

An Analysis of Gender Politics in *Isis* (1999)

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Abstract

This study analyses gender politics in Nawal el Sadawi's play *Isis* through the lens of mirror theory of Jaques Lacan. Mirror theory pertains to the psychosis of the human subject in which subject is in an intense and alternatively adulatory or abusive relationship with the imago or the perfect image, that the subject sees in the mirror. The text abounds in psychoanalytic motifs like hysteria, paranoia, castration and incest that are indicative of the characters' psychosis. Moreover characters are designed as foils to one and other to cement the idea of the fragmented self in which both masculine and feminine halves constitute a single whole. This psychoanalytic approach to the text solves a conundrum present in most critical appreciations of the play: namely the diminished stature of the character of Isis especially after the balance of power shifts to the feminine order.

Keywords: Jaques Lacan, mirror theory, gender politics, image, other, Egyptian mythology.

The gender conflict between the characters in the play arises from their desire of the Other, where the other is the perfect image reflected in the mirror. The desire to be like the other and to become a complete unified self is inevitably doomed as the self in desiring the perfect image sees itself as unfinished and ultimately it is the obsessive adulation for the image that results in the disintegration of the self or psychosis. Lorenzo Chiesa says about psychosis in Lacan: “the most succinct definition of a psychotic in Lacan’s first theory of subject would be someone who is stuck at the mirror stage” (26). Chiesa further explains: “The mirror-stage establishes a structural psychic dialectic between the subject and the other that serves as a model for the entirety of the subject’s many chronologically successive identifications: the ego is nothing but their sum total at a given point in time” (Ibid). Thus ego is a psychic construct external to the subject and perceived in the specular image. The ego is hence essentially eternally regenerating itself in any and all relationships of a human subject. In the psychotic individual, however, the gaze of the subject has fixated on a single image and the obsession with the desired image results in the unraveling of the subject and his alienation from his self. All characters of the play Ra, Seth and Isis manifest themselves to be psychotic in their speech and actions in the play due to their fixation on their respective images.

In mirror theory Lacan demonstrates the human subject’s preoccupation with self since very early stage of its development. The human infant acquires the ability to speak and understand nouns including his own name around the same time he learns to recognize its image in the mirror. The image reflected in the mirror is thus structured like a language that splits meaning among the signified and the signifier, as

like language the ego or the idealized self is split into the image seen in the mirror and the subject. The subject desires the completeness it sees in the mirror and in comparison to it finds itself lacking. This quest for completeness which begins with this feeling of loss and of realizing one's deficiency then continues throughout the individual's life. In *Ecritis*, Lacan says: "the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation" (78). These feelings of insufficiency with the self and anticipation of completion are the cause of the characters' psychosis in this play. A textual analysis of the dialogues in the play identifies this psychosis.

An analysis of Ra's language exposes his unconscious. Ra says in the first scene to Seth: "Gone is the era of women; the era of manliness, courage, power and fear has begun... our sister Isis must realize this truth and forget the past and old epoch. (*Isis* 35). Ra's speech is a discursive enterprise whereby he seeks to oust feminine discourse by the use of rhetoric. In the above quotation Ra announces a self projected image of a desired self in which all feminine qualities are shunned in deference to superior masculine qualities like "power", "courage" and "fear" in the above extract. Such a notion of self is an ingenious falsity imposed and invented in discourse by Ra. Ra in his speech also says: "Now we are in the era of supreme men, the era of masculinity, the era of strong men rulers. Gone is the period of women and weak men" (*Isis* 29). Ra's speech is rife with a constant returns to the feminine, psychologically he cannot take his gaze away from the ideal feminine image in the mirror. His paranoia with women is manifested when he asks Seth that how the people received the news of his victory over the goddess Nut. Seth replies: "with happiness, joy and welcome", to this

Ra immediately repartees: “Except women of course” (*Isis* 30). The constant paranoia of women or the female in Ra’s speech and jokes implies the truth that women are a constant presence in his consciousness as will be seen in further excerpts from Ra’s language. Ra says: “However life without women becomes boring and it is easy to control them and conform them to our will and law. Besides it is much less complicated than enabling men to become pregnant and give birth” (*Isis* 92). Interestingly this speech is given by Ra at the end of the episode in which his wife has been caught in bed with a slave, the use of the adjective “boring” by Ra for a naturally traumatic experience further highlights the tragedy and the depth of his psychic masking of his alienated self. In the above speeches Ra masks his fixation with the image i.e Nut, Isis or all females by objectifying himself. This intersubjectivity in which the subject reinvents itself in order to escape the reflected perfection it perceives in the mirror is a defense mechanism to escape self disintegration by Ra. The unavoidable consequence of such an effort however is that the individual is conscious of his own escapism and thus the moment he realises this objectification of his own self his ego disintegrates.

In his conversation with Seth towards the end of the first scene Ra constantly employs rhetoric and plays with word connotations to declare the feminine and by extension Nut inferior to him. Ra says about Nut: “your mother Nut ascended to the position of sky goddess unexpectedly. She lacked reason and her brain could not understand sacred divinity. This was the reason of her defeat and downfall from the throne” (*Isis* 32). Here Ra suggests that reason more than compassion is necessary for a person in position of power, also the use of adjectives like “unexpectedly” with

“defeat” and “downfall” to imply the inevitability of Nut’s defeat by Ra since he, as the representative of reason was the apt and expected choice as a god. Ra like other proponents of the masculine discourse in the play is obsessed with self image. He constantly inquires Seth about whether his indictments have been announced to the general public: “have you announced this to the people ?”, to this Seth answers: “yes, yes we announced all with megaphones”, this answers does not suffice for Ra as he further inquires: “And hornpipes?” (*Isis* 30). Seth placates Ra by augmenting his need for projecting a desired self image, and assures that he has announced all Ra’s principles and orders with horn pipes and has also instructed the scribe Tut to write them down. Ra’s last speech at the end of scene one demonstrates his heightened paranoia to the extent of hysteria: “Yes sun.... I am Ra, the sun god... I am the only god who has won and conquered the sky... The sun.... I am the only one... and there is no one but me. Me... me” (*Isis* 40). The stage directions and settings enhance this jubilation of Ra on being able to project his desired self image to the people: “*His voice echoes on the horizon, and the sun disc glows and fills the sky. Ra sees his face reflected in the disc of the sun. He laughs than guffaws while repeating with the echo of the sound*” (*Isis* 40). Later in the text Ra’s ego is disintegrated completely, as indicated by his hysterical laughter and repetition in language. Lacan maintained that ego was not an agency separate to the unconscious rather it was the manifestation of the unconscious in language. Consequently human subjectivity for Lacan was a combination of language, culture and the desires of the unconscious. Thus in effect human self was reducible to what it desired most. Ra appears only twice in the play, after first act he appears in the second scene of

second act, and in this appearance the reader finds Ra a hysterical figure diminished in his very act of diminishing women and the feminine. Ra on finding a man in the bed of his wife, leaves his wife alone; however prescribes the punishment of castration for the Ethiopian slave he caught in her bed. His feelings on his wife's infidelity are focused on the slave only: "I want to see him before me, a body with no virility. Exactly like the body of a woman" (*Isis* 91). The wife then is the mirror image within which Ra sees his disintegrated masculinity reflected back at him and as any threat or fault in the mirror image is a threat to his own self identity. Ra seeks to alter the self instead of the image with which he identifies himself when he prescribes castration for the slave and leaves his wife's infidelity unaddressed. Ra defines his masculinity through the feminine. Curtailing the desire of women through castration as recommended by the High Priest is not acceptable to Ra, as he says: "I am afraid that the men's desire will vanish with the loss of the women's desire" (*Isis* 91). Here is the most profound image-subject relationship between Ra and the feminine gender as a whole: Ra who wants to live in an illusion of wholeness by projecting his self as that which is capable of subjugating a perfect self. The perfect self here idealized and idolized is the feminine self, his wife and any other woman who he believes he can conquer due to the un-castrated state of his own self. Manhood as a concept is perceptible in biological terms and refers to the fragmented state of the individual's psyche. As implicit in this definition of manhood is the concept of gaze. Most debate on Lacan's mirror theory contests that even if the mirror is capable of reflecting the image of the subject it can never reflect the gaze with which the subject is looking at the image. So even in the perfectly projected image of the

mirror something essential to the self, the gaze is lost. Here Ra believes the best form of torture for the transgressing slave is to expose him to the ostracizing feminine gaze as he says: “Now *look at yourself*, slave, are you a man? Are you able to touch a woman, let alone gaze higher, at one of the divine women of the god!” (*Isis* 91, emphasis added). Meaning that for his identification as a man a man needs to be able to look at a woman with the confidence of being able to subjugate her sexually. Ra’s obsession with his self image points out this lack in his image and focuses his desire for a perfect self on his phallus alone so the most agonizing punishment he can imagine for the slave is taking away his identity, namely the phallus.

Seth is also a proponent of the male chauvinistic discourse in the play. He is obsessed with Isis and is caught in a dialectic of desire, he cannot give up his efforts to possess Isis and he wishes to possess her precisely because she is unattainable. This according to Lacan is the very essence of desire and desiring that it is essentially a longing for identification that ends in loss. Seth speaks of the nature of his attraction for Isis to The Army Chief: “The tragedy of my life! To be born into this life with a strong woman next to me. I do not know the source of her power. I love her because she is tougher than me. I can never attain her; on the contrary she attains me” (*Isis* 65). The masculine strength of Seth fails him in the face of Isis’s psychological strength that she drives from her unified Self as he relates to The Army Chief his experience of trying to rape Isis: “In her arms, I am transformed from a dangerous wolf desiring to hold her, just before he swallows her, to a sweet lamb crying like a baby on her bosom, and asking for punishment or forgiveness” (*Isis* 65). Isis’s power over Seth is the same that

the image has for the subject. Isis for him is the big other, with whom the infant has both a relationship of adulation and grievance. Seth speaks of his aggravation with Isis in these words: “She disarmed me of my dearest possessions- my honor and my virility” (*Isis* 66). Despite this realization of Isis’s corrosive effect on his self identity, Seth is unwilling to leave her to face the wrath of Ra as he does not want her dead: “I do not want anyone to touch her!” (*Isis* 67). Seth is exhausted of reconciling himself with his image, namely Isis, as towards the end of the scene four of first act he denounces every face, since all faces could potentially be a mirror image: “I do not want to see anyone’s face, I mean no one including the god Ra” (*Isis* 67). Later in scene five Seth reaffirms his subject image relation with Isis: “I see only your face in all women” (*Isis* 77).

Isis’s relationship is similarly problematic with both men in this love rather image obsessed triangle. Osiris is her gaze while Seth is her image. Osiris in the songs in the play is referred as the “heart of Isis” (*Isis* 41,85, 87,88 and 97) alternatively Osiris is also referred to as “the love of Isis” (*Isis* 43). Interestingly, in all these songs functioning as the Greek chorus in voicing the opinion of the community about individual, characters do not refer to Isis as “the heart of Osiris” or the “love of Osiris”. Isis therefore like Seth desires the perfection she sees in her first husband Osiris who is the god of love and kindness. Osiris is all goodness and image of spiritual perfection. He is therefore the gaze with which the subject looks at the image in the mirror while the image in the mirror is Seth not Osiris. Osiris is lost to Isis (in death) like the gaze that is lost to the infant as he looks at the image reflected in the mirror. Interestingly it is Seth who kills Osiris; Seth being the image is a natural destroyer of the gaze.

Isis says to Maat: “In contrast to Osiris who inspires the most beautiful things: love, justice, clemency, beauty and virtue, Seth inspires the most ugly in me: anger wickedness and hatred. He cheats me of virtue and *projects* onto me his vices. *The malicious traits of his face reflect themselves on my face*” (*Isis* 47 my italics). Osiris throughout his presence on stage is a benign influence to the extent of being an inanimate prop on stage that is used as a mere catalyst to initiate the conflict between Seth and Isis. In the entire extent of the play it is not Osiris but Seth who is able to evoke any response from Isis. For instance before her encounter and hostile conversation with Seth in act one scene five, there is no indication in the text that Isis wants to remarry. However to Seth’s incessant insistence to Isis to become his wife and his outraged apprehension: “Are you in love with another man, Isis?” (*Isis* 74), Isis remain silent and replies that there is no one but Osiris in her heart. Seth refuses to believe her and vows: “Do you think I will not know him? I will find him? And he will be punished! This time I will cut his body to pieces and each part will be dispersed to a different locale” (*Isis* 75). It is this confession of his earlier outrageous murder of Osiris and his challenge to render her choice meaningless that forces Isis to respond to the challenge of Seth by remarrying with the Sailor who brought her Syrian dates. Isis’s unconscious recognizes Seth as the image in the mirror. She says: “I do not like to see him because he makes me hate myself and my angry face in the mirror. I also hate my body when it agitates with desire of revenge... I loathe him like death. I wish I could grab his neck in my fingers and squeeze, squeeze, and squeeze until he takes his last breath.” (*Isis* 47-48).

Unlike Seth who acted on the impulse of adulation for the reflected image Isis

acts on the other impulse of aggression for the reflected image. In Lacanian terminology it is a manifestation of *jouissance*, which is the opposite of desire. *Jouissance* was Lacan's reworking of the Fruedian notion of death drive or *thanatos*. *Jouissance* is an emotional response to desire when the human subject finds itself propelled towards that which it cannot have (Seth cannot have Isis and Isis cannot have Osiris) as their respective egos have given up the image in order to contemplate itself in the other.

In the last scene where Seth is castrated after he commits murder of The Army Chief we encounter not only a castrated Seth but also a castrated Isis. However the castration of Isis is not as literal as that of Seth, yet from Isis the active participant of discourse and action, she, after Seth's defeat from Horus, assumes passivity. The disintegration of the projected self image (Seth) results in the fragmentation of the subject's (Isis's) own identity as well. The reverting back of Isis to Mother Nut's principles "forgive when you are capable" (*Isis* 117) which shows a complete elimination of her earlier martial spirit where she bemoans her generous treatment of Seth: "I responded to his harmfulness with clemency. I was loyal to the principles of my mother Nut, but it seems she was mistaken. I should have responded to his wickedness with wickedness" (*Isis* 48). This metamorphosis in Isis is after Seth's Castration reaffirms the premise that without Seth to support her identity Isis's self is fragmented too. Had the play ended on the note of Seth's murder by Horus, Isis's response would have conclusively given the reader an inkling of her unconscious, still the dissipation of her spirit indicates that the loss of Seth's phallus is a loss to her own identity. Ra's actions of not castrating his wife show this understanding on his part that his identity will be halved by harming his

wife, he also says in the text that the loss of women's desire will also result in the loss of men's desire. Desire being the essence of subjectivity in Lacan then results in the loss of the Self for these characters which then accounts for the abrupt ending of the text that on one glance looks like the deconstruction of the feminine discourse constructed by Isis in the rest of the play.

The discourse of the mirror image theory of Lacan when taken as the theoretical framework of the play has thus explained the hitherto incongruent ending of the play by suggesting that the self and the notion of subjectivity in the perspective of masculine and feminine genders is unresolved in the play because each subject is incomplete without its image. If an aesthetic impulse were to be followed by Sadaawi then Isis should have been the one to decapitate Seth and assume the position of the ruler herself, however this course of action would entail a merging of Isis with Seth in her following his Phallus by assuming his identity temporarily in acting like Seth. This is what Isis shirks away from. Even for winning from Seth she cannot partake of his self at the cost of the dissolution of her own; it is her survival instinct and defence mechanism towards the end that she insulates herself from annihilation by reverting to mother Nut and her principles of mercy.

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