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Otherworldliness and Gender Inequalities: Postmodern Reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

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Abstract

This study interrogates otherworldliness and speculative figures in the representation of immediate social realities in Saadawi's Love in the Kingdom of Oil. While a number of studies exist on the novel, they neglect Saadawi's use of otherworldliness and speculative figures to express gender disparities in settings pervaded with religious fundamentalism. The modernist novel has the propensity to address existing realities of life with scientific exactitude, and readers either find it difficult to understand works within the bounds of speculative fiction or contemptuously dismiss them as mere fantasy.

Some modernist critics describe works by speculative fiction writers as so utterly fantastic that they do not address realities of life.This analytical study was carried out on an African novel to cross-examine the effect of otherworldliness and postmodernist forms on exploration of social realities in African fiction. Three novels by African writers (both pioneer and contemporary) were read. Saadawi's Love in the Kingdom of Oil was purposively sampled because it is more fervent about speculative figures. The study adopted a qualitative narrative analysis design. Data from secondary sources enabled the theoretical comprehension and qualitative analysis of primary texts. The study proceeded through close textual reading of the primary and secondary texts, while Atwood's version of speculative fiction served as a theoretical base for interpretation. It was found that rather than express wanton fantasy, some writers in the Global South employ speculative figures and otherworldliness to explore socio-political realities in their settings.

Keywords: Feminist Literature, Margaret Atwood, Nawal El Saadawi, Otherworldliness, Speculative Fiction

خلاصة

تستجوب هذه الدراسة الغيبيات والشخصيات التأملية في تمثيل الحقائق الاجتماعية المباشرة في رواية حب السعداوي في مملكة النفط. على الرغم من وجود عدد من الدراسات حول الرواية، إلا أنها تهمل استخدام السعداوي للعالم الآخر والشخصيات التأملية للتعبير عن الفوارق بين الجنسين في البيئات التي تسودها الأصولية الدينية. تميل الرواية الحداثية إلى معالجة حقائق الحياة الحالية بدقة علمية، ويجد القراء صعوبة في فهم الأعمال ضمن حدود الخيال التأملي أو يرفضونها بازدراء باعتبارها خيالًا محضًا. يصف بعض النقاد الحداثيين أعمال كتاب الخيال التأملي بأنها رائعة للغاية لدرجة أنها لا تتناول حقائق الحياة. تم إجراء هذه الدراسة التحليلية على الروايات الأفريقية لفحص تأثير أشكال العالم الآخر وما بعد الحداثة على استكشاف الحقائق الاجتماعية في الخيال الأفريقي. تمت قراءة ثلاث روايات لكتاب أفارقة (رواد ومعاصرين). لقد تم أخذ عينة

من كتاب السعداوي "الحب في مملكة النفط" بشكل مقصود من النصوص الثلاثة لأنه أكثر حماسا تجاه الأرقام التأملية. واعتمدت الدراسة تصميم التحليل السردي النوعي. مكنت البيانات من المصادر الثانوية من الفهم النظري والتحليل النوعي للنصوص الأولية. استمرت الدراسة من خلال قراءة نصية قريبة للنصوص الأولية والثانوية، في حين كانت نسخة أتوود من الخيال التأملي بمثابة قاعدة نظرية للتفسير. لقد وجد أنه بدلاً من التعبير عن الخيال الوحشي، يستخدم بعض الكتاب في الجنوب العالمي شخصيات تأملية وعالم آخر لاستكشاف الحقائق الاجتماعية والسياسية في بيئاتهم.

الكلمات الرئيسية : الأدب النسوي، الحب في مملكة النفط، مارجريت أتوود، نوال السعداوي، الخيال التأملي

Introduction

Fantasy literature has been addressed merely as the remains of a pre-colonial mythical consciousness making incursions into the world of the realistic storytellers. Riemenscheneider (2005)

Criticism in African literature has deliberately associated the creation of strange worlds with fantasy that runs counter to immediate social realities. The belief that postcolonial audiences have a bizarre inclination for the mystic hampers the writers' effort to express relevant content to the immediate social reality. Riemensscheneider (2005), in the above epitaph, refers to Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard* as an application of the mystic into a genre that should otherwise uphold scientific exactitude. If most readers take this perspective vis-à-vis works of art that exhibit otherworldliness, then many literary writers who utilize otherworldliness will lose readership. Rather than delimit the genre to utter fantasy, the fundamental question should focus on why some writers create a strange world in which to express their content. Why would Jonathan Swift, for instance, creates a strange world in which to express his ideas in *Gulliver's Travels*? From Lilliput, Blefuscu to the Houynonyms, Swift presents another, unnatural world to his readers. Would it be prudent to come up with

a similar postulation that since Swift was White, his work embodied White's passion for the bizarre? Such a proposition would no doubt be unfounded. If it is irrelevant for Western writers, then it cannot be plausible among postcolonial writers despite the cultural and racial differences. It is apparent that otherworldliness is associated with a genre that transgresses the rational thought typical of modernism.

Some scholars view this mode of literary expression as fundamental to the delivery of content to the audience, except for its inconsistency with modernist modes. For example, the speculative mode employs forms that are outside literary conventions; subsequently some readers stigmatize it. Lemus (2021) contends that the otherworldliness addresses reality through otherness "by reframing the world" (1). In other words, the writers incorporate forms of knowledge that modernism considers peripheral to address the salient issues that affect society. Modernism, for instance, consigns religion, spirituality and tradition to private spaces. Magical realism and speculative fiction restore them to the centre to address endemic problems that these otherised subjects cause in society. The modernist inclination to ignoring these aspects is tantamount to abdicating responsibility because the trio continues to wield enormous influence in communities today. Mbiti observes that religion wields the greatest influence on people of African origin (1970, 1). Hence, a writer and leader who disregards it proceeds at his or her own peril. Tutuola is therefore interested in exploration of the place of traditional Yoruba religion against the background of Western culture that fast encroaches on contemporary Nigeria. Hogan (2000, 58) contends that Tutuola is not interested in sheer fantasy, but depicts the canons of the Yoruba religion as appertains greed, human fertility, death and sacrifice in the light of modernity. Based on this

assertion, literary writers utilize fantasy and otherworldliness figuratively to comment on immediate social realities. This paper begins with an analysis of related literature, a statement of the problem, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis of text (discussion) and ends with conclusions.

Review of related Literature

The literature review begins with theoretical review and ends with empirical review to locate the gap in the paper.

Theoretical review

Scholars have made deliberate attempts to distinguish speculative fiction from science fiction. Margaret Atwood (2011, 6) contends that, unlike science fiction, which delves into impossible events, speculative fiction presents socio-political realities; she observes that in spite of the otherworldliness, the writers focus on "things that really could happen but just had not when the authors wrote the books." Marek Oziewicz (2017) avers that speculative is a subset of science fiction of which focus is human rather than technological matters (2). Much as Oziewicz's placement of speculative fiction in a lower hierarchy is dubitable, he agrees with Atwood about its human concerns. The findings of Atwood and Oziewicz's studies are invaluable to the present study as it interrogates Saadawi's work to determine its potential to explore the challenges that bedevil her society.

Literary critics have examined the relevance of speculative fiction in societies today. Steenkamp (2011) contends that despite the use of hyperbole, it is unreasonable to alienate speculative novels from their specific socio-historical contexts, "often serving as due warnings to societies regarding possible future crises" (7). The conclusions of Steenkamp's study enrich the present study, which is a reading of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* to question its connection

to the socio-political context in which it is set for satisfactory interpretation.

Some literary critics have focused on postmodernist aspects of speculative fiction. Linguanti (1999) avers that this mode of writing is associated with postmodernism because contrary to modernist novels,

characters are not single and central but come in groups of two or more, and form communities. The storyline is rendered problematic, freed from logical connections and work only by means of internal causality… it is a form that is considered suitable for the presentation of ways of reconciling other modes of opposition that are experienced as intolerable. (7)

It is apparent (in the extract) that speculative fiction discounts the modernist emphasis on characterization and systematic plotting. After reading Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard*, one does not remember the central character, but the issues of concern to the writer. Furthermore, the rational modernist attempt to attach causality to the plot is disallowed. The story (*Palm Wine Drinkard)* begins from any point and makes back-and-forth movements as the writer deems it fit. Finally, the mode expresses unconventional subjects within the writer's political and cultural context. Linguanti's use of the word "intolerable" refers to the unconventionality and political incorrectness of the subjects. Linguati's study enriches the present study through delineation of attributes of speculative fiction that will enable interpretation of Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil.*

Empirical review

Scholars have read *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* and demonstrated how Saadawi brings to the fore marginalisation of women. Hendow (2019) opines that Saadawi likens women to oil since the

patriarchal system exploits both of them. She contends, "[o]il is objectified and utilised just as women are" (76). Much as Hendow finds similitude between female characters and oil in Saadawi's text, she completely disregards the literary significance of otherworldliness and its speculative qualities, hence the gap for the present study.

Literary critics read Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* as human kind's attempt to exploit the ecological environment. Mahzabeen (2018) contends that Saadawi focuses on petro-fiction to underscore the patriarchal attempt to control and exploit both women and Mother Nature (73). Mahzabee expounds that men find fulfillment in expressing their superiority over women and the ecological environment. While Mahzabeen's focus is feminist elements in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, this study demonstrates how Saadawi employs speculative figures and otherworldliness to address gender disparities and other realities in her society.

Literary critics have demonstrated how Saadawi attacks exploitation and misuse of oil resources. The political elite place a premium on oil exploitation at the expense of other sectors such as water, and use the financial resources to buy loyalty. Denkard (2021), in her comments on the drops of oil in the novel, contends that the regime accentuates the dependence on oil in Saudi Arabia. There is a tendency for the regime to exhaust aquifers, pressurize local oil fields, pumping in water to force crude oil out while at the same time using imported water and wheat bought with oil rents as patronage to secure the loyalty of local elites and pacify dissent (47). While Denkard demonstrates how the regime exploits natural resources, she does not analyse the nexus between the mystic world and speculative figures on the subjects of the novel.

Statement of the problem

This study interrogates otherworldliness and speculative figures in the representation of immediate social realities in Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. While a number of studies exist on the novel, they do not delve into Saadawi's use of otherworldliness and speculative figures to explore women's issues in her society. The modernist novel addresses existing realities of life with scientific exactitude, and readers either find it difficult to understand works under a speculative paradigm or contemptuously dismiss them as sheer fantasy.

Objectives of the study

This paper is based on the following objectives:

i) Interrogate the nexus between otherworldliness and social realities in Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

ii) Analyse the effect of the postmodernist forms (unconventional characterisation and plotting) in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil.*

Theoretical framework

The theoretical reading in this study is tenets of speculative fiction. This study adopts Atwood's postulation on the fiction—literature with fantastic stories about actions that can happen in social and political aspects. Unlike Le Guine (1989) whose delineation associates speculative fiction with tremendous fantasy such as spaceships and "blood sucking Martials shot to earth," Atwood's postulation allows for writing about imaginary tales that can happen in our societies. Similarly, Merril (1971) defines speculative fiction as "stories whose objective is to explore, discover by means of projection, hypothesis […] about the nature of the universe, of man [or woman] and reality (60)." For Merril, the writers' use of "fancy" does not alienate the story from the immediate realities in society. Finally, Oziewicz (2017) considers

speculative fiction a subset of science fiction that preoccupies itself with human subjects. The present study may not agree with Oziewicz's attempt to subordinate speculative fiction, but adopts his postulation about its preoccupation with human concerns.

Procedure and methodology

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique; three texts were selected, read and one sampled based on setting, the presence of speculative fiction, and political and patriarchal oppression. These considerations were aimed at enabling interrogation of otherworldliness, speculative figures, and their effect on the expression of gender disparities in autocratic settings, as well as how they are textualised. One text was chosen from North Africa to interrogate how speculative fiction enables the expression of sensitive subjects to evade censorship in the face of high-handed regimes.

Close textual reading of Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* enabled the collection of primary data for the study and secondary data through the study of articles and books. Primary data was enriched by secondary data from studying, reviewing and selecting scholarly and literary articles from refereed journals and books from online sources. Secondary data propped the study to interrogate the aesthetic effects of speculative fiction and figures in the primary text. In other words, secondary data from books bolstered knowledge of speculative fiction and its impact on feminist literature in a politically oppressive setting.

Data analysis and interpretation

A study of certain speculative fiction concepts, such as otherworldliness, unconventional plotting and characterisation, guided the researcher in the analysis of its effects on Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil.* Atwood's postulation that associates

speculative fiction with socio-political realities was invaluable to cross-examination of the primary text to unravel its relevance to the plight of women in the setting. Phenomenal studies such as Qahtani et al (2020), Tamer (2021) Aslam (2016), Mtango (2004), Tag-El-Din (2021), Gates (2019) and World report (2019) on the ecological, cultural and political aspects of the work's settings enabled effective comparison between the story and social realities.

Speculative figures and social realities: exploitation of women and Mother Nature in *Saadawi's Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

Set in an imaginary political entity, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is concerned with the plight of women in nations that combine religion and politics. Although critics such as Obeid (2005) opine that Saadawi (2001) absolves religion as the prime cause of sexism, this study contends that the contrary is true; the writer has delved into sensitive religious subjects such that she employs otherworldliness and speculative figures to evade direct conflict with religious adherents. As soon as the protagonist reaches the Kingdom of oil, a strange man kidnaps and takes her to a strange home. The narrator explains, "[a]ll he could see of him was his feet and knees inside his nightshirt. His upper half was hidden behind the newspaper" (22). As the man speaks in "rattling voice as if coming from another world" and busies himself with the newspaper in a house full of lizards, geckos and cockroaches (23), he orders her to cook, but the protagonist cannot find a box of matches. Strangely, the man whips out a revolver and directs her to touch the tip end; a spark comes forth that surprises the protagonist. Above the ceiling, she notices oil seeping, and the man explains that there are showers of oil from the sky. When she gets thirsty, the man looks for a strange liquid and squeezes four drops into her

mouth. When she asks for more of it to slake her thirst, the man contends that the law stipulates that she only takes two. The man says that the liquid is not water, but a special drug that simultaneously quenches the thirst and cleanses the intestines (25). The protagonist lies on her back and reflects on her experiences, for instance, how she aspired to become a prophet, but the man interrupts her, "[w]hat are you saying?" (26). The protagonist realizes that the man can discern her thoughts before she articulates them. He contends that there were no female prophets, so her desire to be a prophet was a fantasy. He wants to know whether she knows the female goddesses such as Sekhmet (27). It is apparent that the protagonist is unaware of the goddesses and their influence on her cultural environment.

In the above episode, Saadawi uses otherworldliness to denigrate patriarchal traditions in her setting. The Kingdom symbolises the oil-rich Middle Eastern political entities, including Saudi Arabia. The protagonist's leave and kidnap signify migration from Egypt to Saudi Arabia or any of these political entities. The oil that sips through the ceiling is an exaggeration meant to underscore the abundant oil reserves in countries such as Saudi Arabia. In his report on the production of oil, Descalzi (2019) singles out the Middle East as the largest producer of petroleum oil by December 2019. Compared to other nations, the region led the pack of all oil-producing nations with 803, 220 million barrels. The man in the episode represents some men in Middle Eastern countries and their propensity to abuse women through a deliberate misreading of Islamic precepts. Mtango (2004) contends that the state in Saudi Arabia uses the Qurani to execute restrictions that oppress women, although these laws mostly misinterpret the Quranic teachings (49). The control of the number of drops of the liquid the women are given signifies the patriarchal control of women in Middle

Eastern countries, on the one hand, and attempts to nurture political subservience through favours. About the scarcity of water, Denkard (2021) says, "[t]he phrase refers to the dependence of oil abundance in Saudi Arabia […] a regime that exhausts aquifers in order to pressurize local oil fields, pumping in water to force crude oil out, while at the same time using imported water and wheat bought with oil rents as patronage to secure the loyalty of local elites and pacify dissent (47). The regime exhausts all the water resources in favour of oil exploitation and now has to rely on imported water. The man rations the liquid to signify the water scarcity resulting from greed for oil production. The last part of the episode, which presents the man as omniscient, underscores the high levels of patriarchal control of women. The men place wives under constant surveillance such that they are denied their privacy. Qahtani et al. (2020) in their study in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, show how cases of violence against women have increased in Saudi Arabia because the husbands access wives' communication on smartphones (150). The protagonist's ignorance of female goddesses is a direct indictment of the patriarchal precepts of the Islamic religion in which its prophets are men. It is a major weakness in the target religion, which Saadawi cannot refer to directly, to evade censorship.

In another mysterious scene, Saadawi demonstrates the initiation of women into an oppressive culture in the strange Kingdom (the protagonist finds herself) after the abduction. The man draws on his magical powers to disempower and debilitate the protagonist completely. He starts peculiarly beating her as a ploy to debilitate her inner person such that she completely loses the nerve. As the man's fists flail, the protagonist's attempts to retaliate are thwarted by her body's inability to move except the jaws (72). The act is so mysterious that the protagonist cannot understand why her body

becomes completely powerless save for the potential to scream. It is also mystic that the protagonist experiences excruciating pain but cannot see the flailing fists. She asks "[a]re you hitting me?" The man retorts that he is willing to stop if she accepts to carry the jar of oil. The process of initiation to this patriarchal practice in the kingdom entails harrowing oppressive practices that subjugate the woman completely. The protagonist admits that after the beating, "her posture showed complete submission. There was no resistance whatsoever" (72). The protagonist loses her assertive self and kneels before the man "like a camel". The narrator suggests that the man's blow "deprived of her will" (73) before the man places a wase on her head and the oil jar on top of it (72). As the protagonist finds her way to the company with the jar of oil on her head, the initiation into the patriarchal kingdom is complete.

This magical episode indirectly addresses the acculturation of women into the patriarchal culture in the Middle Eastern nations. Right from the initial stages of the protagonist's arrival in the man's house, he knows he must debilitate her for his full control. According to Tag-El-Din (2009), some men in patriarchal societies marry women to control them. She quotes her grandmother, who insists that men "will marry you to own you. And if you have no degree and no education, you will be like all the others and have nowhere to go and nothing to do but take it" (2). Tag-El-Din grandmother's propensity to associate patriarchal oppression with uneducated women does not apply to Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* because, in the above scene, the protagonist is a degree holder. Nevertheless, the man utterly subjugates her; she carries the oil jar on her head just like the illiterate women. They encourage the protagonist to submit to their chore: carry the oil to the company to lessen the man's fury. The episode mentioned above resonates with Tag-El-Din's postulation that Saadawi's

novels are harsh critiques of gender disparities, male domination and national politics (25). The man's initiation constructs the feminine gender as slaves that benefit men and the company of which owners are state operatives. According to Aslam (2016), the patriarchal culture in Saadawi's fiction consigns women to the domestic space (1), and this is exactly what the reader observes through the man's actions in the episode. His mysterious destruction of her will encompasses deliberate strategies to deny women education, job opportunities, freedom of thought, movement and anything that may empower them. The man neither permits the protagonist to advance in her archaeological career nor read books. He knows such moves will empower women to find better jobs, change their thinking break away from domestic labour and other low-class jobs that benefit capitalists. Mahzaleen squarely blames the capitalist system as an accomplice in the plight of women as it benefits greatly from the patriarchal oppression of women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil.*

Saadawi describes the duties that the patriarchal system assigns female characters in a strange way that the reader may not understand. The episode brings into focus what Lemus describes as adoption of otherworldliness to depict "reality by means of otherness" (78). The strange and bizarre episodes underscore the gravity of the situations female characters experience. When the protagonist complains that she has not been paid for the constant supply of oil jars to the company, it confounds the strange man because he is so engrossed in the avaricious culture that it has never occurred to him that there is something called "company". The protagonist wonders what partners constitute this company and whether the man takes the wages. The "temptation" to have "rebellious thoughts" prompts the man to invoke mystic powers. Saadawi writes, "[t]he world became blood before her eyes" (41)

and with bizarre spontaneity, her neck stretched forward and the man used his axe to mine oil from the ground, filled the oil jar on her head and remarked that a woman would rather work for a greater goal than money.

In this episode, Saadawi utilizes otherworldliness to interrogate the nexus between patriarchy, oil and the position of women in the Middle East. The company represents oil capitalist corporations that work in cahoots with patriarchal political regimes in the region to subjugate women. Writing about the nexus between religions, oil and gender issues in the Middle East, Ross (2008) contends that in most regions where oil extraction is the lifeline, women face the brunt of patriarchal oppression. He writes, "[w]hen growth encourages women to join the formal labour market, it ultimately brings about greater gender equality; when growth is based on oil and mineral extraction, it discourages women from entering the labour market and tends to exaggerate gender inequalities" (107). The exaggeration is evident in the above episode when the protagonist's divergent thought to the pervading patriarchal culture spontaneously extends her neck towards the man to enable him load the head with an oil jar. This suggests that she she can no longer advance her career in archaeology because the oil company pays the man stipends that ought to meet her basic needs. The state expects her to remain submissive to the man in the house. This represents the tendency of men in patriarchal societies to compel their wives to abandon their careers with the promise that they will provide. Ross contends that retaining women at home reduces their political influence, but increases their fertility.

Surveillance and masculine callousness constitute another area where unworldliness pervades *Love in the Kingdom of Oil.* The man's eyes have the capability to penetrate the newspaper and perceive the protagonist's thoughts (about how her husband used

to track her) before abusing her physically (121). The protagonist describes the man's eye as "an eye that never stopped looking at her, the holy eye that never slept" (120). One thought that infuriates the man is the flashback of how she had driven herself inconsistently with the laws of her father's nation. Were it not for her married status, the state would have sentenced her to death (121). Through his mysterious powers, the man is able to understand the "rebellious" thoughts and demands to know why the protagonist is not cooking. He attacks her violently, and several mysterious events are evident. First, there is ambivalence on whether she should raise the alarm. While she weeps inwardly, her body does not manifest the cry, with strong inner dissuasion to cover up the ordeal. Second is the protagonist's separation between the body and self; for instance, she observes her "body stretched out on the ground. One of her legs was enwrapped in the trap of the case" (122), and her eyes rise, move to the front of the head that is dangling on the neck with a black scarf around it. As the self separates from the body, she hears a conversation between her husband in the father's nation and the police. She perceives the smells of corpses as her body warms up; then she senses the man's body on top of her. She asks the man, "was that love?" The man says he has placed her under surveillance, so he spots her with the other man. He says God will give him four wives thereafter, and his neck stretches to the skyline (123). The number of wives, the narrator contends, determines the length of a man's neck.

The aforementioned episode employs otherworldliness to show the authoritarian tactics practiced by the political regimes to bolster patriarchy and the subjugation of minorities in Middle Eastern nations such as Saudi Arabia. The mysterious capability of the man's sight penetrating the newspaper and observing everything the protagonist thinks and does represents autocratic regimes'

propensity to institute surveillance measures that control and subjugate citizens and women in particular. According to Tamer (2021), the Saudi Arabia regime conducts "media control and internet surveillance which allows the regime to simultaneously disseminate pro-state messaging and punish any dissidents" (80). Tamer's observation is in tandem with the 2020 Freedom in the World report, which concluded that Saudi Arabia scores a 0/4 in the category of free and independent media, and the government controls all domestic media and "heavily influences regional print and satellite-television coverage" (83). The man in the episode represents the patriarchal and overbearing regime of which the constitution is the Holy Quran, which is misinterpreted to perpetuate domestic violence, female circumcision, and other obsolete traditions that adversely affect the lives of women. The episode suggests that the men have a right to seek the state's intervention to spy on their wives and beat them. The man metes out violence on the protagonist until she loses consciousness. At death point, the man rapes her. While this ordeal shows the cruelty meted out on women under the pretext of piety, the near-death experience also signifies how a combination of religion and the state accentuate patriarchal traditions that result in the demise of women's aspirations in life. The separation between the protagonist's self and her body refers to the pathological conditions that women in oppressive cultural environments experience. Thampy (2021) associates most of Saadawi's oeuvre with the depiction of "fragmented memories and repressed trauma" among women that "can move from the regions of the unconscious into the conscious and the testimony made help bring about catharsis" (41). Indeed, the domestic violence in *God Dies by the Nile* cause pathological conditions in Zakeya's life.

In the above episode, the female protagonist exhibits symptoms of the fragmented self, which Fairbairn (1954) refers to as the split to the mental or imaginary self to enable the patient to cope with the emotional pain (6). The protagonist in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* experiences severe alienation because the self leaves the body and observes it as a stranger. According to Laing (1960), such patients are unembodied because they lose interest in the pleasures of life (75). Definitely, the protagonist loses interest in sex because of the traumatic experiences in the home. The elongation of the man's neck as the wives increase in number reiterates Steenkamp's assertion concerning speculative fiction's tendency to adopt parody to denigrate certain social realities (7). The longneck represents the vanity and pride in men drawn from aspects of religion that favour them to perpetuate oppressive practices against women.

Saadawi also uses otherworldliness through the creation of transcendent characters that sometimes complicate the logical flow of the novel. Heaven stands out as one of these otherworldly characters that the oppressed, particularly women, appeal to in their distress. After the man brutally beats the protagonist, he darts out to pray to heaven. The narrator asserts that heaven replies, "[b]eat them. She cannot expect a brighter future unless she takes the beating with pride" (126). Heaven is, therefore, a character as he speaks to the man and contributes to character development and themes in the story. The protagonist concludes that the man is God-fearing as he is responding to heaven's request to beat the woman (126). There is also a reference to goddesses, which sometimes speak to the characters directly. After washing the statue of Victory in league with the demands of the King, the protagonist experiences a hallucination in which she sees a woman with two horns that curled forward with planet Earth on her head. As she reflects on the woman's otherworldliness, the goddess adjures her

to stand up, bathe, and receive many blessings (45). That marks the end of their interaction despite the numerous challenges that women experience in the Kingdom. Sometimes, women pray consistently to the female goddesses. In their well-orchestrated battle to confront men, they pray, "[o]ur lady of beauty, lighten our burdens" (32). However, when the men reach the scene, the women lose their nerve and flee the battlefield for their leader to fight. The men vanquish the lone woman and proceed with their dominance.

In this episode, Saadawi further uses spiritual characters to demonstrate how religion bolsters gender disparities in her society. Obeid observes that Saadawi believes that gender disparities in the Muslim world stem from the defeat of the female gods after a battle with male gods (6). He expounds on Saadawi's belief, "[m]an on earth represents God in Heaven. He that interprets God rules the earth." The episode in the battle between the two genders attests to this belief because after the women pray, the goddess inspires the women, but fear grips them in an instant, and they flee to abandon their leader in trouble. The scene confirms that their goddess, the Lady of Purity, is much weaker than the male gods, who enable men to overpower the women easily.

Similarly, after washing the statue of Victory, the Lady of Purity reveals herself to the protagonist but demonstrates little concern for the patriarchal oppression of female characters in the Kingdom. In this episode, Saadawi demonstrates the futility of reliance on religion to sort gender issues in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Religious precepts have already established patriarchal oppression, and women who accept religion accept the full package. In one of her plays, Saadawi indicts the gods, such as Ra, for harbouring resentment against women. Ra, for instance, has a wife who he finds in bed with an enslaved Ethiopian and sends a mandate that a man should not trust a woman (11). In Saadawi's

perspective, most religions have patriarchal foundations that render the pursuit of gender equality inaccessible. Through justification of domestic violence in verses in the Holy Books, the men do not experience any qualms as they violate women's rights. The man in the episode prays and is inspired to violate the protagonist. There have been cases in churches today where clerics abuse children sexually with claims that it was under spiritual inspiration to "sanctify" the victims. According to Kissling and Snippel (2002), extremist interpretation of religion replicates hate and injustices, which are at times directed at women out of a desire to hinder their rise (10). Kisssling and Snippel's ideas are apparent in the above episode, where the man and the state adopt extremist Islamic views that encourage them to assault women. The man believes it is God's command to beat the protagonist, just as Osama Bin Laden believed that Whites are enemies of Islam and ought to be killed. In the recent past, the world has witnessed extremist religious views in Nigeria (Boko Haram), Somalia (Al Shaabab) and Kenya (Christian cults). The Al-Shaabab, for instance, hold and perpetuate the odd tenet that Christians and atheists are enemies and taking pictures is *haram* (Maruf and Joseph 13). Boko Haram is based on the belief that authentic Islam thrives when believers break away from normal society and exist in confrontation with it (Kassim and Michael, 2018). They reject scientific conventions, such as the rotation of the earth, and elevate traditional Saudi Arabian precepts such as the rotation of the sun around the earth. A cleric in Kenya persuaded the laity to fast to death to go to heaven; more than 300 adults and children lost their lives between Jan and April 2023 (Hotchot-Bodin, 2023). Saadawi parodies these extremist tendencies in the above episode.

The way in which Saadawi describes oil exhibits otherworldliness to express certain themes indirectly. When the man feels the need

for oil, he uses an instrument to hit the ground a number of times, and the oil emerges to fill every part of the ground (41). The man draws the oil and fills the jar on the protagonist's neck. The female characters (the women she meets) describe the oil as a lake, which dominates everything, so the protagonist should abandon her career in archaeology and focus on oil supply to the company (75). Anytime the man draws the oil, the protagonist's neck spontaneously responds for the man to pour oil into the oil jar on it. There is a mysterious manner in which oil pours from the sky to perpetuate the perpetual exploitation of women. Although critics such as Hendow draw parallels between women and oil as marginalised characters Saadawi presents as victims of patriarchal tradition, the present study argues that oil tends to conspire with men to enslave women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil.* Hendow also admits that men control the oil industry as demonstrated by the man's propensity to strike the ground to have oil emerge to facilitate the protagonist's enslavement. This act suggests that the men in most societies are quick to manipulate the factors of production, which provide the means or economic power to control women. This is in tandem with Chung (1994)'s observation that men's economic power enables them to perpetuate patriarchal traditions.

Similarly, Mutie (2022, 70) avers that economic marginalisation is one of the prime causes of patriarchal dominance in most African communities. Although Mutie's interrogation of Wangari Maathai's role demonstrates her upward trajectory, the men's control of oil in Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil,* completely disables women's efforts to eradicate oppressive culture. It is apparent that oil becomes men's formidable ally, contrary to Hendow's argument, because its absence in Kenya paves way for Maathai's rise. However, the protagonist of *Love in the Kingdom*

of Oil makes futile attempts to fight for equality because the men have the means to install surveillance technologies that enable them disrupt all the plans of female characters.

Postmodern Aspects of Form: Unconventional Plotting and use of Language

Apart from otherworldliness, Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* adopts what Linguati delineates as postmodernist attributes to underscore feminist subjects further. For instance, Saadawi ignores the modernist emphasis on characterisation in literature; according to Palmer (2008), the major focus of the postcolonial novel is influential characterisation (119). On the contrary, the reader hardly remembers any characters in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, particularly by name. Saadawi only presents the protagonist, "the man" and "the women" without specific identifications. According to Gates (2019), writers such as Olga Grushin do not name the protagonist to show "not only her lack of identity but that namelessness allows her to be representative of the multitude of oppressed women" (12) in the world. Taking Gates' perspective, Saadawi does not name the protagonist to demonstrate the gender othering of women in every aspect of life in the strange kingdom that the protagonist visits. Indeed, throughout the novel, some passages suggest the representation of female characters as an oppressed group. The women sing a song as soon as the protagonist arrives in the Kingdom, "our lady of purity, lighten our burdens" (33), but the deity does not seem to listen to their cries. When the protagonist questions patriarchal beliefs, the female characters brand her as ignorant. This leads her to the pessimistic conclusion that "women will remain subjugated because they lack the nerve to resist the oil" (75). The protagonist's failure at the end of the novel represents the inability of women to successfully overturn the

patriarchal culture that is entrenched in the political capitalistic system that works in cahoots with religious belief systems in the Kingdom of oil.

According to Myrestrand (2020), writers avoid specific names and use "the man" or "the boy" for objectivity to enable the reader to project anything associated with those words (6). She expounds that the evasion of names draws the readers' attention from the characters to allow them focus on the story and its subjects. In other words, Saadawi's major desire is for the readers to focus on the gender marginalization of women rather than personal identities that are likely to derail the audience. Worse still, oppressed people boast of no identity to project to the audience, and therefore, highlighting issues affecting them is paramount. The namelessness also enables readers to draw from the cultural context of the Kingdom of Oil to assign "the man" all the connotative meanings they can find: oppressor, tyrant, manipulator, exploiter, batterer, hypocrite, opportunist, predator, on the one hand, and provider and protector on the other. Similarly, the use of the term "a woman" concerning the protagonist enables the reader to draw from the context to assign connotative meanings: oppressed, enslaved, homemaker, child bearer, submissive, dominated, subjugated, victim and *the other*. The choice of names would most likely delimit the readers' interpretation.

One other aspect that informs categorisation of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* under speculative and postmodernist fiction is illogical plotting. Saadawi discards the modernist logical arrangement of events and causality. According to Chigwedere (2017), the use of non-linearity among postmodernist writers such as Chikwava suggests pathological fragmentation of characters that stems from marginalisation (183). Similarly, Saadawi adopts a non-linear plot to associate her female protagonist with

pathological tendencies because of her prolonged existence in the marginal space. It is not easy to distinguish between current happenings, the past, reality and fantasy in the protagonist's life in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. At the beginning of the story, the authorities are incensed by the woman who has gone on leave in the protagonist's mother nation. In the next episode, the women watch the protagonist pass by with his uncovered face in the Kingdom of oil.

There is a constant shift between events in the kingdom of oil and the mother nation, which confuses the reader. For example, the reader hardly understands the episode in which the protagonist reflects on her having gone on leave when the policeman's interrogation of her husband in her mother nation comes to the scene (46-48). Sometimes, the protagonist's thoughts on the current realities in the kingdom of oil lead her into abstractions that complicate the reader's ability to follow the story. One non-linear episode begins with the police officer interrogating her husband in the mother nation. The protagonist then observes a photojournalist take her husband's picture; she tells the reader about the man's life in the kingdom of oil—his mother always wanted him to grow up and be like the king, not the lady of purity (48). The reader finds it difficult to understand how the story moves from the protagonist's mother nation to the kingdom of oil. The protagonist then enters a delirium where she sees women planning a counteraction against patriarchal practices. She turns into a jar of oil that the women carry and throws to the ground for trampling. It is unclear whether the women she sees are in her mother nation or the kingdom of oil. However, the delirium reiterates Chigwedere's postulation about the protagonist's pathological fragmentation, as the mind has magical abilities to perceive goings on in her mother nation.

Conclusion

This study interrogated otherworldliness and speculative figures as representations of women's immediate social realities in Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. It was found that Saadawi uses otherworldliness to denigrate patriarchal traditions in her setting and evade censorship. *The Kingdom of Oil* represents the oil-rich Middle Eastern political entities, including Saudi Arabia. The protagonist's leave and kidnap signify migration from Egypt to Saudi Arabia or any of these political entities. The man in the novel represents men in patriarchal communities and their propensity to abuse women through misreading existing religious precepts. The man's omniscience underscores the high levels of political and patriarchal control of women through surveillance. The husbands utilise modern technologies to place wives under constant surveillance such that they are denied their privacy. The mystic beating and the protagonist's submission represent the acculturation of women into the patriarchal culture in the Middle Eastern nations. Through a clever combination of education and religion, the culture consistently destroys women's self-esteem, assertiveness and will to resist patriarchy.

Furthermore, the use of transcendent characters demonstrates how religion bolsters gender disparities patriarchal communities. They also serve to demonstrate how men turn to religious extremism to justify the oppression of women. Saadawi, therefore, uses otherworldliness to show the nexus between religious fundamentalism and gender othering in her society. The sensitivity of her subjects necessitates the choice of otherworldliness and speculative figures for subtle expression of her subjects. It was interesting to note that oil represents economic advantages that patriarchal systems avail to men to facilitate women's oppression.

Oil in the novel consistently works for the good of male domination and renders women's resistance an exercise in futility.

Finally, the choice of non-linear plotting suggests the pathological consequences of othering and such as fragmentation of female characters. It gives the story the postcolonial nexus between othering and pathological tendencies. Other postmodernist aspects, such as namelessness and unconventional characterisation underscore the novel's subject: the condition of the oppressed selves in the marginal space.

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