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The Politics of Gender and Domestic Power Relations in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*

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Abstract

This paper examines private, domestic, and marital oppression against women in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* (1987). It argues that the novel presents violence against women as a deliberate patriarchal practice, one that men use to secure their authority and to erase women's independent identity. Through close reading of the novel, the paper first looks at how patriarchy shapes women's private lives and teaches both sexes to accept male superiority. It then turns to the figure of the Imam, whose religious and political power makes him the clearest symbol of this system, and shows how the novel ties the idea of manhood to violence and to men's ownership of women's bodies. Finally, it examines the honor code, exposing its double standard: women's sexuality is watched and punished, while men's is left unquestioned, and even this unequal rule bends according to class and power. The paper concludes that the novel reveals a society in which women are valued as bodies rather than minds, and in which oppression at home is inseparable from oppression in public life.

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1. Introduction

Home is supposed to be the safest place in a woman's life. For many women, it is the opposite. Violence committed by husbands, fathers, brothers, and other relatives turns the home into the place where women are most at risk (Baghdadi 3). This violence is rarely random. Faqir argues that the use of violence to protect male privilege has, over centuries, become part of the very structure of patriarchy, so that most women meet it in some form during their lives (Faqir, "Intrafamily Femicide" 65–66). Because this kind of oppression happens in private, and because it is so often treated as normal, it is one of the greatest obstacles to women's freedom and development (Mansour *et al.*)^[72].

Few writers have confronted this reality as boldly as Nawal El Saadawi. Her work has long challenged the religious and political authorities of Egypt and the Arab world, and it has cost her imprisonment and exile. *The Fall of the Imam*, published in 1987, is among her most provocative novels. It follows Bint Allah, the illegitimate daughter of the Imam, the ruler who holds both religious and political power over his people. Through her story and through the voices of the men around her, El Saadawi exposes how a patriarchal society treats women as bodies to be owned and controlled.

This paper argues that the novel presents private and domestic oppression not as a family matter but as a tool that patriarchy uses to keep women subordinate and to deny them an identity of their own. After outlining the paper's method, the discussion begins with the meaning of patriarchy and its effects on women's private lives. It then examines the Imam as a symbol of patriarchal authority and considers how the novel links manhood to violence and to control over women's bodies. The final section turns to the honor code, showing how it punishes women while excusing men, and how its rules change according to class and power.

2. Methodology

This paper takes a qualitative approach, based on close reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*. Passages were chosen for what they reveal about patriarchal attitudes toward women: scenes of domestic and sexual violence, men's statements about women's bodies and minds, and episodes that expose the double standard of the honor code. These passages are analyzed for the beliefs behind them and the social structures that allow them to go unchallenged. The analysis is grounded in feminist literary criticism, which reads literature in light of the power relations between men and women. Patriarchy serves as the central concept, drawing on the definitions offered by Sharawi, Gruenbaum, and Sultana, who describe it as a system of male dominance that keeps women subordinate. Discussions of honor rely on the work of Abu Odeh and Faqir, while Joseph and Aly inform the paper's treatment of identity in Arab societies. El Saadawi's non-fiction, particularly *The Hidden Face of Eve*, is used to connect the novel to her broader critique of the position of women in the Arab world.

The discussion moves from the general to the specific. It begins with the nature of patriarchy and its effects on women's private lives, then turns to the figure of the Imam and the concept of manhood, and finally examines the honor code and how class shapes its application.

3. Private, and Domestic Oppression Against Women:

Patriarchy affects women's private, marital, and domestic lives, in a way that limits their opportunities; it denies them their autonomy and their role as members of societies. It also forces women to pursue self-suppression and drives them to choose a life that is not their own. Arab patriarchal societies believe that women are inferior to men. Therefore, women are perceived as shameful, weak and imperfect (Sharawi ix). In this sense, the literal meaning of patriarchy relates to the "rule by the father(s)" (Gruenbaum 40); the term is also used to describe the relationship between men and women that is based on power. In *Women between Submission and Freedom*, Sharawi defines patriarchy as the "system that favors men over women" [3]. In addition, the term refers to "male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (qtd. in Sultana 2).

Accordingly, in patriarchal societies which favor men and accord them power over women, women must obey and follow men's word and directions. Thus, the relationship between women and men is very similar to that between a master and a slave, and the ideal woman is judged and measured according to the patriarchal standards and criteria, which stipulate that a perfect woman is the weakest and the most submissive one.

Patriarchal societies are meant to follow several methods to instill this power relationship, such as teaching children that boys are stronger than girls and thus granting boys more privileges. These acts are considered, according to El Saadawi, as the first cultural training of masculinity to impose men's hegemony over women and to let women accept men's superiority. Accordingly, the relationship between men and women is based on power and oppression rather than on mutual respect and equality. In *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, El Saadawi expresses her dissatisfaction about this differentiation by stating that:

Whenever this differentiation occurred I used to rebel, sometimes violently, and would ask my mother and father why it was that my brother was accorded privileges that were not given to me, despite the fact that I was doing better than him at school. My father and mother, would say almost in the same voice: 'He is a boy, and you are a girl.' [10]

Indeed, this differentiation and discrimination lead to the isolation and alienation of women; not only from their families and other people surrounding them but also from their selves. Moreover, it may even go beyond alienation from the self to turn women into enemies to themselves. In other words, a woman is turned into a patriarchal individual who completely believes in her subordination to men (Sharawi 6).

Due to this discrimination against women, women's private, marital, and sexual rights have been neglected, if not entirely denied. Although women's rights are mostly ignored by patriarchal societies, women struggle to find and then develop their identity. To a certain extent, this is the case with El Saadawi, one of the compelling, controversial writers of our time. El Saadawi, as a female writer, has had to struggle against two institutions: patriarchy and political dictatorship. As a female writer, she wishes to deconstruct these institutions and to reconstruct the female selfhood and womanhood.

The controversy over Nawal El Saadawi's literary works relies on her provocations of religious and political figures in Egypt and the Arab world. In September 1981, she was imprisoned by the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, and banned from writing. She explained that "danger has been a part of my life ever since I picked up a pen and wrote. Nothing is more perilous than truth in a world that lies" (qtd. in Sharma 10). Following her publication of *The Fall of the Imam* in 1987, she was forced to flee to the United States, especially after being labeled on the blacklist by some Islamic parties (Al-Samman 74). Inequality between the two sexes led her to lose her faith in God; she explained that she wrote a letter to God when she was a young child asking him to explain the reason behind treating women differently. She never got a reply, so she said, "I told him, 'if you are not fair, I'm not ready to believe in you'" (qtd. in Reuters 1-2).

The Fall of the Imam highlights the influence of patriarchal societies in destroying women's life and identity. Thus, El Saadawi criticizes the double standard ideals of Arab/ Islamic society by exposing the superficial understanding of its honor code and the influence of power relations upon its members. Hence, from the beginning of the novel, we learn that women are valueless and even cheaper than animals such as buffalos are more precious to people than women. A man can have four wives but can hardly afford to have one buffalo. Bint Allah is the only character in the novel who dares to oppose and question the Imam and his orders, though other people follow the Imam's orders without questioning or objecting. The culture within the novel resembles El Saadawi's culture, where religious and political figures are beyond contestation and criticism.

4. Imamichal Oppression and the Concept of Manhood:

El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* provides a journey into the inner patriarchal mind that considers women as brainless bodies. This journey gives the insight that the patriarchal societies' mentality is constructed among the destruction of women's identity and the preservation of main men's supremacy over women. The title of *The Fall of the Imam*

presents a thorough explanation of the nature of such societies. The 'Imam' is a title used in the Islamic communities for the religious and political leader. It is very similar to the 'Patriarch' which is the highest-ranking bishops in the Catholic Church. The title 'Imam' is used in the novel to signify religious and political oppression imposed on women as well as on the rest of the community. In that sense, practicing patriarchal (*Imamichal*) authority over societies restrict all the members of the society into a circle of hierarchical powers, in which women are settled at the bottom of the pyramid. El Saadawi presents the connivance of patriarchy and tyranny in order to subjugate, besiege and devalue the female characters. Therefore, the patriarchal power, represented in the Imam, uses sexual violence in order to maintain the patriarchal supremacy and authority on women:

'You are a woman who is unconscious of her body and conscious of her mind at every moment: After that he would yawn as though sleep had pounced on him all of a sudden, and peer at her with eyes full of jealousy, for he was more jealous of her mind than he was of anything else, sometimes trying to take her by force, to rape her, as though through rape he could restore the balance that was lost between them, only to reveal his impotence more and more. (224-225)

In this part, the Imam rapes his wife in order to destruct her independent self-esteem, as sexual violence is seen here as a systematic tool used to destruct, subjugate, and force women to submit to the patriarchal authority. It is worth noting that, women's independent identity and free mentality are considered the most dangerous things that threaten the manhood zone and the hegemony of the Arab man. Therefore, men force women to submit to their male authority. That is to say, sexual, domestic and private oppressions are practiced on the female body to maintain the patriarchal hegemony over women; as nothing can be more challenging to Arab men than the rise of the independent women. This systematic practice is associated with the concept of manhood that is established on the destruction of the female identity. El Saadawi affirms that women's subjugation and oppression are highly connected with a man's manhood as it is frequently associated with the idea of being tough and violent ^[3]. Consequently, violence against women is a positive indication in some Arab societies as it is associated with the construction of the manhood. In "Changing Attitudes toward Women in Egypt," Suleiman claims that, "aggressiveness is much admired in the male but highly disliked in females" (357).

As I delve into analyzing the concept of manhood and womanhood in such patriarchal societies, I assume that for a long time, the essential formation of the manhood's center is primarily based on the destructive methodology claimed to distort the female selfhood and womanhood. Therefore, rebellious feminist writers and activists seek to establish an independent, genuine female identity that reflects their profound attributes.

Moreover, the traditionally constructed womanhood is associated with weakness and submission (El Saadawi 3). Thus, the Imam points out that he is "jealous of [his wife's] mind than he was of anything else," (225) which indicates that according to that culture women are not expected to be independent or intellectual. Such perception arouses the stereotypical image of women as weak and ignorant. In the chapter 'Coming to My Senses after the Ecstasy is Over', the Imam expresses his desire to own brainless women: "he said,

'and the only thing I long for now is to open the skull of this woman and crush her brain so that, like all the ideal women, she will become an invisible body possessing nothing else except a womb'" (168). This quote reflects the patriarchal authority that conceives women as a mere womb. The patriarchal communities think of women as a means to satisfy not only their masculinity but also their sexual desires and gratification. According to the novel, the image of women as brainless is associated with their sexual organs. This explains the Imam's desire to own Bint Allah's body without her brain. The Imam's desire to crush Bint Allah's brain illustrates the novel society's rejection of strong and independent women. This also reveals his intention to own her body violently, which is also an act of sexual abuse. In that sense, in *Women Between Submission and Freedom: An Interpretation of Social and Political Misogyny*, Sharawi clarifies that Arab communities do not consider the strong woman as a real woman since they deny her the right to defend her gender (X). The Philosopher's complaint, after his wife left him, about only loving "men or women without breasts who give birth to books instead of children" (146), manifests that intellectual and educated women have been deprived from their feminine identity.

According to the Arab culture represented in the novel, the underestimation of women relates to that the characteristics of femininity are seen as incompatible with the intellectual qualities; an intellectual woman is not expected to be able to perform her sexual and reproductive roles. Since women's weakness is associated with their physical attributes, these attributes are socially classified as inferior to male ones. Consequently, all forms of oppression against women in Arab societies are typically imposed according to this classification; inferiority justifies oppression.

In an ironical conversation among a group of men about a spacewoman, El Saadawi reveals the patriarchal societies' belief about women and their conception, in which women are restricted to their reproductive roles; their possession of sexual organs is incompatible with their ability to possess intellectual faculty, skill, and proficiency:

'They have even sent a woman too!' The first man looked even more astounded than he had before and broke in again, repeating woman?' The man who had been talking nodded his head with the air of someone who knows all about it and said, 'I swear by God that it is true, and that they have truly sent a woman? But the first man remained sceptical. 'A woman: he said scornfully. 'Tell us what she looked like. Did she have two breasts like our women here, like your wife and my wife? And did she travel alone without her man, without a male companion?' And the second man said that she went alone, completely alone, without any male companion and she didn't even wear a veil since there are no men on the moon. (139)

This conversation emphasizes the patriarchal belief in the female identity is confined to the domain of sex. The satirical question about the body nature of the woman who is willing to visit the moon symbolizes these men's beliefs in women's incapability to accomplish such an intellectual action. It also reflects how these men think of their women as only being sex machines.

In fact, the degradation of women's value in such societies implies that women are cheaper than animals: "A woman turning a water-wheel while the buffalo rests? They said, here we follow the laws of supply and demand. A buffalo costs more on the market than a woman, so a man can have four wives, but he can only afford one buffalo" (17). El Saadawi

rejects the lack of respect that women endure, as being treated as goods subject to the male demands. Thus, women are considered submissive because they are valueless.

By the same token, the female body has always been the main cultural engine behind defying women's identity and imposing an epistemic blockade on women. That is to say, the relationship between women's body and identity is interrelated, as patriarchal societies attempt to victimize women's body to assassinate women's identity. Hence, the social purpose behind destroying and replacing women's independent identity with an inauthentic identity is meant to subjugate women in order to meet the social prejudiced traditions. Therefore, patriarchal societies have always tended to control women's body. In chapter 'Proof of Innocence,' the Imam expresses his wish to control women's bodies as a way to control their sexuality and identity:

Nothing is more important than ownership of women's bodies, for men should never have any doubts about the origin of their progeny. The father of every child should be known to ail, and legitimate children separated from those born of unknown fathers. Since fatherhood depends on the father's consent, without this consent a child has no rights and all he can do is pray, fast, and repent of his sins, and if the child is a girl her sin is double that of the boy, but she only has half the rights he is permitted to enjoy. (180-181)

The Imam, like the other men in the novel, intends to suppress any female attempt towards the formation of independent identity. This indicates that women's body is the most interesting side of femininity. Thus, throughout the novel, the relationship between men and women is based on men's sexual pleasure that is by turn based on the subversion of a woman's identity and independence.

The Great Writer explains that The Imam does not actually care about women's mentality and passion; what in fact concerns him is women's body: "He did not care about women's heart and mind, and the woman, said to me, body and nothing else" [82-83]. In that sense, El Saadawi explains that "from a very long time, social conditions have imposed women to be as a body only and this lead to destroy herself and her mind" [12].

Furthermore, women's sexuality, in the Arab societies, is given great importance and placed under men's guardianship and surveillance due to traditional association of women's sexuality with the family's and society's honor. It is believed that women can destroy their family's reputation when engaging in any premarital sexual activity. Therefore, women are considered a burden on their families until they get married. In this context, Faqir elucidates that "girls and women can sully their family's honor and destroy their reputation until they get married and become the responsibility of their husbands" [69]. Thus, in order to preserve the family's honor, women's body and sexuality are victimized and suppressed through several oppressive acts, such as honor-killing, female circumcision, and forced and early marriages.

Nowadays, modern, and civilized life is neither able to change the ancestors' doctrine nor change the younger generation's inherited mentality. Women are still victimized for the sake of family honor's security. In "Learning to be Arab: Growing up in London" Aly argues that "[B]ecoming an 'Arab man' or 'Arab woman' is part of a project of cultural survival and social intelligibility, and that Arab identity is an instrumental reaction to being hailed and subjected by social institutions, hegemonic gendered norms" [70].

That is to say, Arab men and women's identities are constructed to accommodate with society's beliefs and gender norms, which lead to women's isolation and alienation. As in the Arab society, that does not support individuality; the value of one's self mainly depends on the social criticism and respect rather than one's morals. In "Patriarchy and development in the Arab world," Joseph elucidates that:

In contrast to the individualist, autonomous, bounded, contractual self valued in the West, both women and men in some Arab societies are encouraged to see themselves in relationship to critical others, especially in their families. The boundary between one's sense of self, and other people, is relatively fluid. [18]

Both Arab men and women, acquire an inauthentic identity that suits their community rather than their self. Therefore, El Saadawi emphasizes the importance of independent thinking for women, as women's identities should be established based on women's sense of themselves. El Saadawi also explains that "losing personality and independence will turn [the woman] to be a toy and a victim of patriarchy". [12]

5. The Concept of Honor Patriarchal Oppression:

The concept of true honor contradicts patriarchal practices that persecute women. Arab patriarchal societies ignore men's sexual violation, while placing women's sexuality under the patriarchal siege and restraining their sexual practices. The concept of honor is only applied to women, in which the sexual discrimination against women creates a contradictory pattern of social morals. Thus, a law that is not applied to all society's members is an unfair law, yet, it is an instrument to enforce the persecution of the weaker. In this context, In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi explains that: True honor is, fundamentally against transforming a human being into an instrument, or an object, or a commodity for sale. The marriage customs and laws followed in our patriarchal and class society are the negation of true honor, for they have transformed women into merchandise, which can be bought in exchange for a dowry and sold at the price of an alimony. [51]

Moreover, in *The Fall of the Imam*, chapter 'Statutory Treachery,' El Saadawi emphasizes the difference of infidelity between men and women, expressing that the infidelity of men is not as social stigma as of women. Adding insult to injury, women are forced to veil their husbands' infidelity. The female narrator expresses the bitterness of such form of oppression indicating that "treachery of men is allowed by divine law, as God Himself has said. But the treachery of women is inspired by Satan" (84). The Great Writer, in the same novel, believes that his mother's silence is the reason for his father's frequent infidelity:

I watched you every day as you continued to wash his clothes, rubbing away at the yellow stains, seeing them with your own eyes, smelling the other woman in them with your own nose but you kept silent. If you had said something just once, if you had refused to wash the dirt off his trousers stained with the stain of another woman, or if you had gone to another man, then perhaps what was wrong with the world would have been partly righted, or would have become more bearable. The treachery of my father remained grafted to our life and you did nothing to cut it off before it invaded everything (118-119).

Ironically, women's conduct and sexuality are publicly monitored, while men's conduct is free from any form of

surveillance. A man's female relative's conduct is watched by other men in the society, and if a man does not kill his female violator, he will lose his social standing in front of the society. Having this in mind, the motive behind Mahmoud's persistence to purge his honor is socially justified. Abu Odeh elucidates that "[m]ale performance is equally sanctioned by penalties. If a man doesn't intervene by killing his sister or wife once she has shamed him, he suffers a loss of his gender: he is no longer a man (therefore, castrated, a "bottom," a woman)" (919).

The patriarchal restrictions do not limit men's sexuality as they do with women. In other words, it is women's sexuality that is consistently at stake. In *The Fall of the Imam*, Bint Allah claims that no one knows that she is the illegitimate daughter of the Imam because the sexual activity of the Imam has never been questioned, she says that: "[n]obody knew that the Imam was my father only my mother and my dog Marzouk knew he was my father. It was Marzouk who saw my mother kneeling on the ground, stifling her sobs, and it was Marzouk who saw my father slipping away in the dark" [21].

That is to say, nobody knows about the Imam's sexual deviation for two reasons. First, he is a man, and men's sexuality is socially not monitored. Second, the Imam is the most prominent religious and political figure in the community, and no one dares to question his personal life. These factors are very essential to the patriarchal system. El Saadawi expresses this in *The Fall of the Imam* stating that "a father can question his son, but on no account can a son question his father. To obey God is an unbreakable law and without obedience to father and husband there can be no obedience to God" [35].

By the same token, *The Fall of the Imam*, while tracing the sexual violence question, brings (men and women) together under the patriarchal (*Imamichal*) oppression. The inauthentic identity of men and women the novel presents is attained through the oppression and tyrannical practices of the patriarchal political system against the individuals in the society. Bint Allah recognizes this and explains that the people in her country: "looked at [her] silently for a while. Then, they pursed their lips and said, 'We have sworn eternal loyalty to him. He is our master, the Imam. God has visited him many a time and so he knows his word better than anyone else'" [19]. Most importantly is the fact that, Arab men have proved to be weak and incapable of challenging the norms and traditions imposed on them by their patriarchal societies. Unlike Arab men, Arab women have proved their capability of challenging the multiple discriminations against them and the various restrictions on their personal and public life.

However, in some exceptional cases, men are obliged to go against their patriarchal system, traditions, norms and values due to social relations, especially those who belong to a lower class. The concepts of honor and dignity are treated differently from the way they are treated by people who are from other classes because the social commitment toward the public life varies from one class to another. Consequently, upper class people are less concerned with combining honor with sexual transgression. Thus they seem to have more sexual freedom than people from other classes due to being less monitored by the public.

In "Patriarchy and Development in the Arab World," Joseph explains that transformation can be defined as 'neopatriarchy' [14]. Faqir adds that the relationships between people in Arab societies are not only influenced by gender, "but also by

class, clan and proximity to the regime. Such relations are based on the subordination of the disadvantaged and the disfranchised" [67]. In *The Fall of the Imam*, The Chief of Security who is married to the State Minister's daughter, a man who is higher in rank than him, reacts unexpectedly when knowing that his wife is not virgin: on the night of our wedding the bridal sheets remained as white as buffalo milk with not the slightest drop of virginal blood, and I said to myself, Somebody must have taken her before I did, but God will compensate me for my loss. The honor of the Minister is more important than my honor and should be given precedence. Besides, God is all-merciful and forgiving and I cannot pretend to place myself above Him. [43]

Being originally from a lower class, according to the patriarchal system, The Chief of Security should return his bride to her family to be killed by them in order to purge their honor. However, knowing that his bride's father is more powerful than him, he decides to remain silent, not because of his morals, but because of the class and power relations.

6. Conclusion

The Fall of the Imam shows a society in which oppressing women is not an exception but a rule built into everyday life. From childhood, girls learn that boys come first, and both sexes learn to accept this as natural. In marriage, women are beaten, raped, silenced, and reduced to their bodies. The Imam, who stands at the top of this system, wants a woman with a womb but no mind, and the men around him share his view that an intelligent, independent woman is a threat.

The novel also makes clear that this oppression rests on a connection between violence and manhood. To be a man in this society is to be tough, to dominate, and to control the women in one's family. The honor code reinforces this. It places women's sexuality under constant watch and punishes any sign of transgression, while men's infidelity goes unquestioned, even when the man is the Imam himself. Yet the code is not applied equally even among men. As the Chief of Security's silence about his wife shows, class and proximity to power can override honor entirely, which exposes the code as an instrument of control rather than a moral standard.

Taken together, these practices aim at one result: the destruction of women's independent identity and its replacement with one that serves patriarchal interests. By bringing this into view, El Saadawi challenges readers to see domestic oppression for what it is. It is not a private misfortune but a public system, and it cannot be separated from the wider political and religious authority that sustains it.

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