



Gender Mediation Discourse and the Prospect of Sustainable Peace in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i6.2332>

APA Citation: Damlègue, L.(2025). Gender Mediation Discourse and the Prospect of Sustainable Peace in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 7(6).320-337. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i6.2332>

Received:

05/09/2025

Accepted:

06/10/2025

Keywords:

gender,
mediation,
discourse,
women,
patriarchy

Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyse Nawal El Saadawi's critical ideas regarding gender mediation in *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. It is to show how she negotiates discourse to encourage dialogue between men and women to construct a balanced society that encourages participatory development. It specifically explores her ideas that level criticism against the unjust/inhuman treatment of women in the Egyptian society thereby calling for a change of attitude towards women, aiming to end sexism, oppression and exploitation of women by patriarchy. As methodological and theoretical approaches, the study is a textual analysis sustained by an African Feminist critical approach developed by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Flora Nwapa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many critical approaches have tried to elucidate Nawal El Saadawi's ideas regarding her feminist ideology, but few critics have considered her opinions as a discourse on gender mediation. Most critics concentrate on her illumination of the traditional patriarchal laws enacted under the influence of Islamic religion in Egypt and her call thereby to reconsider how such laws militate against women's welfare. Adele Newson-Horst asserts that: "Nawal El Saadawi is a renowned Egyptian writer, novelist and fighter for the rights of women and the working poor" (Newson-Horst 2013: 8). Ernest N. Emenyonu observes that Nawal El Saadawi writes to bring revoution in a male-dominating world of patriarchal society (Emenyonu, 2010: 9). According to Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez and colleagues, Nawal El Saadawi paints female Genital Cutting (FGC), insisting that the descriptions of the practice and its after-effects are described in harrowing detail... a hard-hitting denunciation of the practice for both boys and girls [...] (de Hernandez 2010: 167-168). Ode Ogede (2023, p.19) recognizes women's oppression as a global predicament but circumscribes his study only to Nigera. These critical approaches are not conciliatory regarding Saadawi's social vision as expressed in *The Hidden*

Face of Eve: Women in Arab World.¹ Specifically, they do not perceive gender mediation as an important referential agenda to be discussed deeply. That is why I propose to discuss gender mediation discourse and the prospect of social peace as expressed in *The Hidden Face of Eve*. The methodological approach adopted is textual analysis sustained by postcolonial African feminism. Omolara Ogundipe-Lesly highlights the theory in her article "Stewanism: Feminism in African Context" where she advocates that feminism is not necessarily oppositional to men. It argues rather that a woman's body is her inherent property, not to be owned, used, or damaged by men, as radical technologist feminists are saying. Feminism is not dividing the genders as they say to us in Africa . . . It is not a parroting of Western women's rhetoric (Ogundipe-Lesly 2007: 547). Flora Nwapa, in her article, argues that "Women and Creative Writing in Africa" (2007: 529) explains the main agenda of African feminism as a cause championed by African writers. The woman writer cannot fail to see the power of the woman in her home and society. She sees her economic importance both as a mother, a farmer, and trader. She writes stories that affirm the woman, thus challenging the male writers and making them aware of women's inherent vitality, independence of views, courage, self-confidence, and, of course, her desire for gain and high social status. In countries ... of Africa, there have been tremendous changes in all facets of life, which contribute to the continent-wide awareness and rethinking of women's problems and roles in society. I exploit these theoretical ideas to construct my interpretation of Nawal El Saadawi's critical ideas about the functioning mode of females. I intend to analyse how Saadawi envisions a redefinition of dialogue between men and women in African patriarchal societies like Egypt, influenced by Islamic religious laws that further complicate women's condition. In this study, two points are developed : (1) Impediments to Gender Dialogue and (2) Gender Mediation and the prospect of sustainable peace.

2. IMPEDIMENTS TO GENDER DIALOGUE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

African feminism, often used interchangeably with "Womanism," is a critical literary theory introduced by Alice Walker in 1979 to designate the expression of respect for women and their ability to undertake and achieve things beyond race or social class. It is a cultural and ethical perspective that seeks to harmonize and coordinate relationships between women and men so that differences do not become irreconcilable and dissolve into violent destruction. Some use "womanism" and African feminism interchangeably for the same theory. Womanism is taken

¹ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve : Women in the Arab World*. London : Zed Press, 1980. All references in this article are from the same edition and will be written in the text with APA referencing style (the authoress's name followed by the year of publication and the page as (Saadawi 1980 : x).

up by Mary E. Modukpe Kolawole in her book *Womanism and African Consciousness*, where she explains the concept as: the fact for African women to engage in the search for “self-definition, self-valuation, and self-retrieval...As the empire writes back, African women are deconstructing imperialist images of the African, rejecting liminal and negative images of women that are prevalent in African literature by men, and they are reacting to mainstream Western feminism.” (Kolawole 1997 : 193).

Nawal El Saadawi's criticism of the women's condition in the Arab world can be better understood if read in the light of African feminism or womanism. She believes that African societies would better develop if there were an effective gender dialogue that encourages a better understanding of the social functions of men and women, and an effective dialogue regarding the roles every group can play to attend the participative construction society. As such, men and women need to see one another not in an antagonist posture of selfish ambition, but rather as complementary agents in the perspective of interdependence, fighting for mutual progress. In that logic, it is important to reconsider the social attributes of women currently endorsed by patriarchy, which has institutionalized rules and customary traditions that belittle women and negate their emancipation.

2.1. Capitalism and Neocolonialism: Oppressive Tools

Nawal El Saadawi establishes that patriarchy is endorsed by a stronger international system composed of political leadership, economic corporations, and cultural imperialism firmly under the control of men. Such institutions are namely Capitalism and neocolonialism, created and operated by men, ensure the perpetual control of the world and power that will never be relinquished to women unless collective joint efforts are made to push gender mediation forward. She thus invites the reader to see women's subjugation from a broader perspective that calls for a collective consciousness awakening and a determination that should be perceived as a global reality needing support. She states :

This new concept of society, and the process related to its transformation, must be able to concretize the relationships between the general oppression of both men and women, and the specific forms of oppression to which women alone are exposed for no other reason than that they are women. In other words, there is an urgent and vital need to visualize the links between the political, economic and social remoulding of society and the cultural, moral, psychological, sexual and affective remoulding of the human [female]being (Saadawi 1980 : xvi)

Here, Saadawi creates a link between the general political systems of the world controlled by male-oriented politics and economy and the women's oppression. Political leaderships in majority of the countries around the globe are essentially the prerogative of men who are not ready to bequeath that privilege to women. The few countries who happen to bring change by

voting in women are eager to reconquer that power for men, so that women's leadership are shortlived. That situation further complexifies gender relations and creates crisis of confidence. Likewise, the economic systems are constructed to favour the integration of men to the systems at the expense of women. If one cannot reverse history, one can at least Saadawi's logic is given credit when we look at two important books by scholars like Walter Rodney and Edward Said, respectively *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and *Culture and Imperialism*. In *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972 : 70), Rodney contends that colonialism, itself a tentacle of imperialism exploited African wealth and labor for its own profit restructuring thereby economies to serve European interests and fostering dependency rather than genuine development. The introduction of infrastructure and institutions intended primarily to facilitate the extraction of resources and the control of African labor for Europe's benefit. The result was an expansion of capitalism that went hand in hand with cultural imperialism because Europeans were aware that cultural indoctrination and the colonizing of the mind were essential tools to succeed the economic exploitation. In this context, women's conditions in African underdeveloped countries worsened under the control of patriarchy. This resulted in the double colonization of women : that of patriarchy on the one hand and European imperialism on the other hand. A similar demonstration is made by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993 : 95) where Said establishes that imperialism operates as both a political and cultural system with culture shaping and sustaining imperialist ideologies. To truly understand how imperialism promoted women's exploitation, one must recognize its deeply embedded cultural dimension. Capitalism operates thanks to the indoctrination of the colonized people and the brainwashing that makes them to believe that they cannot achieve anything good without the donations and support of the imperialists (colonial masters). As such they put in place systems of exploitation and control whereby the resources of African countries are exploited and resold to them (Africans) with exorbitant interests. As women are subjected to men in the patriarchal world they are indirectly conditioned to that broader system called imperialism.

Saadawi's premises calls to mind Ngugi's. Ngugi wa Thiong'o positions himself in the same line like Nawal when he describes in *Decolonizing the Mind* the damaged identity and worldview of the colonized people. He traced African predicament to colonial exploitation, Euro-American economic and cultural domination on the rest of Third-World countries. Like Ngugi, Nawal the reclamation of indigenous and cultures to dismantle the lingering dominance of western thought so as to promote a more equitable future.

To be specific women's identities, their skills and full potentials are not yet fully understood and taken into account by men. Some traditions view them as weak and unable to achieve

progress in their communities, while others obliterate their skills and indirectly discard them on their agendas. These attitudes need to be reconsidered to include women in the full societal agendas for social reconstruction. For Nawal,

The discrimination between men and women leads to a distortion of the personality of both, and prevents them from becoming really mature. The tendency to exaggerate the boy's feeling for his own ego and masculinity will usually end in inferiority complex, since he will always feel that he will always feel that he is unable to rise up to the image expected of him. On the other hand, the tendency to exaggerate the need for a girl to withdraw, and to shrink into an attitude of passivity, (under the guise of femininity and refinement) tends to build up in her a form of superiority complex which results from the feeling of being better than the image that has been created of her (Saadawi 1980 : 81)

Right from the beginning Saadawi objects to the discrimination between men and women with the former being given authority and power to influence the latter called upon to remain silent and docile. It follows that the attitude thus constructed upon patriarchal standards locks up women and their creative potential, rendering them invisible while in fact their contributions to society's survival and overall development are significant. In a situation as described by Saadawi in the Egyptian Arabic world, patriarchy has enacted laws that turn out to be promoting men and their interests while degrading women and combatting their emergence. Under such circumstances gender dialogue and mediation become necessary. It is a form of dialogue that opens perspectives of change and call for a revisitation of values as to grant more voice and opportunities to women, not with the aim of capsize men's leadership boat but helping women to enter into possession of more opportunities and freedom to be fulfilled. By submitting that "It is natural that patriarchal society, whether in the East or in the West should oppose all attempts at change, and fight for its continued existence. The weapons used by patriarchal society vary from era to era and from country to country" (Saadawi 1980 : 81), Saadawi is trying to bring to the fore the noticeable fact that women's oppression is international and appeals to collective consciousness whereby those holding responsibility positions start rallying the female folk to the cause of constructive change. It goes without saying that when the cause of a social malaise like this one is known, the collective consciousness needs to be awakened for initiatives to be taken to effect change. Saadawi puts it this way :

The struggle of women in underdeveloped countries is not a narrow fanatic movement prejudiced in favour of the female sex and rising to its defence at any cost. We know that progress for women, and any improvement of their status, can never be attained unless the whole of society moves forward... Victory in the long and difficult struggle for women's emancipation requires that women adopt a flexible attitude and be prepared to ally their efforts with all those who stand for progress (Saadawi 1980 : xi).

Here, Saadawi asserts that women's struggle for emergence and possibly their prospective victory can better be efficient if only they collaborate with men. It means gender collaboration is vital if there must be progress in the actions intending to promote social development. The discourse produced here brings to the front the reality that women are integral part of society and as such, social issues cannot be discussed by excluding them. Men are not self-sufficient and cannot claim to do better when excluding women from debates and social affairs. Probing into the collective memory and looking through history, women have contributed significantly to the national liberation struggles working side by side with men. For instance in Kenya Mukami and Muthoni were two legendary women who fought beside Dedan Kimathi to bring political independence. Nawal opines that "Women have always been an integral part of the national liberation movement in the countries of Africa... They fought side by side with the men"... (Saadawi 1980 : xi). It is established that recognized efforts were made for the nationalist struggles that took place in Africa prior to the independences and such efforts registered several female contributors who illustrated themselves as patriots.

2.2. The Devaluation of Women's Services and Body Mutilation

If it is a recognizable fact that women have played and continue to play active roles in the national liberation movements and through this in the construction of African countries, one can also ask why they are most of the time downgraded and excluded from instances of power decision ? The answer to that question can be found in a demonstration made by Saadawi when talking about the postcolonial changes that took place in most African countries regarding the economic system and "The woman remains a source of free labour and of numerous services that would have to be compensated and paid for if other institutional arrangements were to take over her functions in the home" (Saadawi 1980 : xiii). The authoress of *The Hidden Face of Eve* raises the point of women's labour society would like to be rendered free of charge. It is a fact that no society can boast of dispensing itself from women's services as these services are too numerous and vital. Nevertheless, Saadawi objects to the fact that women's services in the society are free or at least are expected to be so. This is very common with most services rendered by uneducated women including laundry, cooking, washing clothes, babysitting, sweeping and cleaning working places and running errands. For an effective gender dialogue, a compromise needs to be found so as to help the women in such social condition to take care of themselves and possibly contribute to their family maintenance. Free or cheap labour among women is thus a factor of impoverishment that impedes gender dialogue. It is also noticeable that when women don't contribute anything to their family maintenance, their husbands take them to task. The grudges resulting from such accusations oftentimes leads to serious marital

disputes, open conflicts and the demand of divorce. Paying women's labour is thus an important ingredient in the gender conflicts resolution.

Whereas society has thrown overboard certain values that were an obstacle to the participation of women in the labour force, it has continued to uphold many old values with remarkable obstinacy, and in particular those values which ensure a continued exploitation of their efforts in caring for the home, husbands and children, efforts which also continue to remain unpaid. It has extolled the work of women and their right to education, and torn down social walls and fences that prevented women from becoming a free circulating part of the labor force (Saadawi 1980 : xiii).

Saadawi's hue and cry are set on patriarchal rules and institutional laws that render women's labour force almost free. Yet she also finds fault with aspects of social speculations that objectify women and negate their welfare. Such laws that undervalue women's labour also fix standards for the unequal payment in case the service is to be paid. Women are often paid less than men. Financial exploitation goes hand in hand with sexual exploitation. Before a woman is recruited, granted promotion or appointed to a higher position it is common place that men seek to have sex with her. Resistance to such demands results in the refusal of the employment, gratification or promotion. Saadawi's gender dialogue philosophy thus questions such practices by raising the question as to when will a woman in society enjoy fully her rights of being a woman and contributing significantly to its development. For dialogue to be effective both speaking parties need to be given equal rights to talk, exchange ideas, agree on principles and make concessions for issues that need concessions. But it seems that the patriarchal society defined by Saadawi as patriarchal (the Egyptian Arab society), make only men keep on talking while women are reduced to listeners and law-abiders only. Sexual exploitation and abuse are topics which are seldom raised in discussions. Women suffer and endure them silently. Silence does not construct dialogue. If by definition, dialogue means conversation between two parties or people, the confiscation of the floor by one party (men in this case) is synonymous of oppression, not dialogue. It follows that the imposition of silence by autocratic patriarchy is antinomic to the dialogical philosophy that should prevail between men and women. Saadawi pleads for an opening of inclusive gender dialogue whereby women will voice their fears and worries and men will listen to them, sympathize with them and change oppression into consideration and freedom. Dialogue thus demands from men, to leave their ego and humble themselves in a conscious desire to promote constructive social change.

One way in which women are silenced by male dictatorship is female circumcision imposed by force on girls. The amputation of the girl's clitoris by force traumatises her and deprives her of her natural sexuality and being. Saadawi reports that female circumcision (also referred to as excision) is practiced on girls aged six or under. The people who do that by virtue of their

physical strength stiffen and oppress the victim girl. No defensible argument is advanced to justify such cruel attack on the intimacy of the victimized girls. The author of *The Hidden Face of Eve* tells :

I was six years old... They carried me to the bathroom. I do not know how many of them there were, nor do I remember their faces, or whether they were men or women. The world to me seemed envelopped in the dark fog which prevented me from seeing. Or perhaps they put some kind of cover over my eyes... Something like an iron grasp caught hold of my hand and my arms and my thighs, so that I became unable to resist or even, to move. (Saadawi 1980 : 7)

What transpires from this passage is that sexual mutilation applied to Nawal El Saadawi is beyond the scope of suffering she could endure. As a matter of fact she is marked off negatively and nurtures hatred for the customs of that society. She also develops a kind of revulsion that stops her from ever thinking positively about her Egyptian society immersed in Arabic culture and practices. The testimonial narrative thus intends to raise awareness on the impediment to gender dialogue. Under circumstances where oppression and physical violence are erected to the status of cultural practice, it becomes difficult that the victimized women, mostly on the receiving end forgive and forget. The female body should be handled with care. It is the organ that shelters human life from fertilization to child delivery. But when it is mutilated through and through, it may result into its inability to play efficiently that reproductive role. At another level of interpretation, It has been established that there is a strong relationship between a woman's psychological state, her emotional condition and the baby she shelters in the womb. When traumatized or when bearing scars of torture or memories of such during pregnancy she foetus ends up being negatively affected. It is therefore urgent that women be maintained in physical, moral and emotional wellbeing to be able to bear healthy and sane children. Not that Saadawi is able to deliver a child at the age of six, but the amputation of her female organ followed by the trauma under such pressure definitely marks off negativity, and nightmarish memories she will bear for life. Other detailed description of that episode comes thus :

I imagined the thing that was making the rasping sound coming closer and closer to me... Somewhere below my belly as though seeking something buried between my thighs... I felt that the rasping knife or blade was heading straight down towards my throat. Then suddenly the sharp metallic edge seemed to drop between my thighs and these cut off a piece of flesh from my body. I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went through my whole body (Saadawi 1980 : 8).

This is an episode describing a complete immobilization, subdue and physical control of a girl for the purpose of excision. It sounds intolerable that females are subjected to the physical mutilation males are not. This unequal treatment between girls and boys create in the girls a

shock and trauma difficult to heal as the victims unconsciously feel guilty to be born girls as if they offended the nature by being born so. It is to remark that female circumcision is institutionalized by men (patriarchy) with the intention to prevent women from being unfaithful to their husband. According to the cultural interpretation of the practice, the amputation of part of the clitoris will thus prevent sexual arousal and orgasm that can bring most girls or women to seek sex out of matrimony. What is at stake here is not yet the expected results but the means used to seek these results. Torture and violence are used to seek submission and faithfulness. This strategy is counter-productive because Nawal El Saadawi turned out to become a feminist, and specifically a rebel by the standards of her patriarchal society. She criticizes mutilations and the suppression of women's emancipatory organs and encourages dialogue between men and women. Having been victim of female circumcision, she objects to it as an abnormal practice that destroys girls and women's happiness.

Many a time they have said to me that circumcision is a safeguard against the mistakes and deviations into which a girl may be laid. This way of thinking is wrong and even dangerous because what protects a boy or a girl from making mistakes is not the removal of a small piece of flesh from the body, but consciousness and understanding of the problems we face, and a worthwhile aim in life, an aim which gives it meaning and for whose attainment we exert our mind and energies (Saadawi 1980 : 42).

The treatment reserved for women victims of excision is unjust and needs change. Excision is practised on girls with false assumptions that they will grow up in consciousness, fix objectives for their own lives and avoid mistakes related to sexual realities like teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and other forms of life inadequacies. Yet, it is a mistake to believe such falacies. Saadawi clarifies in the extract above that it is only true consciousness about life objectives and priorities that can guide young girls to avoid such misleading adventures. It obtains that education in this context plays a key role because morality, values and self-discipline are acquired through teachings. For an efficient moral impactation, parents (mother and father) should collaborate to educate children. If that responsibility is shouldered only by women they are likely to fail. They will better succeed if men and women perform synergetic actions. Consciousness at times comes in a slow process but most definitely, when it is well built up, it embarks the individual on the journey of self-realization, goal setting aiming at the complete welfare of the individual. Gender collaboration in this context obtains when men and women ideologically look into the same direction that is fight for the same goal : the education of children. Yet Saadawi equally traces women's problem right from their birth. She opines that some African societies with islamic education suffer from the phobia of girls' birth. Such phobia is constructed upon cultural beliefs in the superiority of male children over females. It is often said that the adult person is the father of the child to explain the fact that people

exteriorize what they went through in childhood. As such, to produce healthy and psychologically balanced women in society it urges to protect the female infants from all forms of abuse that can mark them off for life and deviate their social characters. Such beliefs need to be deconstructed to give room for objective evaluation of the women's importance, as society cannot exist when they are excluded :

All children who are born healthy and normal feel that they are complete human beings. This, however, is not so for the female child. From the moment she is born and even before she learns to pronounce words, the way people look at her, the expression in their eyes, and their glances somehow indicate that she was born incomplete... The first aggression experienced by the female child in society is the feeling that people do not welcome her coming in the world (Saadawi 1980 : 12).

The idea that comes out here is that in the Egyptian society highly patriarchal, female children suffer from contempt on behalf of society, a social construct that is subjective but tags their lives from primal infancy throughout their lives. Such contempt originates from the ignorance of the real importance of women as the givers of life and the contributors of societal maintenance. Saadawi thus seeks to turn the tide regarding such misbehaviour towards female children. To be exact, the procreation virtue is reserved solely to women, and if they refuse to play that role, the society will progressively be extinguished. The popular saying that "to educate a woman is to educate a nation" finds justification when analysed in the light of the great contributions they make to the economic, cultural and educational construction of the various societies they live in. Saadawi's discourse also aims at explaining that the erasure of gender stereotypes against women is the beginning of true dialogue. To be effective gender dialogue should restore confidence between men and women so as to enable women to repossess their dignity, reconstruct their identity as the regeneration channel of the society. Interdependence philosophy should prevail between men and women as both relocate the social interest within the ambit of complementarity deal. Men need women and women also need men. Neither can live decently and achieve success without the other. As such it is recommendable to reassert women's important functions when they collaborate with men : the edification of the social tissue through marriage, procreation and education. As such, Saadawi thinks it is unfair to load women with such discriminatory adjuncts that renders life difficult for women. She insists on this saying :

But the strongly patriarchal relations in Arab society, coupled with its hierarchical class nature have subjected women to a great deal of discrimination and caused them to be victims of a very marked degree of suppression, both physical and mental. Arab society also suppress children and even men, but the load carried by women is multiplied by the severe physical and psychological constraints which surrounds their lives (Saadawi 1980 : 44)

If the indictment here is on the Arab society, it is nevertheless important to explain that the behaviour is equally found in traditional patriarchal societies. The culture of sexism is not generated by religion but by subjective exploitation and a misinterpretation of religion. Be it Islam or Christianity, the fundamental texts are not intended to impoverish or enslave their adherents. Men have learnt to cajol women with nive words. They should also learn to respect them and collaborate with them for the construction of the society. The implementation of womanist agenda is thus aiming at reinviting men and women around a table of discussion. To be exact, Saadawi pleads for a politics of dialogue that invites courageous and frank mediations between the oppressive patriarchy and the defensive female victims.

3. GENDER MEDIATION DISCOURSE AND THE PROSPECT OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE

Mediation is the fact of conciling conflictual views between two individuals or groups quarelling to help them come to a concensus. Education is the process of teaching and transmitting values and skills to young or adult people to equip them for better social, economic, political or cultural performances. Saadawi advocates gender mediation and dialogue as a foregrounds for sustainable peace. Implicitly she is pointing out the necessity to consider relevant dialogues that take into account both women's and men's ideas for mutual respect and collaborative work.

3.1. Education as a Tool for Mediation

From the critical perspective developed by Nawal El Saadawi, there are two important paradigms that can better foster gender mediation : education and the change of mentality. Saadawi thus develops a proactive discourse on mediation politics foregrounding education to be a stalwart tool for the change of attitude and character. That change of character starts from the change of world perception and ideological stand. Education should aim at inculcating ideas, ways of being and doing things that predisposes boys and girls to gender dialogue. Equally important are the roles played by the teachers and mentors. They need to promote values and ideas oriented towards collaboration and friendship. Warfare ideologies should not be encouraged. Apart from biological roles like procreation and its implicxations, one needs to understand that what men can do, women can also do. Thus, regarding education, Saadawi encourages parents to educate children (especially girls) right from infancy to be assertive on their future roles to play as contributors to social development. She regrets that boys are often privileged in educational affairs to the detriment of girls. Discrimination

We need unity and solidarity between men and women who resist this global injustice at the local level as well as at the international level. But we need a movement that is progressive, not backward, which seeks unity in diversity, by breaking down barriers built on discrimination (by gender, class, race, religion, etcetera), and by discovering

what we have in common as human beings with common interests that may express themselves differently. People can unite and cooperate if they struggle for greater equality and against all forms of discrimination. This requires establishing a network step by step from the local up to the global level to face the international capitalist network (Saadawi 1997 : 19).

This statement unveils Saadawi's creative vision of gender mediation that implies unity and solidarity between men and women especially those resisting global injustice at the local and international levels. This critical position opens vistas regarding her social vision mediation. One can see that possibly education occupies an important place in that construction. For instance, while boys are taught to be assertive, courageous, manly and brave, girls are taught to be passive, remain silent in front of societal, political and economic issues and let men decide for them. Saadawi thinks it is unjust and needs to change. For an effective gender dialogue, education must promote both boys' and girls' interests :

Would it be accurate to maintain that men are sadistic and women masochistic when we now know these characteristics to be the result of patriarchal family systems and the way in which children and young people are brought up ? Male dominant civilization discriminates between male and female children. The male child is taught from the very beginning how to project his personality and how to prepare for man's life involving strength, responsibility, authority and a positive attitude in the face of difficulties. A girl on the other hand is trained and educated right from the start to shrink into a corner, to withdraw and to hide her real self because she is a female and being prepared for the life of a woman, a life where she must be passive and weak, and must surrender to the domination of the man and be dependent on him (Saadawi 1980 : 81).

Saadawi, the authoress of *The Hidden Face of Eve : Women in the Arab World* finds fault with the educational system in Egypt and most African societies where boys are educated differently than girls, the former being encouraged to dominate and conquer, to develop instincts of bravery and courage, to be assertive and the latter to be silent, passive and hiding. It obtains that the problematic ways in which women are educated has counter effects on their social status, achievements and visibility. The education to passivity draws back women, erases their presence and reverses their progressive skills and transforming them into backwardness. If one agrees that the adult individual is the byproduct of the child growing into the ethics of the education s/he receives from infancy onwards, it urges to also remark that education to passivity and silence thus leads to the obtention of passive and silent adult women. This type of education is also at the basis of power abuse in most married couples as the men take the opportunity to oppress and exploit women unopposed. The family system and the internal structure of its composition are thus subjected to rules that firmly maintain the female child under oppression, fear and terror. It results that under such circumstances, mediation is necessary between men and women to enable them to come together and live complementary

lives. As such she argues in favour of developing honest and true love between men and women to attain gender mediation. For her,

One of the first principles of honour and love is that no one should be able to subjugate another...If a man owns a woman as though she were his property this relationship cannot, in its essence, be described as honourable. Honour is justice and equality in human rights. Honourable love is love built on such justice and equality (Saadawi 1980 : 74)

It transpires here that Saadawi equates mediation between men and women to honourable inter-relationship that should be based on true love. The first principle in that relationship is for men not to consider women as their acquired property. Husband and wife marry on agreement based on love. The relationship therefore is not that of master slave one or that of a man and his property. It is true that in most African customs men marry women by paying the bride-price but this should not be regarded as a purchase deal giving right to him to own her as his private property. To arrive at this level men should change their mentality regarding marriage contract. It calls for an understanding of women's identity, their social importance and the place in the cultural artifacts of their communities. Assimilating the woman to a purchased commodity is tantamount to downgrading her and denying her identity and social function as the complementary partner of man. Therefore, an important step in the process of constructing genuine gender mediation is to remove from the man's idea that the woman is purchasable as a commodity. The cultural philosophy of dowry is a symbolic recognition of the efforts made by the parents to upbringing their daughter. It is also the act that bounds the two families engaged in the matrimonial union and rallies them for deeper social relations. In the cultural understanding of African people, marrying a woman is marrying her/his entire family and establishing sustainable relations with it. It is therefore out of question to visualize woman as a chattel. Saadawi explains :

Since the man buys the woman through marriage in order that she might serve him and be an instrument for his pleasures, bear his children, wait on the family members, and care for them in the home, he tends to choose a girl who is many years younger than him, so that she maintains the youth of her body for a long time and can continue to fulfill the functions for which he married her until his old age (Saadawi 1980 : 77)

Men's perception of women counts a lot in the process of correcting distorted mentalities and rethinking their value. Perceiving women as equal partners, complementary helps for family development and social progress will bring men to think differently about women. That is why Saadawi talks about justice and equality in the man/woman relationship.

3.2.Reconfiguring Personal Relationships

Personal relationships between men and women is important in the construction of social development and peace. Saadawi is defensive of the respect for the integrity of woman's body. One way in which personal relationship can be reconfigured is to restore the respect of the

female body. Ending physical abuse (wife battering), sexual mutilations (excision) in patriarchal societies can foster gender dialogue. The female body should not be site of male power experimentation. It should not be a receptacle for a husband's unleashed anger. Women need respect and consideration as men's companions. That idea has met the approval of the critic Debrot Pucherová (2022 : 113) who puts a relevant question : " How can an African woman take ownership of her body if her culture denies her this basic right on the grounds of traditional morality and female propriety?" That calls for a reconsideration of cultural norms that undervalue the woman's body.

Saadawi also develops the logic that there is necessity to reconfigure personal relations to foster gender mediation. To reconfigure personal relations, one needs to restore justice between men and women. Justice refers to the moral virtue of being objective in judgement and treatment of people while equality advocates the idea of reciprocal consideration. The idea of justice implies impartiality, doing things in a balanced manner. Equality reflects egalitarian consideration. The treatment of women with justice and equality is possible when there is a change of mentality. Even religious texts like *The Bible* identifies the woman as 'similar help' when God planned to create the woman. According to Genesis chapter 2 verse 18, "Then the Lord said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make him a helper suitable for him'" (*New King James Version, Genesis 2 : 18*). This directly brings to the mind the idea that God did not intend to create a subservient slave for man but a suitable helper. In other words the woman is a complementary helper whose function is to help man build a family and develop the society. From this perspective it makes sense to say that Saadawi pleads for a kind of mediation that aims to rid man from erroneous thoughts about the woman. She thus repositions the woman in the critical perception and worldview of man. The more respect man pays the woman the more profound his love for her becomes. It follows that gender mediation discourse is oriented towards mutual respect and consideration. Saadawi observes that :

One of the conditions of true love is an exchange, and a necessary condition for exchange is a balance, an equality between the two partners. Exchange cannot take place between a master and a slave, between something that is higher and something that is lower, just as water cannot flow upwards without special interference. Real love cannot therefore be based on a relationship characterized by exploitation of any kind. It is therefore correct to say that most of the relationships that arise between men and women are not built on true love. The love that seems to exclude and well up from Egyptian songs and throb with sighs and crises (Saadawi 1980 : 74).

Saadawi finds fault with master/slave relationship in marital and extra-marital couples. She qualifies this as inappropriate and unsuitable. As a matter of fact, the alternative for true mediation is truth-speaking, mutual respect and the rejection of exploitation. Lying to each other in the couple beckons a sense of immaturity and the rejection of mediation. For the two

parties to succeed in developing fruitful relationship, man and woman should be ready to make concessions and compromise if necessary. The philosophy of mediation does not wait to see conflicts before [re]acting. It should ambition to plan life in advance. Some conflicts can be avoided if the protagonists of these conflicts planned them ahead of time to be avoided. That implies effective communication and dialogue. Dialogue should prevail when making family and social projects. Gender mediation philosophy also involves thinking about children and future generations. For instance, most marriages where men eventually divorce, they do not often think about the children or the future generations. Peace is a precious treasure to preserve and possibly to transmit to future generations. As such, men and women from different origins and sometimes different cultural background living together should understand that they need to agree on the essentials. They cannot supplant each other. They need to be tolerant, patient and predictable. Another important step in the gender mediation policy to attain social peace is the form a strong women's liberation movement on the one hand and on the other to develop scientific studies of women that really concentrate on women's problems so as to definitely find solutions :

It is the merit of the Women's Liberation Movement which has grown in strength, in size and in maturity during recent years that a new task is already being undertaken, in particular that of formulating new values built on the new science of woman that attempts to penetrate into her real physical, biological, psychological and mental characteristics, and unmask the real causes for the distortion that has affected all aspects of her nature and life. This has necessarily led also to a new science of man and his nature, as a dialectical counterpart completing the two components of human life, man and woman (Saadawi 1980 : 79).

Here, Saadawi brings out the importance of women's liberation movement. She is referring to feminist movements which have contributed significantly to debunk aspects of patriarchal legacies and question many of its undue claims on the superiority of men and women. Such movements have also helped to liberate. The achievements of women's liberation movements although important to some extends nevertheless do not suffice to assert that men and women have attained the fulness of its expressive mode. Gender mediation to be specific calls for an objective understanding of men and women's roles at political, social, economic, educative levels. At political level, men and women need to form a synergy of actions to define areas of influence so that African politics become inclusive and participatory. At social level it consists of promoting social values and ideas about the living together in constructive partnership. At economic level it is about working out strategies to find jobs for vulnerable women. It is also about making them self-reliant financially so that they contribute significantly to the family expenses. At the educative level, both male and female children need to be educated differently to the humane values of cooperation and mediation. The school system should encourage

gender mediation and collaboration. In Africa women's liberation movements do not intend to reverse roles and positions so that women take men's places to overrule but rather to help women come out of the unjust subjugation, oppression and exploitation.

It has also brought with it new ideas about child rearing and education, which hitherto were built on a system of suppression and discrimination between the sexes, and served to feed patriarchal class society with the prototype of men and women which it needs in order to survive (Saadawi 1980 : 79).

Here, Saadawi explains that child education contributes significantly to the development of gender collaboration and the ethics of mediation as it prepares children to recognize men and women's importance in society. This type of education tells in concrete terms the flaws of traditional patriarchal educative system and insists on the new values to inculcate to children in relation with the ethics of symbiosis. Men and women are significant contributors to their societies' development. Their lives should be complementary, inclusive and participatory. Saadawi's philosophy thus attempts to bring womanism to the classroom by reconciling manichean and feminist aesthetics. Education is the channel through which constructive ideas about gender collaboration can be easily inculcated to the children. Both formal and informal education should appropriate and diffuse these ideas to achieve better lives in the children. As such school curricula should be designed to encourage more participatory ethics in the building of the nation, an affair of both boys and girls.

3.3.The Role of Collective Action

Collective action to sustain gender mediation consists in joining efforts at international levels to sustain permanent dialogue between men and women aiming at improving women's socio-political and economic conditions. My main contention here is that, since women's oppression is operated mainly by patriarchy which is a global reality, and since it is endorsed by stronger apparatus which are political and economic powers, only collective consciousness and action can better foster gender mediation and provide sustainable solution. To arrive there, one needs to understand how women's oppression is embedded in larger socio-political systems of leadership.

While men occupy most of the power decision positions, women on the hand are left behind to occupy such positions as petty trading, bar maids, housemaids, who in order to make the ends meet trade their bodies in prostitution. Women to have access to civil service (where they can easily have salary), they have to pay with their sex. The economic systems put in place grant easily men financial facilities like easier access to loans and other forms of economic support. Despite their numerical number in society which outdo that of men, their economic

activities and income are weaker compared to those of men. As women are under-represented in the economic sector their economic activities are fragile.

Imperialism too operates considerably against women. The cultural affirmation of Euro-American societies affect the visibility of women in the countries of the Third World. As such, most medias use the female body (half-naked pictures) for advertizements. The money collected seldom serve the interests of women. Education and employments are reserved for men. Cultural imperialism imposed men's education as a necessity while neglecting women's schooling. Where education is granted to women, they are assimilated to weaker intellectual performances : men are encouraged to embrace scientific disciplines needing more concentration and commanding respects like mathematics, physics and technology. Women are oriented towards humanities studies. Regarding sports, men are selected to attend international competitions while women are not. Men's skills are preferred to women's. Trophies are granted to men and rarely to women. To win trophies women have to negotiate against their freedom. In more complex situations where aspects of women's exploitation is shown, it is demonstrated that men are the real perpetrators of such exploitation. The case in point is the long established tradition of prostitution. Women are often exposed in the vitrines of letigations charged to be social nuisance through the practice of sex work. Nevertheless looking closely at the matter, men are those who engender and entertain prostitution work. Though ages, contends Saadawi, kings and princes have used prostitutes (as sex tools) in their international relations, in war and other political ventures to satisfy their manly desires, but when the reversal consequences like the spread of diseases come, women are the only people to be blamed and possibly punished. Men therefore lie behind the cameras scotfree while women are exposed and punished.

4. CONCLUSION

The objective pursued in this study was to analyse the critical ideas of Nawal El Saadawi regarding gender mediation in *The Hidden Face of Eve : Women in Arab World*. Two important ideas are developped. Firstly the impediments to gender dialogue rest essentially on a number of abuses perpetrated by men on women including among other things physical violence (rape, female circumcision), verbal abuse and biased gender education giving priority to boys against girls. Girls thus grown under oppressive patriarchal structures are feminized and silenced in society. Secondly, gender dialogue becomes a vital necessity to bring back to rectitude these forms of abuses against women so as to restore social peace. Peace is predicated upon the correction of these phenomenal forms of sexism and discriminatory practices against women and the complete restoration of their rights as essential members of socio-political development.

The interface education, responsibility and change of mentality then becomes necessary to construct a strong social edifice where both men and women live and collaborate for effective social justice.

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