



Women in The Novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun (In The Context of The Sand Child & The Sacred Night)

Calaivanane. R

Assistant Professor of French (Senior), School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University-Vellore-632014.

ABSTRACT

A woman and her role were among the most debated issues during the mid 20th century. Tahar Ben Jelloun, one of the prominent figures of francophone literature and a realist writer, portrays the realities of the Moroccan society. He stands apart from other writers because of the way he portrays women in his works. His works portray the image of woman as a reflection of society. Tahar Ben Jelloun through his works constantly depicts women of the Arab-Muslim society because he feels that change in the Maghreb will come about only through the actions of women.

Tahar Ben Jelloun gives voice to the victims of social injustice. He projects the status of women in a male dominated society. The women abide by the rules imposed on them by the males under whose protection they live. His sensitiveness to all forms of injustice and oppression can be seen in both these novels. In these novels, he calls for women's emancipation and his determination to present women's voices.

In the novels 'The Sand Child' and 'The Sacred Night' he introduces the theme of women in Islamic society. The story is presented in the form of traditional oral tale, where the author tackles the problems of women in the Islamic society and exposes their lack of freedom. In these works, Tahar Ben Jelloun shows in his own way that gender is a social construction in an orthodox Arab Society. In 'The Sand Child', the novelist questions the notion of gender, and in the sequel he takes one step further into the problematic realm of gender and sexuality, drawing out the physical and mental violence that the characters face. Women have been the victims of men's dominance for ages and that is why Tahar Ben Jelloun depicts women as the symbol of Moroccan individual.

KEYWORDS : woman, authority, male dominance, traditional society

INTRODUCTION:

"A successful woman is one who can build a firm foundation with bricks others have thrown at her"- Dr.Nalini.J.Thampi

Women play a key role in the society. With time, women have come out from the protection of their houses and have started to actively participate in all the fields, throwing away the shackles of confinement. They skillfully balance the responsibilities of the home and work. However, even in the 21st century, we find a few countries that treat women as the "second sex", destined to lead a submissive life in the male dominated society. Women and their roles in society were among the most debated issues during the mid 20th century. The present day Arab Society subjects women to many restrictions based on the religious and social beliefs. Tahar Ben Jelloun, one of the most prominent figures of francophone literature, vividly portrays the insensitive realities of the Moroccan society. He stands apart from other writers because of his unique portrayal of women in his works. The status of women in Arab-Muslim societies is the theme that constantly reappears in his works. Tahar Ben Jelloun, in his works, projects the fact that women willfully subject themselves to male domination. They stoically accept this domination, subverting their existence and faithfully abide by the rules imposed on them by the males.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, who immigrated to France, expresses the cultural problems of his homeland, broaching on the issues of tradition and male chauvinism, which ultimately results in the suppression of women's identity. This paper discusses two novels of the writer, '**The Sand Child**' and its sequel '**The Sacred Night**'. In these works, the writer portrays the social problems faced by women in the society. Both the novels were inspired by true incidents that took place in Egypt, and the novels also represent the strict and barbaric culture that harms and suppresses women. The first novel, '**The Sand Child**', is the story of a girl who is born in an orthodox Muslim family where the father believes

"Being a woman is a natural weakness that all women have got used to it and being a man is an illusion and violence that justifies any action." (Pg. 70).

The father relies on his wrong beliefs that stem from his obsolete traditional outlook, and forces a sinister life on his daughter by choosing a male name and identity for her. Many of the traditional families in that society prefer to have sons since they believe that a son will preserve their family identity and serve as a genealogical link to the next generation while a daughter will take away their hereditary roots after marriage, as she would leave her paternal home. Hence, the birth of a daughter in a family which already has seven daughters leaves

the father feeling ashamed that the eighth child is also girl. Hence, he plans to rear her as a boy by naming her "Ahmed".

"Ahmed is a boy with a girl's face." (Pg. 31).

She grows up to encounter a lot of problems in life, and before her father dies, she reveals her true identity, and later fights with her double identity and personality.

The writer represents the taboos and narrowness of a society in a fearless way. This novel is classified into chapters detailing the "Seven gates of meaning," representing the Islamic idea of the Messiah's entry into Medina. The Arab society believes that only if there is a male heir in the family, the family inheritance is not lost. It is based on the legend of Hajj Ahmed Suleyman's eighth daughter Ahmed/Zahra who is brought up like a man since the status of power for a male in a traditional Arab Islamic society is considered to be the highest privilege. The themes of gender identity and a male-dominated society, of masking and storytelling, and surrealism provide the backdrop for a surreal story of secrets, sexuality and identity. The whole novel revolves around the struggle of Ahmed/Zahra, which reflects the harsh realities of the Moroccan society. The novel, in the beginning, shows the ability of Ahmed to function as a male in the male dominated Moroccan society despite being born a female. Here, Ben Jelloun expresses Morocco's identity crisis through Ahmed/Zahra's unresolved quest for identity. The author represents the challenges the Moroccans face in rooting their identities in the midst of modernization. The words of Ahmed's father strongly depict how females are looked down upon in an Islamic society. He says:

"Before Islam, Arab fathers threw an unwanted female infant into a hole and covered her until she died. They were right. In this way they rid themselves of misfortune. It was an act of wisdom, a brief pain, an implacable logic. I have always been fascinated by the courage of those fathers – a courage I never had. All the daughters your mother gave birth to deserved such a fate. I did not bury them because they did not exist for me." (pg 99- 100).

Tahar Ben Jelloun also portrays how, in an Arab society, a man makes the woman do all the rituals which could change his destiny for getting a male child. In the story, '**The Sand Child**', Hajji Ahmed follows all the superstitions rituals. Tahar Ben Jelloun presents this cultural ritual prevalent in the Moroccan Arab society in its full reality. This is not only Hajji Ahmed's problem but the problem of each parent who does not produce a male child.

"He took his wife to a Marabout tomb and had her stay there for seven days and seven nights on a diet of dry bread and water. She sprinkled herself with the she- camel's urine and scattered ashes of seven-teen kinds of incense on the sea. She wore amulets and sacred texts while travelling to Mecca. She swallowed rare herbs imported from India and the Yemen. She drank a salty, bitter liquid prepared by an old witch." (Pg-10)

In Islamic tradition, the woman is not given even the basic education that men are given; so she unquestioningly follows what the men in the family tell her even though she knows it baseless. The same happens with Hajji Ahmed's wife who undergoes other superstitious rituals, which an ordinary person cannot think of, so that he could make his wife pregnant with a boy. Tahar Ben Jelloun portrays the cultural rituals of the Islamic tradition in detail.

"Letting a dead man's hand pass over her naked belly from top to bottom and using it as a spoon to eat couscous." (Pg-10) 3

Ben describes how Islam is oppressive towards women. A woman is meant to be just an individual who does not get the freedom to express her feelings. She is considered incapable of independent living and is forced to believe that she needs protection and guidance from a man. Another fact that the author presents is that women in Arab society are considered just an object to fulfill man's hypocrisy. Through Ahmed's words, the author clearly puts forth the Islamic view that women should always be under a man's rule and serve as an obedient wife and a dutiful mother whose only duty is to agree to the male of her family even if she feels the facts or decisions are wrong.

"You owe me obedience and respect. Anyway, I don't have to remind you that I am a man of order and that if in our house women are inferior to men it's not because God wishes it or because the prophet decided it thus, but because the women accept this fate. So submit, and live in silence." (Pg.46)

Thus, in the first novel, Jelloun takes on a feminist voice which represents the different issues and the treatment that women face in a Moroccan Muslim society. The protagonist presents the main issues, and the other issues are represented by the other minor characters. The dichotomy between men and women is represented through the character Ahmed/Zahra Lalla who is born a female yet nurtured as a male.

The sequel, *The Sacred Night*, encapsulates the theme of Zahra's impression, cutting across the social and gender frontiers. Through this sequel, Tahar Ben Jelloun, represents the split between Moroccan and Maghreban space. This novel too, written in the story telling tradition, represents the most modern issues present in the modern day world, where the question of justice and treatment towards people has changed. The author points out the dwindling of humanity and equality in our society. In *'The Sand Child'*, Tahar Ben Jelloun, again takes on a feminist tone where he epitomizes various issues and describes the treatment that woman undergo in the Moroccan Muslim society. In the beginning, the story teller points out the status of females in the Arab society.

"For fear of dishonor and shame, some caste off their female offspring's, marrying them off when they were still mere children or burying them alive." (Pg.13).

Zahra comes to tell her story as an old woman but people are not ready to accept her as a story teller because they believe that woman is not allowed to move from confinement of her house. Even after the failure of successive attempts to narrate her story, by different story tellers in different manners, she appoints herself even after objections from her male audience. This reveals the inferior treatment meted out to women in the Islamic society.

"And since when do women not yet old dare to flaunt themselves like this? Have you no father, brother, or husband to guard you from harm." (Pg.13).

The central issues are brought out through the protagonist, while the other issues are represented by the other female characters. The im-

portance of a male heir and the status of women in Islamic society are well represented through the character of Zahra, the story teller. Zahra's father emphasizes the fact that the social and family positions change when there is a male heir in the family. Men are either unable or unwilling to relinquish their competitive desire for not getting a son. It was not merely Zahra's family that had to undergo the stigma of having only female heirs. When Zahra meets L'Assise she too shares the desolation and disappointment that she had to face as a daughter.

"My parents were unhappy. They wore defeat on their faces; and I was their own defeat. To banish the curse, they had a second child. When my brother was born, they had a big party. For them it was the end of the drought." (Pg.94)

Zahra's identity as a male was her father's scheme for his benefit. She was imprisoned in the cage made by her father. During this imprisonment, she performed the roles of a "male" heir of the family, and as a husband. The male identity neither offers Zahra a real "phallus" nor does it compensate for the lack of one; yet, it gives her an access to the masculine world. After her father's death, while she was still in the disguise of Ahmed, she was called upon to lead the Friday prayer. She explains to her audience why she enjoys taking her own revenge on a group of men, who for their benefit had destroyed her childhood and her identity in the family.

"I had to be the invisible son for another day or two. Dressed in white, I presided over the funeral....I did so with an inner joy and barely concealed pleasure. I was a woman gradually taking her revenge on a society of spineless men. At least that's what the men in my family were. As I bent down low I couldn't help thinking of the animal desire my body, especially in that position, would have aroused in those men if they had only known that they were praying behind a woman." (Pg.32)

It is through Zahra that Tahar Ben Jelloun represents the major identity crises faced by the characters. It is painful that these issues are still prevalent in such societies. In a nutshell, this novel depicts the agony inflicted on women in the name of religion and social tradition.

Conclusion:

To sum up, we can say that Tahar Ben Jelloun takes the readers through the emotions, untold suffering and unfulfilled dreams of his female characters.. By writing these novels, the novelist embarks on a threefold journey- as an ontological, linguistic and historical exploration of his own voice and identity. Through his protagonist, Tahar Ben Jelloun presents the history of Maghreb. Both the works depict the major identity crises that the characters face - social, religious, gender, cultural, and psychological. Through Zahra, the author puts forward many questions on the inheritance laws prevalent in the Islamic society and gender imbalances. Tahar Ben Jelloun reveals the truth through the story tellers. These novels ultimately tell the story of wasted lives – of those who have lost their voice and a narrative to make sense of their lives, either in Morocco's patriarchal society or in the modern world. We can state that Tahar Ben Jelloun represents the trials and tribulations of women in his fiction because he believes that change in society can emerge only through meaningful actions and productive engagement of women.

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