

Castrating the Authority in El Sadaawi's play *Isis*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper on the Egyptian feminist playwright Nawal El Sadaawi's play Isis (1986) seeks to explore the psychological and social dimensions of castration by applying the Slovenian Marxist and Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's ideas on symbolic castration, ideological fantasy and mask. The focus will be on Žižek's understanding of Lacan's ideas on symbolic castration. It will be proved that Ra, Seth and their state machinery are castrated from within. But in order to conceal their inner castration, they create a symbolic order of power and masculinity. The role of female gaze, stage props, theatrical devices, language and gestures as tools of deconstruction and castration will be discussed to highlight the castration anxiety, and the symbolic castration of Ra and Seth.*

Key words: psychological, mask, castrated, gaze, masculinity,

In *Anatomy and Physiology of Farm Animals* (2009), Rowen D. Frandson, W. Lee Wilke and Anna Dee Fails define castration thus:

Castration is a term usually applied to removal of the testes of the male animal, although technically it can apply to ovariectomy (removal of the ovaries) of the female animal as well... If an animal is castrated before puberty, many of the secondary sex characteristics fail to develop, and the castrated animal tends to resemble the female of the species. (408,418).

The above definition highlights the mutilation and loss in the animal body after castration. The idea of symbolic castration has its roots in Sigmund Freud's study of the infantile sexuality and his theory of castration complex. In *The Sexual Theories of Children* (1908), Freud discusses his concepts of penis envy and castration complex. According to him, a male child's castration anxiety is based on the signifiers of loss. When the male infant observes the body of his mother, he finds the phallus missing there. He thinks that his mother possessed a phallus but she has been castrated by his father. Hence, he develops a castration complex, and starts fearing his father, and feels more inclined towards his mother. This anxiety plays a central role in the Oedipus complex of the child when he feels antagonistic towards his father, and sexually attracted to his mother.

Alfred Adler (1933), a contemporary of Freud, puts forth the idea of 'masculine protest' in order to highlight an inferiority complex in certain men and women. Masculine protest "means overcompensation in the direction of aggression and restless striving for triumphs" (Connell 16). As feminine traits are taken as the signifiers of weakness and incompleteness in a patriarchal and phallogocentric society, both the male and the female try to conceal their weak or feminine aspects by using the socially-prevalent symbols of masculinity and potency. The subject finds a gap between the socially-constructed ideal of masculinity and his/her own condition. The masculine protest is a desire in a male/female to break free of his/her biological and social limitations, and to be a real man by masking his/her feminine traits. The male subject perceives himself treated as inferior to other men and even women, and strives to be treated like a real man. The female subject sees herself treated as inferior to men, and wishes to be treated like a man. The subject tries to

hide his/her weak and feminine aspects through exaggerated masculine wishes and dreams to achieve a perceived male position of power and status.

Instead of the castration complex, Jacques Lacan (1954-55) talks about the symbolic castration of the male child. According to Lacan, the male infant tries to fathom the desire of its mother so that it may become instrument of the fulfillment of that desire. But the intervention of father thwarts these plans of the male child, and he renounces the wish to be a phallic thing for his mother. This realization of the inability to be a phallus for the mother, which highlights the gap between the imagined self and the real self, is taken as castration by Lacan. This realization of the imperfection leads to the ensuing anxiety. In Lacan's view, the child fantasizes the mother as the source of complete pleasure. But this fantasy stands castrated upon entering the symbolic order; here castration means separation from the fantasized object i.e. the mother. Discussing the Lacanian concept of castration in *The Gender of Psychology* (2006), Tamara Shefer, Floretta Boonzaier, Peace Kiguwa comment, "Castration, at its most basic, is the recognition by the subject of a kind of lack" (69).

Jean Baudrillard discusses the social dimensions of the symbolic castration and the symbolic mask. In his work *Simulacra and Simulations* (1980), Baudrillard says that our postmodern world is a world of signs where the signifier is far removed from the signified. In order to bridge the gap between the signifier and the signified, a symbolic order is constructed which masks the reality by creating a simulacrum of reality. By using the technique of mask, the symbolic representations twist meanings into signs which have become completely alienated from the things which they are originally supposed to represent. The real power lies in keeping the symbolic order in its place so that the targeted people may never reach the real.

Drawing on Marxist, Freudian and Lacanian concepts, Slavoj Žižek explores political and social connotations of the idea of the symbolic castration. In his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx talked about the mask used by the capitalistic system in order to gain and maintain dominance over the working class. In his theory of Base and Superstructure, Marx says that

at the base of each system lies economy. In order to hide the base, the capitalistic system creates a superstructure of law, religion, culture, art and traditions. In Chapter 2 of *How to Read Lacan* (2007) titled “The Interpassive Subject: Lacan Turns a Prayer Wheel”, Žižek asserts that the symbolic castration takes place when the subject discovers the gap between what he/she really is and the mask he/she has worn. The subject is thus castrated from the real "I" by projecting something else (34). In his view, identity is constructed with the help of signifiers and a symbolic order. The wider the gap, the more neurotic the subject will be. This is the gap which makes Macbeth lose his feelings of superiority and invincibility in the Shakespearean tragedy *Macbeth* (1600). Macbeth wears a symbolic mask of power after the prediction of the witches that he cannot be defeated until the Birnam forest moves from its place, and until someone not born of his mother's womb comes to fight him. When Macbeth comes to know about the Birnam forest moving, and the Caesarian birth of Macduff, he loses all his strength. In Žižek's view, even more painful is the realization of some outside gaze looking at that gap. The factors exposing that gap can be both internal and external. In Macbeth's case, it is the external factor i.e. Macduff who unmasks the gap between the real and the projected truth.

In an interview with Greet Lovink (1995), Žižek states, “In psycho-analytic theory the notion of symbolic castration is often misunderstood. The threat of castration as to its effects, acts as a castration, or in power relations, where the potential authority forms the actual threat” (n.pag.). Castration anxiety can also refer to being castrated symbolically. Symbolic castration anxiety means the fear of being degraded, dominated or made insignificant, usually an irrational fear where the person will go to extreme lengths to save his pride and/or perceives trivial things as being degrading making their anxiety restrictive and sometimes damaging.

Nawaal El Sadaawi, herself a practicing psychiatrist, is greatly influenced by the ideas of Freud and the later psychologists. Moreover, her own experience of being excised at the age of six, and her persecution at the hands of the dictatorial regimes in Egypt have a great role to play in her treatment of different kinds of castration and circumcision in her literary works.

In the play *Isis*, we see two kinds of castration: physical castration of slaves and women perpetrated by Ra, Seth and their state machinery, and the symbolic castration of Ra, Seth and the system they uphold at the hands of Isis and her fellows. While Ra and Seth inflict physical castration on their slaves and women with tangible tools like dagger and knife, Isis and her companions perform symbolic castration of the male-centered power set-up with symbolic tools.

Seth, the king of earth, is in a constant fear of being castrated, and his castration takes place on different levels. Unlike the Freudian concept, the object of fear is not the father but a woman or a mother-figure. The castration complex of Seth comes into focus when he requests Ra not to harm or kill Isis after they have killed the goddess Nut, and usurped her throne on the sky. Seth says this because if Isis is killed, he will not be able to express his masculinity to Isis. As Seth remains obsessed with Isis, Isis' femininity is reflected in his speech and actions. Instead of overcoming his castration anxiety and manifesting his masculinity, he finds his fears keep on mounting which make him all the more feminine. Gocke Cansever, in "Psychological Effects of Circumcision", says, "It is now generally accepted that under the impact of Oedipal strivings and castration anxiety, children at the phallic stage are disposed to experience fantastic fears of bodily damage" (321). Seth's fantastic fears include the fear of physical castration, the fear of the father's law, and the fear of being dominated by a woman. All these fears of Seth are actualized through different encounters with Isis and Horus. When the army chief tells Seth that all the opponents to the new regime have been either killed or subdued, Seth repeatedly asks about Isis whether she has been captured or not. Owing to his earlier encounters with Isis, he knows that she cannot be subdued by force. Every meeting with the Other enhances, what Žižek calls, 'the gap' between his real and the symbolic selves. Towards the end of the play, Seth is reduced to the level of a feminine with no force in his language or actions. Hence, his physical castration by Horus makes his outside compatible with his inside.

For Seth, Isis is also a mother-figure and Osiris, a father-figure. The killing of Osiris is an attempt to get rid of the castration anxiety, and to capture Isis. Before that, he requests Ra to make him the king of the earth, a symbol of the mother. By becoming the king of the earth, he

wants to replace his father, Geb, and capture what his father possesses. He kills Osiris because by becoming the legal heir to his father, he will inherit earth as well as Isis. Seth orders the castration of the second Osiris because he cannot put up with the idea of another father-figure who may castrate him. For him, the second Osiris is the return of the father's law which will hamper his own movement towards capturing Isis. This fear of Seth is actualized when Horus, Isis' son and another symbol of the father's law, castrates Seth in the court of the people. On the other hand, Isis develops what Carl Jung calls 'animus', "the unconscious masculine principle as it appears in the psyche of a woman" (Nichols 125). Isis develops masculine qualities as a result of remaining close to her father-figure, Osiris. She turns out to be a masculine woman or femme fatale. Efrat Tseëlon, in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Marginality*, elaborates the concept of femme fatale:

The femme fatale appears to be woman, but underneath she already has the phallus, the sign of masculinity which gives her the power and authority to castrate. Žizek draws attention to this threat of the femme fatale by arguing that it is not Woman as an object of fascination that may cause men to lose their sense. Rather, it is that which remains hidden beneath this fascinating mask and appears once the mask falls off: the dimension of the pure subject fully assuming the death drive. (92)

Isis develops her symbolic phallus in the shape of her force of people, her rational language, her control over the means of production, and her giving birth to Horus. These are the things which Ra and Seth fear, and which finally expose their inner femininity. Horus, the son of Isis is a symbolic tool to emasculate the male Other. He is an alternative phallus to the one severed off Osiris' body by Seth. He is the continuation of that phallus which Seth is afraid of. In the court scene, the fight between Seth and Horus is the fight between two phalluses who claim Isis. M. Keith Booker, in *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnavalesque* (1991), says:

Mythic representations of castration are thus often much more complex than the relatively transparent story of the castration of

Saturn by Jupiter. For example, in an Egyptian myth, with interesting feminist implications, the scattered body of the god Osiris is reassembled by his sister Isis, but she is unable to locate his severed phallus and is forced to manufacture an artificial substitute. Here, the male literally acquired his masculinity directly from the female" (137).

As in the ancient myth, in El-Sadaawi's play Isis gives a substitute phallus to Osiris i.e. by giving birth to a male child. Horus is the symbolic phallus developed by Isis. When Horus is first seen on the stage, Isis is teaching him the use of pen, a phallic symbol. This act of Isis also throws light on her belief that writing is not a neutral activity rather it can be used as a castrating tool. Like Seth, Horus is also shown wearing a dagger on the stage. Isis denies the phallus to Seth as the latter is physically castrated by Horus.

Some tools like dagger, sword, throne and knife also serve ironic purpose as they highlight the emotional and psychological castration of Seth. Instead of being the signifiers of possession, they are the signifiers of loss, or the 'Master-signifiers' as Lacan calls it. In the introduction to his work, *Zizek: A Reader's Guide* (2012), Kelsey Wood puts it thus, "The Master-Signifier is an empty signifier which has no signified content, and which unifies a field of meaning precisely through this very lack or inconsistency" (8). Hence, the master-signifier is an arbitrary construction which stands for the absence of the very thing it seeks to represent. Often when Seth comes on the stage, he is wearing some kind of dagger or sword. This prop serves to highlight his inner castration which he tries to conceal by using these tools as masks. Due to the constant fear of loss, Seth turns neurotic. A parallel can be drawn between Seth and Shakespeare's Macbeth. Macbeth's masculinity faces a challenge after Lady Macbeth incites him to kill Duncan. By taking and using the dagger, Macbeth tries to put a mask on his symbolic castration which is revealed at the end of the play. Before murdering Duncan, Macbeth hallucinates:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible

To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? (2.1.46-52)

For Seth, like Macbeth, the dagger represents the absence rather than presence. It is the false creation of his mind in order to cope with the internal absence. In his article, “Between the Subject and Social: Signifying Images of Desire and Ideological Subjectivities” (2012), C. Zeiher asserts, “the function of the symptom is that it provides such a productive and successful disguise from discomfort that the problem which necessitates the symptom in the first place seems to disappear for the subject. Consequently, the subject learns to enjoy his symptom” (5-6). In the case of Seth, Ra and the army chief, dagger, knife, sword, megaphones and texts are the symptoms of a gap which is only visible to an outside gaze. But, to the subjects themselves, they disguise the painful real by projecting a symbolic representation. They are the empty signifiers which have no signified at the other end. The phenomenon that hides the lack by creating a symbolic presence is termed as interdiction in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In “Beyond the Phallus: Lacan and Feminism”, Deborah Luepnitz explains Lacan’s ideas on symbolic phallus:

Lacan observed that many human beings use the penis to cover their pervasive sense of bodily lack, and so he chose the term “phallus” to refer to our wish for completeness. The phallus therefore signifies, paradoxically, the opposite of completion—that is, lack. Whereas the penis is an organ that some individuals possess and some don’t, the phallus is what no one can have but everyone wants: a belief in bodily unity, wholeness, perfect autonomy. (226)

Substitutions for the lost object assume great importance as they help the subject in feigning the possession of the thing which has been lost.

The castrating gaze of Isis is the biggest tool for her in her battle against Seth and Ra. Henry Krips, in his article “The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek” (2010) defines the Lacanian concept of gaze, “the gaze may be thought of as an external point from which an anxiety provoking look assails the subject” (93).

The gaze creates a fear in the mind of the subject that he/she is being observed or heard. The realization of the presence of an external visual or auditory gaze takes away the composure of the subject, and his/her actions become disorganized. The presence of a real or imaginary gaze is also characteristic of Alfred Hitchcock's movies. In his film *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates is always haunted by the intruding gaze of his possessive mother who is actually dead. In Bates' case, the gaze of the mother is internalized as he is split into himself and his mother. He wants to express his love for Marion Crane but he is threatened by the internalized gaze of his mother. The first-floor window where his mother is seen by some of the characters stands for the Super Ego or the eye of the mother who watches all those who come to Bates Motel run by her son. In *Isis*, Ra and Seth try to avoid a direct contact with the people from the very beginning of their rule. Ra instructs Seth that the people should believe that he never appears on the earth, and that he lives on the disc of the sun. He tells Seth, "to instill terror the god must not stand in front of people to give speeches. Human ears must not hear my sacred voice" (33). Hence, Ra fears both the visual and auditory gaze of the human beings because of some serious gaps between the real and the projected truth. These gaps are later revealed when the secret affair between his wife and a slave is known to everybody in his palace. This incident widens the gap between his projected masculinity and the actual impotence, between his claims of omniscience and his ignorance about what is going on in his own palace.

After the defeat of her mother, Nut, and the murder of Osiris, Isis decides not to yield to the will of Ra and Seth. "I will not escape. I will face him with the accusation of murder. I will confront him face to face" (47). Seth tells the army chief that once he overpowered Isis, but in her arms he turned from a wolf to a lamb, and he lost all his power and masculinity. He lost all his previous composure and confidence against the shattering gaze of Isis. This Hitchcockian emphasis on eyes and gaze has its parallel in the gaze of Mildred in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922). Yank, the protagonist, is full of composure before his meeting with Mildred. But the moment he has an encounter with Mildred, the (M)Other, who cries on seeing an ape-like person, Yank's symbolic order is shattered, and he loses his peace of mind. Mildred is the symbolic mother for Yank because she delivers him into a new world previously unknown to him. In the same way, Seth is devitalized against

the pitying gaze of Isis. He tells the army chief that death is much better than having pity from the one you hate or want to dominate. He says:

At that moment, she could have sentenced me with death and I would have died with honor and manliness in her arms. But her heart was hard. She wanted to destroy the rest of my virility as a man and gave me what is worse than death... I cannot bear pity! Ah, I cannot bear her killing look... She disarmed me of the dearest of my possessions—my honor and virility. (66)

Hence, this encounter with the (M)Other, tears the symbolic order or mask of masculinity. In the pitying gaze of Isis, Seth sees his real image—that of a weak lamb— and feels himself disarmed. Slavoj Žižek, while analyzing some movies by Hitchcock in Lacanian terms says:

We humans are not naturally born into reality. In order for us to act as normal people who interact with other people, who live in a space of social reality, many things should happen: like we should be properly installed within the symbolic order and so on. When this – our proper dwelling within a symbolic space – is disturbed, our reality disintegrates. (00:07:01-00:07:25)

Even long after that encounter with Isis, Seth cannot shake off the effects of it. His two encounters with Isis are failed acts of symbolic sexual penetration on the part of Seth. When the army chief tells Seth that everybody on the earth has been subdued to the authority of Ra, Seth says that Isis cannot be controlled or subdued because he has already seen himself subdued by the gaze of Isis.

This description of Isis' disorienting gaze also hints at the sado-masochistic tendencies of Seth. Thus, from being a sadist, one who seeks pleasure in inflicting pain on others, he also turns masochist, one who seeks pleasure in being punished and tortured. In his essay "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919), Freud talks about the interconnection between sadism and masochism:

Masochism is not the manifestation of the primary instinct, but originates from sadism which has been turned upon the self, that is to say, by means of regression from an object into the ego. Instincts with passive aim must be taken for granted as existing...

The transformation of sadism into masochism appears to be due to the influence of the guilt which takes part in the act of repression. (qtd. in Glick, Meyers 6).

Seth's sadism is also turned upon himself, and starts feeling pleasure in being r Robert A. Glick and Donald I. Meyers in their introduction to the work *Masochism* (1988) comment, "Freud described only two phases in men: first the unconscious, homosexual wish to submit to being beaten by father; and, second, submission to a beating by a powerful woman who replaces father" (6). Seth's first phase is before the death of Osiris. He submits himself to the beating of the father-figure, Osiris when he stealthily sees Isis in the arms of Osiris. The second phase starts with the murder of Osiris when Isis becomes the father-figure for Seth, and the latter is reduced to a castrated being in the former's arms. During this Dionysian loss of self, Seth reaches an ecstatic state or *jouissance* where he is ready to submit his life to Isis, but even death is denied to him. In his article "Desire and *jouissance* in the teachings of Lacan", Nestor Braunstein states:

Jouissance is the dimension discovered by the analytic experience that confronts desire as its opposite pole. If desire is fundamentally lack, lack in being, *jouissance* is positivity, it is a "something" lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure...It is becoming increasingly frequent to find *jouissance* linked to "satisfaction," and then to see this "jouissatisfaction" proposed as a goal to the psychoanalytic process in lieu of the supposedly old-fashioned, Freudian, proto-Lacanian notion of desire. (104)

For Seth, punishment becomes a source of pleasure while pity turns out to be the greatest torture.

Ra also suffers from a severe castration complex which is reflected in his opening speech where he speaks to Seth after their victory against Nut, the goddess of the sky. "Now we are in the era of supreme men, the era of masculinity, the era of strong men rulers" (29). In this scene, Ra is shown sitting on the throne. For him, capturing the throne from Nut symbolizes capturing women. His gesture of sitting on Nut's throne is an effort on the part of Ra to assert his masculinity by

concealing his castration. His act of castrating his slave, and ordering the castration of all slaves and women strengthens the idea of his inner emasculation. When he finds his queen in a secret relationship with a slave, his own feelings of castration are awakened. The affair between the queen and the slave exposes the gap between his real self and the mask of masculinity which he wears. He feels that he cannot sexually satisfy his wife that is why she is having a secret sexual relationship. He realizes that the slave has the snatched phallus from him by seducing the queen. Moreover, he wants to show his masculinity by having a male heir to the throne. But again, his impotence is exposed by the doubts about the father of the child conceived by the queen. The army chief tells Maat about the rumors that the child begotten by Ra's queen is an illegitimate child as he does not resemble Ra. To revenge his absence of a potent phallus, he orders the castration of his slave before his eyes, an unconscious effort to take the snatched phallus back. The cutting of the slave's testicles involves a sadistic pleasure for Ra. It is the externalization and otherization of the internal pain he goes through due to his impotency. Erich Fromm, a renowned American psychologist, in *The Art of Loving* (1956) comments:

Very often if the masculine character traits of a man are weakened because emotionally he has remained a child, he will try to compensate for this lack by the exclusive emphasis on his male role in sex. The result is the Don Juan, who needs to prove his male prowess in sex because he is unsure of his masculinity in a characterological sense. When the paralysis of masculinity is more extreme, sadism (the use of force) becomes the main—a perverted—substitute for masculinity. (37)

After the loss of the real phallus, the dagger is the only symbolic phallus which Ra can use. Therefore, he orders the castration of all the male slaves and the circumcision of all the women.

The army chief of Seth is another case with a castration complex. He serves as a tool for the rule of Ra and Seth by killing the people who are against them. First, he exaggerates his masculinity by referring to his act of rape of an abducted girl, and generalizing that all women like to be subdued with force. He says that women need to be taken as mechanical objects that can be operated with keys. Seth proves a symbolic mirror for

the army chief as when Seth gives vent to his fear of castration to the army chief, the army chief sees his own image in the anxiety of Seth. After his meeting with Seth, his anxiety keeps on mounting. He starts fearing the imaginary gaze of Isis which starts haunting him soon after Seth's account because of his own cruelties against women. Later, he refuses to carry out Seth's order of castrating the second Osiris because he finds the imaginary gaze of Isis stronger than the real gaze of the castrated Seth. To negotiate with this fear, he seeks to make a compromise with Isis and Maat. When Maat asks him the reason of his forsaking the loyalties to Seth, he replies, "I am not sure ... But I cannot continue with this cruelty ... Yes ... I have killed many people ... I was his partner in this brutality ... I was his sword and dagger ... But I decided to stop ... I do not know exactly why" (105). The frequent ellipses in the army chief's speech hint at the internal gap or lack. In order to conceal that gap which becomes obvious after his unconscious identification with Seth, the army chief seeks to shift his loyalties. This move of the army chief is not based on any change in his political ideology; it is another political maneuver. He sees Isis' potential power reflected in the fears of Seth. Fearing his symbolic castration for being the perpetrator of cruelties ordered by Ra and Seth, he seeks to make peace with Isis. He thinks that when the symbolic mask of Ra and Seth is taken off, his own mask of manliness and potency will be torn.

The gestures and movements of the characters are used by El Sadaawi to create a dramatic impact. Body language of Ra and Seth often removes the mask from their hidden castration. Basavanna, a character in Girish Karnad's play *Tale-Danda* (1993) says, "Meaning is generated by this moving body and it is this human body that should be our primary concern" (18). In *Isis*, gestures, at times, look more conspicuous than words or action. In the opening scene, Seth appears wearing a dagger. When Seth mentions his mother, he draws his dagger. The mention of the mother reminds him of his rivalry with his father Geb whom he is soon going to replace. He draws his dagger to give a manifestation of the masculinity which he actually lacks. It is also an imitation of the phallic erection which he actually cannot perform due to his castration. When Seth relates to the army chief how the former used to steal a view of Isis' body when she was in the arms of Osiris, he "squeezes his fingers with all his force as if he is crushing something between them" (63). This, again, is an empty gesture which hints at his

sense of loss, the feeling that Isis has been taken by someone else because he is castrated.

El Sadaawi makes an apt use of the stage devices like sound and light in order to bring into focus the symbolic castration of Ra and Seth. After the death of Seth's father, when Osiris is declared to be the heir of the deceased king, darkness prevails and Osiris is murdered. The darkness on the stage highlights the castration anxiety of Seth and his associates as they do not want to face the social gaze after their acts of murder and destruction. The peasant woman who moans the loss of her daughter also tells Isis and Maat that she could see nothing when her daughter was abducted by some ghost-like figures. The darkness is thus the signifier of absence. Ra is not visible to his worshippers. He is always identified with the disc of the sun. The sound of horns and megaphones highlights the inability of Ra and Seth to engage in a dialogue with the people. When Osiris is killed, there is a lot of sound of the military boots and beating. These chaotic sounds give a picture of the inner chaos and impotency. In scene five, when Seth meets Isis, and tries to win her love for himself, Isis' angry rebuttal makes him speechless. When Seth leaves the stage in fury, he produces sound with his boots and sword as the stage description shows, "He beats the ground with his metal boots and shield and his sword screeches around him in a terrible hideous sound" (81). The screeching sound of the sword, which is a phallic symbol, represents the inner castration of Seth. It is the cry of the phallus for being dysfunctional.

El Sadaawi utilizes many images of power in order to show Isis in the subject position in the power relations between Isis and her enemies. The images of fire and water stand for the power Isis can wield. Isis says to Maat, "I will transform the tears into burning fire. I will transform the grief into bright light" (50). The sailor comes sailing his boat in the Nile, and then he takes Isis and Maat along with him. The fluidity of water stands for the adaptability of Isis as contrasted with the obstinacy of Ra and Seth represented by the props like throne, dagger and sword. The water of the river is also an image of power as it can carry things away. The animal image of wolf and lamb also shows the reversal in the power relations. Seth tells the army chief that in the arms of Isis he turned from a wolf to a lamb. Here comes the breaking of the illusion caused by the mirror stage of Seth. When Seth sees Osiris with

Isis, he sees his own image in Osiris. This identification with the mirror image hints at a realization of a lack on the part of the infant. According to Lacan's mirror stage theory, when a child sees its image in a mirror, it feels that its image is perfect but it (the child) is not. According to *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*:

...the child sees its body in the mirror as whole and integral but does not possess the coordination necessary to experience it as such, and feels frustration. Thus to relieve this tension and aggression, the child comes to identify with the image... [and] it is this identification that brings the ego in being. The ego is, therefore, a product of alienation, deferral and lack: the child mistakes the self for the image, and assumes that the coordination, integrity and power that the image seems to possess will accrue back to it at some idealized later point in time. This lack will be retroactively identified with castration. ("Mirror Stage," def. 250)

The image of wolf and lamb shows the distancing of the real self from the mirror image. During this meeting, Seth realizes the imperfection of his self as opposed to his idealized mirror image (Osiris). A wolf might be the mirror image of a lamb in the sense that both possess teeth. But when it comes to using the teeth, the difference becomes obvious. Again in the last scene, Seth is proved a lamb in his fight with Horus where the latter dominates and castrates the former.

All female protagonists of El Sadaawi are great manipulators of language in their fight against the patriarchal system of their society, and Isis is no exception. Firdaus, the heroine of El Sadaawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) asserts her right to speak, "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me" (9). Like the woman protagonists of Ibsen's plays e.g. Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879), Isis uses language as a tool to castrate the patriarchal system she and her supporters face. In her discussion with Maat, the goddess of justice, Isis emphasizes on the significance of the appropriate use of spoken and written language. When Maat decides that she will remain neutral, and will write only on the matters of poetry, philosophy and novels, Isis replies:

When you write a word, it becomes biased. The word is an opinion. You think you are unprejudiced because you do not side with or against Seth, but in the end your impartial position turns out to be with Seth because you know that he is brutal and an assassin and you stay silent. Your silence supports him in continuing his cruelty and crime. You are not as neutral as you may think; you are partial, on Seth's side. (46)

Ra and Seth believe in killing their opponents without giving them any chance of speaking. They depend on the symbols of power and masculinity. In scene four, the army chief tells Seth, "As for you, my lord, your image is everywhere... in every heart worn on every chest, and posted on the walls. You have been supported by the army, police, megaphones, books, thinkers, the pipe players, and, above all, by almighty Ra" (54). Isis' ability to make an adequate use of language makes her face the tragedy of her husband's death brought about by Seth and Ra. She is reminiscent of Milton's Satan in Book I of *Paradise Lost* (1667). Addressing the army of the fallen angels, after losing his place in paradise, Satan decides not to allow his mind to be conquered. "The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (7). Her meeting with Seth in scene reduces Seth to the level of an impotent being because Seth fails to give satisfactory answers to the questions posed by Isis. Instead of dialogue, Seth and his associates rely on rumors and false media reports as the army chief tells Seth, "We started some rumors about her. This war of rumors, my lord, results from our effective talent and will definitely destroy her" (54). The court scene further proves the incapability of Seth to communicate and convince. The gap between the real state and the imposed symbolic order is further exposed. Seth cannot serve any logical argument in support of his charges against Isis and Seth. When he loses the argument, he starts swearing by Ra as Maat says, "When he is unable to answer, he swears..." (114).

The power structure of Ra and Seth castrates itself by removing the gap between the projected and the real. In the opening scene of the play, Ra tells Seth that nothing in the world is hidden to him. Hence, he tries to show his omniscience and potency. But this mask of omniscience is torn down when Ra finds his wife having a secret relationship with one of his slaves. It is ironical that Ra cannot see what is going on in his

own palace. Later, Seth tells Maat that Ra is not sure about the fatherhood of his only son. The castration of the whole system established by Ra and his followers is shown through many slips of tongue on the part of the army chief of Seth. When Seth and the army chief are discussing their problems concerning the control over the world, the army chief makes some slips of tongue which puncture the balloon of Ra's so-called supremacy. They expose the gap between the fact and the mask covering it by showing that he is greedy and less powerful than the goddess Nut. During this interaction, both these characters unmask their own castration or the fear of it. Seth castrates himself in the eyes of the army chief by telling him the story of his unsuccessful love for Isis. This confession on the part of Seth directs the army chief's gaze to his impotence concealed under the mask of the symbols of power and potency. The army chief gets disillusioned of the system he is supporting. This disillusionment leads him to change his loyalties.

Ra and his associates create a superstructure of ideology, religion and traditions in order to conceal and control the means of production. After his victory against Nut, Ra tells Seth, "I need the holy book and the dagger together" (36). In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek talks about an ideological fantasy which is used to mask reality, and to make it pleasing to the people. According to Žižek:

Where is the place of ideological illusion, in the 'knowing' or in the 'doing' reality in itself? At first sight, the answer seems obvious: ideological illusion lies in the 'knowing'. It is matter of discordance between what people are effectively doing and what they think they are doing—ideology consists in the very fact that the people 'do not know what they are really doing', that they have a false representation of the social reality to which they belong (the distortion produced, of course, by the same reality. (30-31)

Ra and his state machinery interpellate the people by turning them into subjects without leaving any chance of free will. According to Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), any ruling ideology interpellates its people by capturing their transition from pre-social to the social level. With the help of ideology, the people

are turned into subjects even before they are born. The priest is the symbol of that ideological fantasy in *Isis*. But it is impossible for him to maintain his fantasy in the new system established by Isis. When Isis and Seth are talking, Maat and the sailor overhear all. This overhearing on the part of the sailor, a representative of the common people, shatters the mask of sanctity and it is revealed that he and the system he upholds exploit the common people by creating fantasies. Hence, with the retreat of the priest, the institution of blind faith stands castrated. Isis and her followers take hold of the land. According to Todd McGowan, “Every social order demands castration—that is, it demands a sacrifice of enjoyment by its subjects... There is a direct link between individual acts of sacrificing enjoyment and the growth of capitalism” (42-43). There are some other metal devices which are used as phallic symbols in *Isis*. The army chief tells Seth that all women like rape. He says, “There are keys to each woman” (62). The metaphor of key has also sexual undertones. At the same time, it highlights the reification of women at the hands of the ruling power. Reification, as Karl Marx theorizes in his *Das Kapital* (1867), is treatment of the human beings as commodities and objects by the exploitative capitalistic system. Seth also suggests to Ra that women should be treated as objects that can be opened and locked. He proposes that chastity belts be used to keep all women locked. Ra’s order to castrate all the slaves and circumcise all the women is an effort to reduce them to the level of objects and child-producing machines with no emotions at all. Isis and her believers castrate this capitalistic system by capturing the base.

Certain objects are used as symbolic masks to conceal the inner impotency of the ruling ideology. Megaphones are also constructed phalluses. Their communication with their subjects is a one-way communication: through written order or through horns and megapipes. These devices of one-way communication signify a hidden gap or a symbolic castration. The throne and the written texts are the symbolic masks which conceal more than they reveal. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek points out certain flaws in the way a political or social order creates hype about the significance of the objects representing something actually absent. The priest is used as a human mask to exploit the working class, and extract wealth from them in the shape of sacrifice and offerings.

The above discussion is summed up with the assertion that Sadaawi, a leading Arab feminist, explores the potential power of woman in her work. She shows to the world how a woman who is always suppressed or marginalized can assert her power to challenge the supremacy of the patriarchal society. Woman has the potential to direct a change by putting male against male, and by discarding all traditional tools of power. Sadaawi also shows that every dictatorial system is inherently flawed, and carries the seeds of its own destruction. She further highlights that the real power needs no symbolic representation as it is pre-lingual and pre-symbolic like the Lacanian Real. Symbolic representation of authority is always triggered by some inner gap which needs a prompt masking. The more serious the inner gap, the more violent its translation into action will be.

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