

Gender and Insecurity: An Examination of Nawal El-Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero and Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah

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Abstract

Every society has, over the years, experienced or is experiencing one form of onslaught or the other. This, no doubt, has shaped not only the way writers perceive issues, but the way they treat them. The 21st century is, therefore, characterised by a myriad of social issues militating against its development. Simply put, the 21st century is embroiled in a lot of issues which have become a clog in the wheel of progress. This paper, in attempting to examine these issues, contemplates on gender issues and insecurity as characteristic of the 21st century. Accordingly, it seeks to examine the gender issues from the angle of the girl child whose neglect has not only exposed her to untold hardship, but also made her susceptible to wide-ranging abuses. The paper assumes a position that the most unsecured person in the 21st century is the girl child. To advance this claim, the paper will draw from an array of literary texts with particular emphasis on Nawal El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (2007) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013).

Introduction

Gender and insecurity are two issues that have assumed an unprecedented dimension in the 21st century. This confirms the notion that, for every epoch, there is a peculiar issue that the society grapples with. Although, it could be argued that the 21st century is bedeviled by daunting issues too numerous to catalogue, it will

not be a misnomer to argue that gender and security are two of such issues that are topical. While the effect of this may be mild in some quarters, it may have assumed a different proportion in others. This could be attributed to the manner by which they are handled. Society's inertia in addressing the gender and security question over the years could have deepened the situation. And this may have had a devastating toll on the masses, especially women and children. Women and children are thus, becoming endangered human species in the 21st century, however promising the 21st century looks. According to Constantinos (2011):

The 21st Century has marshalled in a time of unprecedented global wealth and extraordinary opportunities for many. Nevertheless, with increasing violence against and inequality of women, Africa is languishing as a basket case of international martial intervention and charity. Conflicts, famine and pandemics continue to threaten women in Africa with a calamity unforeseen hitherto...

Within the context of the foregoing, it becomes pertinent to note that women are at the receiving end in the scheme of things in the 21st century. This brings to wake, the question of the place of the woman in a fragile and vulnerable society characteristic, to a large extent, of the 21st century. African writers over the years have been attempting, with varying degrees of accuracy, to capture the vulnerability of the woman in the face of the dwindling state of security plaguing the society, especially the African society. To advance this claim, Constantinos (2011) argues that conflicts, famine and pandemics continue to threaten women in Africa. Women have not just always been exposed to untold hardship in the face of global security breaches; they have equally been used as pawns. There is, therefore, a growing concern about the possible disconnect between the government and the people, in relation to security. This disconnect has, therefore, become a melting pot for creative writers to contemplate the issues of (in) security and gender in the 21st century. In other words, since literature, arguably, does not spring from a vacuum, it has become imperative for literary writers to take advantage of the 21st century disorder with a view to forging a 'new' kind of writing. This is largely due to the fact that the 21st century is embroiled in a lot of social issues, particularly, that of (in)security which can give vent to a new corpus of literature.

For Fonchingong, (2006), African literature is replete with write-ups that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman. This is suggestive of the fact that the woman, even in the literary space, is made disadvantaged by her male counterparts. This, in itself is a form of insecurity confronting the woman. There is a notion that, in Africa, women and girls are disproportionately affected by poverty and discrimination. Women often end up in insecure, low-wage jobs, and have limited access to the educational resources and financial tools they need to succeed. This is a signification of the fact the woman in the 21st century is indeed, enmeshed in a plethora of social issues that have not just placed her in a disadvantaged position, socially, economically or psychologically, but to a large extent, have excluded her from the developmental process of the society. In the words of Lucas (2001), “excluding women’s input into development by inhibiting their involvement in education, leadership, finance and social improvement has a negative impact on development”. While this presupposes that the woman is a key player in the development of the society, excluding her from participation therefore makes her vulnerable. The vulnerability of the woman in the 21st century, thus, stems up from neglect, occasioned by the society. For Adegbam (2013), security, which has been a form of human existence and sustenance, could be viewed as freedom from threat or violence. This shows that security is a situation in which citizens are free from any threats to their lives and means of livelihood, safe from bodily harm, diseases, unemployment, and human right violations wherever they may find themselves within a sovereign nation. The feminist perspective thus defines security more broadly than is typically found in conventional International Relations theories. Feminists define security in multidimensional and multilevel terms where security threats include violence, rape, poverty, gender subordination and ecological destruction as well as interstate war (Tickner, 1997).

In this paper, the term ‘insecurity’ will be situated within the purview of gender violence perpetrated against women especially, and children. In other words, this paper will contextualise insecurity as the susceptibility of the woman occasioned by the continued dehumanisation, devaluation and denial of her rights and womanhood in the society. This paper, therefore, probes the concept of insecurity and its attendant effects on the woman in the 21st century, within the context of her

relationship with the opposite sex; her relationship in the family; her relationship with the society and the response of the government towards her plight.

An Analysis of Woman at Point Zero

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi presents the agonizing experience of Firdaus, a young girl sentenced to death for killing a man. Having gone through harrowing experiences in the hands of men, Firdaus takes to prostitution, and is eventually imprisoned for killing a pimp who beats and rapes her. *Woman at Point Zero* is, therefore, a window through which the trauma, agony and vulnerability of the woman in a patriarchal society are contemplated. It therefore, raises a lot of concern on the security of the woman. The neglect of the woman does not only increase her vulnerability, but also compounds her fear in the society. For instance, Firdaus expresses how insecure she is by lamenting her father's selfish and uncaring attitude towards her. She recounts that:

Our hut was cold, yet in winter my father used to shift my straw mat and pillow to the small room facing north, and occupy my corner in the oven room. And instead of staying by side to keep me warm, my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm. In summer I would see her sitting at his feet with a tin mug in her hand as she washed his legs with cold water (16).

As a child, Firdaus is already psychologically traumatised by her father who is meant to give her care and succor as he stands as a commanding obstacle between her and her childhood comfort and security. The action of Firdaus's father is a clear indication of abandonment. One wonders why a father would abandon his responsibility and deprive his child (Firdaus) of her comfort. The tendency for Firdaus to grow up feeling unwanted and insecure is thus heightened by her father's selfish attitude towards her.

In another vein, Firdaus brings to the fore, the hypocrisy of her father, and by extension the male characters. She does not seem to understand why her father, who professes to be religious, should treat her as though she were not a human being. She is also critical of the failure of the religious institution, as people use religion to cover up their inadequacies and evils. This is exemplified as she laments thus:

Every Friday morning he would put on a clean *galabeya* and head for the mosque to attend weekly prayer. The prayer over, I would see him walking with the other men like himself as they commented on the Friday sermon, on how convincing and eloquent the *imam* had been to a degree that he had surpassed the unsurpassable. For was it not verily true that stealing was a sin and killing was a sin, and defaming the honour of a woman was a sin and injustice was a sin and beating another human being was a sin...? (10-11).

The psychologically traumatised and unsecured Firdaus does not only develop hatred for her father, but also vehemently detests his hypocrisy. For her, he appears to be very pious, as symbolised by his very clean *galabeya*, but in reality, he could best be seen as a beast, as neither him nor “other men like himself” (10) appear to benefit from the sermon, for their daily lives do not seem to correspond with their professed beliefs, as they see religion as a tool in “defaming the honour of a woman” (11). Born into hypocrisy, Firdaus soon discovers early in life that men hide under the cloak of religion to perpetrate evil and injustice, especially against women. At a very young age, she does not only become wary of men, but also keenly observes their hypocritical mannerisms. She affirms that:

I was still young at the time, and my breasts were not yet rounded. I knew nothing about men. But I could hear them as they invoked Allah’s name and called upon His blessings, or repeated His holy words in a subdued guttural tone. I would observe them nodding their heads or rubbing their hands one against the other, or coughing, or clearing their throats with a rasping noise or constantly scratching under the armpits and between the thighs. I saw them as they watched what went on around them with wary, doubting, stealthy eyes ready to pounce, full of an aggressiveness that seemed strangely servile. (11-12).

The level of deprivation Firdaus suffers, especially in the hands of her father brings to wake the gender question. One wonders if her father deliberately takes delight in making her pass through difficult times on account of her sexuality. For, besides being a dictator to his family, he could not only be described as a failure in family affairs, but also as a ravenous beast whose selfish proclivity leads him to perpetually oppress his own flesh and blood. Through the eyes of Firdaus, therefore,

Woman at Point Zero reveals how enslaved and insecure the woman has become. For instance, Firdaus' father would prefer his children to go hungry, but not him. In other words, he seems to believe that his responsibility is to bring children into the world, but not to fend for them. Through a vivid description of his dictatorial tendency, Firdaus recounts thus:

My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened. Sometimes when there was no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomachs. But he would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watched him. (17-18).

The height of his inhumanity manifests each time the hungry Firdaus tries to scramble for a morsel of food from her father's bowl. She reveals that:

One evening, I dared to stretch out my hand to his plate, but he struck me a sharp blow over the back of my fingers. I was so hungry that I could not cry. I sat in front of him watching as he ate, my eyes following his hand from the moment his fingers plunged into the bowl until it rose into the air, and carried the food into his mouth. His mouth was like that of a camel, with a big opening and a wide jaw (18).

Within the context of the foregoing, it could be inferred that the attitude of Firdaus' father towards his family has created a feeling of animosity that will linger not only in the subconscious of Firdaus, but also that of her siblings. For, at a tender age, the only description of her father that plays through her mind is that of a beast. This accounts for the reason she likens him to "...a camel, with a big opening and a wide jaw" (18). The metaphor of a camel as used in the description of Firdaus' father exemplifies how disgusting his character is. He is so beastly that he does not show any empathy when his family is bereaved. That is, he is projected as one who does not have a human face, as the death of any of his children does not mean anything to him. This is enunciated thus:

When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother then have his supper and lie down to sleep. (17).

Against the background of the above, it becomes pertinent to note that Firdaus' father's attitude does not only show that his children are susceptible to danger, but also reveals that they may not have a secured future. This is so because, not just Firdaus, but her siblings and mother have become slaves in the hands of their father. His treatment of his wife, in particular during the period of demise of any of their children subtly reveals his preference for a particular sex. For instance, as revealed by Firdaus, "when one of his female children died", he "would eat his supper" and ask her mother to "wash his legs" (17); exhibiting an oppressive feeling of nonchalance. However, "when the child that died was a boy", he would beat her mother. This presupposes that each time a male child dies in the family, due to no fault of Firdaus' mother, but due to the negligence of her father; Firdaus' mother becomes a punching bag in the hands of her father.

Accordingly, in *Woman at Point Zero*, the feeling of the preference of one sex over the other pervades the entire story. While this feeling symbolically places one sex at an advantaged position, it, no doubt, dislocates the other sex, especially from the scheme of things. For instance, Firdaus does not only bear the feeling of being insecure in a society where men subjugate and dehumanise women, she also harbors the feeling of being dislocated and dislodged from the scheme of things. This bias is, therefore, what the 21st century woman is grappling with. She suffers neglect and marginalisation in all ramifications. Firdaus recounts her experience with her uncle when she asks to go with him to Cairo to study. His reply to her indicates marginalisation, as depicted below:

When my uncle would clamber into the train, and bid me farewell, I would cry and beg him to take me with him to Cairo. But my uncle would ask, 'what will you do in Cairo Firdaus?' And I would reply: 'I will go to El Azhar and study like you.' Then he would laugh and explain that El Azhar was only for men... (14-15).

Her uncle, having assumed a posture, less inhumane than her father, could still be seen as a microcosm of patriarchal cruelty. Due to the absence of a father-figure in her life, Firdaus does not only grow to love her uncle; but equally sees him as one who fills the vacuum created by the hostility of her father because he seems to pay more attention to her than her biological father. In her words, she affirms: "my

uncle was closer to me than my father” (18). Painfully, however, her ‘loving uncle’ harbours incestuous feelings towards her as he takes advantage of her innocence. This is exemplified in the following lines:

To knead the dough I squatted on the ground with thigh between my legs. At regular intervals...my *galabeya* often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle’s hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was a sound of a footstep at the entrance of our house, his hand would withdraw quickly. But whenever everything around lapsed into silence...his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence. (13).

It is worthy to note that the level of sexual molestation going on in the society is alarming, and because of the frailty of the girl child, she is usually abused even by close relatives. Through the eyes of Firdaus, therefore, the susceptibility of the girl child is projected. For, at a very tender age, she has not only been sexually molested, but also active. This is revealed as she compares her sexual experience between her uncle and her little friend (12). Her revelation of her uncle’s sexual escapades towards her is, indeed, shocking. She reveals that: “in fact, he was doing it even more” (13). It becomes worthy to note that her uncle, who is supposed to be a shield for her, turns out to be the one who eventually sets her on the path of prostitution.

More worrisome is the society’s treatment of the girl child. Early in life, she does not only pass through series of violations; she equally passes through the pain of genital mutilation. Firdaus, through a graphic description, recalls that her mother “...brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thigh. I cried all night” (12). The woman is mutilated both physically and psychologically. Okpara asserts that “while the woman’s body is mutilated for the benefit of the man, the male organ in the course of circumcision gets manicured for the reification of woman.” (193). This reveals that Female Genital Mutilation is at the detriment of women and concerned only with the satisfaction of men’s pleasure. This single act leaves a devastating effect in her life as she is unable to experience sexual pleasure because according to her, “a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return” (13).

Similarly, the girl-child, being considered a burden, is often married off early to men older than her father. For instance, at a tender age, Firdaus is forcefully married off to Sheik Mahmoud, a sixty-year old rich widower, by her uncle. This is orchestrated by her uncle's wife who complains that she eats twice as much as any of their children (36). The vulnerability of the woman is heightened, especially as she no longer feels safe in her matrimonial home. This is due to the domestic violence she suffers in the hands of her husband. Firdaus always gets a discouraging response from her uncle each time she reports her husband's dehumanising attitude against her. According to her, "...my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her" (46). She suffers the same violence in the hands of Bayoumi, a coffee shop owner who initially offers to help her. She recounts her agonizing experience in the hands of Bayoumi, thus: "He jumped up and slapped me on my face... His hand was big and strong and it was the heaviest slap I had ever received on my face... The next moment he hit me with his fist in the belly until I lost consciousness immediately (52).

Despite the fact that Firdaus is raped and sexually exploited by Bayoumi, he also allows his friends to molest her sexually. Even as a prostitute, Marzouk, a pimp, threatens Firdaus and often beats her (102). The varying agonizing experience of Firdaus as captured in *Woman at Point Zero* are clear indications of the vulnerability of the woman in the 21st century.

Examining Gender and Insecurity in Americanah

The African woman is constantly faced with the issues of gender inequality and insecurity, and a determination to resist these anomalies is usually met with oppositions from the society that has set standards for women, and views any woman who tries to go beyond those standards as a pariah. The fear of discrimination and crave for acceptance make some women conform to the gender roles that the society has placed on them. This conformist attitude becomes detrimental, as it often leads to insecurities and identity crises which can hinder the woman from fully exploring her potentials. Adichie, through her characters in

Americanah, examines the issues of gender and insecurity in Africa and America and the consequences of the aforementioned on the lives of the characters.

As a female child grows up in Africa, there is a constant reminder from her parents on the need for her to behave well so she can find a husband, keep her home and raise good children but rarely do these parents advise their male children on the need to imbibe good character so that they can become good husbands to their wives, keep their homes and nurture their children. The consequence of this disparity is that, it places the responsibility of keeping the home largely on the shoulders of the woman and makes her the architect of her misfortune in a situation where her marriage fails. This pressure does not only make the woman struggle to keep her home by all means, but also willing to lose her identity in the process. In *Americanah*, Obinze does not find his wife Kosi exciting because she wants to please him and every important person she comes across. At Chief's party, Kosi agrees with every suggestion about the school she should send her child to as if she does not have a mind of her own.

Similarly, Obinze is disgusted by the fact that Kosi wants to appear to be the perfect wife. In other words, he "is always struck by how important it was to her to be a wholesomely agreeable person, to have no sharp angles sticking out" (34). This attitude always exhibited by Kosi makes him compare her with his ex-girlfriend, Ifemelu who has a mind of her own and who is not afraid to speak for herself.

Within the context of the foregoing, it could be argued that Kosi represents the typical African woman who feels that the responsibility of keeping her home lies solely on her shoulders. All she demands from her husband is, thus, financial security. This is typical of the way the African society is structured: the woman is supposed to build her home, take care of her children and turn a blind eye to her husband's excesses, as long as he meets his financial obligations. However, in the event that he cannot or does not, she is expected to take up that responsibility as well. In trying to keep their homes, women can become enemies to one another and may be ready to destroy anyone they consider a competitor. This, therefore, heightens the level of insecurity that the woman faces.

There is a level of animosity that a woman develops against her fellow woman who is perceived to be 'over-protective' in the face of seeming danger. For instance,

Kosi sends Marie (a would be housemaid) away because she has a pack of condoms in her luggage. Her former employer's husband had, on several occasions, sexually molested her, and she has resolved to protect herself if she cannot help her situation. Kosi, however, does not feel any sympathy for her but states, "Please carry your bag and go ... can you believe the nonsense, darling? She came here with condoms and she actually opened her mouth to say that rubbish. Can you believe it? (42). When Obinze tries to make her realize that Marie is only trying to protect herself, she responds thus: "You feel sorry for her. You don't know these house girls. How can you feel sorry for her?" (42). Kosi exonerates Marie's former employer's husband as she sees Marie as the evil person who can also destroy her home if hired.

In the words of Acholonu (2011:217), "the African woman is trapped in the claws of taboos and restrictions that only help to propel male chauvinism". This quotation captures succinctly, the condition of most women in Africa, as they are somewhat supposed to be seen but not to be heard, so it becomes an affront when a woman is able to express how she feels and is, most times, termed as rude by men.

In *Americanah*, the protagonist, Ifemelu is not liked by many because she is able to air her views without fear. For instance, Kayode is of the view that "Ifemelu is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees. But Ginika is just a sweet girl" (73). From Kayode's view, it becomes obvious that ladies like Ifemelu may not be likable to some men who are opposed to women that are perceived to be assertive, but are more likely comfortable with a girl like Ginika who is passive. Ifemelu, thus, symbolises the woman who does not only represent independence, but also one who sees the need to break away from the manacle of insecurity imposed on the woman. This is so because she is constantly analysing Auntie Uju who has built her life around The General, who sees her only as a second option. Ifemelu does not seem to understand why Auntie Uju is so upset with everyone when The General cancels his planned trip to Lagos after all the preparations Auntie Uju has made. In her usual assertive nature, Ifemelu cautions Auntie Uju to channel her anger to The General. This propels her (Auntie Uju) to vent her anger on The General who, in turn, sends his apology in the symbol of a cake. Auntie Uju, however, keeps the cake in the freezer for several

months probably to serve as a constant reminder of the only time she was assertive to the General.

The General is killed in a plane crash and his family members threaten to throw Aunt Uju and her son, Dike, out of the apartment because she is not legally married to him. Aunt Uju has to pack the property in the house to secure a future for herself and her son. This grieves Ifemelu as she does not seem to understand why a woman should lose her identity to a man just because she is married to him. She is equally surprised that this attitude transcends Africa. For instance, Kimberly, her employer in America loses the little self esteem she has the moment her husband, Don, comes into the house, as he "would come home and sweep into the den, expecting that everything would stop because of him. And everything did stop...Kimberly, fluttery and ardent, would ask how his day was, scrambling to please, as though she could not believe that he had again come home to her" (198).

In another vein, Ifemelu loses many opportunities of getting a job because she looks and speaks a bit too confidently. For example, Kimberly did not hire Ifemelu initially because of her criticism of the depiction of violence in cartoons. She had affirmed this to Laura, Kimberly's sister. Laura sees this as an affront from an African employee who should count it a privilege that she is being interviewed in the first place. The need to be accepted in the society makes a lot of women less assertive, which often leads to identity crisis in women who are constantly caught in the mesh of trying to understand who they really are and who they are expected to be.

Many African women are faced with various forms of insecurity, these multifaceted forms of insecurity is equally examined in *Americanah*. Beneath every form of insecurity that every female has, is either a fear of not being liked or accepted by others, or the fear of losing what she has. Kosi, Obinze's wife is afraid that she may lose her husband, to a house girl whom it would never occur to him to seduce (42). To allay her fears, she attends prayer meetings at the "House of David Church which had a special prayer service for Keeping Your Husband"(43). Still entrapped by fear, Kosi dissociates herself from her friend, Elohoro, on the preconception that the latter who is single may snatch her husband from her. Kosi's attitude stems from the fear of losing the home she has built and the comfort she has with Obinze. The effect of this fear is that she simply transfers Obinze's duty to

act responsibly and be faithful to his marital vows to herself. This prompts Obinze to affirm to Kosi that nothing would happen except he permits it (43).

Due to insecurity, Kosi finds it difficult to confront her husband, Obinze, even though it is obvious he cheats on her, especially with his ex girlfriend, Ifemelu, whenever he visits Nigeria from America. Kosi pretends that she is not aware. When Obinze tells her he wants a divorce, she falls on her knees to beg him not to leave her and their daughter. Thereafter, she brings out a matching set of clothes for them to attend his friend's daughter's birthday as if Obinze did not just tell her he wanted a divorce. It is worthy to note that Kosi's attitude reemphasizes how the African woman is expected to act in a marriage. She is expected to tolerate a cheating husband and keep praying for him to change, whereas that same society frowns at a cheating wife and would not hesitate to support a man who throws his wife out of the house on account of adultery.

Aunty Uju is insecure about her hair that she decides to take off her braids when she is to go for an interview. She affirms that, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I should not wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional" (146). Ifemelu is confused about "the strange naiveté with which Aunty Uju had covered herself like a blanket"(146). Ifemelu keeps trying to understand why Aunty Uju "deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place" (146). That essential thing is confidence, Obinze seems to answer Ifemelu's question when he states "it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity"(147). Aunty Uju's insecurity stems from the fear of rejection.

The discrimination that the woman faces on the basis of her appearance is further revealed as Ifemelu, faced with the same situation when Curt was trying to secure a job for her, takes off her braids and straightens her hair because she wants the job. Curt is surprised she has to straighten her hair, a situation which he finds worrisome. This indicates that for the fear of rejection and discrimination, the woman is made to embrace a character that is alien to her. In other words, surviving becomes difficult for the woman unless she is ready to adopt the society's definition of her. It can be argued therefore, that the fear of rejection and the fear of not being liked are likely some of the causes of insecurity, and being the worse hit

by this malady, women need to learn to accept that they owe it to themselves to live above society's definition and perception of them.

Conclusion

Every literary text is a depiction of the writer's philosophy and ideology as he blends different metaphors and artistic artefacts in the bid to capture pressing social issues in a changing society. The 21st century is, therefore, a melting pot for the contemplations of varying pressing social issues, such as gender and insecurity. *Woman at Point Zero* (2007) and *Americanah* (2013) offer informed perspectives on these issues, especially as they concern the girl-child in the 21st century. The issue of insecurity is such that has assumed a proportional dimension, and as such, should be given adequate attention. And through literature, the subject of insecurity can be contemplated with a view to fashioning out ways through which the needed peace, even if not absolute, can be attained. The need for tolerance and respect for the woman should be upheld, this is because the girl-child/woman is susceptible to myriads of social issues that constantly expose her to all manner of dangers, ranging from sexual abuses, neglect and domestic violence among others.

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