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Contending Patriarchy, Confronting Civilization: The Mother as the Doughty Rebel in Driss Chraibi's *Mother Comes of Age*

Dr. Asha S.

Assistant Professor,
Department of English & Comparative Literature,
Central University of Kerala,
Post Vidyannagar, Kasaragod,
Kerala, India.

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Abstract:

Driss Chraibi, a 20th century Francophone Moroccan novelist, is critical of both Islamic and Occidental cultures in his novels. The patriarchal feudal traditions of Morocco along with the dehumanization accompanying the material progress of modern Parisian life become the targets of his attack. This paper focuses on Chraibi's novel *Mother Comes of Age* (1972), which charts the journey of a Mother (with the assistance of her two sons) from total seclusion and ignorance to knowledge and emancipation. In the process, the Mother has to contend not only patriarchy but also the Islamic civilization, which keeps its women secluded and subjugated and the colonial leadership, which with its imperialist ambitions, is oblivious and detrimental to the interests of the Moroccan women, children and the poor. The paper also argues that as a Francophone novelist, schooled in the French tradition, Chraibi does not completely escape West fixation in the pattern of liberation he charts out for his female protagonist.

Keywords: Maghrebi, patriarchy, civilization, Mother, DrissChraibi

The Islamic civilization, unlike its Western counterpart, has been portrayed in mainstream literature and cinema as one that curtails/abrogates the rights of women, confines them to the four walls of the home, and relegates them to a position secondary to the male. The liberation of the Muslim woman from the clutches of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy has been the professed agenda of the colonial enterprise. The sinister politics of this 'colonial feminism', which continues into the post 9/11 years, has been exposed by postcolonial and feminist theorists like Leila Ahmed, Mohja Kahf, Reina Lewis, Chandra Mohanty and others. Popular western educated writers from Muslim cultures – such as Azar Nafisi, Khaled Hosseini, Tahar Ben Jhelloun and Nawal el Saadawi others – are also taken to task by postcolonial critics like Hamid Dabashi, Amal Amireh, Geoffrey Nash, Roksana Bahramitash and Fatima Keshavarz for their misrepresentation/stereotyping of Muslim cultures and the Western line of modernity they envisage for Muslim women. While this remains a truth, patriarchal oppression and confinement (which has little to do with religious stipulations) are hard realities the Muslim woman has to contend with in her struggle towards self-realization. The Moroccan writer Driss Chraibi becomes significant in this respect in that he is critical both of Islamic and western societies in his novels such as *The Simple Past* (1952), *The Butts* (1955), *The Crowd* (1961) and *Mother Comes of Age* (1972). It must also be said to Chraibi's credit

that he charts not just the seclusion, deprivation and suppression but the doughty struggle for emancipation of the Muslim woman.

The region of Maghreb – comprising Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria – has produced several Francophone writers such as Abdel Kader, Fatima Mernissi, Driss Chraïbi, Mohamed Dib, Meddeb and Abdullah Laroui. Driss Chraïbi was a Francophone (also considered Francophile) Moroccan novelist, who, though tutored in the French school and attuned to French culture, trains his guns against both the oppressive patriarchal, feudal traditions of Morocco and against the dehumanisation accompanying the material comforts and technological advances of 20th century Parisian life. The choice of French (re-appropriated, of course) over Arabic appears to suit a writer who is not fully at ease either with his Arab or French identity. But the Maghrebi writer continuing to use French in the postcolonial era can never be anything more than, in Driss Chraïbi's own words, "a little monkey, dressed in a European style" (Bahri 65). Chraïbi is aware of the hybridized identity of Francophone writers like him, who are more well-received in the West, than in their own country and culture. The biculturalism that characterises Chraïbi's fictional characters has autobiographical echoes, created as they are by a writer, who himself inhabited dual cultural/linguistic locations.

Mother Comes of Age (1984), which belongs to the later phase of Chraïbi's prolific literary career, has a two-part structure, each unfolding through the perspective of each of the two sons of the Mother and is set in the years preceding the Second World War. The novel can be read as a counterpoint to his first novel *La Passé Simple (The Simple Past)*, published in 1954, wherein the tyrannised, subjugated, silenced and secluded mother figure seeks refuge in suicide, from the oppressive Islamic traditions and the patriarchal repressions of her husband. It charts the journey of the Mother from naivete to knowledge, from confinement and ignorance to freedom and exploration. The journey, which begins in her mid-thirties, is set in motion by her two sons, Nagib and Junior. Cast in the bildungsroman mode, the novel reverses the parent-child roles – a reversal which reaches its culmination in the scene where the son rocks the mother to sleep. In her new birth, new awakening, she emerges younger than her own children.

Orphaned at six months and married at 13, Mother was never taught anything. In the early part of the novel, Junior, describes her as

a happy child who had never gone beyond an inchoate and untainted adolescence and would never become an adult; no matter what the events, and that despite the fact that beyond the door, the History of man and civilizations was undergoing mutations (Chraïbi 23).

Unlettered and confined to the home as she was, she was an indefatigable home-maker, an avid producer of indigenous goods, such as toothpaste made of charcoal ashes and olive oil concocted in an earthen cooking pot, lip rouge made by grinding poppy petals in rose water and clothes made from the wool of sheep she herself shears with a pair of Japanese scissors, one of "the two products of civilization" she had come face to face with, the other being a sewing machine. Crude as her methods of production and the products of her labour be, she comes off as a rich fund of traditional knowledge and wisdom. A staunch custodian of traditional beliefs and practices, she insists on her sons washing out their mouths once they

get back from school “to cleanse away the remnants of the French language” they had picked up” (Chraibi20).

The early chapters of the novel humorously depict the infantile mental and intellectual state of the mother. She greets the installation of electricity with child-like joy and wonder. Her children are at a loss trying to explain to her the working of electricity. The radio can best be understood by her as a box that talks by means of magic. Convinced that it is a living organism, she christens the radio Monsieur Kteu and even tries to feed him! She heats the electric iron on the brazier and hangs it up by the cord after use. She stands overawed at the technological prowess of the European:

Those Europeans certainly do have heads on their shoulders. They have provided for everything, two holes and two prongs and a cord to hang it up by when you’ve finished with it” (Chraibi42).

In a novel set in the colonial era of the Maghreb region (Morocco remained a French Protectorate from 1912 till 1956), the infantile state of the adult protagonist may be perceived as an allegory of the docile, infantilised condition of the colonised. The metaphor of the child is continued in the image of the doll, which typifies the circumscribed world and mummified existence of the mother in the colonised land. “Doll herself, she had been strangled by the law and by her duty” (Chraibi54). The blurring of personal-civilizational boundaries is imperative in a novel set in a period of cultural flux and civilizational conflict. More than the saga of an individual’s transformation, the novel resonates with the struggles, anxieties, hopes and triumphs of a centuries-old civilization. The English translation of the title in fact misses this emphasis on civilization in the original French title *La Civilisation, Ma Mère!* (*The Civilization, My Mother*).

What the title figure feels stifled by is only fleetingly referred to in the novel. In fact, the feeling of curtailment is itself the product of the new awakening. Otherwise the Mother was a contented figure, happily fulfilling her expected roles of wife and mother. The father is a benevolent dictator in place of the cruel patriarch of Draïbi’s first novel. He was religiously following the dictates of his civilization in secluding his wife within the four walls of the home.

The man, pickled in the brine of his times, in its morality and sense of honour, had done nothing more than apply the letter of the law. Religiously (Chraibi54).

The sons extend the boundaries of their Mother’s physical space by taking her out into the street (which later becomes the Anti-school for Nagib, who gives up formal schooling), to the park, a dance, a fair and the cinema, where her presence makes the audience jump to their feet en masse for “women never came to a movie” (Chraibi59). The exhilaration of moving out is accompanied by trepidation - the trauma of breaking free from the past, compounded by the uncertainty about the future. “Freedom is a bitter thing ... It brings suffering in its wake” (Chraibi74). The son rocks the Mother to sleep, providing the much-needed reassurance to her fractured self, in its groping after freedom and identity. The expansion of the mental horizon follows with the Mother being tutored in lessons of history, geography, literature and politics. The process of moving out into new spaces – physical, mental, intellectual, cultural - is slow and agonised, but rewarding.

The second part of the novel, narrated by Nagib (after Junior leaving for France for medical studies), shows the Mother plunging into larger political and social causes. Sewing together the flags of every democratic country, she makes an enormous, myriad-coloured flag, holding which she heads an anti-war demonstration, demanding audience with General Charles de Gaulle, the chief executive of France.

Tell him that there aren't only men on this earth. There are women too, and nobody consulted us. We exist and we are here as anyone can see (Chraïbi87).

The anti-war demonstration shades into anti-colonial and anti-imperialist protest. "And we don't want any more intermediaries or people who think for us and act for us ... we have two arms, two legs and our thirtytwo teeth. We can't say the same of the men who are leading us" (Chraïbi89). The demonstration marks the release of pent up energies of the multitude of women trammelled by tradition and orthodox patriarchy.

They had waited all their lives, already overburdened with the waiting of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers with the patience of enough centuries to evaporate the Atlantic Ocean as well as their passive fate. They hungered and thirsted for an existence by and for themselves and not dependent on others (Chraïbi90).

The confrontation with father follows soon after. Mother's theatrical outburst calls to mind Ibsen's Nora. What marks the final stage in her journey to freedom and selfhood is her rejection of her son's offer of protection. Janice Spleth brings out the parallels between the two scenes of the Mother's confrontation, the first with General de Gaulle and then with her husband.

Chraïbi is setting up a parallel here between Mother's situation as a cloistered wife and her status as colonial subject, a parallel that is strikingly confirmed when de Gaulle at last appears, and Mother is surprised to note that he looks exactly like Father (84).

Mother rejects the paternalism of her husband, her son and the colonial administrator.

As a Maghrebi novelist, Chraïbi's novels show an abiding engagement with the theme of cultural confrontation between the Islamic and Occidental cultures. The Mother in this novel, sums up the hybridized identity of her sons, when she says, they have "a French mouth, a German nose and English eyes" (Chraïbi45). The Westofixation manifests in the pattern of liberation the novelist charts out for his protagonist – the woman with deep indigenous roots ironically finds liberation in smoking cigarettes, cutting her hair short, renouncing the Islamic faith and finally leaving for France. The avid maker of indigenous products turns into a licentious consumer. New items of furniture, cutlery and other household goods are bought from France. Ironically, it is the Father and son who now long for the Moroccan style of eating with the hands. The Mother, who was once the guardian of tradition and crusader for indigeneity, has given herself over wholly to the European ways. The final step in her journey towards selfhood is the burial of the past, an act symbolically represented by the burial of every single object kept treasured in her coffer – objects that had been the companions of her childhood and youth and crowning them by planting an orange tree above it.

Education as a liberating, transformative force, serves as a basic theme of the novel, observes Hugh Harter, the English translator of the novel (13). But education was deployed by the coloniser primarily as an ideological tool to manufacture consent for imperial hegemony. Through education Mother evolves, matures and transforms into a fully-grown individual, without doubt, but she does not receive her lessons unquestioningly. Her disconcerting questions pose a challenge to the intellectual superiority of her teacher, who comes to dread her very presence in the class. She rejects the great masters of literature, both European (Tolstoy, whose attitude to women was far from benevolent) and Arab.

Mother is not content with self-awakening; her mission will remain incomplete if she does not disseminate her newly-gained knowledge among her legion of women friends in the country. The thinning audience at the weekly-luncheon debates on wheels does not dampen the Mother's spirits. "I can't lift up a mountain, only a stone. That's quite enough for me" (Chraïbi 15). The father is eventually brought to self-realization by the transformation of the Mother as an individual and the change she ignites in the society. The benevolent patriarch who has been watching the new-found enthusiasm of his wife as the eccentricities of a child, is eventually forced into the realization that the patriarchal enslavement of women in Islamic culture has been the reason for their lagging behind the civilized world.

With Morocco gaining independence in 1956, Mother's world opens up still further. She passes the driving test, is a regular at public meetings and contradicts the speakers with her relentless pursuit after truth. It does not take her long to realize that the politicians, administrators and police officers in the free country are no different from their colonial counterparts. The realities she confronts are so complex that even religion ceases to offer solace. She buries it with the other debris of the past under an orange tree.

The novel dwells less on the workings of patriarchy and the sources of the religious tradition that subjugate the woman than on the rebellion of the individual woman subject. The factors that fetter the freedom of the woman barely figure in the novel, rendering the rebellion and emancipation a little less convincing and forceful. The protagonist's decision to renounce her religious faith would have carried greater conviction and force, had the oppressive religious traditions been identified and explored in the earlier sections of the novel. The rebellion plays itself out largely on an individual plane; even in the mass demonstrations, anti-war protests and the luncheon meetings, the activism of the Mother overshadows/drowns out other collective voices of resistance. This, along with the protagonist's decision to leave for France at the end of the novel, reinforces some of the Orientalist stereotypes about the Islamic civilization as denying the agency of the woman and the myth of the liberation of the Oriental woman as the White Man's burden. Nevertheless, it must be said to Driss Chraïbi's credit that he has etched the transformation of the Mother and her rebellion against the patriarchal mores of her society in vivid detail. The call for transformation echoes beyond the individual plane, though the response by the larger society remains rather lukewarm. Nevertheless, the family is the first bastion of patriarchal values a woman has to contend with. The rejection of patriarchal familial authority in the novel does not stop with the rebellion against the Father; the Mother also rejects the protectionism of her sons, who had initially catalysed her transformation and incited her to rebellion. That the Mother succeeds in setting in a transformation in the family, which is the prime locus of patriarchal authority, may be looked

upon as a sign of her future successes against other forms/sites of domination and exploitation, such as Orientalism, imperialism, racism and neo-capitalism.

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