

ISSN:0976-8165



The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-2 APRIL 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

Impact Factor: 8.67

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Kohlberg's Differential Socialisation and Lacan's Mirror Stage in Nawal El Saadawi's *Circling Song*

Dr Manoj Kanth

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11104048>

Article History: Submitted-15/03/2024, Revised-10/04/2024, Accepted-15/04/2024, Published-30/04/2024.

Abstract:

The Lacanian concept of the mirror stage (Lacan 36) intensely explains how a child forms the self-image by looking into the mirror and going through various stages. It takes time for the child to understand that her image is reflected in the mirror. Proceeding from an understanding of one's own image as an 'other', one learns to compare oneself against others, strengthening the binary between the self and the other. Saadawi's fiction demonstrates that the mirror is also not "neutral" but rather is a gift from society, which is eager and motivated to mould people. Such a mirror provides ideas about gender, class, religion, and other identities apart from the image of an individual. On the other hand, "The Circling Song" intricately explores the concept of differential socialisation through the lens of gender and societal norms prevalent in Egypt. The research article aims to examine how the protagonists, Hamida and Hamido, navigate a society steeped in patriarchal structures that dictate stringent roles for men and women. Saadawi meticulously portrays the dichotomy between societal expectations and individual desires, shedding light on the profound impact of differential socialisation on twin brother and sister's lives. Through vivid storytelling and character development, Saadawi delves into the complexities of gender roles and the societal pressures faced by Hamida and Hamido. The novel highlights the struggles and challenges that arise when individuals are forced to conform to rigid norms that may not align with their true selves.

Keywords: Lacan's mirror stage, Nawal El Saadawi, gender binaries, gender teaching, Differential socialization, The Circling Song.

Introduction:

Gender is a social construct that creates and maintains differences between men and women. From birth, children are socialised to conform to traditional gender roles, often reinforced by the family, community, and societal expectations. The Lacanian psychoanalytic theory proposes that the formation of gender identity occurs during the mirror stage, a developmental phase that occurs during infancy. The mirror stage is when an infant recognises its reflection in the mirror and develops a sense of self. In this article, we examine the mirror stage in the *Circling Song* of Nawal El Saadawi, particularly how it influences gender identity formation and its role in the social construction of gender. By analyzing the characters and their interactions in the *Circling Song*, we can gain insight into how gender norms are internalized and perpetuated through the mirror stage. Understanding this process can shed light on the ways in which individuals come to embody and perform gender roles within society.

Gender and the Mirror Stage According to Lacanian theory, the mirror stage is a crucial moment in a child's development as it marks the beginning of the formation of the ego and the sense of self. During the mirror stage, the infant recognises its reflection as a coherent and complete image. This moment is significant because it marks the moment of the subject's separation from the object, as the infant comes to identify with its own image. The mirror stage, therefore, plays a significant role in the formation of the subject's gender identity as the child internalises the social norms and expectations of gender that are projected onto them. This process of identification with the reflected image sets the foundation for the individual's understanding of themselves and their place in society. It is a pivotal moment in the development of self-awareness and identity formation.

El Saadawi's fiction explores the mirror stage and its impact on gender identity formation. Her works depict the gender socialisation of children from a young age, where boys are taught to imitate their fathers and male role models, while girls are expected to imitate their mothers and other female figures. The family and the community reinforce traditional gender roles, and the gender gap between boys and girls widens with every move and act. This gender socialization perpetuates the inequalities and power dynamics within society, leading to the oppression and marginalization of women. El Saadawi's depiction of the mirror stage highlights the influence of

societal norms and expectations on shaping one's sense of self and identity. Through her exploration of gender identity formation, she challenges these norms and calls for a re-evaluation of the roles and expectations placed on individuals based on their gender. Ultimately, she urges her readers to question and resist the constraints imposed by society in order to achieve true self-empowerment and liberation.

Gender socialisation is evident in El Saadawi's portrayal of the practice of circumcision, a traditional rite of passage that is performed on both boys and girls in some cultures. The circumcision of boys is celebrated as a rite of passage that marks the transition from childhood to manhood. In contrast, the circumcision of girls is performed in secrecy and often involves significant physical harm. The practice is intended to control female sexuality, and it underscores the gender hierarchy that exists in many societies.

El Saadawi's fictitious female characters experienced circumcision, depicted as a traumatic and painful experience that remains with them throughout their lives. Through her characters, El Saadawi critiques the patriarchal systems that perpetuate such practices and advocates for the empowerment of women.

The Mirror Stage theory posits that a child's first recognition of themselves as an individual occurs when they see themselves in a mirror or through the gaze of another. This moment of self-realisation is the foundation for the development of the ego, and it is also when the child begins to recognise and internalise societal norms and expectations. In *The Circling Song*, Saadawi's characters, Hamida and Hamido, go through a similar process of self-realisation and societal recognition.

The central point of *The Circling Song* is the gender differences that separate Hamido and Hamida, to the extent that Hamido takes up the responsibility of punishing Hamida to uphold the family's honour. Their childhood had no personal differences, except for their parents' deferential attitude in nurturing them right from birth. They grow up together, enjoying each other's company, but as they enter adolescence, societal norms differentiate them.

Saadawi, in *The Circling Song*, discusses the applied gender differences that separated twin brother and sister, Hamido and Hamida, to the extent that Hamido takes up the responsibility of

punishing Hamida to uphold the family's honour. Initially, the children had no personal differences except for the parent's deferential attitude in nurturing them from birth. They grew up together, enjoying their togetherness. However, as they entered a heteronormative society that differentiates between male and female genders, spaces and activities started to vary, and the differential treatment of their parents also started to increase.

The mirror stage theory comes alive when we examine the learning process of the twins Hamida and Hamido. They played similar games together, went to school together, and expressed similar interests, making it difficult for their parents to differentiate between them. However, as they grew up, they started to examine themselves to discover their differences. They concluded that it was sex that made all the difference, as they were raised in a society that builds male and female genders, with nothing in between.

To understand the religious and cultural differences between genders, Hamida and Hamido started to examine their bodies, particularly their gender organs. Hamida sometimes thought she was Hamido, and Hamido sometimes thought he was Hamida, leading to an oppositional binary between the self and the other. Circumcision clarified their doubts about the difference between the two. The physical violation and cultural reaction confirmed the difference between the primary sex/gender and the secondary sex/gender.

However, Saadawi suggests that Hamido knew he was something other than Hamida. This "something other than" could be his understanding of society and his gender privilege. Hamido's gender consciousness is based on the idea of difference, which he contemplates from the elders and his peers. This understanding becomes his imitation of his father, as he knows he has to be like his father, the male head of the family. He took up the authority to punish women of the family, symbolised by a stick he carries around, just like his father.

Interestingly, both Hamida and Hamido remember the voice of their father and the stick that he carried. Nevertheless, they mean differently to them. For Hamido, his father's voice became a model for becoming the male head of the family, and the stick completed that process. For Hamida, the voice othered her, and the stick punished her. Both try to imitate the father, but Hamido's imitation is welcome, and Hamida's imitation is criticised.

Hamido's moving toward his father distanced him from his mother, and he had to prove himself as a man and the future head of the family. However, his mother's body remained a soothing and assuring place for him, connecting him with the memory of his mother feeding him her milk. In contrast, his father's coarse hand woke him up as he slept next to him, reminding him of his duties as a man.

The oppositional gender binaries come into force much more vehemently in the case of siblings. Gender conscience develops as the child starts learning first from her parents and then from her surroundings. As Lindsey rightly observes, "Parents are models of male and female role performance for their children's imitation." (Lindsey 20) Boys are instructed to imitate their father or any other male they encounter, and the girls are instructed to imitate their mother or any other 'acceptable' woman. Both boys and girls have masculinity and femininity within their personalities, and gender teaching makes them dominate the other. In *Gender in Personal Life*, R Connell describes how colour is associated with gender and gender roles. Blue babies for boys and Pink babies for girls based on the colour's association with the gender. And Connell describes how this association of gender with colour develops with the toys they play with, reflecting their femininity and masculinity as they grow.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (Simone 32). This 'becoming' does not happen automatically. One has to go through several stages to learn, adapt and transform to become an acceptable gender and play normative roles. Those who protest against such becoming are subjected to rigorous disciplining by the hegemonic institutions. Such institutions defend practices and beliefs that violently reiterate gender identity. One such practice is circumcision. Abdessamad Dialmy in *Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society* says,

Hamida in *The Circling Song* learns about herself by looking at her brother Hamido. She sees the contrast double in him. Hamida is not allowed to sleep as her brother does or play in the streets as her brother does after a brief childhood. She was taught to do the household work. Her mother repeatedly compares herself with her daughter saying she was much more responsible though younger than Hamida when she was married. Her comments include those on her daughter's body and the need to control it.

Hamida and Hamido, being twins, shared the same world without any gender discrimination, as long as they were inside their mother's womb. None could distinguish between the two. Even their parents could not identify who was who; as such is their resemblance. Saadawi's point is that the cell design made all the difference between Hamida as a girl and Hamido as a boy. Apart from that, there are no essential differences. Nevertheless, these minute differences are crucial in differentiating between boy and girl for the world outside the womb.

The mirror image theory comes alive when we examine the learning process of the twins Hamida and Hamido. Not only are their names identical, but also did they look alike. It was difficult for their parents to differentiate between them. Initially, they failed to understand the difference between the two. However, gradually, they started to examine themselves to discover the differences. The mirror is also conditioned and moulded by various agencies, and they think that it is sex that makes all the difference. They grow up in a heteronormative society that differentiates between the male and female sex and builds male and female genders. There is nothing between these sexes and genders. Physicality becomes a crucial issue here, as it was in the case of the father's presence.

Hamida sometimes thought she was Hamido, and Hamido sometimes thought he was Hamida. Such a mix-up between the self and the other, a binary, becomes an oppositional binary. Circumcision, in a way, clarified their doubts about the difference between the two. The physical violation and the cultural reaction confirmed the difference between the two as the primary sex/gender and the secondary sex/gender. However, Saadawi says that Hamido knew he was something other than Hamida. This "something other than" could be his understanding of society about his gender privilege. It is this idea of difference on which Hamido's gender consciousness is based. He does not seem to be referring to the "lack" in Hamida's body but is contemplating the gender instruction that he gets from the elders and his peers. This understanding turns into his imitation of his father. He knew that he had to be like his father. He was a son and a brother, but he was also a father in the making.

Hamido tries to speak like his father in a coarse voice. He holds a stick and chases Hamida, imitating her father. The stick symbolises the authority to punish, especially women of the family. This could be his attempt to reiterate the hegemonic difference between him and Hamida though they grew up together. Interestingly, both Hamida and Hamido remember the voice of their father and the stick that he carried. However, they mean differently to them. For Hamido, his father's

voice became a model for becoming the male head of the family, and the stick completed that process. For Hamida, the voice othered her, and the stick punished her. Both try to imitate the father, but Hamido's imitation is welcome, and Hamida's imitation is criticised. Just like her brother, she too imitated her father, his rough voice, the way he coughed, stood at the large entrance of the house, threw her head back conceitedly, inflated her jaws and kept her right hand firmly on her hip as her father did. She is trying to imitate the posture of her father, and even the author confirmed that if anyone caught a glimpse of her at that moment, one would mistake her for Hamido. "She used to believe she was Hamido, and she would stride over the ground firmly, hitch up her *galabeyya* over her thin hard legs, and run towards the boys, shouting 'I'm Hamido.'" (*The Circling Song* 161)

Hamido's moving toward his father distanced him from his mother. He was required to prove himself as a man and the future head of the family. He is still a child, like Hamida. He finds comfort in his mother's presence. His mother's body is still a soothing and assuring place for him, whether awake or asleep, thus connecting him with the memory of his mother feeding him her milk. The coarse hand of his father wakes him up as he is happily sleeping next to his mother on a reed mat and orders him to go searching for his missing sister to eliminate her. It is almost like a dream for Hamido. The dream symbolically suggests how he is pulled away from his mother to become a man and preserve the honour of the family for his father and his father.

Hamido's character conveys the suffocation that the growing-up years are subjected to. Like women's repressed psyche, we come across a conditioned and moulded Hamido who is forced to prioritise his family's reputation over his emotions and relationships. Although he rushes after his sister to carry out his father's order, he is unsure why he has to kill his sister. He fails to accept his drastically transformed identity from a playful, loving sibling to a vengeful, hounding brother. He cannot even share or express his emotions to anyone. His bottled-up emotions turn him into a vulnerable man with a fragile ego. Hamida and Hamido could both remember their mother's face hidden in a black Tarha. Hamida fails to recognise her father among the men coming from the mosque on Friday. Hamido also fails to recognise his mother among women wearing Tarha. When he goes to Cairo to search for Hamida, he finds all the women dressed like her mother. When he comes across Hamida, he thinks it is his mother because she is wearing Tarha.

Instruction is part of moulding children according to society's accepted norms and standards, and the parents and the outside world do this. We discussed earlier in this chapter that

Hamida and Hamido were asked to follow the instructions of their parents and society. Hamida's mother gave her the instructions to become an ideal woman, and she also instructed her to run away from the village to escape from the haunting death. Cairo city instructed Hamida to resist the action of the policeman who later dragged her to his shabby room, where he molested her. It instructed her to work in the master's house without thinking of running away from work and yielding to her master's advances.

In conclusion, Saadawi's selected fiction reflects Lacan's Mirror Stage theory. The characters' self-realisation and societal recognition are depicted in their exploration of gender roles and gender expectations. Hamido and Hamida's journey through their teenage years perfectly represents the theory. By exploring their bodies and understanding the difference between genders, they embody the foundational aspects of Lacan's Mirror Stage theory. Saadawi's work thus provides a powerful insight into the oppressive nature of societal norms and their effect on individuals' self-realisation.

Works Cited:

Abida Samiuddin, and Rashida Khanam. *Muslim Feminism and Feminist Movement. Central Asia*. Global Vision Pub. House, 2002.

Adele Newson Horst, and Nawal El Saadawi. *Nawal El Saadawi*. Zed Books, Limited, 2010.

Allman, James. "Family Patterns, Women's Status and Fertility in the Middle East and North Africa." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1978, pp. 19– 35, www.jstor.org/stable/23027140.

Beasley, Chris. *Gender and Sexuality : Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. Sage, 2008.

Berger, Maurice, et al. *Constructing Masculinity*. Routledge, 1995.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.

---. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Cooke, Miriam, and Nawal El Saadawi. "The Circling Song." *World Literature Today*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1990, p. 187, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40146069>.

Cohen-Mor. *Fathers and Sons in the Arab Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 1949.

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. *Children in the Muslim Middle East*. University of Texas Press, 1995.

Hearn, Jeff. *Men in the Public Eye : The Construction and Deconstruction of Public Men and Public Patriarchies*. Routledge, 1992.

Lahoucine Ouzgane. *Islamic Masculinities*. Zed ; New York, 2006. Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

Lorber, Judith. *The Social Construction of Gender*. Sage, [19]95, 1991.

Michel, Foucault. "The Subject and Power." *Critical inquiry*, vol.8, no. No.4 (Summer), 1982, pp. 777-795

Slavoj Žižek, and Jacques Lacan. *Jacques Lacan : Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 2003.