

TW Press & Publishers  
V.V. 3, Keffi Road/Lagos Street,  
Kaduna, Kaduna State, Nigeria.  
08036986882. 08023439939

*From which ever angle or focus of consideration, women and women-related issues occupy the front burner of most contemporary studies today. The agitation, struggle and movement of this global phenomenon for the restoration of women rights long imprisoned by obnoxious cultures and traditions, as well as modern structures of state, sometimes with legal backings, are justifiably challenged in our time more than ever before. This book is a collection of articles from theatre gurus, which focuses principally on the works of Irene Salami-Agunloye. **Feminist Aesthetics and Dramaturgy of Irene Salami-Agunloye** may not be the first combined statement about the works of Professor Irene Salami-Agunloye, however, every chapter is intriguing and eye-opening in our continuous debate on feminism and related movements both in the academia and outside. Before this book, there were comments on Irene Salami-Agunloye's works. After this book, there will be more reactions. Nevertheless, with this book, the study of feminism and dramaturgy expunged by Irene Salami-Agunloye in her creative exploits will never be the same.*

EDITOR  
EMMY UNUJA IDEGU

A publication of the Department of Theatre and Film Arts,  
University of Jos.

ISBN:978-978-908-249-0  
Copyright 2009

# Feminist Aesthetics and Dramaturgy of Irene Salami-Agunloye



Editor  
Emmy Unuja Idegú

## 9

## The Poetics of Woman's Survival: Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed*

SHAI RUDIN

Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* focuses on the survival story of a five year old girl who was hidden during World War II in a dark pit under the house of Polish peasants who did it for money. The novel is constructed by using integrated poetics, crossing each other, unfolding the girl's survival story as a puzzle, thus enabling the reader to discover a rich and complex geology of layers. Further more, reading the novel through radical feminist eye enrich the public discourse on issues such as rape and sexual abuse.

Radical feminism is precisely that - it delves into the roots of female suppression. Unlike liberal feminism, radical feminism does not aspire to equality, but to the present and preserve the female difference, and depict the means of subjection that stop women constituting a real force. Radical feminism deals with the functioning of these means: abuse of women, violence against women, rape of women, pornography, prostitution, control of decisions about the female body (prohibition of abortion, forced heterosexuality), and the spatial exclusion of women. A radical feminist reading, then, refers to the way the particular female experience is characterized, as

distinct from the male and not judged according to it. Examples of unique female experiences are pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage/abortion, and also sexual violence at the hands of men, whereby institutional male dominance is carried into the private chambers within, between men and women. Sexual violence may be activated against the male sex too, but evidence of this is slight, and manifestations this (or intimate) violence, such as rape and sexual harassment, are still related to women.

Such a reading also traces the oppressive foci that perpetuate women's marginality and reification, for example, traditional heterosexual coupledness that imposes on women a life of wives inferior to their husbands and bound to family care. A further example is different social arrangements, such as the legal system, founded on laws made by and for men and not referring to the female perspective; likewise the economic system, which ensures the retention of economic resources in the male niche and dictates in this light female requirements and a range of women's acts of survival to gain access to economic resources.

While hiding in the pit, the little girl in the novel, is raped repeatedly by the son of farmers who "gave her refuge". The novel begins with the question "How to tell the story?", since the child that became a grandmother in Tel Aviv is now demanded by her granddaughter to share her life-story, for a school project. The grandmother is torn between two inner conflicting forces. On one hand, her desire to tell the story in order to perpetuate it is strong. Yet, the need to protect her granddaughter from the ugly and painful details that might scar her young soul. But there are more difficulties: Grandmother wants to tell the story by using terms out of fiction, such as "Start" and "End", "Hero", "Sequence", while facing her inability to formulate a coherent linear narrative.

The protagonist who has no name in the novel (which makes her an "everywoman" character) realizes that her story is but a "stump-tail". The reason lies in both difficulties - telling put loud experiences

that happened at the age of five when she lacked articulated language skills. That makes it impossible for her to use a conventional linear plot. The other difficulty in revealing her repeatedly brutal rape as a helpless child, is the fact that she had never dared even mentioning it to herself thought the years. Fragmented sentences and broken narratives are all she can use and these are a challenge to the reader so he can recreate a coherent story, including the horrific sexual abuse, as appearing in the grandmother's consciousness.

### The Footsteps of The Farmer's Son.

At five she could count already. Up to ten, and one more. Coming down, closer, his legs heavy, the wooden ladder creaking. The ninth rung is shaky. Ave Maria, Holy Mother, make him stumble and crash. But the farmer's son knows about the weak rung, and he treads carefully. She counts till she runs out of numbers. She doesn't know exactly how old he was. To her he was a man. How could she tell? A breed of giants, mean, deceitful, treacherous. She never wanted to grow up. *And the Rat Laughed*, (2008:pp 25-26)

The footsteps of the farmer's son distinct from other sounds that the girl learn to identify. In order to avoid mentioning the horror experienced in the pit, the grandmother uses synecdoche which replaces the hard core description of the event. Even when she recalls the Polish parents' question to their son: "Stefan, what are you looking for down there?" the reader must complete the missing details, and fill in the "holes" in the story, deciphering the coded language. The following sentences become the testimony by itself, but without mentioning names, dates, and facts:

Jewish skin, so soft, so smooth.

Jewish undies.

Don't you dare open your Jewish mouth, or I'll kill you.

How could she tell now?

Either way, it will end in death (*And the Rat Laughed*, pp. 28).

Five short fragmented sentences can restore in the grandmother's consciousness the entire story of abuse, the use of violence to impose sex, the exploitation of a vulnerable situation, the threat after such a violent act, and the self acceptance of the inability to talk about the horrid experience. In her conversation with her granddaughter, the grandmother who through the act of storytelling is slowly freed from being an emotional mute, decides to excise the "story between her legs", not because she's unaware of the explicit terms. Formal terms to describe the actions of the farmer's son, such as "rape", "sexual abuse", "physical violence", "threats" - are not being pronounced in her testimony to her granddaughter for she needs an entire new emotional vocabulary. The "Explicit Word" will always fail to describe her personal trauma, following years of keeping silent, and burying the events in her own pit. The grandmother's instinct of protecting her granddaughter corresponds with her inability to express her story through any familiar tools, hence the granddaughter's statement to her teacher "She has no story". The granddaughter does not accept the non-structured fragmented language and therefore she is sure her entire school project is a failure.

"I don't have any story", she notes while her grandmother refuses to answer her well prepared questions. Her desire to achieve some historic coherent testimony fails, and the granddaughter can only record a "legend", forced upon her by her grandmother instead. Using previous perceptions of the term "Holocaust Survivor", the granddaughter is desperately seeking some known narratives (including dates, names and numbers) and when these are not provided, she comes to the "logical" conclusion that her grandmother is not a

Holocaust survivor.

The so called "legend" told to the granddaughter by her grandmother is indeed a transformation of the testimony in its familiar pattern. This is the only way the old woman finds to express both the failure to reveal the horrific experience in formal terms, while following the urge to protect her granddaughter by providing a narrative disguised as folk-tale. Her "legend" goes back to the biblical myth of Creation in the book of Genesis. In her new version the rat demanded the gift of laughter from the Creator, because he wanted so much to resemble human beings - "those created by the Divine Image". Choosing a rat as the protagonist enables the old lady to distance herself from the tragic and painful events, as well as using symbolic and metaphoric language that makes it much easier for the recipient to respond to, yet at the same time it still hides the brutal facts.

In this form, the rape story is shifted to the edge of the ongoing narrative, turning to be a sub-plot.

While the girl and the rat in the legend are making their acquaintance, we are being told:

But then, just as the rat was about to make his "rattish" dream come true, another human climbed down underneath the ground. Not a man-cub like the little girl, but one that had also been created in the divine image. He began to bite her, human bites, not rat bites. And digging tunnels inside her, human ones, not rat ones (*And the Rat Laughed*, pp. 87).

The external text-recipient, who merges between the

grandmother's consciousness and the "legend", can now rebuild the story out of its fragments, and finally is able to understand the old lady's unusual testimony about her survival. However, the internal text recipient - the granddaughter herself, does not understand the meaning of things submitted to her, since the mix of genres. However, she is already changing the story, adding also her own interpretation to the original version. Yet, despite her lack of fully comprehending everything, the granddaughter eventually succeeds in recording her grandmother's story. Their conversation becomes an initiation rite instead of a simple testimony exchange.

Through specific female linguistic codes the grandmother passes her personal story, at a crucial turning point of the granddaughter's life - her Bat-Mitzvah celebration - an important Jewish occasion marking a girl coming into womanhood. The granddaughter notes that her grandmother did not buy her a gift, but in fact, her grandmother gives her a very precious one - a story never told to anyone else before. This story of initiation can be decoded only when the girl grows up and fully matures. According to the well-known research of Mircea Eliade, in the process of initiation, boys and girls learn how to function as adults in society where they belong to; what spiritual and cultural values are considered in the eyes of their society; which behavior is required of them; and what are the crucial institutions of their society. Also, they are exposed to tribal traditions - religious myths within society they will live as adults.

Eliade's description refers to the normative hegemony initiation, while the grandmother's story takes a different form: the social traditions and institutions that the grandmother teaches her granddaughter are targeted towards the oppression of minorities (the Holocaust) and women (sexual abuse). The patterns of behavior stemming from her words are survival patterns rather than settling.

The third part of the novel takes us to 2009. Ten years after passing on the "legend" a strange website titled "girl&rat" appears on the Internet. Its mysterious poems, written by an anonymous en-

tity, could well be the grandmother's creation or maybe they were written either by the granddaughter or by one of her classmates who already heard the story via the school project. These replace both the historical event and the chronological narrative. They become the grandmother's strong statement that only art can fully represent her torturous past, while normative terms or genres can never represent her biography. One of the poems, "Large - Small", recalls the little girl being raped, using childish language:

I have a big pit outside me  
 I have a little pit within  
 The big pit is mine  
 The little pit is the Stefan's (*And the Rat Laughed*,  
 pp. 100).

Not only a symbolic description of the sexual abuse is describes in the poems, but also the reality of women's lives in a patriarchal and violent world.

The poem "Male - Female" not only describes the individual experience of the grandmother, but also becomes an existential statement on the distinction between the fate of men and the fate of women. Men are always in a ruling dominant position, while women are controlled by the males, being subjected to men's subordination:

Lucky you're a he-rat  
 And not a she-rat  
 Lucky you're a he-animal  
 And not a she-animal  
 Because only a he-rat  
 Can get out and move on  
 And every she-rat  
 Is prey for the Stefan (*And the Rat Laughed*, pp. 102).

The mysterious narrator in the poems who speaks to the rat,

explains how lucky he is to be born male, since females are only prey for men such as Stephen - the monstrous son of the Polish peasants. Moreover, unlike female, male can always escape.

The title of the poem "Male - Female" corresponds with the story of creation as mentioned in part two of the novel, but it is a separate version, challenging the original one. While the Biblical version of the creation reports that "male and female He created them", the alternative creation in the novel is different. The first couple of mankind is not created as equals. Their relationships are a violent one. Men are predators while women are eternal victims. Turning this version into lyrics undermines the familiar testimony, often given in similar ways in prose. Creating an alternative version describes the experience in non-invasive forma on one hand, while representing the system of female oppression, on the other hand. All in a short, compressed poem, containing a powerful sub-text.

Another example is a riddle poem, imitating the ones often appearing in children's magazines. The riddle places three questions in simple direct words:

Where's the little girl?  
 What little girl?  
 Was there ever a little girl? (*And the Rat Laughed*,  
 pp. 110).

Arising these questions, while at the same time they eliminate themselves, makes it clear to the reader that this is but a parody on the genre of humorous riddles. Although a riddle is often associated with questions directed to children, the first one "Where is the girl?" opens a series of extra "naive" ones.

But the next question "What girl?" makes it clear that this is the statement of woman who was raped and that is why her childhood was ripped off from her. She was never a child since the horror she

had experienced obliterated her being one. The last question undermines the world that was existed before the horror, making it unrecognized and unfamiliar.

The fourth part of the novel, written as science-fiction speculative genre, tells the story of the transformation of the grandmother's personal story into a popular, well known myth called "girl & rat" whose various versions, including its origin, were lost. The protagonist of this part - Lima Energelly, an anthropologist who lives in the future - is trying desperately to uncover them.

In this futuristic part of the novel, the myth is already dangerously reversed and falsified. Stephen the abuser becomes the girl's victim while the girl is seen as a blood thirsty monster. Lima says: "the reversal of roles shocks me". She demands justice and starts her journey to clear the girl's name and reveal the truth behind the popular myth and poems. Although this part is written in the science fiction modus, the fantasy is realistic and helps us to fully understand grandmother's past.

Lima's rejection of the falsified version symbolizes the discontent against the syndrome of "second rape" which is often shown in rape victims cases during court trials. In most cases the victim is presented both in court as in the media as "unworthy", a ritual which promotes a perception that the woman "invited" her own rape, because her behavior was "improper". Choosing the science-fiction modus outlines the future of such a personal story in an indifferent and cruel society. This allows the author to address not only the abuse issue, but also the systemic aspect inherent in every rape case. The personal story, which at the opening of the novel is perceived in the grandmother's mind, becomes common knowledge and from that point it is distorted.

In cases such as this, when society adopts and supports the abuser, it is no surprising that many women, according to wide research, choose not to press any charges against their abusers, especially when the victim is minor. Surprisingly, the priest in part five of the novel,

who finally saved the girl and who represents the patriarchal religion, expresses in his diary his strong stand against such horrendous approach. He sees the abuser as a satanic power and anti-christ and his confession in his diary expresses his utmost disgust with this human beast.

He is especially horrified by the fact that Stephen continues with his normal life, has a family and children and his actions are not punished. In his diary the priest describes how he treated the broken girl and rehabilitated both her tortured body and injured soul.

The priest's character as a man of religion distinct him from the anti-Semitic environment where he lives, and undermines the monotheistic faith. In a world that was regressed to chaos again, he becomes the moral judge of the story. If in the first part of the novel the readers face the consciousness of the grandmother. In its final part the world has become devoid of any morality except for the priest who represent a ray of hope. The priest as a representative of state religion, confronts both his own incompetence to change the world, but also God's incompetence in preventing such horrors. The Lord had created a world in which humans inflict torture upon each other and the priest doubts if the Almighty will ever take responsibility for his damaged creation.

*And the Rat Laughed* makes it clear that the testimony of a woman who experienced sexual abuse cannot be introduced in familiar literary tools and it needs much more innovative ones. That kind of testimony requires new poetics measures, replacing the known formulated patterns. Fragmented sentence, a so called "legend", internet poetry are all different dimensions in a woman's testimony, rejecting the journalistic and legal men's discourse. Although the direct recipients of the testimony - the granddaughter, is unable to fully comprehend it, the reader himself can fill in the gap of its meaning and emotionally understand the core of grandmother's story.

The reader is the one who confronts the horrific abuse and its reifications. The old woman will never forget her past as a victim, yet

although she tries to conceal the facts from her young granddaughter she indeed succeeds in passing the truth to the next generation, teaching her granddaughter how to listen to feminine testimony without being forced into the rigid perception of men's code.

Nava Semel, an internationally acclaimed author from Israel, reached in her novel the highest level of art. She gives the readers an incredible fascinating story, which grips us to our roots, even long after we finish reading it. This is an amazing literary challenge. Picking up each delicate piece back into its place in the puzzle and recreating a shattered world and rebuilding it from scratch.

These unique qualities make *And the Rat Laughed* a rare feminist master-piece.

What helps us to understand Showalter's model of women's writing. See:

Showalter, Elaine (1985). "Feminist criticism in the wilderness, in *New Feminist Criticism*, Pantheon, Pp. 243-270.

Showalter, Elaine (1997). "A Criticism of our own: Autonomy and assimilation in afro\w-american and feminist literary theory", In *Feminisms - An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Robyn R. Warhol & Diane Price Herndl, Pp. 213-233.