*, authors attained their goal of showing how society perceives women and the need for changes.

Significance of Study

This study focuses on the use of works of literature to help change society’s perception of some traditions. In this case, the authors, Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), John Maxwell Coetzee (1940- ), and Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), have proven the prowess of framing characters in their novels in a manner that the reader gets the real picture of gender inequality. Thus, this study will help in showcasing how works of literature change individuals and society at large. Through characters such as Amina, Vera, and Sibongile, one can clearly see that most of the traditions are in favor of one gender, the men, thus victimizing women. *Palace Walk*, *Disgrace*, and *None to Accompany Me* are among the novels that champion for empowerment of women and free them from the bondage of traditions. The authors Naguib, Coetzee, and Gordimer are examples of laureates recognized for their noble work and awarded as African and feminist writers. The authors have created a new definition of women against the traditional perception accorded to them. Thus, the named novels have a similar theme, only that the approaches and situations are different. Among the factors that limit the freedom of women is gender roles, for instance, a belief that women should be concerned with domestic chores only. As for Amina, her Muslim tradition expected her to comply with the tradition of getting married early and playing the wife’s role henceforth. According to the Muslim tradition, women should serve the house chores, and when they have to get out, they are prompted to cloak fully in a burka as a sign of dignity (Mondal, 1999). As for Lucy, she was much free because her tradition was not as strict as Amina’s. According to Boever (2011), Lucy was a white lesbian who relied on selling flowers and looking after pets for people who were on holiday as the main source of income. On the other hand, as portrayed by Gordimer, Vera was an individualistic white lawyer in Legal Foundation. Lastly, Sibongile is an African who was active in the national revolution. Unlike Amina and Lucy, Vera and Sibongile are in the public domain playing roles of empowering women and helping change the perception of society on women in South Africa. According to Sakamoto (2014), the two answered the call of empowering women and ended up neglecting their families. Perhaps, from that angle, gender roles are among the factors that limit women’s freedom. The four characters present the life of women – what limits their freedom and the course of fighting for revolution and a change in women’s role in society. Feminism can be understood well if the suffering of women is well highlighted

Rationale

This study will prove that rights can be lobbied and fought for without violence. In this paper, books and novels are highlighted as the main channel for communicating social issues. Thus, this research will help highlight how women can gain their rights and freedom through being courageous and questioning the traditions. The research revolves around three characters who
faced the same challenge of proving the worth and potential of a woman despite being in different settings.

**Research Problem**

The underlying problem that serves as the motivation of this research is that, despite the awareness that women are treated unequally in society, the question of ‘what should we do’ may still be a hindrance in creating a change. This research proves the use of art in making societal changes, such as through novels.

**Research Questions**

1. What is the underlying reason(s) of gender inequality?
2. Apart from demonstrations, rioting, and creation of movements, can art be used in solving social issues such as gender inequality?
3. How have works of literature proved worth in solving social issues?

**Literature Review**

The issue of inequality has been among the social issues debated for a long time. The main concern behind gender equality is that societies support some practices through their beliefs. According to Hazel and Kleyman (2020), “for women in the U.S., progress towards equality has been often met with backlash, stalling and/or rolling back any advances.” The backlash may be caused by the initial friction towards any change in society. Each change means that the community members will start behaving or acting differently. For instance, if the shift in gender equality is instilled, it will mean that husbands will have to give their wives liberty and not treat them as inferiors. The issue of gender inequality has led to discrimination of women even in other areas such as occupation. According to Hazel and Kleyman (2020), women are most likely to live below the poverty line compared to men. However, the main question arises as to what hinders the actualization of equality in major platforms such as leadership, occupation, and overall human rights and freedom. According to Cerrato and Cifre (2018), women face “conflict between their work and home roles due to limited time, high levels of stress, and competing behavioral expectations.” Despite the push to institute changes in how women are addressed in society, they are still bound by gender roles, particularly domestic chores. Cerrato and Cifre (2018) assert that “gender roles are shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex which are the basis of the division of labor in most societies.” Thus, the most basic way of understanding women's struggle is by highlighting how various traditions and beliefs have subjected them to turmoil and suffering.

**Methodology**

The research is based on a qualitative approach of analyzing the works of various authors and supporting their presentation with the already done research works. Thus, this work is qualitative research that focuses on literature reviews. The choice of the used texts was made as per their relevance to ‘feminism’ as the topic of study. Additionally, the used novels have been supported by recent research works that detail more about the issue of gender inequality.
Analysis and Discussion

Women’s Dissatisfaction in “Palace Walk” that led to Feminism

Different societies dictate how people should lie, both males and females. The Palace Walk covers a story whose setting is a community that believes in gender roles. According to Cerrato and Cifre (2018), the issue of gender roles differs from one society to another; nevertheless, in most, women are expected to serve the domestic roles while men are expected to serve as the heads of the family. The novel presents Abd al-Jawad and Al-Sayyid Ahmad families where women are confined to domestic chores. On the contrary, males have the liberty and are expected to head their families and be in charge of all leadership and decision-making roles. For instance, Al-Sayyid Ahmad is portrayed as the head of the family who is strict with his family, thus, instilling fear. Nevertheless, Al-Sayyid Ahmad is described as intelligent, kind, and polite in the public view. Thus, it is evident that the conduct of Ahmed as the head of the family is different from when he is dealing with clients and friends – and this has been among the ways women are suppressed. El-Shall (2006) asserts that Ahmed is a stern disciplinarian who also monitors all of the wife’s movements when at home. This means that the wife is not free, and going contrary to what is expected of her may cause commotion or friction between her and the husband and the community at large. As expected, the wife, Amina, is submissive and obedient – thus, in this status, she is represented as a typical Egyptian wife who was expected to show unquestionable loyalty to the husband. El-Shall states that the traditional Egyptian culture was stern and strict, particularly on the liberty and freedom of women. Thus, there was segregation and discrepancy in how the male and females were being treated in the society, and, like in most traditions, women were suppressed as men dominated (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). For instance, women could not go out or engage in activities without the permission and consent of their husbands. The main argument was that the conduct of women was a reflection of society – thus, when out, women were supposed to remain in a burka.

In a community guided by a tradition, the husband is deemed effective and reputable of his family and adheres to the set standards and rules. Hazel and Kleyman (2020) opine that most traditions have been among the barriers to the attainment of gender equality. According to El-Shall (2006), the Al-Sayyid Ahmad family is an example of a compliant Egyptian family. For instance, Amina is a submissive and humble wife who has accepted all society’s dictations, including being secluded from the external world. As per the norms of Muslims, at that time, women were not even allowed to pray at the mosque; their husbands would represent them as heads. According to Oersen (2005), a Muslim wife could only step out when in her husband’s company, and as for Amina, she was out only when visiting her mother. Amina lived a lonely life, and the only time she could break from her daily routine was when she went to the rooftop.

As time passed, Amina started to compromise her beliefs and could now go to the mosque alone. According to El-Shall (2006), in the case of Amina, Naguib intended to show how women’s rights are restricted and how such affects the quality of life they live. The novel’s setting was after World War I (WWI) when there were commotions in Egypt as the locals staged constant rebellions against the British imperial system. Egypt is among the nations that have had initiatives of women’s revolution and recorded the first movement in 1923 (El-Shall, 2006). While there is no mention of feminism, the change in the environment affected the family of Al-Sayyid much.
Mahfouz presents Fahmy as an intelligent character who chose to pursue law to become a lawyer or perhaps a judge. He sacrificed much in the demonstration of calling for a better Egypt. Mahfouz used Amina to reflect on the streaks of rebellion that engulfed Egyptian women. The portrayal of Amina as a submissive and obedient wife is meant to set a foundation for the possible changes through feminism. Feminism has been termed as the trend of empowering women and helping them gain equality as their male counterparts. Thus, when women start to assume roles that are meant for men, it can then be termed a revolution. In the absence of her husband, Amina began to go to the mosque alone for prayers – and this, as portrayed by the author, can be argued as the beginning of a change and yearning for independence.

While most of the women were being submissive and obedient, it seems that the dependence on their husbands was the leading cause – thus, they were acting out of fear. For instance, Jalila, who was Al-Sayyid’s elder daughter, a musician, had made free decisions of living a pleasurable life of prostitution and is recorded questioning how men overbear control over their wives. These sentiments were made during Aisha’s wedding and can reflect the Muslim women’s view on their cultural system. When defining her father, Jalila termed him as a jealous man who dominated women (El-Shall, 2006). In this scenario, Jalila was a mouthpiece for many Muslim women who found the culture of being overwhelmed by men to be unfair. In most instances, the revolution starts when a group questions how they are handled or their issues addressed.

Motivation of Feminism in the “Disgrace”

The novel of Coetzee is another example of a text that covers the lives of women to show how they are discriminated and why feminism is a necessity for women. In the Disgrace novel, the major characters, such as Lucy, had a particular range of freedom; nevertheless, there were still limiting factors that made them yearn for more. The treatment accorded to women is the primary factor to consider when discussing feminism and discrimination. Lucy was a victim of a biased society after three men raped her. As for Lucy, perhaps due to the possible critiques from the community member, she chose to be silent about the ordeal and the consequent pregnancy. The case of Lucy seemed to be orchestrated by the black youths, whose actions may be defined as revenge or just act of demeaning women. During the case, Lucy was living with her father, who had resigned from his job after a sexual harassment scandal. Doesn’t the case show the need for consideration of women as equal members of society? Women’s vulnerability in a discriminative and biased community is high and can endanger their lives because they can be easily taken advantage of. When Lucy was questioned about her choice of not disclosing the issue, she stated that it was because the issue, at that moment, was private. This meant that filing a case against the rapists would be in her personal interest, which would be done at her cost. According to Lucy, she was optimistic that sometimes, such issues will become a public issue. Thus, Lucy accepts the reality and lives optimistically with the hope that the time will come when the needs of women are a public concern. What this means is that the community leaders should be considerate of the vulnerability that each of the members had and ensure that proper measures will be taken. Perhaps, due to male chauvinism, Lucy would have been accused of recklessness, and the ordeal is termed a personal choice. The decision of Lucy to be silent is evidence that in that state, most women could not get help; that is why she chose silence over pursuing the perpetrators. What if when such a case is reported, the authorities will act accordingly? Perhaps, Lucy would have resorted to
reporting to the authority. In the instance where a person chooses to be silent about the problems, it is that they look around and see that there is no one to help. The main agenda of feminism is to offer help to women, empower them, and help them overcome societal limits. As for Lucy, the issue did not end with the rape scene, but she had to bring up a child of mixed race.

There are many women undergoing problems associated with gender-based violence. However, if society is not ready to hear their stories, they may probably have to keep silent about their issues. According to Graham (2003), Lucy’s denial is a portrayal of women as weak and vulnerable to victimization. While Lucy may heal from the physical scars, the emotional scars may live forever. Understanding feminism may not be understood without acknowledging the suffering women are going through. Perhaps, the lack of a specialized department that can address such issues in a rape case is why Lucy chose to be silent. For instance, in a rape case, there needs to be proof that the act happened, and the process may be dehumanizing. However, with women in leadership, there may be the formulation of measures to counter such issues. Perhaps, Lucy would have come across a group of women who help such victims, she would have opened up, but now that there is not much hope, she chose to hide the possible shame.

From the narration of Lucy to his father on why she chose not to talk to the promise despite them arriving and the scene of a crime, it is evident that she has a history of how such cases have been addressed in the past. When a person chooses to seek legal help, the motivation is that they will be helped – thus, when one is in doubt of the assistance, they will likely hide their issues. Lucy is not willing to go through the harsh process of trial, which would view women with suspicion in such cases. After her father, David, instead of reporting the case, Lucy stated, ‘it is my life,’ meaning that she was ready to bear all the consequences that would come after the decisions were made. According to Coetzee (1999), Lucy insisted that while it was her right to report the case, it was still her right not to initiate it because she knew there was a rigorous session of justifying herself. According to Boeyer (2011), that is the nature of radical democrats fighting to ensure that society is first shaped for all people, regardless of race, class, gender, color, or sexuality, to fit. The case of Lucy may be an example of many cases and eventualities that various vulnerable groups are facing; however, their helplessness contributes to silence as they hope at some point, they will have someone to air their issues. Thus, feminism, as a system, is a response to the suffering of women, and the Disgrace covers the story of many women who have no one to speak for their rights.

**Motivation of Women Empowerment in “None to Accompany Me”**

Gordimer’s novel, *None to Accompany Me*, is another novel covering the suffering of women in society. The novel was written after the release of Nelson Mandela, thus marking an end of a particular regime. The new government was more considerate and aimed to have women’s national empowerment and prevent cases of stereotyping such as job specifications. Women were being encouraged to join the mainstream in the country’s development. According to Duffaud (1994), during the Apartheid era, the leadership portrayed masculine concepts meaning that women and children were the most vulnerable. The traditional social organizations were male-dominated, meaning that the culture of having males as the leaders and females as the followers were the norm of the time. While feminism does not target the traditional standards, it is against
any conduct or activity that demeans women. Initially, women would not be allowed into complex or unique jobs because such as secluded for men only. However, with a new regime, women were made to be part of the system by giving them a chance to hold offices and showcase their skills in various departments. African beliefs, which are also supported by religious inclination, failed to acknowledge the possible impact of women on the development of the community. Instead, women’s contribution was to be as per the authority of a man, thus limiting the potential of women in nation-building. Vera Stark and Sibongile are among the main characters in the story of Gordimer. Vera Stark is white and works as a lawyer without discrimination of color. As a lawyer, Vera was fighting for the rights of the black, particularly in getting back the land that the colonial government had seized. Thus, Vera was more into humanism, the classification of people. Vera’s love for the blacks was great to the extent that she had to abandon her white husband for a black one, and this could be termed unconventional. The relationship between Vera and Rapulana was against the normal odds of gender, sex, or race – it was a new concept of home in post-apartheid South Africa. Thus, what Vera was preaching is equality across all classifications of people. The main purpose behind this narration is that Gordimer seemed to portray the picture of women as a tool of change. This is contrary to the normal view of women because, traditionally, they were not allowed to hold higher offices; instead, they were expected to only focus on the domestic chores. Thus, the act of Vera acting as an activist in fighting for the rights of the blacks and her relationship with Rapulana is a direct indication that women, too, can be agents of change. In the typical social setting in those days, men were the only ones involved in political issues and social welfare; women were supposed to remain home attending to the domestic chores. The fact that Vera was working as a lawyer and was active in fighting for the welfare of the blacks marks her as a feminist – a woman who believes in the capability of females.

The act of act was a challenge to the conventional system that confined women to their homes. According to Duffaud (1994), such moves motivate other women and keep them high-spirited in attaining their goals regardless of how society defines them. The action of Vera to be in a relationship with a black man can be translated as a visionary person who is optimistic that at some point, the universe will accommodate all people without any discrimination. The post-Apartheid era brought about sharing of power between women and men like never before. According to Sakamoto, the new regime meant that women would no longer be limited in opportunities and expression; rather, they would be given chances to express their interests, particularly those that contribute to nation-building. As for Sibongile, she also believed in women’s empowerment, although she also believed that demonstrations are necessary to put pressure on the leadership. After a failed coup, Sibongile had to flee but later became a vital political figure. This is an example of the characters that have changed the universe to view women differently, not like before. Thus, Sibongile and Vera are an example of female revolutionaries who believed in the power of women in impacting the society and country at large.

**Conclusion**

Traditions and beliefs have for long hindered the efforts of helping women attain basic freedom and rights. Consequently, there have been demonstrations and riots as women claim their rights and freedom; nevertheless, all these approaches seem to be violence-driven. Various icons have come with the idea of non-violent approaches, which is the use of art. Naguib, Coetzee, and
Gordimer have proven that the use of novels can help highlight the turmoil and distress that women undergo due to biased traditions. From the used novels, the authors have focused on the changes surrounding women’s well-being and how their oppression had become a norm until various iconic figures challenged the norm. In Naguib Mahfouz’s *Palace Walk*, the setting is of an ancient Egyptian family which was bound by strict Muslim tradition. Such traditions required women to remain at home and only leave with their husband’s permission or company. However, such tradition made women live in boredom, and the bold ones could only express their concerns about the same. Amina, who is the main character, happens to be a victim of a biased society because she is required to be unquestionably submissive and obedient to her husband. In Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, the main narrative is about how women suffer yet choose to be silent due to a lack of hope in the societal system. Lucy chooses to be silent despite being a victim of rape since she knows that she should be taken through a rigorous and biased examination system which will likely leave her ashamed. In Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*, the setting is how women can play a significant role in making the world a new place. Feminists believe in the power ad capability of women as contrasted to the traditional view of women as inferiors. Vera and Sibongile are portrayed as visionary women who believe in possibilities after the overthrowing of the apartheid leadership. Generally, the argument is about women and how they deserve to be empowered. Some narration focuses on how women face hardship due to society’s views. Thus, the appreciation of feminism can only be attained after considering the challenges that women go through under the crude leadership of biased tradition and culture. The efforts of authors to preach the message of gender equality have been applied in different measures and approaches. As for the discussed texts, Vera and Sibongile stand out as women who believe in women’s empowerment.

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