Image of the Mother in the Novels of North African Men

by Evelyne Accad

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A number of North African men have attempted through their fiction to bridge the gap between the victimized female and the traditionally insensitive male. The social condition of women is an important thematic element in the fiction of such writers as Mouloud Feraoun, an Algerian Kabyle writing about lower class society; Mohammed Dib, an Algerian whose fiction depicts urban life among the upper classes; Driss Chraïbi, a Moroccan, who in bold and harsh language criticizes Islam for its dehumanizing customs; Albert Memmi, a Jewish writer from Tunis who describes the conditions of ghetto life; Abdel al-Karim Ghallab, a Moroccan who writes in arabic and who reveals the hypocrisy and brutality which underlie the veneer of piety and tradition in middle-class life; and Kateb Yacine, an Algerian whose creative contributions to the form of the novel are attempts to inspire symbolic solutions rather than attempts to present detailed analyses of social conditions.

The fiction written by these North African men is built around a central male consciousness and is frequently autobiographical. While the women novelists often concern themselves with the intellectual implications of various escapes from victimization, the male novelist tends to reveal other aspects of the situation. He leans more toward 1) rebellious condemnation of authority (Chraïbi) 2) depiction of how males are victimized by tradition (Mammeri) 3) rejection of women for their acceptance of victimization (Memmi) and 4) direct attack on apprent sources of social oppression, e.g., religion and social tradition.

In depicting the suffering which occurs through the absence of personal freedoms, these writers describe women in various relationships: familial (wife, mother, sister, aunt, grandmother) and illicit (adulterous lover, concubine, prostitute, slave servant). The fact that these relationships are almost invariably defined by the nature of a woman's connection with a man indicates the extreme degree to which the social status of North African woman is both male-centered and male-sanctioned.

It is not surprising then that "the mother" frequently plays a major role in the fiction of the seven male North African writers under consideration. The mother's identity is firmly in the grip of two sets of males. In order to attain motherhood she is dependent on having a husband and, to be truly honored in her status as a mother, she must bear sons. In addition to this important thematic consideration, there is also a structural reason for the preponderance of the mother figure. This arises from the autobiographical nature of many of these works. They are frequently structured around a boy's progression to manhood, a development in which the male's relationship with his mother is necessarily an important one.

In the following paragraphs, we will choose to analyze the most significant mother figures as presented in the most important North African novels written by men. In

Evelyne Accad, author of the article published in this issue, held on November 30, 1978 at BUC a panel attended by IWSAW members and some guests, in which she discussed the images of women in the contemporary fiction of North Africa.

La Terre et le sang (The Earth and the Blood. Paris, 1953) written by Mouloud Feraoun, Kamouma, Amer's mother, is portrayed as an emaciated elderly woman whose suffering is reflected in her eyes, which are marked with large, dark cataracts and framed with red eyelids. Her life has been the typical life of a kabyle woman: married very early to a man of her parents' choosing and shifting from her father's authority to her in-laws's tyranny. She had borne many children whom she had cared for until, one by one, she followed them to the tomb. Finally Kamouma found herself alone with no possessions, not even the family land because her husband had sold it before his death. Until Amer's return, she had lived upon the generosity of the village which, as Feraoun explains, is considered simply normal help among neighbours. It is significant that Kamouma's extreme poverty and dependence are brought about by the absence of a male element in her life. Her husband is dead, as are her sons with the exception of Amer, who is in a faraway foreign land. This condition is mitigated only by the slight status Kamouma achieves among the village women. She had opened her house to all of them and they came to her for advice.

The hard conditions under which many North African women live out their lives are also apparent in the early fiction of Mohammed Dib. As in Feraoun's novel, the mother is one of the central characters of Dib's **La Grande maison (The Big House.** Paris, 1952). Omar's mother, Aïni, is a widow who has three children to raise and a total of five persons to feed, since her mother lives with them. The despair which underlies Aïni's existence is quickly

apparent. The first time we meet her, she is cleaning roots for the family's main meal. Because of the urgency of his hunger, Omar continually asks when the food will be ready. Suddenly Aïni throws her knife at him, a gesture which in its homicidal overtones symbolizes the despair of a mother not able to feed her children. Hunger is at the core of the novel and it is Aïni's daily anxiety. Often, when she has nothing at all to feed her children she pretends to be cooking until they fall asleep from exhaustion, forgetting their hunger. Aïni herself shows the signs of severe deprivation in both a physical and emotional sense.

In comparison to such an existence death seems a peaceful escape to Aïni and her despair frequently takes the form of rage. Omar often observes her complaining about her fate and cursing her children as well as their father. But despite her despair and her inability to provide successfully for her family, Aïni is the central and most significant figure in the lives of her children.

The Moroccan writer Driss Chraïbi brings to his fiction a measure of open revolt in addition to the depiction of despair arising from untenable social conditions. In his first novel, **Le Passé simple (The Past.** Paris, 1954) as with so many works by North African male writers, the central figure of **Le Passé simple** is the mother:

> My mother, tender and resigned, five feet tall,
> weighing ninety pounds and whose fate was to
> ignore even the act which could fulfill her.
> In forty years of existence this is how she
> had been and not a whit more. (p. 34)

The autobiographical nature of the works is obvious from the centering of consciousness in the boy, Driss. He acutely observes his mother's behaviour as well as the way in which his father, Le Seigneur (The Lord) treats her. She must call him "maître" (master) and her relationship to him is essentially that of a servant. She tells Driss that she does not want to go on living and wishes that he would find a fast and sure way for her to die. She can no longer tolerate the conditions of her existence: to be spat upon, to have her ancestors cursed and to be threatened with repudiation. Driss closely observes the hypocritical attitudes of his father, who pretends to piety while perpetrating gross cruelties.

While Driss sees his mother as a victim, he also blames her for blindly following old beliefs and superstitions. His anger sufaces one day when he sees her all dressed up with kohl on her eyes and henne on her fingernails. Although she has just lost a child, who died due to his father's mistreatment, she is preparing to seduce her husband in order to have another child. Driss confronts her with the inconsistencies in her behaviour. In tears she replies: "He was my littlest one... Now I want to replace him." (p. 124). The implications behind this statement are both clear and poignant: not only is childbearing her only legitimate function in the eyes of society, the only way in which she can feel any measure of personal fulfillment, but, if she does not rapidly produce another child she may find herself fallen from her husband's graces.

No longer able to witness the degradation to which his mother is subjected, Driss leaves home. Shortly thereafter he learns that his mother has committed suicide. His father blames the boy and Western influence for her death because he himself does not want to face the fact that he is the cause of it.

Chraïbi's language, bold, sarcastic, harsh and biting, is one of the tools he uses to express his rebellion against the inhuman customs he observed in his native land. In his personal life, his rejection of these customs has taken the form of marriage to a Frenchwoman as well as emigration to France, where Chraïbi has lived since 1947. Many of Chraïbi's countrymen, who approve of neither his language nor his subject matter, criticize this personal retreat as an escape from the very problems of which he writes. While there may be a certain socio-political justification for this criticism, it is probably safe to say that there is little if any literary or aesthetic justice in it. Like many another artist, Chraibi may simply have chosen to use the conditions of his social origins as a springboard to further achievements.

Most of the male North African writers considered in this analysis have managed to incorporate a substantial concern over the condition of women into their portrayal of their own anguish at the cultural – and, at times, economic – oppression in which they themselves were reared. That this is the case may suggest that the oppression of women is one of the single most characteristic features of North African culture, from both a social and an aesthetic standpoint. Put another way, the oppressed condition of women seems to have nearly as marked an effect on the upbringing of the North African male as it does on the women themselves. At times it is clearly evident that the oppressor is oppressed by his own oppression, and in any case the hypocrisy and double standards which result from the social code color much of the moral element of society. As in a Greek tragedy, it is impossible for society to escape the pollution of any of its members.

Lower birthrates in 10 Egyptian districts

In a recent training session held at Alexandria for heads and members of information and family-planning centers, a discussion took place concerning the accomplishments of these centers and their role in linking demographic goals with national development.

Reports revealed that between 1976 and 1977 a lowering of birth rates took place in 10 Egyptian districts, in a proportion varying between 0.2 and 4.0 per thousand.

They also showed that the practice of family planning in the same area has been increasing from 5 to 50 percent, and reaching sometimes four times the initial figure.

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