

## **Resistance against Women's Oppression to Achieve Equal Recognition with Men in Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor***

**Gemechu Hinika Gameda\***

Haramaya University, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, School of Foreign Languages and Journalism

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**Abstract:** This article deals with Nawal El Saadawi's strategies of resistance to achieve altered representation whereby woman attains potent agency of resistance through dismantled gender hierarchy in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. The paper examines El Saadawi's presentation of resistance through which she suggests a peaceful coexistence where partners view each other as equals. Feminist theoretical perspective is employed to examine the meaning and condition of resistance. Women have been subjected to complex systems of oppression and exclusion in many African cultures. However, one hardly finds a system of gender oppression and exclusion in which women have not participated. The most important step in the resistance against gender-based oppression is creating understanding on how the system of oppression works and the link between the structures and processes of oppression. The narrative is relayed in the first-person point of view unfolding the evolving character who eventually accepts living with a partner. The article argues that El Saadawi's version of resistance is intended to bring about representation of harmonious coexistence of both sexes in which woman is guaranteed due recognition, love and equality.

**Keywords:** Gender equality/hierarchy; Patriarchy; Representation; Resistance

## 1. Introduction

El Saadawi is a leading figure whose “influence on Arab feminism has been profound” (Smith, 2007: 59). Her greatness as a literary figure lies in the place she owes to the treatment of the theme of resistance against women’s suppression in the Arab Islamic world in particular and the whole world in general. El Saadawi, therefore, subscribes to the ‘nationalist-feminist generation’ whose writings are characterized by resistance against sex-based suppression (She, 2010: 3). She has contributed substantially to dissident literature by questioning the Arab-Islamic world’s structural and discursive representation of women. Her writings confront “the cultural construction of women as invisible bodies appropriated by patriarchy” (Guèye, 2010: 161). Resistance and the urge of transformed representation of women in patriarchal society are the core themes in El Saadawi’s works. Thus, she stands as a prominent agency of resistance and controversial literary figure in the Middle East who was forced to live in exile (Al Mhairat, 2016). Her works such as *A Daughter of Isis* (1999) and *Woman at Point Zero* (2007) oppose perverted representation of women in Islam and patriarchy, which is also spectacularly visible in her first work of fiction-*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*.

El Saadawi’s writings, including the ones mentioned above, are reflections of “her political contestation” and “feminism achieved by re-articulating heterosexual relationship” (She, 2010: 89). *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* reveals her experience both in medical profession and political activism. As El Saadawi puts in her introductory note, the novel expresses her own feelings and experience as a woman professional doctor who still continues to experience the unchanged role of a mother and wife. Owing to this, writers like She (2010: 69) consider the novel “partially as El Saadawi’s autobiographical accounts”. Kōşeli (2013: 210) also notes that it deals with facts overlapping with El Saadawi’s life as the narrative flashbacks on her childhood and emphasizes on her psychological suffering from ‘sexual discrimination’. However, El Saadawi openly disclaims that it is an autobiography of her own actual life accentuating that facts are fictionalized and writing fiction is quite different from writing autobiography.

The serialized versions of this novel were being published in the *Ruz al-Yusuf* magazine before its publication in the form of novel in 1957 (El Saadawi, 1988). The magazine rigorously censored the serialized versions in favor of the government. Despite her attempt, she failed to get the uncensored version to be published as a novel. Being ‘eager to see the book in print’, she allowed publication with censorship that caused significant deletions to the work. Yet, she believes that the novel describes negative and stereotypically founded representation of women in the Egyptian patriarchal community of its time.

As Ojaruega (2012: 198) indicates “imaginative writings by men are not accurate representations of the actual positions of women in society”. Consequently, the main concern of the feminist resistance in fiction by female writers is to subvert patriarchal ideology that undermines the representation of women. By implication, investigation of women’s writings becomes an issue of great significance to critically judge not just how women subjects are represented in a patriarchal society, but also to analyze

how counter-reactive resistance to subvert such perverted representations of women is suggested. Hence; the main concern of this article is to identify and investigate how Nawal El Saadawi presents feminist resistance in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* to imply the subversion of patriarchal ideology that undermines the representation of women by taking the matter into their own hands. With this background, the current study investigates El Saadawi's use of textualised effort of dismantling gender hierarchy to realize harmonized coexistence of both sexes. The paper tries to show how the novel refutes the groundlessness of sex-based inequality, and the role of narrative in exposing and subverting the ideologies that naturalize patriarchy.

## 2. Research Methods

For this research, appropriate data that shows El Saadawi's treatment of resistance to suggest representation of gender equality is collected from the novel. Reading the novel employing the feminist theoretical framework, relevant data addressing issues of resistance and representation were identified. To minimize subjectivity, analysis was conducted based on data collected from the novel. Moreover, placing the analysis within appropriate theoretical and analytical framework, and making the analysis within and cross-data comparison have contributed further to reduce the extent of subjectivity in the analysis.

Thus, the paper draws on the reading that reveals how El Saadawi delineates various patriarchal mechanisms intended to maintain women's oppression. On the other hand, textual evidences, which explicitly/implicitly suggest women's resistance and representation, i.e. equal recognition of male and female sexes are identified through critical reading of the text. In this study, reading as a process and a technique of data collection concentrates on identifying textual evidences that reveal how the novel presents both mechanisms of patriarchy in women's subjugation and resistance strategies that counter the oppression. To do so, the reading adopts the perspective of the feminist theoretical framework. Core feminist theory advocates the equality of women to men politically, socially and economically (Freedman, 2001). Feminist theoretical framework addresses issues related to women's suppression, resistance and representation in a better way than other theoretical perspectives. Based on this, data samples that provide clues on the presence of gender inequality and resistance against that inequality were spotted as relevant. After identifying relevant data, its classification under different thematic areas was undertaken to make the selected sample ready for analysis.

## 3. Analysis and Discussions

*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* is written in the first person and relays to us an account of a nameless woman character who is a medical doctor by profession. The opening scene presents the reader with optimism that women's representation would change sometime in the future. In the beginning, the narrator hates her femininity and shuns away patriarchal agents for the injustices they inflict onto a woman subject. She blames her mother for her part of incessant indoctrination of patriarchal values and mentoring to be a good cook and wife who serves her would-be husband. The hatred

she developed gradually left her with utter rejection of husband, marriage and all other situations thought to promote the perpetuation of patriarchy. Furthermore, she questions why people fail to consider their sons and daughters as equals irrespective of their biological differences. As an example, the character mentions the relative freedom of her brother who enjoys privileges she is denied for the mere fact that she is a female. Thus, she resolves to fight against unjust treatment of women assuming the role of self-declared advocate for those who suffer patriarchal oppression. In her fight against the patriarchal injustices, the narrator avers to medicine as a tool of feminist resistance, which helps her to identify strong truth on the non-existence of any justified difference between male and female sexes.

She shuns marriage proposals from men in order not to give in to the power of male. She makes clear her protest against the portrayal of woman based on objectifying principle by dismissing the view that woman can hardly combine good look and mind. Consequently, El Saadawi strongly fights against the culture of valuing a woman's body over her intellect. Thus, she rejects marriage proposal based on woman's outward appearance and her willingness to remain an objectified servant to her husband rejecting to be viewed as an object such as a piece of land.

As the novel approaches its closure, we see the previously naïve character who relays on the philosophy of evacuation as a sole means of resistance, averting to alternative terms. As a result, the novel suggests her resistance against gender inequality in many ways. The character accepts her femininity, marriage and man on her abiding principle of 'no half measures' whereby woman maintains love and equality. Ultimately, she finds a husband who forms a harmonized union. As Bhabha (1990) suggests in theory of mimicry, El Saadawi accentuates the transformative potential of increasing a subject's freedom on her choice and subjectivity.

This section, therefore, deals with thorough analysis, discussions and interpretations of the extracts drawn from the novel by employing the feminist theoretical framework. In the course of this, the novel's treatment of women's objectified representation in various contexts is shown. In addition, the ensuing resistance against undermined representation of female subjects as suggested by El Saadawi, whether that is implicit or explicit, was extensively explored.

Thus, issues like change, optimism, various dimensions of resistance against patriarchal conventions, i.e. resistance against male superiority, patriarchal restrictions, women's objectifications, and patriarchal mechanisms, etc, have been given due space and treatment. Finally, the conclusion/finding of the article has been derived as a probable inference of the detailed analysis and discussions of these topics. Put differently, the section presents how El Saadawi dealt with the objectified representation of the narrator and voices of dissidence against such representation common in the traditional discourses of patriarchy.

### **3.1. El Saadawi's Obsession with Resistance and Change**

Prior to embarking on the analysis, it seems imperative to examine El Saadawi's obsession with resistance and change in the beginning of this novel. Close reading of the novel reveals El Saadawi's philosophy of resistance which aims at achieving due

representation. Resistance is the main concern in the novel and this is evident in her avoidance of proper names while addressing characters throughout the novel. The erasure seems deliberate act of resistance against identity taken for granted that alludes to the underrepresented female subject in patriarchal community. El Saadawi's nameless character stands for the voice of defiance against radicalized restrictions sanctioned by patriarchy. The narrator's characterization without proper name suggests a strategy of defiance that liberates the medical practitioner and narrator "from the shackles of patriarchy" (Guèye, 2010: 164) which is ironically a device of inversion (Abrams, 1999) claiming the presence of the absented.

### 3.2. El Saadawi's Optimism

Optimism is an underlying force through which El Saadawi tries to shape the positionality and subjectivity of women. For her, powerful resistance is one that is fueled with the spirit of change and possibility. El Saadawi explains that this novel is concerned with resistance against woman's oppression in Egyptian society. However, she is optimist that resistance would bring about transformed representation of woman: "... *Memoirs*...express [es] a reality ... still relevant today. It is a simple, spontaneous novel in which there is a lot of anger against the oppression of women in my country, but also a great deal of hope for change, for wider horizons and a better future" (El Saadawi, 1988: 8). The optimism with which the novel opens is suggestive of the change realized by the culmination of resistance in transformed representation of the previously rebel heroine who accepts a husband on the condition of maintained gender equality as it closes. The core aim of a feminist resistance is to dismantle gender-based partiality and ensure equality by subverting patriarchal convention that defines, objectifies and marginalizes women by what they allegedly lack (Stratton, 1994; Tyson, 2006).

### 3.3. Portrayal of Self-Reproaching as a Self-Destructive Habit

*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* portrays the subjectivities and statuses of favored male character who "... has the world supporting him and holds the sceptre of life in his hand... owns the past, the present and the future... the spiritual and the material world ... chooses ...to let it live or have it destroyed" (El Saadawi, 1988: 75-76). In contrast to this, El Saadawi shows a feeble woman character who weeps over her femininity which fails to guarantee nothing more than just her presence in the patriarchal society in a quite similar way that Wanja perceives her femininity and her vagina as curse (Ngugi, 1977). Women are presented as "... voiceless in every matter...in order not to offense others...[and] their attitudes are based on group decision rather than individual's decision" (Binti, 2015: 926). The novel shows self-reproaching characterization in which woman's self-hatred gets more attention. El Saadawi thus portrays self-reproaching as a self-destructive posture through which women participate in the system that controls, subdues and sidelines them, (Hussein, 2009), to implicate into the fact that there is no patriarchy in which women have not both performatively and discursively played. El Saadawi's literary fame is associated with the "...battle against the self and embedded ideology" (Al-Khateeb, 2013: 5).

Resistance against representation of a woman subject whose inferiority is capitalized both by herself and others contributes substantially to the development of the novel's plot. The anonymous character suffers from ideologically infused self-reproaching as female because of nothing but her body that is implicated in forging chains that ensure her captivity: "I hated being female... felt ... I was in chains forged from my own blood... produced by the cells of my own body, chains of shame and humiliation" (El Saadawi, 1988: 12).

Binti (2015: 926) reveals the experience of undermined representation of Japanese women who "have been taught... to serve men faithfully and ...carefully indoctrinated with the idea that women are subordinate to men." It is in the light of this framework that El Saadawi's heroine views her femaleness as a source of disgrace. Such undermined representation of female engenders self-reproaching in which the narrator understands her existence as "miserable". She reproaches her nature and sheds tears committing no other mistakes except for her femininity which is none of her choice and considered as enmity between her and her nature: "I felt sorry for myself and... cried...[not]... because I'd done badly at school ... but because I was a girl" (El Saadawi, 1988: 10).

Self-reproaching is an effect of patriarchal ideology on women's subjectivity and sense of self. El Saadawi sees it as a social-psychological and affective condition that reinforces woman to view herself and sexual identity as naturally antagonistic entities. Thus, the heroine speaks of the hostility between self and femininity is as old as herself indicating the extent to which patriarchy invests its gendered ideology on women to eternalize her inferiority: "The conflict between me and my femininity began very early on, before my female characteristics had become pronounced and before I knew anything about myself ..." (El Saadawi, 1988: 9). Malti-Douglas (1995: 4) also accentuates the existence of "radical incompatibility between narrator and her female body", and says that in Saadawian literary corpus body becomes "a source of conflict...intimately tied to a discourse of gender and sexual definition".

The negative image of the self implies internalised self-inferiorisation by woman which unwittingly becomes a fact of finding oneself in collaboration with patriarchal power whose main intent is to portray inferior image of woman. Al-Khateeb (2013: 4-5) also observed that El Saadawi confronts 'battle against the self and embedded ideology' in her effort to expose the systematic suppression of women in the Egyptian patriarchal society. In this regard, El Saadawi tries to elucidate the extent to which women are made to unwittingly accept their alleged inferiority through socializing agents such as a mother character who reproduce patriarchal ideology that resulted in self-reproaching.

El Saadawi resists self-reproaching attitude by portraying the heroine who reveals womanhood in acceptance of the self as female. She manipulates womanhood as a powerhouse of resistance against self-reproaching. The "female doctor re-discovers motherhood in her through taking care of her patients" (She, 2010: 33). Accordingly, El Saadawi (1988: 49) views womanhood as power instead of shame:

...mystery and wonder... restored for me... my womanhood had emerged defiantly from its prison, dismantling on its way all the memories stored in my mind,... the

stormy yearnings of my soul had uprooted the ugly images of the body from my imagination....

El Saadawi suggests negotiated acceptance of self-bringing to spotlight the power of womanhood against self-reproaching portrayal through revealed womanhood subverting patriarchal ideology. In resistance, she dismisses a tradition that keeps her a prisoner. The womanhood that emerged defiantly brought about the reversal of self-hating instinct in search of the reconciliation with the self. The narrator's reference to defiant womanhood suggests resistance through dismantled ideology of subject entrapment, and reconciliation with her identity of femininity. Instead of running away from herself, she embraces with her femininity and challenges the superiority of masculinity.

#### **3.4. Resistance against Male Superiority**

El Saadawi surreptitiously diverts male superiority by portraying a more vigorous female subject than man whose support hails from patriarchy to subvert woman's undermined representation. She refutes male superiority as groundless social construct: "I felt stronger than him in spite of the barriers he dragged along with him, the barriers he surrounded himself with, the armoury supporting him" (El Saadawi, 1988:77). El Saadawi explicates man's failure, to comprehend woman's ability to reject him, and the patriarchal tradition which reinforces that a woman has to accept 'whoever chose her' because of man's unquestionable superiority. In resistance to the patriarchal portrayal of man as powerful being, the heroine asks: "Isn't a woman just like a man, doctor? Have you forgotten your science? Or has your mind become separated from your body? Arrogance turns a man into a stupid, feeble-minded creature" (El Saadawi, 1988: 78). According to El Saadawi, man, ideologically constructed as all-knowing, is to blame for his failure to realize that a woman can do all he can. She implies man's failure using the narrator's profession. The excerpt shows that the narrator as medical practitioner has been able to accomplish her duties and responsibilities as per the demand of the profession just like any male doctor. El Saadawi uses this instance to prove that male's superiority is nothing more than social construct. Thus, sex-based inequality and man's exclusive empowerment that stands in contrast with woman's underrepresentation has been overturned. Her attempt to dismantle inequality is substantiated by Butler's (1990: 25) performative theory that claims nonexistence of "gender identity", except that it is performatively constituted.

#### **3.5. Resistance against Woman's Objectification**

El Saadawi exposes patriarchal view that approves prominence of woman's body over her mind, as an attributing factor to self-reproaching that ought to be resisted. Body has significant space in El Saadawi's writings (Malti-Douglas, 1995). El Saadawi resists its characterization as "the cultural element" that signifies female (Guèye, 2010: 160). El Saadawi stresses that woman is more obsessed with her body disregarding her mind which has to also be developed. Furthermore, she reveals patriarchal perception of woman's body and mind as separate entities and how that

perception is naturalized. Woman is socialized to accept that she cannot combine beauty with intelligence and ‘...she's a body and nothing more’ (El Saadawi, 1988: 55-56). The extract demonstrates how patriarchy reinforces the perspective that a woman is objectified being viewed through the masculinist gaze. From gender performative theory (Butler, 1990), one can argue that El Saadawi stresses how gender identity is performatively constructed and the role of body politics entrenching that identity. For El Saadawi, a woman’s identity is at the intersection of body, sex, sexuality and power rejecting the ideology that naturalizes a woman is body alone. Rather, El Saadawi warns that a woman’s body should not be her sole concern to be perceived independent of her mind.

### **3.6. Resistance against Mechanisms of Objectification**

Religion and marriage are among patriarchal strategies of silence employed to enable effective subordination of woman. These strategies are conspicuously shown in El Saadawi’s novel as quite interrelated in promoting patriarchy.

To begin with, El Saadawi rejects Islam as a promoter of patriarchal values through revealing systematic manipulation of Islamic values to objectify women. Yet, this is quite different from affirming that she is against Islam. Rather, she is against wrong interpretation of its values to “empower men and oppress women” (Guèye, 2010: 161).

El Saadawi views veil wearing is a way through which the patriarchy controls women’s body. In protest, her heroine resists wearing a veil to see a male without it. Wearing veil faces conflicting narratives from the Arab Islamic world and Western society in that the former views it as important element in defining the identity of Arab Muslim women while the latter considers it as a sign of backwardness (Sarhan, 2011). El Saadawi still maintains her resistance against veil by emphasizing its role in importing and perpetuating all patriarchal motives. El Saadawi’s attitude of utter disenchantment towards veil and her being quite critical of women who wear it resulted in her re-signifying Islam (Osirim, 1999; She, 2010). El Saadawi’s involvement in the violation of “sacred enclosures”, Malti-Douglas (1995: 3), in a way no any other Arab women writers have ever done is noticeable strategy of resistance. Thus, her character who dares to see her guest without veiling could be considered an act of resistance against Islamic cultural practices in and through which patriarchy controls woman’s body. Appearing without veil in the Arab-Islamic world of patriarchy implies the power that a woman has gained over her own body.

El Saadawi provides numerous instances that show how Islamic life style and orders have contributed toward patriarchal suppression. When the primary concern of Koran is advocating justice for humankind, its systematic manipulation ironically contributes towards women’s objectification to prioritize patriarchal interest. El Saadawi analyses and criticizes “ruling classes of Egypt and other Arab nations” for their manipulation of the “sections of the Koran...to legitimize the subordination of women” (Osirim, 1999: 177). The following extract indicates how Koran is de-contextualized to ensure subjugation of woman through marriage:

My eyes fell on unexpected words... I associated with contracts for renting flats and shops and plots of agricultural land: 'On this day... in my presence and by my hand... I so-and-so... official attached to such-and-such a court... marriage of so-and-so to so-and-so... on payment of such-and-such a marriage portion by the husband... an amount to be paid at the present time... and an amount to be deferred. .. legal marriage according to God's Book and the Law of His Prophet... with the legal consent of the aforementioned husband... consequent on both parties being verified as free from any religious or civil impediment and on the wife having no income or salary from the government and no wealth exceeding...' (El Saadawi, 1988: 61-62).

The discursive tone of the excerpt shows the extent to which patriarchy exploits Islam to realize woman's objectification in the name of marriage. El Saadawi implies resistance against Islam as a patriarchal mechanism in her ironical comments on religion. The marriage contract which is entered "... according to God's Book and the Law of His Prophet..." implies that it complies with principles of Islam. Among its devoted followers, Islam is understood to be a religion of peace, fairness, and equality. However, shortly after mentioning Koran as such a Holy Book, El Saadawi tells us that a married woman is devoid of her right to earn salary. This has powerful implication about the peripheral position of woman since she is denied access to income in marriage. While reference to the Koran and the Prophet's Law indicates that everything is going to be handled in fairness, the declaration about the wife's having no income suggests to readers that it is God's will that women be relegated from earning any income. In fact, this is quite substantial evidence that shows El Saadawi's view that "gender oppression" is a variant of woman's political and economic disempowerment (Cooke, 1999: 180). Consequently, it could be inferred that religion ironically legitimizes marriage, which in turn is a typical patriarchal institution that facilitates women's commodification. This practice of woman's commodification in El Saadawi's novel parallels the Japanese practice of trading virginity for price, which Binti (2015) describes as one of the many forms of the commodification of body.

The novel also deals with the philosophy of evacuation, Allen (1984; cited in Nnaemeka, 1997), as resistance strategy whereby agents of suppression are abandoned though this is reversed at the end. In line with this framework, El Saadawi's narrator runs away from people and circumstances that perpetuate patriarchal ideologies to ensure women's entrapment. Marriage is one such entrapment mechanism against which El Saadawi openly revolts: "Yes, I'd done wrong. I'd disobeyed my heart and mind and done what this man wanted, entered into a marriage contract which looked like a contract for renting a shop or a flat. By doing that hadn't I put him in authority over me?" (El Saadawi, 1988: 66). The lines suggest the role of marriage in women's objectification to imply that it be evacuated. El Saadawi's heroine stands in resistance against marriage that throws her fate in the hands of her husband who would treat her like an object. Marriage is suggested as patriarchal machinery that engenders the death of a woman by facilitating her complete and endless subjugation, and it is likened to signing a death warrant. Regarding this, the narrator says:

I might as well have signed my death warrant. My name, the first word I ever heard and which was linked in my conscious and subconscious mind with my existence and very being, became null and void. He attached his name to the outside of me ... people call me by my new name. I looked at them and at myself in astonishment as if they couldn't really be addressing me. It was as if I'd died and my spirit had passed into the body of another woman who looked like me but had a strange new name (El Saadawi, 1988: 62).

The narrator's look of astonishment in embracing the new identity is suggestive of El Saadawi's resistance against such marriage that endorses identity crisis. Marriage becomes a tool of enslavement as it usually erases a woman's existence represented by her first name. Her real name's replacement and attachment to her husband's is symbolic of woman's subordination endorsing her dependency on man thereafter. Haley (1974) indicates similar resistance in portraying Kunta who refuses to accept the name *Toby* as imposed new identity. Like Kunta, El Saadawi's heroine views the erasure of her identity symbolized by her name as something like death. El Saadawi shows that marriage empowers man when the would-be husband of the narrator declares himself the owner of the "house and all that's in it", the narrator included, for just being a man but nothing else (El Saadawi, 1988: 63). In this masculinized declaration, a woman is given an attribute of being an object and a man owns her as if she were one of the objects inside that house. Her fellow doctor treats the narrator "as nothing but a sexual object" but she disputes "biological nature" which is "not a static idea" (She, 2010: 71). The narrator further expresses hatred towards marriage owing to the gravity of its mission of objectification. In the passage below, El Saadawi indicates how she hates vocabularies like 'husband', 'kitchen' and 'food', which suggest the future secondary position of woman through marriage:

You're going to be married one day. You must learn how to cook ... Marriage! Marriage! That loathsome world which my mother mentioned everyday until I hated the sound of it. I couldn't hear it without having a mental picture of a man with a big see-through belly with a table of food inside it. In my mind the smell of the kitchen was linked with the smell of a husband and I hated the word husband just as I hated the smell of the food we cooked (p.14).

El Saadawi strongly resists patriarchy that firmly disciplines girls "to prepare them as good wives or mothers in the future" (Binti, 2015: 926). In connection to this, Dangarembga (1989) discusses related view as she relays Jeremiah's advice to his daughter to give priority for cooking business rather than learning as she would not cook and feed books to her would-be husband. El Saadawi protests against patriarchal ideology that prepares a woman to accept enslavement through portraying the narrator who dismisses marriage in anticipation of what it imposes on woman. Its evacuation in resistance to its consequences is suggested in expressions like 'loathsome' 'hated' 'big see-through belly' that represent the narrator's attitude of protest. Similarly, El Saadawi (1988: 59) writes the heroine's hatred of words like 'marry', 'kitchen', 'food' as they are associated with forces of silence against which she rebels. Through the heroine's hatred of hearing: 'You're going to be married one day... learn how to cook ...' El Saadawi implies resistance against patriarchal machination of subordination through marriage. Her interest in the world free from marriage and husband in contrast to her hatred of the mother's sound that daily mentions 'marriage' suggests evacuation of this patriarchal demand. Moreover, this

suggests the narrator's hatred towards patriarchal agents represented by people like her mother who actively assume a role of incessant indoctrination of patriarchal ideals into her. Yet, the narrator dismisses her mother's imposing role that enforces and reinforces living with unattractive '*man with a big see-through belly*'.

### **3.7. Refutation of Gender Hierarchy**

The framework of El-Saadwi's literary resistance rests on dismantling gender hierarchy. She (2010: 253-254) suggests 'creative dissidence' as a vital impetus that has given rise to the production of the discourses of resistance against gender hierarchy in El Saadawi's works. El Saadawi's concern in dismantling gender hierarchy is reflected mostly in her "strategy of critiquing women stereotyping" to demystify "the myth of cultural origin" (She, 2010: 262). To achieve representation of equality for women, El Saadawi exhaustively employs various subversive mechanisms.

#### **3.7.1. The role of medicine in El Saadawi's resistance**

Professions play great role in reinforcing gendered ideology, and in El Saadawi's case the profession of medicine "reinforces a traditional gender discourse" (Valassopolous, 2004: 87). For Valassopolous, medicine is considered a project of failure as it could not bring about immediate impact on the narrator who still in actuality experiences the role of traditional woman and wife in ideal Egyptian patriarchal society.

Nevertheless, several implications in El Saadawi's novel indicate that medicine has profoundly contributed to the mental as well as emotional evolvment of the heroine, and ultimately to making a powerful agency of resistance out of her. It has contributed to altering woman's representation and accelerated El Saadawi's move towards subversion of gender inequality tremendously. The narrator recovers from her failure to arrive at the truth she has been seeking for thirty years. This would not be possible if she were not educated as medical practitioner. El Saadawi is a resistant feminist fiction writer who employs "self-referentiality to challenge and reject the strictures placed on all women" (Mule, 2006: 94). Mule furthers that El Saadawi artistically exploits medical discourse to explore the political environment that favors the emergence of female agency towards resisting gender inequality. Consequently, medicine equipped the female narrator of the novel to question woman's untranslated desire (Mwangi, 1977). It has enabled the narrator to justify equality through dismantling gender hierarchy in many ways. For instance, to escape a patriarchal suppression experienced from her early childhood, El Saadawi avers to medicine as a tool of resistance. In addition, medicine has equipped the narrator with access to helping others: "Being a doctor meant giving health to all who needed it... and success was to give what I had to others" (El Saadawi, 1988: 100). With the power of medicine, El Saadawi subverts injustices inflicted on women, and pledges to avenge herself against perpetrators who get away unpunished: "I would become a doctor... I'd make my mother tremble with fright and look at me reverently; I'd make my brother terrified and my father beg me for help" (p. 23).

El Saadawi portrays medicine as “a vehicle for women to regain their lost power” (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 21). El Saadawi exploits medical profession to refute the myth of gender hierarchy through the analogical demonstration that likens human beings to an animal in order to prove the absence of any justified claim to man’s superiority. She writes:

Science proved to me that women were like men and men like animals. A woman had a heart, a nervous system and a brain exactly like a man's, and an animal had a heart, a nervous system and a brain exactly like a human being's. There were no essential differences between them!... A woman had male organs, some apparent and some hidden, and a man had female hormones in his blood. I was delighted by this new world which placed men, women and the animals side by side, and by science which seemed a mighty, just and omniscient god; so I placed my trust in it and embraced its teachings (El Saadawi, 1988: 32).

The analogy indicates El Saadawi’s endeavor to dismantle superiority of one gender. Likewise, Tyson (2006) provides evidence on the absence of absolute difference between male and female using analogical illustration of penis and birth canal. By setting analogical comparison between the anatomy of man and female, Tyson claims the presence of more similarities than the differences. Accordingly, penis and testicles are analogous to the birth canal and the ovaries, respectively except the difference in location: man’s organs point outward while the woman’s point inward. Thus, El Saadawi’s career as a medical practitioner has enormously contributed to her actualizing gender equality. To further the point, Malti-Douglas (1995: 4) indicates that medicine opens up opportunities for “female physician to question games of power and social hierarchy” to liberate “characters whose narratives would otherwise remain hidden”. Furthermore, El-Saadawi (1988: 32) acknowledges science as it created an opportunity for her to investigate and reveal a ‘vast new world’ of ‘the secrets of human existence’ to disprove the ‘huge differences’ her mother constructs between the narrator and her brother.

Thus, El Saadawi is indebted to medical profession that has enabled her to prove the absence of any justified distinction between male and female. Science has dissolved the artificial differences revealing the secrets of human life and contributed substantially to altered representation whereby the empowerment of woman is ensured. By way of showing resistance, El Saadawi disproves man’s claimed superiority as implied in her narrator’s treatment of a helpless male patient placed under her sole charge. The difference between the two sexes is largely attributable to the patriarchal agents such as the narrator’s mother who construct world of differences, which in actuality are nonexistent.

The role of medicine in dismantling gender inequality is attributed to woman’s empowerment through education since the knowledge of medicine is the consequence of the character’s prior exposure to education. For instance, the animal-humankind analogy to demystify gender hierarchy is an opportunity created through education that empowers woman (Stratton, 1994). El Saadawi suggests education as a feminist tool of resistance like Dangarembga who portrays women characters that are committed to learning to escape patriarchal entrapment. The analogy is a strategy of resistance against defining a female by what she lacks – an organ like penis - to

attack the myth of superiority and inferiority as correlates in nature in the representation of male and female subjects respectively (Tyson, 2006).

### 3.7.2. Confronting patriarchal ideals

All forms of injustices women subjects suffer are causes for confronting patriarchal class system. El Saadawi responded to such injustices by questioning patriarchy's unfairness through violating patriarchal conventions. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* fulfills the task of revealing the fact that violations of patriarchal conventions such as dressing style are some of the ways through which resistance against suppressive system has been mounted.

El Saadawi's heroine narrates that she has been "immersed in a series of endless battles" and decides to confront patriarchal society for the injustices it perpetrates. She asks herself: "Should I do battle with society or submit to it ...?". Eventually, she resolves to fight gender-based injustices in self defense: "I would fight, looking to myself for protection, looking to my strength, my knowledge, my success in my work ... I'd decided to do battle ... to face society on feet of iron" (El Saadawi, 1988: 79). She interrogates patriarchal community as to why it does not acknowledge the equality of daughters and sons to advocate the nature of the change that is at the heart of her philosophy- the quest for change and transformed representation.

Suppression resulted in resistance intended to protect the oppressed. Promoting the scope of her resistance, El Saadawi asks herself as to why she does not help others in fighting against the society that protects offenders. She has made clear her stance of resistance against Egyptian oppressive patriarchy in interview with Smith (2007: 63) in which she states that the patriarchal system in the country punishes the victims while it lets criminals get away with their offences unpunished. Privileged because of his sex, man is not punished even after committing "sexual crimes" and can marry and divorce as he wishes. The patriarchal injustices forced El Saadawi to become an advocate for the oppressed represented by the helpless girl portrayed in the novel as shown below:

How could I abandon her when I was all she had, or sentence her to death ... How could I leave her neck under her father's knife when I knew that her father, mother, brother and uncle had all done wrong? How could I punish her alone when I knew that the whole of society had participated in the act, or wonder at her when I knew that everybody did similar things? How could I not protect her when she was the victim and society protected the real offender, or disapprove of her error when I myself had already fallen? I who had lived twice as long as her and seen and learnt many more things than she had. How could I not absolve... (El Saadawi, 1988: 80).

The passage illustrates the narrator's reaction to the society that protects the perpetrators while victimizing females. Being well-educated medical doctor who has suffered gender abuses, the narrator blames herself for not helping other victims. She questions patriarchy why it defends perpetrators and pledges to fight injustice with the help of her education as a weapon of resistance to liberate other women. The determination to offer self-sacrifice for the sake of others promotes her to attain high level of selflessness which dissipated into fighting against patriarchal world likened to "the fangs of the wild beasts and the snakes, rats and cockroaches" (El Saadawi,

1988: 81). She resolves to help the poor child no matter if that would be crucifying in case it is disclosed.

Further, the narrator blames the society for its failure to care for woman's mind, while it cares for perpetrators. El Saadawi reveals that a female undergoes series of ideological naturalization which she courageously interrogates as the system that is unfair to women (Al Mhairat, 2016). The dismissal of gender-based chauvinism is an aspect of confronting intentional peripheralisation of women. Consequently, the narrator interrogates mothers in particular and patriarchy in general for their failure to recognize male and female as equals.

In El Saadawi's novel, much has been invested on the delineation of character who suffers self-reproach, objectification, gender hierarchy, etc. Much has also been invested in the characterization of the heroine who resists such injustices through various mechanisms. Thus, the determination to confront patriarchy seems to appear as a logical consequence of intensive patriarchal oppression. As revealed in the following excerpt, injustices against women subjects have effectively resulted in resistance whereby the narrator is left with no option apart from confronting the oppressive system by rejecting circumstances that hinder her progress:

All that was left for me was to reject, to challenge, to resist! I would reject my femininity, challenge my nature, resist all the desires of my body, prove to my mother and grandmother that I wasn't a woman like them, that I wouldn't spend my life in the kitchen... so that my husband could eat and eat (p.22).

Representation based on inferiorisation is a form of marginalization which brings about silence that could be realized as "a form of resistance" (Sarhan, 2011: 11-12). Similarly, Nnaemeka (1994) suggests being in margin is being in a privileged position for resistance and creativity. Thus, resistance is implicit in such representation of a woman subject. A close analysis of the passage reveals inferiorised representation of the narrator which has led to the rejection of her feminine interest that keeps her a prisoner of patriarchy. As a result, she pledges that she would interrogate patriarchal authority to bring its perpetuation to its end. Resistance against groundless gender inequality is a consequence of discontent "with cleavages surrounding cultural constructions of biological differences" that motivated "El Saadawi's narrator to fight against gender inequities and to trespass on the enclosed spaces imprisoning her femininity" (Guèye, 1974: 166).

### **3.7.3. Violation of patriarchal restrictions**

Philosophy of evacuation is one way in which resistance against patriarchal ideals manifests itself in El Saadawi's novel. The narrator shuns away company of others considered as agents of patriarchy. She relays her first act of rebel in this way: "For the first time in my life I left the flat without asking my mother's permission. ... my provocative act had given me a certain strength. As I walked, a sign caught my eye: 'Ladies' Hairdresser'. I had only a second's hesitation before going in" (El Saadawi, 1988: 17). The narrator's leaving the flat without her mother's permission whatsoever is an intentional act of resistance against suppression she suffers from patriarchal community she lives with. She collects courage to go where she wants without seeking the patriarchal gatekeepers' permission for the very first time.

Evacuation of patriarchal agents without permission was the case hitherto impossible. This act of running away is symbolic of woman's resistance against patriarchal ideologies of subjugation.

In relation to this, Malti-Douglas (1995: 4) emphasized on male-female difference on the "Saadawian stage" that allows "Brother and sister, a potentially explosive heterosexual duo in Arabo-Islamic civilization...". Earlier in the novel, El Saadawi states that the narrator's brother can go anywhere without permission while she is not allowed to do so to underscore patriarchal partiality. This displays the ontological foundation of resistance against patriarchy and the moral justification for countering such partiality. More importantly, Ojaruega (2012: 199) indicates that gender imbalance due to "the preference for male-child" is quite common in African patriarchal societies. Resistance against patriarchy is justified as a due cause to counter partiality of this nature. The narrator resists against ideological indoctrination that inculcates inferiority in the mind of a female subject, while on the other hand it instills pride, confidence and superiority in male counterpart.

Her visit to a hairdresser to get her hair trimmed introduces act of violating patriarchal control over woman's body. The heroine's experiencing no right over her own body including the right to get her hair done in a way her inner freedom chooses implies that she has been imprisoned because of her body. Her determination to visit a hairdresser and get her hair cut is resistance that represents her decision to take responsibility for her own body. The determination is not just a decision of revolt to ensure one has the right to manage her body; it is also a robust resistance against patriarchal view that over-values a woman's body disregarding her mental capacity. Based on resistance theory one could infer that women are expected to exercise their power to realize their freedom.

Moreover, the visit to a hairdresser without permission is suggestive of interrogating the patriarchal authority and its agents to imply subversion of the priorities and privileges bestowed on male but denied to female. The mother character is portrayed as an accomplice of patriarchy since she incessantly indoctrinates her daughter to accept patriarchal values. Indeed, challenging her implies challenge to patriarchy. In this regard, the novel elucidates sexual prejudice, by showing how the narrator compares and contrasts her suppression against her brother's relative freedom. According to theory of feminist resistance by Butler (1990), it is imperative for activists like El Saadawi to prove the absence of ideology that favors one sex while undermining the other.

Control over women's dressing style is another area that has triggered resistance against patriarchal institution. Mother tells her daughter to cover her body since it is considered as shame that deserves to be covered. Nevertheless, the narrator intentionally violates the instruction to resist the patriarchal normative standards that suppress woman's sexuality. The narrator, therefore, refuses to cover her body disputing the view that it is the centre of patriarchal concern at the cost of her mind, which remains neglected. The daring narrator who questions her mother's authority on such matters represents El Saadawi's determination to interrogate suppressive patriarchal authority. Dismissing the systematically imposed patriarchal orientations,

she questions how her mother could convince her that “body was somehow shameful?” (El Saadawi, 1988: 44).

As a result, the narrator dismisses the notion that woman’s body is a source of shame and tries to defend that it is rather a source of pride. El Saadawi politicizes and exploits woman’s body in her writings to suggest resistance against patriarchy that values woman’s body to entrench its suppression of women further. Woman’s body is said to have quite significant role in Saadawian literary tradition as it becomes “the terrain on which games of power are played” (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 114). The narrator’s refusal to cover her thigh suggests resistance against patriarchy that values woman’s body and determines which part of it must be covered. El Saadawi portrays a defiant woman character as a courageous agent of resistance who dares to question the system and practices that impose patriarchal standards set for ensuring social and behavioral control. She protests against restrictions imposed on how one should behave and dismisses the ideology that programmed her in such a way that she would feel ashamed of her own body as an embarrassing part that ought to be covered.

The novel also deals with a physician narrator’s violation of gendered restrictions imposed on her with respect to how she ought to behave while eating and drinking. In relation to this, El Saadawi has the following to say:

I forgot my mother’s instructions about how a girl should eat... stuffed my mouth with food... drank cold water from earthen-ware jag, making a loud noise and spilling water all down my clothes... ate till my hunger was satisfied and till my thirst is quenched (p. 44).

El Saadawi launches resistance against a tradition that sanctions such restrictions by portraying a character who refuses to behave as her mother instructs her while eating and drinking. She rebels against her mother’s agency who makes her busy with pre-marital coaching. Rejection of such indoctrinations is suggestive of resistance against the disciplining nature of the patriarchal power. The narrator further tells us her rejection of indoctrinations:

My mother had always told me that a girl shouldn’t laugh loud enough for people to hear ... I opened my mouth as wide as it would go and laughed and snorted and the air flooded into my chest—pure, clean air free of...all the refinements of society (p. 43-4).

El Saadawi deconstructs “patriarchal class system” (Shihada, 2007: 162) in her resistance against women’s suffering as her character violates indoctrinated restrictions/conventions set to control how one being a female should eat, drink, and laugh.

The quest of women’s rights through revealing their suffering in the hands of suppressive patriarchal society provides archetypical framework for El Saadawi’s writings of resistance (Al Mhairat, 2016). Thus, resistance is suggested in the delineation of a character who ignores patriarchal conventions in defiance to females’ imprisonment by conventions. She defies restrictive authority that reinforces its needs and values. Resistance has been realized as the narrator refuses, as a voice of dissidence, to eat and drink in the manner she has been mentored to do to imply subversion of patriarchal authority through practical discourses whereby a woman partakes in the violation of normative standards set by the patriarchy to perpetuate the unequal relationship between men and women.

### 3.7.4. Rejection of marital arrangement

Patriarch's empowerment of itself in arranging marriage for women becomes another area of resistance, which El Saadawi attacks. The narrator's quest for an ideal man and her resolve to choose him herself is resistance against the standard that deprives women the right to make free and firm decision on their own affairs. She decides to leave her husband, blames herself for consenting to marriage, and resolves not to give in to a husband who intends to own her just like any property. Her resolution suggests courageous act of resistance against man's authority to which she responds in terms of evacuation of marriage. The narrator questions:

People opened their mouths wide in astonishment and protest. How could she leave her husband? And /why? How dare they... who handed them-selves over to me body and soul, whom I saved from ruinous illness and death? What right had they to object to something in my private life, or to tell me their opinions? I was the one who advised them what to eat and drink, explained to them how to breathe, sleep, live, multiply... Had they forgotten, or did they think that when I took off my stethoscope and white coat, I put aside my mind and intelligence and personality? How little they knew! (El Saadawi, 1988: 67).

She questions why patriarchy fails to understand woman's enthronement which science has proved: a female doctor who is one of the most important personnel regardless of patriarchy's interest in what she has to be. The fruition of her resistance is reflected in her resolve to effectively use the rest of her life. She rejects social orientations that deny women the right to decide. She questions why patriarchal agents who need her professional decision in medicine meddle in her affair by deciding whom she has to marry. Rather, she empowers herself to make her own decision although she knows the difficulty of finding a man who recognizes women as equal: "Did he exist ...? I wanted a perfect man like the one in my imagination and a perfect love and I wasn't going to abandon either of these goals... 'All or nothing' was my abiding principle and I'd never accept half measures" (p. 71).

Fortunately, the narrator procures an ideal man of her quest who serves as a model of what a fair-minded man should fulfill to dismantle patriarchal convention for altered representation of woman. She suggests marriage based on love and equality is essential for life to become complete in her portrayal of ideal man who is different from other men as he recognizes woman as equal: "I'm not one of those men. I want a woman who's my partner, not my servant. I'm proud of your mind" (El Saadawi, 1988: 56). Consequently, the narrator praises the ideal man's thought about gender:

His words penetrated and quietened my rebellious depths and calmed my confused heart. I felt the conflict between me and the male sex evaporating and leant my tired head contentedly back against the stone of the pyramid. Why hadn't my mother spoken to me like this, or society recognized the truth of notions such as these? And here was a man doing it, acknowledging that women had minds; that a woman, just like a man, had both a body and a mind. Here was a man uttering the very words I'd said to myself ever since I'd first noticed what was going on around me (p.56-57).

The narrator realizes the truth through dismantled gender inequality as an effect of confronting patriarchal ideals. Change is implied through realized equality of the two sexes accepted by this man dismantling patriarchal view that woman hardly combines good look and mind. To confirm this, an ideal man holds and embraces her so close

to himself that both seemed to have their whole existence melted into one. The procurement of an ideal man is an achievement of El Saadawi's resistance that culminates in the formation of a true union in which love and equality attain due recognition. Ultimately, with love and equality maintained, she regretfully reconsiders her experience of resistance by evacuation of marriage and man: 'I didn't understand anything. I was blind. All I could see was myself. The battles I was fighting hid the truth from me.' (p. 99). El Saadawi's resistance is not intended to marginalize others. It is rather intended to bring about the realization of harmonized coexistence based on "the need for tolerance and accommodation" between the two sexes (Ojaruega, 2012: 202). Since El Saadawi is strongly opposed to union that disregards woman's equality, finding a partner who recognizes woman as equal is considered as the realization of the truth she has been after which the narrator failed to realize because of her mother who kept her always a prisoner of societal conventions. Moreover, the truth, which is eventually made possible by her experience of medical profession, is the narrator's gaining better insight into the art of giving what she has and taking what she needs from others.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

The preceding discussions have revealed El Saadawi's art of plot development in delineating a nameless resistant character who eventually accepts all she rejected on condition of maintained love and equality. The plot of the novel is framed around the objectified representation of the narrator who is a medical practitioner. Women have been presented as objects who cannot manage their own affairs. El Saadawi presents voices of dissidence against such representation common in the traditional discourses of patriarchy (Ojaruega, 2012). Her work suggests a practice of re-gendering sex-role-correlation in female authored discourses as a strategy of subverting male literary traditions (Stratton, 1994). The paper tried to analyze the ideological angles from which El Saadawi observes the asymmetrical power relationships between men and women and the social, cultural, moral and normative processes set to perpetuate the relationships. Acceptance of man with love and equality, which is at the centre of her quest, seems to have been attained. The novel promotes alternative and transformed way of resistance founded on acceptance of previously shunned people. This means, the narrator's change of mind from evacuating husband and marriage to accepting them with women granted equality and love suggests El Saadawi's central quest for achieving equal recognition of both male and female sexes. The type of harmony and representation, which El Saadawi suggests in the opening scene, is subtly implied to have been achieved here in the final scene. The necessity of her optimism rests on "Reshaping the relationships between men and women in a new light of partnership rather than antagonism for a resolution of the problems they face together [which] is more empowering for the feminist writer" (Guèye, 2010: 160). She buries her head in his chest, weeps and shades tears of relief from pain. She gets her lost self restored upon finding an ideal man of her quest. Her feminine identity deprived of all the necessities it deserves rehabilitates through acceptance of husband who owes her due respect expressed in terms of love and equality as the resultant

effect of woman's resistance. Thus, El Saadawi's resistance aims at altered representation of woman subject through education, which is represented through heroine's profound knowledge of medicine.

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