

Nawal El Saadawi's *Two Women in One* and Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to compare and contrast Nawal El Saadawi's *Two Women in One* (1975) and Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982), with the view of examining their reconsideration of the gender relations inscribed in the dominant culture in their Egyptian and Nigerian societies respectively. The two novels are strikingly similar in almost every aspect of their narratives. The heroine in each of the two novels is a university student wrestling with the problems of identity and gender oppression. The heroine in each of the two novels is involved in a love relationship with a fellow university student, who either promotes or obstructs her quest for self-realization. Moreover, the titles of the two novels highlight the similar predicaments that the two heroines confront in the context of their patriarchal dominant cultures [1]. However, the study will show that, with the exception of their similar approaches to the female body, the two novels are significantly different in both their handling of gender injustice and their attempt to alter existing gender arrangements. The study takes as its basic thesis the assumption that the significant difference, as well as the similarity, between the two novels can be effectively articulated in the context of Raymond Williams' conception of cultural emergence. One thinks that an analysis that is grounded in Williams' robust cultural approach can yield a succinct description not only of the similarity between the two novels concerning their approaches to the female body, but also of the more substantial discrepancy between their approaches to gender injustice and female self-realization.

Of particular importance to the present study is the definition of cultural emergence that Raymond Williams presents in his “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent.” Williams defines emergent cultural elements as “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships [which] are continually being created.” Williams differentiates the cultural elements which are “emergent in the strict sense” from those which are “merely novel,” or “some new phase of the dominant culture.” He argues that the substantial aspect of emergent cultural elements is that they are “alternative or oppositional” (237) to the dominant culture. In other words, truly emergent cultural elements clash with and seek to replace their counterparts in the dominant culture.

Although Raymond Williams’ conception of cultural emergence does not treat of gender, it provides an analytical framework that can aptly define the approaches to the patriarchal dominant culture which both El Saadawi and Emecheta adopt in their two novels. Each of the two novelists develops a counter-culture in her novel, but the way in which each of them works out the relation between the counter-culture and the dominant culture imparts to each of the two novels a largely different character. In terms of the above-mentioned analytical framework, the two novels are similar in their presentation of a counter-culture that challenges and subverts the dominant culture when they handle the question of the subjugation of the female body, but they part company when they deal with the greater questions of gender injustice and female self-realization. Their similar approaches to the female body will be examined first.

The female body is viewed not simply as a biological fact, but rather as the target of varying ideological repression exercised by the patriarchal dominant culture. Catriona Mackenzie emphasizes the role of the dominant culture in the prescription of a certain conception of the female body, stating that “the female body is itself just a cultural artifact” (145). Susan Hekman argues that the cultural conceptualization of the female body must be oppressive, because it “has been defined by masculine language” (6). Therefore, some feminists relate cultural definitions of the female body to Foucault’s conception of power. As Aurelia Armstrong points out, “Foucault’s identification of the female body as the principal target of power has been used by feminists to analyze contemporary forms of social control over women’s bodies” (6). El Saadawi’s and Emecheta’s counter-cultures regarding the female body are prompted by this manipulation of the female body by the dominant culture.

In El Saadawi’s *Two Women in One*, the emergent culture takes the form of a counter-culture that El Saadawi develops in order to challenge the repressive manipulation of the female body by the dominant culture. This counter-culture manifests itself in the heroine’s rebellious body movement and posture. The heroine, Bahiah Shaheen, is an eighteen-year-old medical student, whose defiant body movement and posture distinguish her from all other female students. Her posture subverts dominant cultural norms. She often stands with “her right foot on the edge of the marble table and her left foot on the floor, a posture unbecoming for a woman.” Bahiah’s gait is equally defiant. Unlike the other female students, she wears trousers, so that she can “walk firmly, swinging her legs freely and striding out confidently.” But the body movement of the other female students betrays the heavy-handed role of the oppressive discipline of the dominant culture. They walk with “their feet shuffling along while legs and knees remained clamped, as if they were pressing their thighs together to protect something they were afraid might fall” (7). This strictly disciplined body movement points to the manipulation of the dominant culture that Bahiah’s emergent attitude seeks to subvert.

Therefore, Bahiah's body movement and that of the other girls are more often than not portrayed in oppositional terms. In other words, Bahiah's gait, which reflects cultural emergence, is set in stark contrast to the other girls' body movement, which betrays the oppression of the dominant culture. Bahiah herself is aware of this contrast. So, when Bahiah "saw the other female students walking with their strange mechanical gait, their legs held tightly together, she realized that they belonged to one species and she to another" (33). Bahiah cannot in any way tolerate the uniformity of the other girls' reptilian body movement, because she embodies an alternative to the female-restricting dominant culture that manifests itself in their imprisoned bodies.

This oppositional relation is essential for a proper understanding of Bahiah's negative view of the other girls, which is often misinterpreted. For instance, Georges Tarabishi, El Saadawi's most celebrated critic, provides a groundless evaluation of Bahiah's negative attitude towards the other girls, because he does not take into consideration the emergent cultural element that Bahiah introduces. Tarabishi claims that Bahiah has "an undying hatred for members of [her] own sex" (71). In fact, Bahiah's "undying hatred" is not for the other girls, but rather for the culture that cripples them. Bahiah's criticism of their subdued body movement is even tinged with her far-reaching sympathy for them, because she regards them as victims of certain crippling elements of the dominant culture that should be changed. The idea of victimization is emphasized by El Saadawi herself, who dedicates the novel to young men and women. In her dedication, she tells both young men and young women that, in their relation to the dominant culture, they are like the burgeoning flowers which are "assaulted by swarms of bees that suck their petals." She warns them that "if they do not fight back, they will be destroyed" (5).

El Saadawi's counsel in the above-quoted dedication explains the tense relation between Bahiah and her mother, who is one of the chief agents of the disciplinary power of the dominant culture in the novel [2]. Armstrong underlines the objective of disciplinary power with regard to the body, and argues that "disciplinary practices subject bodily activities to a process of constant surveillance and examination that enables a continuous and pervasive control of individual conduct" (2). When applied to the female body in a certain cultural context, this view shows that the disciplinary power of the dominant culture turns into a manipulative power that strangles authentic female existence. In view of the nature of the emergent culture that Bahiah introduces, the relation between Bahiah and her mother becomes a struggle between emergent and dominant cultural elements for the female body.

Therefore, Bahiah's rebellious, or alternative, body movement is persistently repressed by her mother. Bahiah's mother regards Bahiah's body movement as a violation of the social norms of being a female. So, when Bahiah stands putting one foot on a chair or a table, her mother censures her severely: "This is disgraceful, Bahiah.... Can't you see how your girl friends stand?" (77). Bahiah's mother is also determined to impose the norms of the dominant culture on Bahiah's gait. She insists that Bahiah should "tense the muscles of her legs, bring her thighs tightly together, and walk...with that familiar girl's gait: legs bound together, barely separated from one another" (76). But Bahiah's body movement is not permanently conditioned by the disciplinary pressure her mother puts on her, as she observes the norms of socially acceptable body movement only when she is under her mother's surveillance.

However, Bahiah's commitment to a personal, body-related emergent culture as against the dominant culture does not blind her to the power of the body-related dominant culture. Her

realization of the power of the dominant culture in this regard breeds within her a sense of insecurity and, occasionally, an inclination towards exaggerated reactions. Her sense of insecurity on account of her confrontation with the body-related dominant culture is translated into visions of threats to her body. She is sometimes seized with the haunting fear that some “mythical god” would grasp her body with his hand, and that “when he opened his hand [her body] would be gone” (10). She also feels at times that the threat has already penetrated her body and destroyed it by robbing it of its authentic existence. When under the influence of this fear, she feels “as if a germ lived inside her, eating her body away cautiously and quietly, gradually destroying it” (22). In her occasional exaggerated reactions to what she terms “the tragedy of her own body” (11), she betrays a desire “to dissolve to the last atom so that she would be liberated and disembodied and weightless, like a free spirit hovering without constraints” (83). These tribulations are the price she has to pay in consequence of her adherence to her body-liberating emergent culture that is oppositional to the body-restricting dominant culture.

Like Bahiah, Nko, the heroine of *Double Yoke*, struggles against what she regards as an oppressive conception of the female body that the dominant culture has perpetuated. Nko and her lover, Ete Kamba, are Nigerian university students, whose relationship brings into focus the conflict between the dominant and emergent cultures concerning the female body. This means that, in *Double Yoke*, Nko’s lover takes on the role of the dominant culture bearer that Bahiah’s mother plays in *Two Women in One*. Katherine Frank, a prominent critic of the African novel, fails to recognize this focal point in *Double Yoke*, probably because of her desire to emphasize symmetry in selected novels by African women writers. Frank argues that in “*One is Enough*, *Destination Biafra*, and *Double Yoke*, the heroines’ mothers...embody traditional African values” (16). But this judgment does not apply to *Double Yoke*, because Emecheta gives this role to the heroine’s lover, Ete Kamba. In *Double Yoke*, traditional values in their relation to the female body manifest themselves in Ete Kamba’s oppressive view of the heroine’s virginity. Like Bahiah’s body movement, Nko’s virginity becomes a cultural construct rather than a physical element. Therefore, the bitter conflict between Ete and Nko over the question of virginity is in reality a clash between the dominant culture and the emergent culture embodied in Ete and Nko respectively.

Nko’s rebellious reaction to Ete’s obsessive doubts about her virginity explains the nature of this clash. Ete is deeply in love with Nko, and they plan to marry when they are qualified. Nko submits one night to his desperate desire for making love. Afterwards, he is haunted by the suspicion that Nko may not have been a virgin. The sixth chapter of the novel, which is entitled “Quest for Virginity,” portrays Ete’s desperate attempt to find out the truth about Nko’s virginity, and to extract from Nko a reassuring answer; but she refuses to tell him that she was a virgin when they first made love. He appeals to her desperately: “Swear that you are a virgin”; but her reply does not comfort him: “I swear to nothing” (57). One word from Nko could put an end to Ete’s trouble and to the soul-rending conflict between them, but she withholds it, because she refuses to bow down to the dominant culture’s conception of the female body that Ete’s quest stands for.

In fact, Nko not only challenges this conception, but she also subverts it, because she considers it a channel of male oppression. The relation between virginity and the exercise of oppressive male power is therefore emphasized when Ete’s view of the significance of virginity is laid out. He attaches great importance to virginity because he wants to be “the first of all men, taking possession, conquering his partner whose blood would have washed them both almost like a living

sacrifice” (61). As Katherine Frank observes, what troubles Ete is that Nko refuses to reassure him about her virginity, “thereby robbing him of the spoils of his victory over her” (24). Nko mocks Ete’s view; she tells Nwaizu, her roommate, sarcastically that Ete “wanted enough blood to float his whole village” (154). Nko’s unflinching stance is the natural reaction of the emergent culture she embodies to the subjugation of the female body inscribed in the dominant culture. It is this stance which allies Nko with Bahiah Shaheen; they both embrace a body-related emergent culture that is oppositional to the dominant culture’s oppressive conception of the female body.

However, persistent and consistent adherence to cultural emergence in its strict sense is the factor that divides Nko and Bahiah when they approach the fundamental arena of gender injustice, particularly female identity and the institution of marriage. Nko’s approach to female identity and marriage, unlike Bahiah’s, dilutes her emergent attitude towards the oppressive conception of the female body inscribed in the dominant culture. Ete Kamba embraces the traditional, oppressive conception of marriage inscribed in the dominant culture, and all that Nko seeks to achieve is to reconcile it with her own. One regards as completely groundless Katherine Frank’s claim that in Nko’s relationship with Ete Kamba “there is no possibility of a compromise or even truce with the enemy” (15). In fact, what Nko aspires after in this regard is, at best, a compromise. She never presents her self-fulfilling conception of marriage as an alternative to that of the dominant culture.

The traditional conception of marriage, which Ete Kamba embraces, represents entrenched sexism. It dehumanizes and objectifies women. When Ete thinks about marriage, he makes it clear that he wants “a woman he would like to own and possess” (62). He would discipline his prospective wife by beating her, because he would have “little patience in talking her out of her evil ways” (59). He is not ready to accept a wife who “would like to know all the reasons behind his orders” (124). Nko, who is shocked by the depersonalization of women inscribed in this traditional conception of marriage, complains to Ete: “I want you as you are, as against your wanting me as you think I ought to be” (62). But he does not take her complaint seriously, because he believes that “women are not always what they seem” (49). Ete remains adamant in refusing Nko’s appeal for change, because he is reassured by the traditional notion that “a woman who is not married is better off dead” (63). So, he is confident that Nko must submit in the end.

Ete’s unrelenting conception of marriage is significantly related to his view of his mother as a model of wifehood. This points not only to his firmly traditional stance, but also to the difficulty of change. He expects all women to be like his own mother, who willingly merges herself into her husband. What he likes in his mother as a wife is that she is “the type who took pride not in herself but in her man. The type who would always obey her man... even if he commanded her to walk through fire, the type who never questioned” (37). Therefore, he is startled whenever Nko does not seem to fit in with the traditional model of wifehood that his own mother represents. He then says desperately to Nko: “I wish you were more like my mother” (63). In fact, Ete resists change, and continues to view his marriage in terms of the traditional conception of marriage that he strongly embraces. Whenever he thinks of marrying Nko, he emphasizes the qualities of a good wife in terms of this conception. He insists that a good wife should be “a very quiet and submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother” (26). Thus, Ete embodies one of the most oppressive and aggressive aspects of the patriarchal dominant culture.

However, Nko does not present her somewhat different and self-fulfilling conception of marriage as an alternative. In other words, the perpetuation of the traditional conception of

marriage inscribed in the dominant culture is not seriously challenged by Nko's relatively different view of marriage as an institution that should be reconstructed. Rather, she aspires to carry a double yoke: the old yoke of a traditional wife and the new yoke of self-realization.

Nko's failure to present or stick to an emergent view that can be an alternative to Ete's oppressive conception of marriage is attributable to the fact that she does not possess a fully free spirit. She seems to suffer from the deficiency that George Eliot aptly describes in her *Middlemarch* as "spots of commonness" [3]. In other words, she cannot get out of the commonplace when she envisages identity and marriage. The following extract, which lays out Nko's vision of her marriage, betrays her firmly normalized "spots of commonness":

She would work hard at her studies and she was going to get not just a degree, but a good one. Then she would marry Ete Kamba and they would have six children....

The only fly in the ointment was the new self she was beginning to acquire. Previously she would let Ete Kamba have his own way...But now, she was beginning to ask questions, to ask him to give her his reasons for some of his actions. She hated herself after such questioning; she knew that Ete Kamba did not like it, and many a time she would promise herself never to do it again. "For what is a woman if after her degrees...she is not married?" (92-93)

Nko's acquiescent view in the above-quoted passage betrays her desire to adjust herself to, and probably her internalization of, the traditional conception of marriage that Ete Kamba embraces. Linda Osborne's observation that Nko wants "a Husband as well, but not one who will govern her behavior" (714) is, therefore, inaccurate.

However, the conflict between Nko and Ete Kamba is inevitable, because she insists on having an education that is equal, if not superior, to Ete's. But this kind of education does not square with Ete's manipulative conception of his wife; he wants his wife's education to be less than his own, "otherwise they would start talking on the same level" (26). The problem confronting Nko is thus twofold. It stems not only from the difficulty of reconciling her dream of becoming an academician with Ete's traditional conception of marriage that she readily accepts, but also from the difficulty of obtaining Ete's approval on that account. Nko does not resolve this twofold problem by herself, but, rather, she relies on the help of others to achieve that purpose.

In order to resolve the first part of the problem, Nko tries to enlist her mother's support and experience. The following vehement appeal to her mother for help is a case in point: "Oh mother, I want to have both worlds, I want to be an academician and I want to be a quiet nice and obedient wife, the type you all want me to be. I want the two, mother. Oh please mother, help me." Her mother's advice sounds cautionary: "You are under a double yoke. So you need a stronger shoulder with which to carry it" (94). Nko insists, in spite of her mother's warning, that she should be both an academician and a subservient wife. Yet, Emecheta does not illustrate how Nko can meet the claims of these two largely conflicting roles. It seems that Nko decides to bear a "double yoke" that is in reality unbearable.

Nko does not resolve even the second part of the problem, which is Ete's opposition. It invites the mediation of Miss Bulewao, Ete's creative writing teacher at the University of Calabar. Miss

Bulewao learns of the impasse facing the relationship between Ete and Nko. She holds Ete responsible for the problem, because he is not ready to offer any concessions. She teaches him how to be a modern African man, who can embrace the principles of tolerance and flexibility in his relationship with his prospective wife. Miss Bulewao claims that Nko has resolved the conflict between tradition and modernity; then she urges Ete to follow Nko's example and do the same thing in order to be a modern African man. She thus tries to undermine Ete's resistance by emphasizing Nko's superiority: "Nko is already a modern African lady, but you are still lagging...oh, so far, far behind." She asks him a challenging question: "Are you strong enough to be a modern African man?" (162). Miss Bulewao's effort yields the desired result, as Ete and Nko are reconciled. But this development does not resolve the inevitable clash between the conflicting roles embedded in the "double yoke" that Nko aspires to carry.

Unlike Nko, Bahiah Shaheen depends on her own resources and adheres to a view of female identity and marriage that is fully in keeping with cultural emergence. She presents her self-fulfilling view of marriage as an alternative to the sexist one inscribed in the dominant culture. The course that Bahiah's actions take in this respect reflects El Saadawi's view that "mental health does not mean adopting and adjusting to the world and its social systems. Indeed, art is a kind of revolt against the injustice of these very societies" ("El Saadawi's Reply," 193). In a general sense, Bahiah's endeavour serves, as Diana Royer observes, El Saadawi's objective of "altering a patriarchal society that oppresses both men and women" (9). In fact, Bahiah's emergent attitude, unlike Nko's reconciliatory one, represents a channel of real and substantial change in a social context that perpetuates what Fedwa Multi-Douglas terms "gender obsessions" (16). In a more specific sense, Bahiah, unlike Nko, rebels against the social disciplines of femininity and subservience that clash with her authentic existence, and threaten to perpetuate her condition as "two women in one."

Therefore, Bahiah, unlike Nko, does not aspire to carry a "double yoke." She does not attempt to adjust her authentic existence to the gender oppression of the dominant culture. On the contrary, she aspires to subvert her "twoness" by sloughing off the false identity that the dominant culture seeks to impose on her. This causes her to view her condition in terms of a binary opposition based on authentic/inauthentic existence. The binary opposition defines her experience of gender injustice, which manifests itself basically in her experience of her name and of marriage.

Bahiah's name is shown to reflect gender injustice, because it is tied up with an oppressive conception of femininity. As Toril Moi points out, femininity is a social construct in terms of which "patriarchy has developed a whole series of feminine characteristics [such as] sweetness, modesty, subservience [and] humility" (109). The oppression of this construct lies in, Moi argues, "imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women" (108). This view of femininity can explain Bahiah's attitude towards her name. Bahiah mistrusts her name, and the reason is the femininity-related conditioning it triggers. Tarabishi misjudges Bahiah's motive when he attributes her mistrust of her name to what he regards as her feeling that "the name will imprison her within the confines of an independent and specific being" (81). In fact, this misjudgment distorts the course of Bahiah's experience. Bahiah has strong misgivings about her name, not because it gives her "an independent and specific being," but, rather, because it is associated with a social conception of femininity that robs her of independent being.

Therefore, Bahiah experiences the dread of social leveling whenever her name is pronounced, especially by those who exercise disciplinary power over her. Bahiah's father plays a role in this regard, which is as important as that which her mother plays in relation to Bahiah's body. Bahiah realizes that her father accentuates her self-division by his insistence that she should be cast in the mould of femininity of the dominant culture. Consequently, she feels that "her father stood like a vast high barrier between her and her real self" (27). This role defines Bahiah's experience of her name when her father calls it out. When her father calls out her name, Bahiah feels that "her father's voice rang in her ear like a shot, like the sole voice of truth. It made her realize that she was Bahiah Shaheen, the hard-working, well-behaved medical student" (75). Bahiah's self-division on account of the association between her name and the social conception of femininity dates back to her childhood years. When she reminisces about the early period of her life, what comes most vividly to her mind is that "they used to hit [her] on account of someone else called Bahiah Shaheen, who was obedient and well-behaved" (41). It is obvious that Bahiah attempts to distance herself from her name in its relation to the social conception of femininity that alienates her from her real self.

As a result, Bahiah tends to disown her name or, at least, to ignore it. She more often than not refuses to recognize her name when it is called out, because she has a growing understanding "confirming to her that she was definitely not Bahiah Shaheen" (13). For instance, when Bahiah is arrested for her participation in nationalist student demonstrations, she does not recognize her name when the police officer calls it out:

The officer opened a large book the size of his desk top and his voice rang out: 'Bahiah Shaheen!'

She realized he was calling someone else, so she did not reply. But he called out once more, still louder: 'Bahiah Shaheen!'

She looked around, searching among the faces for someone called Bahiah Shaheen. (92-93)

Bahiah's attitude towards her name as illustrated in the above-quoted passage can only be explained in terms of the nexus between her name and social leveling. She disowns her name because, being associated with the social construct of femininity, it perpetuates her "twoness," or her self-division.

However, Bahiah is ready to claim her name back when it is divorced from the conception of femininity inscribed in the dominant culture. This dissociation takes place, for instance, when Bahiah is acquainted with Saleem, a fellow-medical student who views her as a unique and independent human being. He distances Bahiah from the leveling of the dominant culture; so, Bahiah's experience of her name when Saleem calls it out is completely different:

'Hello, Bahiah.'

His voice surprised her. The name 'Bahiah' had acquired great intimacy. It was unlike any other Bahiah's name. It was hers to the exclusion of millions, she with her special being. (62)

As the above quotation illustrates, the dialogic relation between Saleem's voice and the voice of Bahiah's father highlights the opposition between the emergent and dominant cultures on the ground of Bahiah's identity, and explains the context of Bahiah's changing attitude towards her name. Bahiah rebels, not against her name per se, but rather against the standard of femininity attached to it, which gives rise to self-division. Bahiah cannot accept Nko's compromise concerning the conception of femininity inscribed in the dominant culture. Unlike Nko, she seeks to replace this arbitrary conception with the attributes of her authentic existence.

Cultural emergence also defines Bahiah's experience of marriage. The above-mentioned binary opposition underlies her view and experience of marriage. Bahiah struggles to replace her arranged marriage with a relationship on her own terms. While the former is in keeping with the dominant culture, the latter is an expression of Bahiah's real self. Therefore, the two relationships are portrayed in terms that suggest death and life respectively.

Bahiah's father forces her into an arranged marriage that Bahiah regards as tantamount to death. Since this marriage marks the death of her free will, Bahiah considers it a conspiracy woven against her and a blow dealt to her by fate, which fades into the image of her father. She feels that "she was in the grip of fate," and that "fate was her father" (96). The marriage in this light means the death of Bahiah's free will and real identity. Therefore, death imagery is extensively used in portraying the wedding:

Her white silk dress stretched tightly over her chest, smothering her breasts. A long tail folded like a coffin around her bottom and legs...the bridal stage, surrounded by roses, looked like the grave of the Unknown Soldier. (100)

The death of Bahiah's real identity, which is effectively hammered out in the above quotation particularly by the resemblance between the bridal stage and the grave of the Unknown Soldier, is further emphasized when her father hands her over to her husband. In a manner that recalls Emecheta's description of the fate of the heroine of *The Slave Girl* [4], El Saadawi shows that Bahiah's arranged marriage is simply a change of masters:

At the door of the new flat, the father handed over his property to the bridegroom: Bahiah Shaheen passed from the hands of Muhammad Shaheen into the hands of Muhammad Yaseen. (100)

However, Bahiah is unlike Emecheta's heroine, who often accepts with resignation the gender injustice of the dominant culture. Bahiah's emergent attitude re-asserts itself and challenges the dominant culture, which is embodied in the traditional marriage. In a highly suggestive move, Bahiah, on her wedding night, "kicked [her husband] in the stomach and he fell to the floor" (101). The act of "kicking" marks Bahiah's rejection of the dominant culture; and her subsequent flight from her husband's house highlights her escape from the prison of that culture.

Moreover, while Nko adjusts her identity to the dominant culture's conception of marriage, Bahiah works out an alternative to the traditional marriage she rejects. The alternative is a relationship on her own terms as against the terms of the dominant culture. In this sense, Bahiah's relationship with Saleem Ibraheem is radically different from Nko's relationship with Ete Kamba.

Bahiah's relationship represents the freedom she seeks, but Nko's reflects the gender injustice that she reconciles herself to.

Therefore, Saleem is shown to be the antithesis of Ete Kamba in terms of their views of their relationships with their prospective wives. While Ete Kamba views his relationship with Nko through the standards of the dominant culture to which Nko has to conform, Saleem sees Bahiah as a unique individual whose value resides in her specific being and not in her conformity to social standards. When Bahiah meets Saleem for the first time, she is impressed by the fact that he, unlike others, can see her as an individual:

When his eyes moved in front of hers, she felt as if he were seeing her. It was the first time she had ever been seen by any eyes other than her own....In the street, on the tram or at college, she realized that eyes were incapable of seeing her or distinguishing her from thousands of others, that she was lost among the sameness of bodies. (36)

All through their relationship, Saleem is associated in Bahiah's mind with his unprecedented ability to "see" her. Through this relationship, consequently, Bahiah avoids the leveling of the dominant culture and comes into contact with her real self. Therefore, his ability to "see" her is shown to be accompanied by her own ability to see "her real self in his eyes" (97). In other words, he speaks to Bahiah's real self that has been struggling for recognition and actualization.

Hence, Bahiah's relationship with Saleem, brief as it is, gives an immense impetus to her commitment to her emergent attitude. Shortly after he establishes his relationship with Bahiah, Saleem is imprisoned for his nationalist activities; but, nevertheless, the brief relationship gives Bahiah the key to selfhood [5]. Bahiah's final decision, which brings the novel to its close, confirms her cultural emergence, her unshakable determination to dismantle the gender injustice of the dominant culture:

She was sure that she would not plunge into the abyss. She would not be Bahiah Shaheen, would not return to the ordinary faces, would not sink into the sea of similar bodies or tumble into the grave of ordinary life. (124)

Bahiah's final resolution is crucially different from Nko's compromise. Nko's compromise might be described in Raymond Williams' words as, at best, "some new phase of the dominant culture." It might be more pragmatic; yet, it is tantamount to capitulation. But Bahiah's full-fledged cultural emergence, though more exacting in terms of effort and suffering, is of crucial importance to the progress towards substantial cultural change.

Notes

[1] The title of Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Two Women in One*, sums up the plight of the heroine, Bahiah Shaheen. She is split up into her false identity that is imposed on her by the dominant culture, and her authentic identity that she struggles to realize. The title of Buchi Emecheta's novel, *Double Yoke*, suggests a similar condition. The heroine of *Double Yoke*, Nko, is consumed by the tension between the traditional role that the dominant culture prescribes for her and the self-fulfilling role that she struggles to bring into being.

[2] The oppressive power of the dominant culture is more pervasive in *Two Women in One*. Bahiah's parents and relatives are agents of this power. Family power even fades into the repressive state apparatus. Thus, Bahiah's father is associated in her mind with the police. Bahiah has an intensifying feeling that "the house had become a prison, her father a guard" (58-59). Bahiah draws a picture of her father, and she gives him the guise of the policeman who used to terrify her when she was young; she gives him "two red eyes and a black handlebar moustache, huge hands and fingers coiled round a long stick" (27). When Bahiah is arrested for her participation in nationalist student demonstrations, her father pays a ten-pound bail and takes her home; she then feels "as if she had been arrested again, but this time by another kind of police" (94).

[3] In her *Middlemarch*, George Eliot describes the weakness of Lydgate as residing in his "spots of commonness." As Eliot points out, Lydgate's "spots of commonness" detract from his intellectual brilliance:

Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intentions and sympathy, were half of them much as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment." (179)

One thinks that Nko has a similar weakness, which causes her to accept, like ordinary women, the oppressive attributes of a good wife inscribed in the dominant culture. Both Lydgate and Nko, in spite of their distinction of mind and ambition, fail to get out of the commonplace field of action and choice.

[4] In Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Slave Girl*, the marriage of the heroine, Ojebeta, is portrayed in terms of slavery. When Ojebeta moves to the house of her husband, Jacob, Emecheta describes the marriage in the following terms: "Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters" (179). This is strikingly similar to El Saadawi's description of Bahiah's arranged marriage.

[5] When they are acquainted, Saleem takes from his pocket the key to his flat and gives it to Bahiah. The key becomes a symbol of the new vista of self-realization opened up to Bahiah by the establishment of her relationship with Saleem. To Bahiah, the key "looked like the key to any other door. But she knew that objects change when feelings do. A little metal key can suddenly become magic" (53). Bahiah feels that the key would bring her into contact with her real self: "it would mean that she was Bahiah Shaheen no longer, that she had become that other stronger being" (57).

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