

## When the Old Woman Speaks in Soueif's "Her Man" and "The Wedding of Zeina" and Rifaat's "Bahiyya's Eyes"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper compares between the voices of three old women characters in three short stories by two Arab women writers. The stories are Ahdaf Soueif's "Her Man" and "The Wedding of Zeina" (from the same story collection *Aisha*) and Alifa Rifaat's "Bahiyya's Eyes" from her story collection *Distant View of a Minaret*. The paper reveals, from a feminist perspective, how the women characters are positively or negatively influenced by the way patriarchy perceives them and relates this perception to Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze. It also shows how each one of the old women characters seeks to pass her understanding to the upcoming generation and demonstrates how her voice turns out to be either one of patriarchy or resistance. The paper finds that although the voices of the three old women in the three short stories differ in their representation, they can be placed in the same boat as the female character who listens to the old woman's voice does not act passively in any of them.

### INTRODUCTION

A word is dead  
When it is said  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.

Emily Dickinson,

*The Works of Emily Dickinson*. (19)

As implied by Nineteenth Century poet Emily Dickinson's quotation, the utterance of a word represents its birth and its true chance to become a living thing. This manifests the power of words when expressed, for they simply start taking the shape of an influential voice which can contribute to constructing or deconstructing a dominant power.

In this paper, the voices of three old women are presented. The women are Zeina's old grandmother in Egyptian British Ahdaf Soueif's "Her Man," the old Zeina in the same author's "The Wedding of Zeina," and Bahiyya in Egyptian Alifa Rifaat's "Bahiyya's Eyes." As these women prove to be fully aware of the effect of words when said as indicated by Dickinson's quotation, they start acting by speaking up in an

attempt to pass their knowledge to the upcoming generation, represented by Zeina, Aisha, and Bahiyya's daughter in the three stories under discussion, respectively. Thus, each of the old women's voices stems from her perception of women either as originally weak and inferior to a superior power or as a suppressed other who deserves to be of more value. This makes their speaking up an attempt to either imprison or liberate the upcoming generation of women. Their voices, thus, are the embodiments of patriarchy or resistance as will be shown in this paper.

### DISCUSSION

In "Can the Subaltern Speak," Gayatri Spivak interrogates women's ability to speak in the questioning title she gives to her famous essay. Commenting on her essay, Graham Riach remarks that for Spivak, "When oppressed peoples are not allowed to speak for themselves, or to have their contributions recognized, they are in effect erased from their place in the world. This is especially common for subaltern women" (Riach 11). Riach's understanding of how important it is for the marginalized to express their own

desire and to have a voice applies to the three short stories under discussion. The three old women's endeavor to speak up can be considered a sincere act of survival and an attempt not to be erased regardless of whether the characters are being negative and are passing their passivity to the upcoming generation or are trying to have a positive influence by empowering and awakening the upcoming generation. In all cases, it is a matter of having a position so as not to be erased by any means.

In *The Arab Atlantic: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*, Yousef Awad remarks that Arab writers who live in Diaspora straddle two cultures. He adds that they skillfully blend their Arab cultural heritage by establishing a common ground that bridges the gap between two cultures (Awad 18). Being an Egyptian British, Ahdaf Soueif uses the English language as a medium to depict the dynamics of relationships between men and women in the Egyptian culture and to present the problems inherent in patriarchal society. In her short story "Her Man," Soueif represents Zeina as a victim of patriarchal society and traditions which give privilege to man over woman. Her dictated understanding of a woman's role revolves around pleasing her man. Thus, she cannot stand it when she knows that her husband, Subhi, has married another woman on top of her. She tries to resist and to express her refusal to this added inferiority as she comments, "Don't I please him anymore? Or am I not a good housewife? Haven't I borne him a son and a daughter, may God have mercy on her? What is wrong with me that he should marry on top of me?" (Soueif 98).

Yet, as if her understanding of her inferior position as a housewife seems not to be enough, her grandmother's voice is always there to add more passivity and inferiority to the situation. She is there to advise the grandchild to be "wise and careful" (100). She reminds her of the proverb which states that "the shade of a man is better than that of a wall" (98). In one way or another, she is there to silence Zeina's refusing and resisting voice and to ensure that she inhabits the patriarchal forms of power. The grandmother justifies Subhi's action of marrying another woman whose father passed away six months ago by remarking that Subhi "has preserved Sheikh Mahgoub's honour by marrying Tahiyya" (99). She blames Zeina for having been angry with her husband and even tries to make her feel guilty. She seeks to take her grandchild back to what she believes to be the right track as she explains:

He's still your husband. He hasn't left you or neglected you. He still supports you and brings you meat and fruit, even though you've not been speaking to him. He still holds you dear. But you're hurting his pride and his manhood. Take care what you're doing lest you drive him away (98)

Zeina's grandmother sees women as objects in the sense that their only role is to please men and to preserve their manhood. As far as the significance of the grammatical structure in her speech above is concerned, she obviously denies women their right to be subjects and doers. For her, agency is an issue of manhood, except when the woman is the doer

of something wrong. In other words, Subhi is the subject of almost all her sentences, and Zeina is the object. She only allows Zeina to be a subject when she blames her and tries to fill her with shame, such as when telling her "you've not been speaking to him," "you're hurting his pride," and "take care what you're doing lest you drive him away" (*my italics*, 98).

The grandmother's passive perception of women can be related to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze, which is explained in Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In this book, Lacan tells an autobiographical story that demonstrates how he came up with his theory of the gaze. He narrates:

I was in my early twenties...and at the time, of course, being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical... One day, I was on a small boat with a few people from a family of fishermen... as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean...pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can... It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me – You see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you (95)

Based on the story told by Lacan, the reversibility in vision changes the position of the young Lacan, the observer, into an object that is merely observed. As Henry Krips comments in "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Zizek," the flashes of light brought by the can to the surface "create in the young Lacan a palpable and excessive anxiety, even shame, about what he is and what he is doing" (92-93). Krips adds:

The discomfort that accompanies the psychological difficulty that the young Lacan experiences in looking at the can contributes to a self-centered anxiety about his identity. This anxiety, in turn, is transformed into an experience of being externally scrutinized – an anonymous look from elsewhere by an invisible other before whom the young Lacan is reduced to anxiety and shame (93)

In other words, the fact that one is being gazed at by an outside force brings about a feeling of shame. Moreover, Lacan demonstrates on relating his theory of the gaze to women in the same aforementioned book of his that "at the very level of the phenomenal experience of contemplation, this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at" (75).

The satisfaction referred to by Lacan is achieved when the subject does not feel offended having been denied its subjectivity and when it internalizes its inability to see and, thus, becomes the object of the gaze. This reversibility in vision is what changes the position of the young Lacan, the observer, into an observed object in his narrated story. Likewise, Zeina's grandmother's reversed vision makes her view herself as an observed and scrutinized object, so she ends up being filled with anxiety and shame. As a result, she wishes to please the gaze by functioning as its object to overcome her feeling of shame and to feel satisfied, and this passive perception she takes for herself is what she tries to pass to her granddaughter, Zeina, throughout the story.

On the other hand, Zeina proves to resist her grandmother's attempts to silence her and to position her as an object filled with shame. She uses her wit to get rid of Subhi's new wife, Tahiyya. The night before Subhi comes back from a funeral he has been to for a few days, Tahiyya resorts to Zeina's bed seeking safety because she is scared to spend the night on her own. Pretending to be extremely kind and fully considerate to her situation, Zeina showers the new wife with touches and hugs; she seizes the opportunity and leaves a big blue mark on her body. When Subhi comes back home on the following day, Zeina arouses suspicion in him towards Tahiyya by making him believe that the latter showed Zeina the mark which he personally left on her body. Convinced that his new wife has betrayed him while he was away, Subhi divorces Tahiyya, and Zeina remains his only wife without a woman on top of her.

Zeina's rejection of her grandmother's perception of Subhi's action demonstrates her refusal of Lacan's gaze. She considers Subhi's act a humiliating one and decides to act against it. What she cares about is her own offended pride and womanhood, not what her grandmother advises her to care about, which is her husband's manhood. She rejects her grandmother's perception and chooses to see life in her own way.

The voice of Zeina's old grandmother is also heard in Soueif's "The Wedding of Zeina," to which "Her Man" is a sequel. Yet, the grandmother's passive voice does not appear as a main voice in this story, but is reported and embedded within the story which old Zeina, who has become a nanny, narrates to nine-year-old Aisha about the day of her wedding. In this story, the reader gets to know about how little Zeina was married to Subhi when she was a child. As this study is concerned with the voices of the old women in particular, I have chosen to start with the second story of the sequel in order to foreshadow how the resistance in Zeina's voice becomes more evident as she grows up and becomes the old woman of the first story in the original order of the two stories in Soueif's collection.

In the story old Zeina narrates to Aisha, she tells her that on the day before her wedding, her grandmother took her to the woman who adorns the bride to prepare her for the groom. She also tells her that her marriage to her cousin, Subhi, was set without her own knowledge or consent when she was fifteen years old. To make sure that Zeina knows what the duties of a housewife are, her old grandmother tells her in the story "You'll be his wife and he'll be your husband and you'll serve him and do what he tells you," and she continues "You can cook and clean and look after a man" (85). Nevertheless, old Zeina's voice appears as a dominant one in this story. She narrates her story to Aisha aiming at awakening her to the status of women as preys of Lacan's gaze in patriarchal society. Commenting on what she did on her wedding day to resist Subhi's attempt to touch her, she narrates:

I managed to wrench a leg away and as he leaned forward I gave him a mighty kick that sent him scrawling on his backside. He looked so funny sitting there (91).

By narrating her story to Aisha, what old Zeina wishes Aisha will do is to resist and kick the denial of women's subjectivity and the inversion of their gaze. It is also worth noting that the name of Aisha, to whom the story is narrated, is highly significant as it means the living. Thus, she represents the future women who are going to live. By narrating her story, Zeina seeks to have an influence not only on Aisha, but also on the whole upcoming generation of women.

The power of storytelling is explained by Anh Hua in her essay "Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling, and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance." Hua argues that "the narrative world can become a site of resistance and a political tool to generate agency for the subjugated" (41). She adds that women can use spoken words "to fight against their assumed and constructed invisibility, powerlessness, and voicelessness" (31). In other words, storytelling can be used to fight against society's fixed power structures and ultimately become visible, powerful, and voiced.

The fight in the story Zeina tells Aisha is related to Lacan's gaze, for old Zeina wishes Aisha will fight the constructed invisibility of women and will be an active observer not an observed object. She wishes Aisha will be able to have her own vision and to see with her own eyes just like Zeina herself did in the past. She wants her to be alive and to resist the reversibility of the perception.

The technique of storytelling is also used in Rifaat's "Bahiyya's Eyes." The story opens with old Bahiyya, who has been told by the physician that her gradual loss of sight will lead to her blindness. She narrates the story of her eyes to her daughter, whom she has asked to come and sit with her for a few days. In a male-dominated society which deems women inferior to men, Bahiyya makes it clear that she has managed to survive, "like a cat with seven lives" (5). This signifies the many death-like situations she went through ever since she was a child as she was always "ruled by a man" (11); the ruling men were her father, her husband, and her brother.

Unlike the old grandmother in Soueif's "Her Man," Bahiyya's words speak of her dissatisfaction with the role of women in society. Like old Zeina in "The Wedding of Zeina," Bahiyya does not maintain what Lacan refers to as the satisfaction of the gazed at woman. While narrating her story, she goes back in her memories and outlines the role of women in society by drawing on the role which she and her sisters took after her mother, compared to the role which her brother, Awwad, took after her father. She says:

While we were spending the whole day collecting up the dung, Awwad would be playing in the water channel or romping round the fields, and when he came home he'd expect us to serve him like my mother served my father (8).

Bahiyya illustrates that she was not the only girl suffering from this gender-based inferiority and passivity imposed on girls and women. Nevertheless, she explains that she was different from the other passive girls as she narrates:

But my nature wasn't the same. Tears were always running down my cheeks. It was like my eyes were preparing themselves for what was to come, because it's not as if life got any easier as I grew up. Just the opposite. The

fact is there's no joy for a girl in growing up, it's just one disaster after another till you end up an old woman (8).

Bahiyya has always suffered from the fact that as a woman, she was forced to remain passive and to view herself as an object. The societal lens through which she was supposed to view herself stands for Lacan's gaze. The loss of her sight is caused by the fact that she held the societal perception which she failed to resist in the past by remaining silent and keeping to the degrading societal image. Determined to resist after having turned to an old lady, she tells her story to her daughter because she wants her daughter to learn from her own experience and mistakes. She comments on crying at the end of the story by saying "It's just that I'm sad about my life and my youth that have come and gone without my knowing how to live them really and truly as a woman" (Raafat 11). Thus, Bahiyya's act of storytelling based on her own memories is a form of what feminist Adrienne Rich refers to as "the act of looking back – of seeing with fresh eyes" (Rich 18), and it represents Rich's "refusal of the self-destructiveness of the male-dominated society" (Rich 18) as she explains in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision."

Bahiyya goes to the physician to solve the problem of her eyes, but she does not seem to trust his diagnosis. He tells her "it was all caused by the flies and the dirt" (6). He prescribes eye drops for her, but she does not buy them. She tells the nurse on her way out of the clinic, "Dear, hand me the stick 'cos it seems I'll be holding it all the time from now on" (6). Moreover, Bahiyya tells her daughter that she has asked her to come and stay with her for a couple of days so that her eyes would take fill of her (5). This connotes that Bahiyya believes the cure of her eyes lies in awakening her daughter and granting her power, and this reveals the power of her resisting voice, which is capable of reversing the societal structures as well as the societal gaze.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the voices of the three old women in the three short stories differ in their representations. Whereas the voice of the old grandmother in "Her Man" represents patriarchy, the voices of both old Zeina and Bahiyya in "The Wedding of Zeina" and "Bahiyya's Eyes" turn out to represent resistance. Thus, while the old grandmother who is affected by the patriarchal gaze seeks to pass her false perception and her passivity to her granddaughter through directing her and

telling what to do to remain weak, the other two old women remain unaffected by the societal gaze and seek to pass empowerment and knowledge to the upcoming generations using the technique of storytelling instead. Moreover, the grandmother's attempt to weaken or silence Zeina fails, and this failure shows in Zeina's resistance, for she attempts to get rid of her husband's new wife despite her grandmother's warning in "Her Man," and she chooses to tell her story to little Aisha in "The Wedding of Zeina."

This puts the three short stories in the same boat, for in none of them, the female character who listens to the old woman's voice acts passively. Zeina the granddaughter acts in a resistant way, and the fact that Aisha and Bahiyya's daughter are listening to the stories being told to them suggests that they are becoming more and more aware of the societal gaze as well as of oppressive silencing powers around them, and this in itself tells the story of their awakening.

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