

**THE SITUATION OF THE WOMAN IN A PATRIARCHAL
AFRICAN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF NAWAL EL
SAADAWI'S GOD DIES BY THE NILE AND WOMAN AT
POINT ZERO.**

BY

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**A thesis submitted to the Department of English, Kwame Nkrumah University
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DECLARATION

I certify that I have personally undertaken this study under supervision. I also certify that this dissertation has not been partially or wholly presented by anybody else for any degree.

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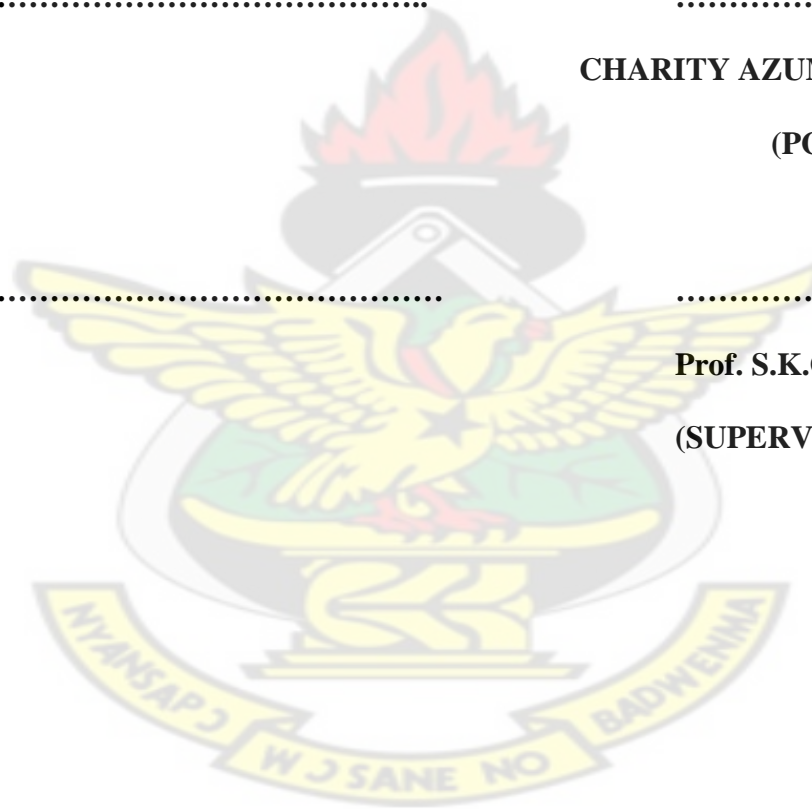
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ABSTRACT

A critical review of the existing literature on Africa clearly shows that women occupy an inferior position in society. Having a voice in society is often something that women in the Western world take for granted. However, in many African countries, especially the Islamic ones, the majority of women remain silent. First World Feminists have contended that while it is true that colonial history has taken advantage of African traditions to locate the place of women in a subservient position, it is also true that the trend has not changed even after independence. As a result of this, the transfer of power to national elites merely ensured the continuation of colonial structures benefiting the male national elite. Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer, believes however that even though women occupy an inferior position in traditional society, Islamic societies manipulate the precepts of Islam in order to oppress and restrict women. Further, she seeks to highlight the deeply rooted teachings of equality in the Quran and encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching based on the Quran, *hadith* (sayings of Muhammed), and *sharia*. (law) She does this with the aim of creating a more equal and just society. The study found that even though women occupy an inferior position in traditional society, Islamic societies manipulate the precepts of Islam in order to oppress and restrict women. Besides, the study concluded that patriarchy, a cultural constraint in God Dies by the Nile and Woman at Point Zero emerges as a system with political, economic, social, cultural, and psychological manifestations bound together by underlying class dynamics.

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DEDICATION

To He who breathed life into me, You remain my father.

To the late Mr. and Mrs. Issaka, and Mr. and Mrs. Anuseh, thank you for sowing the seed.

To the two men in my life whose love has never waned, Vincent, and Raphael, I love you.

And to Manuella, you heal the wound in my heart, you are God sent.



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INTRODUCTION

Having a voice in society is often something that women in the Western world take for granted. On the other hand, in many African countries, the majority of women remain silent. This is because traditional African societies have cultural and traditional practices that hold them together and act as their codes of conduct and this has been compounded by social, economic, political and cultural structures built on assumptions that are deeply rooted in our societies. These assumptions are taken by many women as well as men to be part of the order of things, a part of the landscape rather than a man made edifice built upon gender oppression. Through centuries of male chauvinism, the woman has come to accept the misconception that: “To be a woman is a natural infirmity and every woman gets used to it. To be a man is an illusion, an act of violence that requires no justification.”¹ She has therefore become the passive sacrificial lamb, always ready to be sacrificed on the altar of man’s bloated ego. The situation has been compounded by religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Consequently, postcolonial feminists have had to contend with two obvious realities: the women’s respect for, and obedience to their communities’ traditional demands and the subservience to the dictates of fundamentalist religious rules.

Disgruntled at the patriarchal depiction of culture by their male counterparts, African women writers have learned to use writing to make their voices heard on their own terms. They have used writing as a tool of communication to bring to the attention of their own people and, by extension, to the wider readership aspects of culture which are of most concern to women but which have not been addressed at all or insufficiently

addressed. Their writings provide the literary spaces where questions on women are posed, discussed, and, in some cases, answered. Yet, from Bessie Head to Buchi Emecheta to Mariama Bâ, many African Women Writers and some men like to declare that they are not feminists.² However, nothing could be more feminist than the forceful articulation in their writings of deep preoccupations with, and attempts at explaining the experiences and fate of women in patriarchal African societies.

Nawal El Saadawi, the Arab world's most well-known feminist is one of the writers whose writings attempt at explaining the experiences and fate of women in patriarchal African societies. Her works reflect cultural contexts where rape and female sacrifice embody the violence of a social structure that has established virility as its norm for manhood. Such a concern may also serve as a way of pointing the finger at the pain and suffering of muslim and other third-world women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last three decades, scholarly attention to gender issues in the Middle East and North Africa has been focused on a quest to understand Islamic femininity. That is, what it is and how it is made and regulated with muslim women's oppression, the question of the *hijab*, and the practice of female genital mutilation attracting most of the scrutiny. Writers such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Fatima Mernissi and Nurridin Farah among others have attempted to explain this in their writing.

The Sand Child by Tahar Ben Jelloun is a tale of a muslim father in the city of Marrakech who, feeling publicly humiliated, especially in his brothers' eyes for having produced only seven daughters, decides to raise his next child who turns out to be yet another girl as a boy, then as a man. A victim of her father's aggression, Zahra is seen as the embodiment of the gendering process prevalent in North Africa, one in which sexual violence marks the very origin of gender itself. To illustrate this idea, the novel introduces us to the dramatic story of Antar, another tale of a woman disguised as a man, a ruthless warrior chieftain and an exemplary man of legendary courage. What is most striking in this story is the way in which masculinity is hallowed at the expense of femininity.

The topic of male-female dynamics in muslim society is one of the main issues covered in the book, Beyond the Veil, by Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi covers a wide range of issues, all of which pertain to the female position in a muslim society. Though much of the data comes from Moroccan society, the general subject matter attempts to describe all muslim society. This book has two parts, one of which focuses on the traditional view of women, and the second, which focuses on a more modern and changing view of women's place in society. The book contrasts views on female sexuality and one view is that of Imman Ghazali, and the other view is that of Sigmund Freud. Ghazali claims that the female sexuality is active, and equal to the male sexuality. Therefore, females need to be restrained in order to prevent fitna (chaos) in the social order. Freud, on the other hand, sees female sexuality as passive, and therefore masochistic. Ironically, both theories attempt to prove the same point that women, as uncontrollable beings, are destructive to the social order and need to be restrained.

Part two of the book starts out with interviews and data collection from Moroccan society. This information is mostly focused around sexual desegregation. Mernissi's conclusions basically say that the traditional/older generation is more sexually desegregated, while the more modernized/younger generation encourages desegregation. She also points out that rural societies are more sexually traditional than urban societies.

Nurridin Farrah discusses the status of women in a country balancing traditions and Islamic values in From a Crooked Rib. Farrah tells the story of Ebla who her grandfather has announced will marry a man she has not met. She escapes to live with her cousin who also sells her off. She escapes again to seek equality but she learns that to be a woman means little in comparison to a man in her society. She questions her religion and the world around her. Farrah concludes that the world be a happier place if we treated each other equally something he thinks religion does not exactly help.

In So Long a Letter, Bâ displays well the troubles of muslim women and a key element in the book is polygamy as practised in the muslim African world. She adds that most muslim women are brought up to accept the notion that men are polygamous by nature. She criticizes the situation that marriage is contracted not on love but on the basis of man's financial status and that once the Islamic religion sanctions polygamy, they have the right to marry two, three, or even four wives. Bâ concludes that the response to this decision taken by men in such societies and sanctioned by religion takes two forms. The first is a reluctant surrender and a decision to bear the burden while lamenting and exposing social and other kinds of

ills or categorically refusing to shoulder the burden and a determination to opt for freedom through various means.

For Eugene Hillman in Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches, (1975) men and women do not necessarily look at polygamy as a sign of women's degradation. He argues that many young African brides, whether Christians or Muslims or otherwise, would prefer to marry a married man who has already proved himself to be a responsible husband. He concludes that many African wives urge their husbands to get a second wife so that they do not feel lonely.³

An Iranian newspaper, the *Ittalaat (daily), Tehran*, (No. 13114) reiterates Hillman's view. It states that a man with his three wives approached the Matrimonial Tribunal to seek their permission to marry a fourth wife. All three existing wives recommended and approved the intended marriage. The reporter of *Ittalaat* approached the mother of the wife-to-be, to investigate the background of this incident. He learnt that in that village there were 2000 women compared to 400 males (half of them still below 14 years of age). The would-be 'Mother-in-law' preferred to give her daughter to a man already having three wives to the alternative of keeping her unmarried for the rest of her life.⁴

Professor Russel, an American scholar adds his voice to the polygamous nature of African men when he says in a conference on the Family Rights at the University of California that: "Marriage to one wife and being tied down to only one wife for the whole span of life is unnatural and unreasonable...man ought to accept the law of more

than one wife as an important factor in the struggle for the survival"⁵(Ittilaat, Tehran, No. 3104).

But Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian writer thinks otherwise. It is her belief that even though women occupy an inferior position in traditional society, Islamic societies manipulate the precepts of Islam in order to oppress and restrict women. Therefore, she aims in her writing to demystify the belief that the Islamic religion sanctions submissiveness in the face of injustice. She seeks to liberate the woman from the oppressive rule of the male and the enervating cultural norms of a patriarchal social system "with a woman's eye view."⁶ She, like all other African feminists, directs her missiles at patriarchy, "the rule of the fathers"⁷which imposes male superiority on womankind in the name of religion.

Moreover, in her writings, she advocates gender equality, and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. More importantly, she seeks to highlight the deeply rooted teachings of equality in the Qu'ran and encourages a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching based on the Qu'ran, *hadith* (sayings of Mohammed), *Sunnah* (actions of Prophet Mohammed) and *Sharia*. (law) She does this with the view of creating a more equal and just society. People frequently attribute women's difficulties in entering the public life, their lesser numbers in the workforce in the Arab world as compared to some other regions, and the customs of veiling and of separation of the sexes to unfair and sexist ideas inherent in the Islamic religion. It is for this reason that some critics of El Saadawi have incorrectly represented her arguments as an

attack on Islam. While she does not exonerate muslims from mistreating women, she does not consider Islam to be the source of the problem. In The Hidden Face of Eve, (1980) Saadawi states:

The reasons for the low status of women in our societies, and the lack of opportunities for progress afforded to them, are not due to Islam, but rather to certain economic and political forces . . . making a concerted attempt to misinterpret religion and utilize it as an instrument of fear, oppression and exploitation.⁸

Alamin Mazrui and Judith Abala also speak of this issue in their article, "Sex and Patriarchy: Gender Relations" in God Dies by the Nile in Research in African Literature Journal. (1997) They quote El Saadawi as saying:

Islam is not exceptional in having transformed women into slaves of their men. Judaism and Christianity subjected women to the same fate. As a matter of fact, the oppression of women exercised by the temple and the church has been even more ferocious than by Islam. Changes in the situation were the result of social and economic development and the weakening grip of religion.⁹

Saadawi attacks the ways in which muslims adopted cultural practices that predated Islam or are derived perhaps from Byzantine or Sassanian culture such as stricter veiling, and the extraordinary valuation given to virginity, leading, to a male-dominated society. It is this lacuna that this thesis addresses by analyzing two of the fictional works of Nawal El Saadawi.

Out of El Saadawi's novels and short stories, Woman at Point Zero (1975), and God Dies by the Nile (1985) have been selected for this project. The texts selected for the study are two of the important works of Saadawi which depict the hardships of muslim

women in Egypt. By addressing women's issues such as clitoridectomy, marriage and polygamy, Saadawi has not only created a "room of her own," in the Virginia Wolfe sense of a space of creativity, but has more significantly made a forcible entry into writing, hitherto the preserve of men.

Chapter One of the thesis deals with a brief biographical sketch of the writer, a summary of the plots of her texts and an analyses of the concept of culture. In Chapter Two, Islam and its contribution to the restoration of women's rights is discussed. Chapter Three explores beliefs in the subservient role that muslim women are expected to play in marriage and Chapter Four discusses the power structures that nurture the cultural biases and gender inequalities. Chapter Five analyses the the characters in the novels, and the conclusion sums up the arguments made.

OBJECTIVES

The study attempts at:

Providing a fair evaluation of what the Islamic religion and cultural practices contribute or fail to contribute toward the restoration of the woman's dignity and rights in Islamic communities.

Finding out whether the Islamic religion sanctions submissiveness in the face of injustice.

Finding the experiences and fate of women in a patriarchal society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions are of concern to the study:

Is the woman considered inferior to man according to Islamic doctrine?

Is the woman's consent important in Islamic marriage?

Is polygamy a religious obligation in Islam?

Female genital mutilation: is it a religious obligation?

How is power, sex and religion related in patriarchal societies?

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

In today's world where terrorism and Islam have become almost synonymous, it has become important more than ever to delve into an Islamic community and to clear some peoples mind on the negative perception of women attributed to Islam.

Again, in the wake of the proliferation of religious bodies in Ghana, the study educates people especially women on the deceptive nature of some people who use religion as a bait to exploit and to perpetuate injustice to mankind.

The study further seeks to educate all people that culture is dynamic and that it is necessary we do away with that part of our culture which is outdated and dehumanizing to humankind.

Finally the study seeks to implore stakeholders to strife for education for women since that could in a way liberate women from some cultural practices.

METHODOLOGY

A brief review of how women were treated in Egypt and elsewhere in general in previous civilizations and religions, especially those which preceded Islam will be carried out. A focus on the position of Islam regarding the status of women will then be analyzed. A content analysis of the texts which are set in a muslim society will be carried out. A conclusion will then be drawn on what Islam and culture contribute or fail to contribute toward the restoration of the woman's dignity and rights



ENDNOTES

¹ Tahar Ben Jelloun, The Sand Child. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1985) p.70.

² Lorraine Code, Eccyclopeadia of Feminist Theories. (New York: Routledge, 2000) p.12.

³ Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches. (New York: Orbis Books, 1975) p. 88.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_ethics.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_ethics.

⁶ Ginet McConnel, "Language and Gender" Language: the Socio cultural Contex. (New Mayor: Cambridge university press, 1990) p 91

⁷Carole J. Sheffield, "Sexual Terrorism" Woman: A Feminist Prespective. (Mountain View: Mayfeild Publication Co.,1984) p.3.

⁸Nawal El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab world. (London: Zed Books, 1980) p.41.

⁹Alamin Mazrui and Judith Abala, "Sex and Patriarchy: Gender Relations" in God Dies by the Nile: Research in African Literature. Journal, Vol. 28 issue 3, 1997 p. 17.

CHAPTER ONE

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF AUTHOR, SYNOPSES OF TEXTS AND DEFINITION.

This chapter explores a biography of the writer, a summary of the plots of the texts and an analysis of the concept of culture.

Born on October 27, 1931, in Kafr Tahla, a village in the Egyptian delta north of Cairo, to El Sayed, a local education director, and Zeinab, a homemaker, Nawal El Saadawi developed the interest in writing at the age of six. Although her family held progressive views and El Saadawi and her sisters were educated, she was forced to undergo a traditional clitoridectomy when she was six years old, a memory recounted in El wajh el ary lilma'ra el arabeya (1977; *The Hidden Face of Eve*). After secondary school, she enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Cairo, where she was one of only a handful of female students seeking a degree as a medical doctor. She specialized in psychiatry and received her degree in 1955 but she practised both general medicine and psychiatry. That year she married a fellow physician, Ahmed Helmy, and had a daughter, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1956. In 1958 she began working for Egypt's Ministry of Health in Cairo and was eventually named the department's Director of Health Education.

El Saadawi began writing at thirteen with the novel Memoirs of a Female Child Named Su'ad. She wrote short stories while she was a university student, and continued writing fiction in the 1960s. In the 1970s, her writing shifted entirely to gender issues. She

became known as the most outspoken critic of the oppression of women and the first to write openly about aspects of female sexuality such as clitoridectomy, incest, prostitution, and the negative effects of the cult of virginity. She addressed these issues in an uncompromising manner. She has written novels, non-fiction studies of women and men, short stories, essays, and plays, which have been translated into at least ten languages. Her works were banned in Egypt and she was therefore forced to publish in Beirut. Soon, her career shifted from state funded medical work to full-time research, writing and activism. When she published Women and Sex, (1972) she was removed from her post as Director of Health Education, and from her editorship of Health Magazine. The banning of Women and Sex followed. Having been relieved of her post, she had more time to devote to research on neurosis in women, and this work led her to the women's prison in Qanatir, where Woman at Point Zero takes place. Since then, she has written a number of fiction and nonfiction works, including her most popular nonfiction work, The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World. El Saadawi became an advisor on women's programs to the United Nations in Addis Ababa in 1978, and then moved to the Lebanese office of the United Nations in 1979 with regional responsibility for women's programs.

In addition to her writing, in 1982 El Saadawi founded the Arab Woman's Solidarity Association (AWSA), which holds seminars that discuss gender relations and the status of women. The group organized a conference, sent a delegation to the United Nations International Conference on Women, and participated in debate and activism within Egypt concerning the proposed amendments of the laws of Personal Status. As an

undeclared war between Islamist militants and the government heightened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, El Saadawi's organization was made illegal and closed. The charge was that the AWSA had broken the rules limiting political activity on the part of non-governmental organizations after issuing a statement contrary to the government's position during the Gulf War. El Saadawi received threats, and was obliged to hire an armed guard at her residence. She continued to write, but her feminist activism was curtailed to some degree as a complex backlash against feminism occurred. In 1981 Anwar Sadat, the then former President of Egypt, rounded up political dissidents, both male and female, and imprisoned them for their beliefs. El Saadawi was one of the women held at Qanatir Women's Prison. Her incarceration was the basis for her memoir, *Mozakerati fi signel nissa* (1983; Memoirs from the Women's Prison). Due to political persecution and threats on her life, she left Egypt in 1993 and accepted a post at Duke University. Since that time she has held positions at many prestigious colleges and universities worldwide, including Duke, Cairo University, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, the Sorbonne, Georgetown, Florida State University, and the University of California, Berkeley.

El Saadawi has since returned to Cairo, where she lives with her third husband, Sherif Hetata, a physician and the translator of many of her works. In 2001 a fundamentalist Islamic group sued to annul Hetata and El Saadawi's marriage on the grounds that her heresy was causing harm to his soul. The case was eventually dismissed, but it illustrates the continued antagonism toward El Saadawi and her writings. Even so, she does not shy away from difficult or taboo subject matter. Her works ask questions about

the meaning behind relationships between males and females, gender identity, religion, and the treatment of women in Egyptian society. She attacks fundamentalist religious groups of all types, pointing out that these extremist groups have beliefs that are based on a distrust of women and they blame women for the sins of mankind. In her works under study, El Saadawi advocates the separation of religion and state, the termination of the practice of female circumcision, and the recognition of women's rights to control their own bodies and destinies. Other works by Saadawi include: Women and Sex, her first published work, *Emra'atan fi emra'ah* (Two Women in One), *Ughniyat al-atfal al-da'iriyah* (The Circling Song), *El gha'aeb* (Searching) *Suqut al-Imam* (The Fall of the Imam), *Ganat wa iblis* (The Innocence of the Devil), A Daughter of Isis and Walking through Fire. For the purpose of this study the synopses of the plots of the two novels would be provided.

The novel God Dies by the Nile (1985) chronicles the never-ending struggles of the peasants of the town *Kafr El Teen*, represented by Zakeya and her family against the predatory conduct of a village mayor and his sycophant cohorts--Sheikh Zahran, the Chief of the Guard, Haj Ismail, the village barber, and Sheikh Hamzawi, the Imam of the village. When the story opens, we meet Zakeya, an agricultural labourer who is working on the soil by the Nile River. We soon meet her family of poor peasants, as well as the privileged ruling class of the village. Four years earlier, her son Galal had gone off to fight at Suez, and had never been heard of again until he resurfaced at the latter part of the story. Her brother, Kafrawi, a widower, and his two daughters, Nefissa and Zeinab, live with her. The four of them work in the fields, as does everyone else in

the village, until a summons comes from the mayor that Nefissa should work in his house as a maid so that he will pay the family an almost unimaginable sum per month. Kafrawi urges his daughter to accept the offer and Nefissa goes. At the mayor's house, she is molested and raped by the mayor. When the people of the town find that she is pregnant, the mayor murders an innocent man from the village, Elawu, and frames the girl's father up for the murder. Kafrawi is thus arrested, charged with murder and imprisoned. Meanwhile Nefissa gives birth, abandons the baby and runs away. The mayor next turns his eyes on Zeinab, and the whole painful cycle begins again. Galal returns and finds that Zeinab is working for the mayor. Knowing Galal for what he is, (man of justice) the mayor and his group frame him up. He is arrested, charged with stealing and subsequently imprisoned. Hurt by these injustices, Zakeya takes hold of a hoe, goes to the mayor's house and butchers him to death. She is arrested and imprisoned.

There is also Fatheya, the strong-willed wife of the leader of the village mosque. This lady is forced to marry the sheik of the mosque who is impotent. Fatheya, who has been longing for a child, chances on the baby Zakeya has abandoned and takes it home. For taking the innocent baby, she is stoned to death by the people in the village.

The other novel, Woman at Point Zero, (1975) opens with the author's account of her efforts to obtain an interview with a woman prisoner whose unique demeanor fascinates and troubles the prison doctor, the warden, and eventually, the author. The woman, Firdaus, a prostitute, whose name means 'paradise' in Arabic, is soon to be executed for

murdering a man who had proclaimed himself her pimp. The prison doctor and warden inform the unnamed author (El Saadawi) that Firdaus will not speak to her and she has even refused to sign an appeal to the President that would commute her death sentence to life imprisonment. The author is deeply troubled by Firdaus' refusal to be interviewed. She is then abruptly summoned to Firdaus' cell where she listens to the prisoner's tale.

Firdaus' tale explains her hatred of men, arising from the male oppression she has experienced throughout her life. As a child, her father beat his wife, and neglected his female children, eating when the rest of the family had no food. Without explanation, her clitoris is excised, according to the custom known as female circumcision, and she is no longer allowed to roam the fields, but expected to stay at home, cleaning and cooking. She is sexually molested by her uncle, whom she nonetheless loved dearly. Eventually she follows her uncle to the city of Cairo where he studies at the religious university, al-Azhar.

Firdaus is sent to school where her love of reading leads her to further understand the domination of men throughout history. Her aunt and uncle view her as a useless burden after her graduation, and marry her off to the elderly Sheikh Mahmoud. He has an oozing tumor on his chin, and is physically revolting to Firdaus, but he insists on having sex with her and scrutinizes her constantly. Sheikh Mahmoud, realizing that Firdaus' family will not intercede, beats her more severely and she runs away into the streets.

The owner of a coffee-house offers her temporary shelter, but eventually abuses her as well, locking her in his flat, raping her, and sending in his cronies to have intercourse with her. She escapes, once again, into the streets, meeting a woman, Sharifa Salah el Dine. Sharifa teaches Firdaus how to use her body to get what she wants. She receives male clients while Sharifa collects the payments.

One client decides to take her away from Sharifa. Firdaus overhears an argument between this man, a former lover of Sharifa and her mistress followed by their violent lovemaking. She flees, as has become a pattern, into the streets.

She encounters a policeman who threatens her with arrest if she does not have sex with him, and then a stranger who rescues her, sleeps with her and leaves her ten pounds, the first money she has earned for herself. Her self esteem is ruined when a client speaks of her lack of respectability. Despite her efforts to attain respect, she eventually realizes that as a poorly paid employee, she has gained no social status or respect, and that in fact, prostitution is less confining than the life of female employees who are terrified of losing their jobs.

Firdaus falls in love with a fellow worker, Ibrahim, who is the head of a revolutionary committee within the company. She labours incessantly for the committee, as other women do in so many political or revolutionary organizations only to discover that her lover has become engaged to the company chairman's daughter.

Firdaus returns to prostitution and her financial success brings her to the attention of a head of state, whom she refuses, including men who wish to marry her. A dangerous pimp, Marzouk, threatens her, takes over her business and uses his network of connections to his advantage. When she attempts to leave, they argue. He slaps her, and Firdaus stabs him, discovering that her fear for Marzouk, indeed her fear of all men and of the vicious nature of her society has vanished. She walks again into the street, where a prince accosts her. She terrifies him when she demonstrates her lack of fear, and he screams until the police arrive, arrest and send her to prison.

To understand fully the literature written by Sub-Saharan women in terms of their representation of African women and their worldview, it is important not to separate it from its historical and cultural contexts. This is because the writers are committed to reflect and often to reform the culture that the literature represents in their writings. At its face value, culture is one of those terms in our daily lexicon for which there seems to be a consensus of use. According to Stephen Greenblatt, a literary critic in his book On Culture, (1995) “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹ For Greenblatt, culture should be understood “as a complex whole.” (p.478) He adds that because the term is used so frequently, it often does not mean much, pointing only vaguely to a variety of "capabilities and habits adopted by human beings.” (p. 478)

Consequently, Greenblatt redefines the concept of culture in a fashion he believes can do more work for the literary scholar. This refined understanding of the concept, he believes, must begin with the acknowledgement that culture ironically "gestures toward what appears to be opposite things or constraints." (p.487) In asserting that culture signifies or indicates social forces of constraint, Greenblatt points out that every culture is formed by an "ensemble of beliefs and practices."(p.478) These beliefs and practices, he adds, set up standards that "function as a pervasive technology of control" to structure and delimit the behavior of members of a society; and since the beliefs and values of a culture discourage people from going outside what is "appropriate" for that society they are constrained by that society's expectations.(p.489)

In a more anthropological sense, Thomas Barfield in The Dictionary of Anthropology, (2000) considers culture as a non-biological concept transmitted by society. It includes all aspects of human enterprise such as the artistic, social, ideological, and religious patterns of behavior, and the techniques for mastering the environment.² In a numeric sense, Winnick Charles in his Dictionary of Anthropology, (1956) sees culture as "a social grouping that is smaller than a civilization but larger than an industry."³ Even though Winnick fails to define "civilization" in its relationship to culture in this instance, Winthrop Robert, in Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology, (1991) concludes that "civilization refers to the sum of numerous ethnic groups."⁴ Winnick also maintains that "culture" is not organic, although he observes that wherever there is human life there is culture

Culture can therefore be said to be entirely the result of societal invention by a social group, and it is transmitted by precept from one generation to the next. A social group is an organization based on relatedness or a shared common ancestry or a community of people sharing artifacts and living together at a given period and place. Cultures are thus distinct in their own rights so that members of one culture may behave differently according to their cultural patterns in some significant respects from members of every other culture. Since culture is the result of societal invention it consists not merely of what is done, but also of the additional element of the ought to be. Patterns of behavior then become patterns for behavior. In effect, these beliefs and practices set up standards that function as a pervasive technology of control to structure and delimit the behavior of members of a society. For this reason, the safeguard of these habits and their strict adherence falls to the members of that culture jointly and severally. Severe punishment or sanctions may be meted out to those who contravene or refuse to follow the established patterns of behavior. If people do something unacceptable, something counter to these ideals, then they suffer the consequences everything from stares, contempt, or laughter to legal sanctions like imprisonment. On the contrary, people are rewarded for conforming to the constraints of culture with praise from others, an admiring look, or a pat on the back. Since the beliefs and values of a culture discourage people from going outside what is "appropriate" for that society, they are constrained by that society's expectations.

Since, however, patterns of behaviour have to reflect the standardized nature of society in general, cultures become specialized in their normative applications. That is, distinct

patterns of behavior for male and female, youth and adult may be found. In other cases, according to Hoebler Adamson in The Nature of Culture. Man Culture and Society, (1965) societies function according to internal sub-groupings affording each one of these sub-groups the freedom to exhibit its own behaviour characteristics or specialties applicable only to its members.⁵ The individual himself or herself has to wrestle constantly with the conflict of individual self-interest as against his obligations to the group interest. Hence a member of a cultural group, when thinking and acting as a member of the group, may express the cultural standards of the group but when acting in response to dominant individual desires, may be found to contravene consistently that group's standards. Harry L. Shapiro, Man, Culture and Society, (1960)⁶ Although in some cases there is a marked individualized manifestation of culture, the notion that culture is determined by the individual is a false one because culture predates as well as postdates the individual's existence. An important task of this essay then, is to examine the culture upon whose existence the works were predicated as well as their constraints. Set in an Islamic community, the study looks at the status of women in Islam and this will be done in the next chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹ Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture." Critical Terms for Literature Study. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1995) p 478.

² Thomas J. Barfield The Dictionary of Anthropology. (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2000)

³ Charles Winnick, Dictionary of Anthropology. (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc.,1956) p.144.

⁴ Robert H. Winthrop, Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

⁵ Adamson Hoeble, The Nature of Culture. Man Culture and Society. (New York: OxfordUniversity Press Inc, 1965) p.334.

⁶ Harry L. Shapiro, Man, Culture and Society. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) p.231.

⁷ Nawal El Saadawi, God Dies by the Nile. (London: Zed, 1985) p.23.



CHAPTER TWO

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

The major objective of this chapter is to provide a fair evaluation of what Islam contributed or failed to contribute toward the restoration of the woman's dignity and rights. In order to achieve this objective, it is useful to review briefly how women were treated in general in previous civilizations and religions, especially those which preceded Islam. A survey of the status of women in pre-Islamic Egypt may shed more light on the subject, thus providing a better basis for an impartial evaluation. The chapter starts with a brief survey of the status of women in pre-Islamic Egypt and other countries. It then focuses on the position of Islam regarding the status of women. A conclusion would then be drawn on what Islam contributed or failed to contribute toward the restoration of woman's dignity and rights. Part of the information provided here, however, describes the status of the woman as late as the nineteenth century, more than twelve centuries after the advent of Islam.

Before the advent of Islam, conditions for women in Egypt were very bad. Women were treated like slaves or property. They were not regarded as human beings but as a kind of a sub-species between humans and animals. Allen, E. A., History of Civilization, (1989) states that a wife was described by historians as: "a babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband."¹ Again, in his submission to the "Commission on the Law of Marriage and Divorce and Matrimonial

Status of Women,” Seyyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, Chief Missionary of the Bilal Muslim Mission of Tanzania, wrote: “the Babylonians and the ancient Egyptians punished the woman for her husband's mistakes. Therefore, the birth of a daughter in a family was not an occasion for rejoicing, but was regarded with humiliation.”²

Additionally, women were never even treated as a party to a marriage contract because by their culture, they were nonentities. For example, in the Mosaic Law, the wife was betrothed and in explaining this concept, Rev. T.K. Cheyene, and J.S. Black in Encyclopedia Biblica, (1902) state: "To betroth a wife to oneself meant simply to acquire possession of her by payment of the purchase money; the betrothed is a girl for whom the purchase money has been paid."³ From the legal point of view, the consent of the girl was not necessary for the validation of her marriage. This meant that women had no independence, could own no property and were not allowed to inherit the husband. As a result, a husband could treat her as one of his property making physical abuse permissible. As to the right of divorce, Rev. Cheyene and Black in Encyclopedia Biblica, (1902) state: “The woman being man's property, his right to divorce her follows as a matter of course. The right to divorce was held only by man. In the Mosaic Law, divorce was a privilege of the husband only.”(p.2445)

The situation in India and most parts of Europe was no better. It was due to this unthinkable state of woman that James Hasting in Dictionary of the Bible, (1963) states that according to the English Common Law:

...all real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts devised means to forbid a husband's transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife's personal property, the husband's power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit.⁴

Again, according to Rev. T.K. Cheyene, and J.S. Black in Encyclopedia Britannica, (1902) we find a summary of the legal status of women in the Roman civilization which was similar to that of Egyptian women:

In Roman law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married she and her property passed into the power of her husband . . . the wife was the purchased property of her husband, and like a slave acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office, could not be a witness, surety, tutor, or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract.⁵

Describing the status of the Indian woman who shared the same sentiment with the Egyptian woman, the Encyclopedia Britannica, (1902) states:

In India, subjection was a cardinal principle. Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Manu. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is, descent traced through males to the exclusion of females. In Hindu scriptures, the description of a good wife is as follows: "a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband. (p.2946)

Moreover, in Athens, according to Rev. T.K. Cheyene, and J.S. Black in the same book state that women were not better off than the Indian, the Roman or the Egyptian women.

Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male – to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin. Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary and she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, and receive from them her husband and her lord, even though he were stranger to her. (p.2946)

Furthermore, in their book, Marriage East and West, (1960) David and Vera Mace wrote:

Let no one suppose, either, that our Christian heritage is free of such slighting judgments. It would be hard to find anywhere a collection of more degrading references to the female sex than the early Church Fathers provide. Lecky, the famous historian, speaks of these fierce incentives which form so conspicuous and so grotesque a portion of the writing of the Fathers.... woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance on account of the curses she has brought upon the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is the memorial of her fall. She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the devil.⁶

Additionally, a crude cultural practice, genital mutilation, was prevalent in Egypt. Alison T. Slack in Female Circumcision: A Critical Appraisal, (1980) states that “female circumcision has been practised from as early as 2500 years ago and continues in practice today in over forty countries.”⁷ Fran Hosken notes in her 1994 Hosken Report that Egypt is one of the countries which have a circumcised female population of 60 to 75% and female children were circumcised at the age of six.⁸ Added to Slack’s assertion is Dr. Marie Assad's Female Circumcision in Egypt: Social Implications, Current

Research and Prospects for Change, (1980) that proposes that the origins of female circumcision are Egyptian, since evidence has been found that infibulation was practised on ancient mummies. Thus, infibulation is also called *Pharonic circumcision* in the Sudan and in Egypt.⁹ The primary job of the clitoris is for sexual stimulation. When some or all of the genitals are removed, the ability for full sexual development is hindered in the process. The woman's body thus joins others in a language which is muted because there is the instant separation of her sexuality from her biological function -- reproduction. Marriage, after becoming 'purified' through circumcision ultimately leads to childbearing.

Apart from female circumcision, in Marriage in Islamic Law: The Modernist Viewpoint, (1978) Khadduri Maji observes that in pre-Islamic Egypt, the culture of the people permitted unrestricted polygamy.¹⁰ Additionally Cory H. Sukuma in Law and Customs, (1953) admits that anthropologists tell us that among various tribes and societies, polygamy is a social and economic necessity because children are a source of additional labour for the earning capacity of the family and to have more children under such situations would require the practice of polygamy.¹¹ David Murray, an anthropologist, defends the practice and insists in *The Washington Times*, 13 Dec 2000, that historically, polygamy is more common than monogamy.¹² Leonard J. Swidler in Women in Judaism: the Status of Women in Formative Judaism, (1976) argues that the *Talmud* (collection of Jewish law) advises a maximum of four wives and European Jews continued to practice polygamy until the sixteenth century while Oriental Jews regularly practiced polygamy until they arrived in Israel where it was forbidden under

civil law.¹³ However, he adds, under religious law which overrides civil law in such cases, it is permissible.(p.44-45)

Besides, polygamy was, reportedly, practised by Hebrew patriarchs such as David, Moses, Abraham, and Jacob in the Old Testament. In Judaism it is notable that most of the Old Testament Prophets were polygamous. Hasting, in his book The Dictionary of the Bible, (1963) states that in the Old Testament, Abraham, "the friend of God" had more than one wife, David had one hundred wives, and Solomon is even said to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines. (p.1907) God had allowed such marriages to certain men of the Old Testament only in particular circumstances, and if a Christian wanted to follow their example he had to show that the circumstances were similar in his case; but polygamy was undoubtedly preferable to divorce. It is against this background that, Yusuf Ali in The Glorious Qur'an: Text Translation, and Commentary, (1979) defends polygamy when he writes:

Polygamy was prevalent among all the nations of antiquity, not excluding the Hindus and Buddhists. The world in general and Arabia in particular before the ministry of the Holy Prophet was lying deeply buried under gross licentiousness and depravity which historic fact no educated one among us can ever contradict, particularly about the private life of the rulers of the states. The great king Dasarata, the father of Sri Rama, was polygamous. The Christian monarchs of Europe could not help themselves against having wives more than one. Henry the VIII of England had as many as eight wives. Even the great Apostles of God like Abraham, Solomon and the others had wives more than one.¹⁴

From this analogy, if polygamy is immoral per se, then these leading figures in the Biblical traditions are immoral. In this case, there would be no sanctity attached to the Bible, its Prophets, or its teachings. But no sincere Jew, Christian or Muslim, would

regard God's chosen Messengers as immoral persons. This is because polygamy in the African context is a just permission with certain limitations and conditions. In some of the circumstances, this permission proves extremely useful. For example, if a wife is chronically ill, or is barren, or for some other reasons it is not desirable for the couple to live as husband and wife, the remedy offered by certain societies is to divorce the wife and remarry. But is this justice? Is it kind or noble to turn out a woman in her old or middle age from her home, just because she remains sick or she happens to be barren? In such a situation, polygamy proves useful.

But the Philosophy behind the legalisation of polygamy in ancient Egypt defeats the essence of its practice. The Philosophy is explained in the Encyclopedia Biblica as: "The man who owns his wife as a chattel can on the same principle own as many as he pleases, that is to say, as many as he can afford to buy and keep." (p.2946) Though some of the early Christian Fathers in Egypt accused the Jewish Rabbis of sensuality, no Council of the Church in the earliest centuries opposed polygamy, and no obstacle was put in the way of its practice by kings in Egypt and other countries where it had occurred in the times of paganism. It was only at the beginning of the eleventh century that polygamy was expressly prohibited in Judaism.

Apart from polygamy, the traditional dress code for the married woman in Egypt was very simple. Outside her home, an Egyptian married woman traditionally wears a black outer dress over her brightly colored housedress and covers her hair with a long veil, which often sweeps the ground behind her. She wears black dress and head cover

embroidered in tiny cross-stitch designs: blue for unmarried women and red for married women. She covers her face with a veil highlighted in the same stitches and often decorated with shells and coins. She wears her dowry of gold necklaces and silver bracelets and anklets which are an insurance against poverty if her husband divorces her or she becomes widowed.

The points discussed were the state of women in Egypt before Islam was introduced. During the initial Islamic invasion in 639 AD, Egypt was ruled at first by governors acting in the name of the Righteous Caliphs, and then the Umayyad Caliphs in Damascus. From that time till date, Islam has been practised by the majority of Egyptians and it governs their personal, political, economic and legal lives. Islam originated from what is today Saudi Arabia and the Prophet Muhammad is seen as the last of God's emissaries to bring revelation to mankind. He was distinguished with bringing a message for the whole of mankind, rather than just to a certain people. As Moses brought the Torah and Jesus the Bible, Muhammad brought the last book, the Qur'an. According to Yusuf Ali in The Glorious Qur'an: Text Translation, and Commentary, (1979) the Qur'an (literally "the recitation") is the central religious text of Islam. The Qur'an and the *Hadith*, (sayings of Mohammed) properly and understood unbiased, he adds, provide the basic source of authentication for any position or view which is attributed to Islam, and Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the book of divine guidance and direction for mankind and they consider the text in its original Arabic to be the literal word of God. (Qur'an 2:23–24)

The Qur'an also ordains that the followers of Islam need to obey Allah and obey the Messenger (Prophet Muhammad), stressing the importance of keeping the commandments mentioned in the Qur'an by Allah, and following all the teachings of Muhammed,(4:59) labeling everyone who concurs as a 'muslim'(22:78) and as a part of the "best of communities brought forth from mankind."(3:110) According to the Islamic religion, God, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful, insists on making His religion easy, practical and enjoyable for His true believers. He reminds muslims in the Quran that He has placed no hardship on His followers in practicing the religion "You shall strive for the cause of God as you should strive for His cause. He has chosen you and has placed no hardship on you in practising your religion - the religion of your father Abraham. ..." (22:78) For this reason, no one can place any hardship or rule on any muslim, male or female.

It is true that Allah created females and males with some physical differences between them; however, this does not mean that one is superior and the other is inferior. Many non-muslims believe that Islam oppresses women, and makes them inferior to men. Some muslims actually consider women inferior to men by their misunderstanding of Islam or because of their culture's influence although they would not admit that. Muslims in general believe that Islam gave women many rights, but at the same time, they feel that women are not equal to men in rights and obligations. It is therefore prudent to correct the image non-muslims have about muslim women, and to correct the wrong understanding of some muslims about women in Islam.

In terms of women's rights women generally had fewer legal restrictions under Islamic Law. For example, Badr Gamal M. in "Islamic Criminal Justice," The American Journal of Comparative Law (1984), says under traditional interpretations of sharia, women had the right to keep their surnames upon marriage, inherit and bestow inheritance, independently manage their financial affairs and contract marriages and divorce.¹⁵ Indeed, the Qur'an provides clear-cut evidence that woman is completely equated with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibilities. The Qur'an states: "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds." (74:38) It also states:

..So their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another... Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will we give a new life that is good and pure, and we will bestow on such their reward according to their actions.(3: 195)

Moreover, before Islam, having a female baby was such a disgrace that it was acceptable if their fathers buried them alive, and there were no consequences for this heinous crime. John L. Esposito in The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, (2003) states that the general improvement of the status of Arab women included prohibition of female infanticide and recognizing women's full personhood.¹⁶ Criticizing the attitudes of such parents who reject their female children, the Qur'an states:

When news is brought to one of them, of (the Birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance) and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on? (16: 58-59).

Far from saving the girl's life so that she may later suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment for her. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad in this regard are the following: "Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her

alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise.”¹⁷ A similar *Hadith* (sayings of Prophet Mohammed) deals in like manner with one who supports two sisters. “Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the Day of Judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together.) (Ibn-Hanbal, No. 2104) Again, the right of females to seek knowledge is not different from that of males. Prophet Muhammed said: "Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every muslim." (3:6) The word “muslim” as used here includes both males and females.

Moreover, reforms in women’s rights affected marriage, divorce and inheritance. Marriage in Islam is a civil contract which is not valid unless both contracting parties consent to it. Thus, no wife can be forced or “given” to a husband who is already married. Besides, according to Elsayyed Sabiq, Fiqh al Sunnah, (1994) the wife has the right to stipulate that her husband must not marry any other woman as a second wife.¹⁸ It is thus a free choice of both parties. Ibn Abbas buttresses this point when he reports in the “Hadith” that a girl came to Prophet Muhammed and reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice between accepting the marriage or invalidating it. (Ibn Hanbal No. 2469) In another version, the girl said: "Actually I accept this marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right (to force a husband on them.)"¹⁹ (Ibn Maja, No. 1873) As a wife, the Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves, and that its objectives, besides perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony and its bases are love and mercy.

Besides all other provisions for her protection at the time of marriage, Islam specifically decreed that a woman has the full right to her marriage gift, (Mahr) which is presented to her by her husband and is included in the nuptial contract, and that such ownership is not transferable to her father or husband. According to John L. Esposito in The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, (2003) under Islamic law, marriage was no longer viewed as a "status" but rather as a contract in which the woman's consent was imperative. (p.79) The concept of *Mahr* in Islam is neither an actual or symbolic price for the woman, as was the case in Hebrew culture, but rather it is a gift symbolizing love and affection.

The rules for married life in Islam are clear and in harmony with upright human nature. In consideration of the physiological and psychological make-up of man and woman, both have equal rights and claims on one another, except for one responsibility, that of leadership. This is a matter which is consistent with the nature of man. The Qur'an thus states: "And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." (Qur'an 2:228) Such degree according to the Qur'an is maintenance and protection. (*Quiwama*) This refers to that natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker sex to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before the law. Man's role of leadership in relation to his family does not mean the husband's dictatorship over his wife. Among the most impressive verses in the Qur'an about marriage is the following: "And among His signs is this: That He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect." (Qur'an 30:2 1)

Over and above her basic rights as a wife comes the right which is emphasized by the Qur'an and which is strongly recommended by the Prophet; kind treatment and companionship. There are several verses in the Qu'ran that support kind treatment. For example, the Qu'ran states:

...But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good, the best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family. . "Be kind to your wife and treat her well. Kindness will change her for the better, will keep her satisfied and will preserve her health and beauty. The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives." (Qur'an 4: 19-20)

Added to this, when some women came to Muhammad's wives complaining against their husbands who beat them, the Quran says: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect."(Quran 30: 21)

As the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so also is her right to seek an end for an unsuccessful marriage recognized. To provide for the stability of the family, however, and in order to protect it from hasty decisions under temporary emotional stress, certain steps and waiting periods should be observed by men and women seeking divorce. Considering the relatively more emotional nature of women, a good reason for asking for divorce should be brought before the judge. Like the man, however, the woman can divorce her husband without resorting to the court, if the nuptial contract allows that. When the continuation of the marriage relationship is

impossible for any reason, men are still taught to seek a gracious end for it. The Qur'an states about such cases: "When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits.)" (Qur'an 2:231, 2:229 and 33:49)

As regards polygamy, Islam did not outlaw polygamy; it regulated and restricted it. In Islam, polygamy is neither required nor encouraged, but simply permitted. Before the advent of Islam, some men had many wives, but Islam came with a limit of four and there is the condition of dealing justly, otherwise men are not allowed to marry more than one wife. However, some Muslims misunderstand their religion and think that polygamy is allowed without a good reason. Examples of situations when polygamy solves problems are when women outnumber men such as in wars, which result in a large number of widows and orphans or if the first wife is chronically sick or disabled, or unable to have children. In such a situation Islam states that polygamy is a moral, practical and humane solution. (Qur'an 1) Abd Al-Ati Hammuda in Islam in Focus, (1963) argues that the verse which allows polygamy was revealed after the battle of *Uhud* in which many muslims were killed, leaving widows and orphans for whom due care was incumbent upon the Muslim survivors.²⁰ The verse in the Qur'an that allows polygamy is: "If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then(marry) only one..." (Qur'an4:3)

From this verse, a number of facts are evident: that polygamy is neither mandatory, nor encouraged, but rather merely permitted; that the permission to practice polygamy is not associated with mere satisfaction of passion. It is rather associated with compassion toward widows and orphans, a matter that is confirmed by the atmosphere in which the verse was revealed, that even in such a situation, the permission is far more restricted than the normal practice which existed among the Arabs and other peoples at that time when men married as many as ten or more wives; and that dealing justly with one's wives is an obligation. This applies to housing, food, clothing, and kind treatment, among others, for which the man is fully responsible. If one is not sure of being able to deal justly with them, the Qur'an says: "then (marry) only one." This verse, when combined with another verse in the same chapter, shows some discouragement of such plural marriages. The other verse plainly states: "You are never able to be fair and just as between women even if it is your ardent desire..." (Qur'an 4:129) The requirement of justice rules out the concept of the man can "own as many as he pleases."

In spite of the rules regarding polygamy, one of the rationales given by some Muslims for polygamy, which has not been sanctioned by the Qur'an, is that if a man's sexual needs cannot be satisfied by one wife, he should have two. It is interesting to note that Professor Russel, an American scholar, buttressed this point when he said in a conference on the Family Rights at the University of California that: "Marriage to one wife and being tied down to only one wife for the whole span of life is unnatural and unreasonable...man ought to accept the law of more than one wife as an important factor in the struggle for the survival" (Ittilaat, Tehran, No. 3104).²¹ In another instance,

G.R. Scott in History of Prostitution, (1968) says "Man is essentially polygamous and the development of civilization extends this innate polygamy."²² Dr. Mercier in Conduct and its Disorders Biologically Considered, (1911) buttresses this point when he argues: "Woman is by nature monogamist; man has in him the element of polygamist."²³

Presumably then, if a man's lust is greater than four wives, he should have three, and so on until he has four. Only after this fourth are the Qu'ranic principles of self-restraint to be finally exercised. This excuse opposes Islam's requirement of self-restraint and fidelity at the onset of marriage for both the wife and the husband, and thus is not acceptable. The polygamous husband, it would seem would be on a figurative merry go round, moving from woman to woman. What type of morality would such iniquity portray in the human race? Anyone who understands the essence of Islam would not say polygamy is required or encouraged without real needs or conditions in which polygamy may present a solution to a situation, otherwise it turns into animal enjoyment. But if polygamy is discouraged and loaded with such constraints, could it have been better if the Qur'an simply forbade it?

As a realistic religion that legislates real solutions for humanity, Islam avoided any utopian doctrine. Jamal Badawi in his book The Status of Women in Islam, (1971) states that in many of its laws, Islam keeps in mind the flexibility of the law and the realistic factors and circumstances. A law, he adds cannot be a hundred percent good for every person, groups, culture, or country. However, he concludes, Islam considers the

overall values and gains. If the advantages of a law overcomes its disadvantages, then that law would be legislated and *vice versa*.²⁴

The communal obligations that the Quran mentions in association with the permission of polygamy are more visible at present in some Western societies than in Africa. For example, Nathan Hare and Julie Hare in Crisis in Black Sexual Politics, (1989) state that in the United States today, there is a severe gender crisis in the black community. One out of every twenty young black males may die before reaching the age of 21. For those between 20 and 35 years of age, homicide is the leading cause of death.²⁵ As a result, one in four black women, at age 40, has never married, as compared with one in ten white women. (p.94) Moreover, they conclude, many young black females become single mothers before the age of 20 and find themselves in need of providers. The end result of these tragic circumstances is that an increasing number of black women are engaged in what is called 'man-sharing'. (p.95) There is neither internal nor external control in matters of sex adds Bertrand Russell in Marriage and Morals, (1970) and observes that as “The opportunity gives rise to the thought; the thought gives rise to the desire and in the absence of religious scruples, the desire gives rise to the act.”²⁶

Additionally, Billy Graham, the eminent Christian evangelist says in, Woman in Shari'ah, (1994) by Abdul Rahman Doi:

Islam has permitted polygamy as a solution to social ills, and has allowed a certain degree of latitude to human nature but only within the strictly defined framework of law. Christian countries make a great show of Monogamy, but actually they practice polygamy. No one is unaware of the part mistresses' play in Western society. In this respect Islam is a fundamentally honest religion, and permits a Muslim to marry a second

wife if he must be strictly forbidden all clandestine amatory associations in order to safeguard the moral policy of the community.²⁷

Even if the communal obligations that the Qur'an mentions are visible in any given situation, the verse "...But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good, the best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family. ." (4:19) should surpass the situation.

With regard to the woman's right to seek employment, Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby-sitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of an upright, complex free, and carefully-reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as "idleness." There is no decree in Islam which forbids woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her most. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching especially of children, and medicine. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field.

On how women should dress, the Quran is very clear about the dress code for believers. The first regulation of dress code for Muslim women is in Qur'an 7:26, the second is in 24:31 and the third is in 33:59. In 33:59 it says "O prophet, tell your wives, your

daughters, and the wives of the believers that they shall lengthen their garments. Thus, they will be recognized and avoid being insulted. God is Forgiver, Most Merciful.” (33:59) In this verse, God told women to lengthen their garments, and never said how long it should be. God could have told them to lengthen their garments to their ankles or to their mid-calf or to their knees, but He did not. He did not, out of his mercy, not because He forgot as God does not forget. Perhaps God knows that Muslims will be living in different communities and have different cultures and insists that the minor details of this dress code be left for the people of every community to hammer for themselves. The second rule can be found in Quran 24:31. Here God orders woman to cover her bosoms whenever she dresses up:

And tell the believing women to subdue their eyes, and maintain their chastity. They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies, except that which is necessary. They shall cover their chests, (with their Khimar) and shall not relax this code in the presence of other than their husbands, their fathers, the fathers of their husbands, their sons, the sons of their husbands, their brothers, the sons of their brothers, the sons of their sisters, other women, the male servants or employees whose sexual drive has been nullified, or the children who have not reached puberty. They shall not strike their feet when they walk in order to shake and reveal certain details of their bodies.(*zeenatahunna.*) All of you shall repent to God, O you believers, that you may succeed. (24:31)

The commandment in the verse is clear. Cover your chest or bosoms, but it was found that most of the translators claim “cover your head or hair”. Veil (*Hijab*) is the term used by many Muslim women to describe their head cover that may or may not include covering their face except their eyes. The Arabic word *Hijab* can be translated as veil or cover. The word *Hijab* appears in the Qu’ran 7 times, five of them as *Hijab* and two times as *Hijaban:* in 7:46, 33:53, 38:32, 41:5, 42:51, 17:45 and 19:17. None of these *Hijab* words is used in the Qu’ran in reference to what the traditional Muslims call veil

(Hijab) as a dress code for the Muslim woman. Many Muslims call "*Hijab*" an Islamic dress code, but it should be noted that *Hijab* as a dress code has nothing to do with Islam and nothing to do with the Qur'an. *Hijab* or veil according to Badawi in The Status of Women in Islam, (1971) can be traced back to early civilizations and that a study of the Jewish traditions or religious books shows that head cover for the Jewish woman and men has been encouraged by the Rabbis and religious leaders. (Badawi p.897) Some Jewish women and even some women of today still cover their heads most of the time and especially in the synagogues, and at weddings and religious festivities. The traditional Arabs of all religious background, Jews, Christians and muslims used to wear head cover not because of Islam, but because of tradition. Christian women also cover their heads on many religious occasions while the nuns cover their heads all the time. In Saudi Arabia, up to this day, most of the men cover their heads not because of Islam but because of tradition. North Africa for example is known for its tribe (Tuareg) that have the muslim men wearing *Hijab* instead of women. Badawi reports in The status of women in Islam, (1971) that a well respected Rabbi once explained to a group of Jewish young women: "We do not find a direct command in the Torah mandating that women cover their heads, but we do know that this has been the continuing custom for thousands of years."(899)

It could then be said that if God so willed to order women to cover their heads or their hair, nothing would have prevented Him from doing so. God does not run out of words and does not forget. Women who wear *Hijab* because of tradition or because they like it for personal reasons commit no sin, as long as they know that it is not part of their

religion. Those who wear it because they think God ordered it are committing idol-worship, as God did not order it and idol-worship is the only unforgivable sin, if maintained till death. (4:48) These women have found for themselves another God than the One who revealed the Qu'ran, complete, perfect and fully detailed to tell them for they do not have to cover their heads to be muslims. If wearing *Hijab* is the sign of the pious and righteous muslim woman, Mother Teresa would have been the first woman to be counted. Ignoring what God asks you to do in His book, or following innovated laws not stated in the Quran, is a clear sign of disregarding God and His message. When tradition supersedes God's commandment, the true religion takes a second place. God never accepts to be second, He has to be always the First and to Him there is no second.

The last part of the verse (24:31) translates as, "They shall not strike their feet when they walk in order to shake and reveal certain details of their bodies. They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies, except that which is necessary." This quotation tells us that God uses this very general term to give muslims the freedom to decide according to their own circumstances the definition of "What is necessary." It is not up to a scholar or or any particular person to define this term. God wants to leave it personal for every woman and no one can take it away from her. Women who follow the basic rule and are righteous will have no problem making the right decision to reveal only "what is necessary." At the end of the verse, God told the women not to strike with their feet to show their *zeenatahunna*. Striking the feet while walking can shake certain parts of the body. It is important to remember that striking the feet while walking does not have this

effect on the head, hair or face; they are not part of what God calls in this verse the hidden *zeena*. It could refer to the buttocks.

It is clear from the above verses that the dress code for the Muslim women according to the Qu'ran is righteousness and modesty. Modesty for a woman who lives in New York may not be accepted by a woman who lives in Cairo, Egypt, and the modesty of a woman who lives in Cairo, Egypt may not be accepted by a woman who lives in Ghana.

From the discussion so far, it is evident that family, society and ultimately the whole of mankind are treated by Islam on an ethical basis. More importantly, Islam respects the woman gives her enough room to operate; and no man or woman can deprive her of that right in the name of religion. Differentiation in sex is neither a credit nor a drawback for the sexes. What makes one valuable and respectable in the eyes of Allah, the Creator of mankind and the universe, is neither one's prosperity, position, intelligence, physical strength nor beauty, but only one's Allah-consciousness and awareness. (*taqwa*) Again, the general rule in Islam is monogamy and not polygamy. However, permission to practise limited polygamy is only consistent with Islam's view of the nature of man and woman and of the various social needs, problems, and cultural variations. Even though we see the clear permissibility of polygamy in Islam, Dr. Jumah al-Kholy in '*Ta'addud al-Zawjaat wa Hikmatuhu fil Islam,*' (Multiple Marriages In Islam & It's Wisdom) Journal of the Islamic University of Medina, Vol. 4, states that its actual practice is quite rare by devoted moslems in many muslim societies. Some researchers, he adds, estimate not more than 2% of the married males practice polygamy. Dr. Jumah al-Kholy

concludes that this is because most muslim men feel they cannot afford the expense of maintaining more than one family and even those who are financially capable of looking after additional families are often reluctant due to the psychological burdens of handling more than one wife.²⁸

Unfortunately, within many cultures or families, Islam's opinion, whether in the Qu'ran or the sayings of the Prophet or the work of scholars and jurists on many issues regarding women is either ignored or even unknown. For example the *Taipei Times* reports that an Afghan Member of Parliament, Shukria Barakzai had the shock of her life when in 2004, 12 years after they were wedded, her husband took a second wife without telling her, and she admits to feeling "disturbed and hurt" and "a victim of tradition" because of his decision.²⁹ Apart from Shukria, Lubna Ahmed Hussein, a female Sudanese journalist was jailed for a month after being convicted of dressing indecently because she wore trousers. She was sent to prison after refusing to pay a fine of about 200dallors (122 pounds) saying she did not want to give the verdict any legitimacy.³⁰ Moreover, some muslims get very upset when their wives and daughters fail to wear a scarf or even cover their faces. Most Islamic countries complicate the divorce procedure for women by asking the woman to provide evidence that her husband did something wrong, ignoring the fact that such a requirement did not exist at the time of the Prophet Mohammed. Some women get forced into marriage, and get forced into giving their dowry to their family. In all these examples, Islam is not being applied or is misunderstood by muslims. Some of these misconceptions are the issues

highlighted by Saadawi in her novels under discussion and these will be dealt with in the next chapter.

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END NOTES

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CHAPTER THREE

MARRIAGE AND THE CULTURAL *STATUS QUO*.

In chapter two, I looked at what Islam contributed toward the restoration of the woman's dignity and rights. In this chapter, I will analyze how the rights of marriage have been exercised in the texts God Dies by the Nile, (1985) and A Woman at Point Zero. (1975)

In Africa and many sub-Saharan cultures, marriage is an alliance between two kinship groups and is seldom a union of individuals. Some ethnic groups prefer exogamous marriages while others are endogamous. But whether endogamous or exogamous, marriage has the power to render a woman powerless in patriarchal societies. Religion, in its purity, is an overarching factor in the marital, cultural and socio-economic tensions in the works of Saadawi under discussion. It is perhaps the most single peril to women's subordination due to the fact that some customs are fortified by religious interpretations even though they are not directly spoken of in the Qur'an and the Hadiths. Saadawi reiterates this view when she remarks in The Hidden Face of Eve, (1980) that: "In any society, it is not possible to separate religion from the political system, nor to keep sex separate from politics. The trilogy composed of power, religion and sex is the most sensitive of all issues in any society."¹ It is therefore prudent to juxtapose how marriage is perceived in the novels with what the Qu'ran actually says.

Marriage in Islam, like any other religion, is a legal institution and the rules for marriage in Islam are clear and in harmony with upright human nature. Islam emphasizes the importance of taking counsel, and mutual agreement in marriage

decisions as already discussed in the previous chapter. However, men in patriarchal societies abuse the right of women to marry by marrying them against their will under the guise of polygamy. The African society is essentially a polygamous one where a man has the right to take as many wives as his financial position can allow him. Polygamy, a polemical issue today in both intellectual and non-intellectual circles, is prevalent in African muslim societies. Among muslims, the men are required, at their first marriage, to declare whether they intend to be monogamous or polygamous. In practice, however, many African Moslem men see polygamy as part of their devotion to their religion, as well as a status symbol. Affluence, an indicator of social status, usually determines whether or not a man can have more than one wife. If affluence is true for the urban elite, among the rural folk where polygamous marriages are higher, it is family pedigree that counts.

Besides, a man who at his first marriage declared his intentions to be monogamous, may change his mind later on in the marriage to take on more women, without being held to his word. Economic success, tied to levels of education, is usually one of the reasons why these men may decide to go back on their word.

In addition to this, in Africa where women are said to outnumber men in some communities, the very concept of marriage is another justification for polygamy. For example, Eugene Hillman in Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches, (1975) says that in the U.S. there are, at least, eight million more women than men. In Guinea there are 122 females for every 100 males. In Tanzania,

there are 95.1 males per 100 females.² A woman may therefore accept to be a second, a third, or even a fourth wife in order to meet society's definition of a complete woman. At the same time, but for a different reason, men believe they are carrying out a traditional obligation by marrying the women since, without polygamy, some would be without husbands and might be tempted to settle for the less respectable status of concubines instead of wives.

Consequently, men take advantage of these uncompromising positions to take more than one wife. Sheikh Hamzawi and Fatheya's marriage in God Dies by the Nile, (1985) stands as an example. Sheikh Hamzawi is the religious leader of the community "responsible for upholding the teachings of Allah, and keeping the morals and piety of the village intact."³ Ironically, his other side is portrayed to us as he abuses religious ideology. He marries Fatheya, a girl young enough to be one of his grandchildren as his fourth wife against her will. He is impotent; and by forcefully marrying Fatheya, he believes "Allah can infuse life into dead bones"³ by restoring his sexual potency. Like the Imam in Bâ's So Long a Letter who breaks the news of Modou and Binetou's marriage to Ramatoulaye, we come across an insensitive individual in the person of Hamzawi, completely oblivious to the fact that he has delivered a heavy blow to his victim by marrying her without her consent and knowing that he is impotent. As a man who is well versed in Islamic laws, all that matters to him is that the law to marry more than one wife has been adhered to. As to whether the condition is met or not is not within the Imam's immediate purview. The fact is that the imposition of conditions has made polygamy very much restricted but he refuses to see the reality in all these. In

bringing in the Imam and his role in marriage, the selfish desire that leads men toward marriage (polygamy) is criticized.

The point is that men and some women in Africa do not necessarily look at polygamy as a sign of women's degradation. For example, Eugene Hillman in Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches, (1975) argues that many young African brides, whether christians or muslims or otherwise, would prefer to marry a married man who has already proved himself to be a responsible husband. Many African wives urge their husbands to get a second wife so that they do not feel lonely. (p.92-97) In addition to this, an Iranian National Newspaper, *Ittilaat (Daily)*, *Tehran* (No. 13075) published the news that a young wife, who did not bear children and, as a result, was very much distressed, approached the Matrimonial Tribunal and asked them to persuade her husband to take a second wife. The paper quotes the wife as saying:

Do not think that I do not love my husband, or that there is no accord between us. On the contrary, because of my deep love to him, I do not want him to remain without child, due to no fault of his own. I have tried to persuade him to marry another wife, but he does not agree. Therefore, I request this Tribunal to intervene. I solemnly pledge to live in harmony and with co-operation with the second wife.⁴

The same newspaper (No. 13091) reported another woman as saying:

Some years ago, my husband married me so that the two sons of his late brother do not remain without a guardian. Later we had a child of our own, but he died after one month only. My husband is younger than me; and I resolved to find for him a younger wife. Now I have succeeded in getting him married to another girl." 'And one Christian woman told me: won't mind being a second wife of a man. Life becomes hopeless when a woman doesn't have a man's protection. It's better than remaining unmarried.

Another issue of the *Ittilaat (daily), Tehran*, (No. 13114) states that a man with his three wives approached the Matrimonial Tribunal to seek their permission to marry a fourth wife. All three existing wives recommended and approved the intended marriage. The reporter of *Ittilaat* approached the mother of the wife-to-be, to investigate the background of this incident. He learnt that in that village there were 2000 women compared to 400 males (half of them still below 14 years of age). The would-be 'Mother-in-law' preferred to give her daughter to a man already having three wives to the alternative of keeping her unmarried for the rest of her life.

In addition to these declarations, Philip L. Kilbride in Plural Marriage for Our Times, 1994, writes:

In a survey of over six thousand women, ranging in age from 15 to 59, conducted in the second largest city in Nigeria, it showed that 60 percent of these women would be pleased if their husbands took another wife. Only 23 percent expressed anger at the idea of sharing with another wife. Seventy-six percent of the women in a survey conducted in Kenya viewed polygamy positively. In another survey undertaken in rural Kenya, 25 out of 27 women considered polygamy to be better than monogamy. These women felt polygamy can be a happy and beneficial experience if the co-wives cooperate with each other.⁵

What is perceived here is because culturally, polygamy is entirely the result of societal invention, and it is transmitted by precept from one generation to the next. It therefore transcends the mere collection of isolated bits of individual behavior to include learned behaviour traits which are manifested and shared by the members of the society. Such a belief has been integrated into series of patterns of behavior developed from mass habits

and which, once established, tend to project themselves into future behaviour. The behavior of the women is therefore as a result of their being engulfed in age old traditions of which they have no control. It has to be emphasized, however, that polygamy in Islam is a matter of mutual consent. No one can force a woman to marry a married man. In all these cases, the women consented to the marriage but that does not mean that it should be mandatory for every woman. It should be the girl's prerogative whether or not to enter a polygamous marriage, even if it may not necessarily be beneficial for her. In Fatheya's case, there is neither evidence of consent nor marriage ceremony whatsoever between her and the Sheik. Therefore, we are made to believe that when it comes to the choice of partners for marriage, the Muslim culture has constraints on women. Women have no voice because they are considered as the property of men. This is manifested in the manner in which Masoud forces his daughter Fatheya, to marry Sheikh Hamzawi, the impotent Imam of the community:

Fatheya, come here at once. But there was no answer, so he climbed up on the top of the oven, pulled her out by her hair, and beat her several times until she came down. Then he handed her over to Haj Ismail and the same day she married the pious old sheikh.(G.D.B.T.N.p.31)

This picturesque scene goes a long way to enable readers' feel how it is to live in a male dominated society. After this incident, Fatheya is bundled up and put on a horse to be sent to the "pious and God fearing man." At the shiek's house, she is "carried into the house like a sack of cotton," (G.D.B.T.N.p.32) showing the nothingness of woman in a patriarchal society. One can say then that men in patriarchal societies support what Mary Ellman Thinking about Women, (1968) refers to as "phallic criticism" that

portrays women as inferior and diffident, good only as wife or mother.”⁶ It could be said then that men like Hamzawi in patriarchal societies see polygamy as a trade of commodities for those with the necessary financial wherewithal to afford it. In a conversation with Haj Ismail, Hamzawi says Fatheya’s father is poor and is privileged to have him as a member of his family. He adds that “It’s only what you have in your pocket that counts where a man is concerned.”(GDBNp.29) After the marriage, Fatheya is molested sexually by her husband, Hamzawi:

Every evening, Fatheya would sit on the prayer carpet and repeat the same ritual then she would recite the holy verse of The Seat and perhaps other verses. Her lips would feel heavy and quite often she fell asleep while kneeling. In her ears echoed the words of Allah and between her thighs crept the hands of sheik Hamzawi. She abandoned herself to sleep as though abandoning herself to a man, opening her thighs wide apart and dropping into a deep oblivion right in the middle of the prayer offered to God. (GDBNp.33)

One may contend that in patriarchal societies, a married woman surrenders her body to the husband who handles it the way he so wishes. This is because after clitoridectomy, the woman’s sexual life is terminated. Due to his sexual impotency, the most that Sheikh Hamzawi can manage is to caress Fatheya's thighs and nothing more. Therefore, one may say that by marrying Fatheya by virtue of his position, Sheikh Hamzawi has condemned her to a perpetual state of virginity and misery. Taking the perception of marriage into consideration, it is a fact that often the line between religious dictates and their application is often intentionally blurred to favour whoever stands to gain the most. In patriarchal societies like the African, it is no surprise that men are the ones who enforce strict religious rules. Hence, religion becomes the site where cultural biases and

gender inequalities are made to appear as if sanctioned from above the way God meant them to be. Those who indulge in licentiousness under the pretext of polygamy misuse an Islamic law and the society has every right to call them to account and punish them.

To say that Hamzawi is the only person to blame for this behaviour is fallacious at best and a flat-out denial at worst. The truth is that Masoud, Fatheya's father's behavior is equally questionable as it seems he has traded off his daughter. Living in total denial but wanting to be seen as a man in total control of his household, Masoud is reluctant to admit that the Qu'ran prescribes that a woman can decide who to marry and who not to marry. He sees fathering as an authority that is available for men only. It would seem therefore that in patriarchal societies, fathers trade off their daughters in exchange for male power. It is evident then that the Sheik of the mosque and Fatheya's father are not acting in accordance with the Qu'ran but by their own cultural doctrines. Further, it will seem such a marriage often results in the institution of marriage being distorted. This is because for Hamzawi, Fatheya is seen less as a partner with whom to build a life committed to a social, political or modern ideal than a mechanism for rejuvenating himself and being respected in the eyes of his contemporaries. Again, one can say without doubt that the institutionalization of polygamy provides men with the perfect legitimizing instrument of domination of women because polygamy has the power to render women like Fatheya powerless in patriarchal societies. It should be understood in Fatheya's case that it is very painful, difficult, and traumatic for women, especially in those societies where polygamy and forced marriage are practised. The survival of such

a culture has so strongly overwhelmed the patriarchal society that there is not only a fear of ruining the marriages but also a chance of their losing their religious values.

Another manifestation of religion's power to render a married woman powerless in patriarchal societies is in the treatment given to Fatheya. After the marriage, Fatheya is confined to a house which is better described as a prison. She is expected to live in her husband's house surrounded by all due care and respect, never to be seen elsewhere:

She no longer insisted on visiting her aunt perhaps because each time he got into a temper and tried to stop her from going out. The wife of shiek Hamzawi was not like the wife of other men. Her husband was responsible for keeping the morals and piety of the village intact. The wife of a man like that was not supposed to be seen by just anyone. Her body has to be covered even from her closest relatives except for her face and her palms. She was expected to live in her husband's house surrounded by all due care and respect, never to be seen elsewhere. (G.D.B.T.N.p. p3)

This way Hamzawi can be seen by society as a 'man' with male powers over Fatheya. It is observed that what really concerns the Imam is his public image; the impression that he is a man in complete control of his household. "A man, whose shoulders do not droop but are straight and broad, who has legs, each separate from the other so he could move each one on its own confidently and freely." (Saadawi, Man, 1989)⁷ The male obsession to be at the top of the social and sexual hierarchy is further exhibited when on his way home, as soon as he spots his wife, Sheikh Hamzawi would call out to her,

asking for something in a loud throaty voice calculated to sound more throaty and virile than usual, then cough and clear his chest several times to ensure that the neighbours would realize that Fatheya's husband, the man of the household, was back (G.D.B.T.N.p.103).

Obsessed with his virility, this humour shows that manhood is based on a particular relationship to property and on social power. Commenting on the situation of women in general, Saadawi in The Nawal El Saadawi Reader, (1997) says:

I remember my mother saying that my grandmother had moved through the streets on only two occasions. The first was when she left her father's house and went to her husband's house, the second when she left her husband's house to be buried. Both times no part of her body was uncovered.⁸

It seems then that in the Arab-Islamic family, according to Moghadam in Patriarchy in Transition: Women and the Changing Family in the Middle East: Journal of Comparative Family Studies, (1976) a man is entitled to exercise his marital authority by restraining his wife's movements and preventing her from showing herself in public.⁹ The wife's main obligations then are to maintain a home, care for her children, and obey her husband whether he is right or wrong. In other words, that society places so much weight on financial independence for the man while considering stay-at home mothers as favourable to patriarchal status.

It is worth noting that there is no decree in the Qu'ran which forbids women from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it or forbids women from modest dressing as has been discussed in chapter two. To restrict a woman as Hamzawi does is therefore unislamic and a way to render women powerless. It can be observed that that society has been indoctrinated by age long traditions which the people in the novel including the shiek of the village himself, find difficult to relinquish. In The Innocence

of the Devil, (1994) Saadawi reiterates the age long tradition of women being inferior in the character of Eblis:

He heard his father saying that women were lacking in mind and in their faith in God. At school he had heard his teacher say that men were custodians. The teacher made him open the book and read out the phrase: Men are the custodians of women, and every day he was made to read it out and repeat it three times after the teacher. He put up his hand and asked: -
-Sir, what does the word custodian mean? To be a custodian means to be sovereign over someone. --And what does to be sovereign mean, sir?
--Sovereign means that the male rules over the female, boy, and that the female submits to the male.¹⁰

These teachings, from the male elders to the young men, simply perpetuate the belief that women are supposed to be subordinate to men. This belief is then later carried to the extreme, making it acceptable for men to beat, abuse, and oppress their wives for the simple fact that the women are inferior. A manifestation of this male power is evident when Kafrawi and Masoud, both peasants, ask what they are to do when their daughters and wives refuse to comply with them. Sheikh Zahran who is well versed in the Qu'ran retorts by challenging their manhood.

What do you do?' exclaimed Haj Ismail, now looking furiously. 'Is that a question for a man to ask? Beat her, my brother; beat her once and twice and thrice. Do you not know that girls and women are only convinced if they receive a good hitting? (G.D.B.T.N.p.100)

Saadwi uses simple but appropriate diction in this dialogue to create a powerful imagery. This way, one could feel the actions of the speaker and this makes the nothingness of a woman in a patriarchal society more credible. Commenting on how ideology is forcibly implemented, Antonio Gramsci in Selection from Prison Notebooks, (1971) argues that patriarchy is achieved only when the victims, through a process of cultural and religious socialization, become alienated. They learn to deny

their existential being and imbibe the views of their oppressor. Violence against women and extracting women's labour through coercive labour relations are, therefore, part and parcel of capitalism.¹¹ Therefore, Fatheya, in God Dies by the Nile and other women like Ganat, Firdaus, Bint Allah in Saadawi's other novels, are silenced for years as this belief has been passed down through generations of men. It is evident then that in patriarchal societies, even men in the lower class are empowered to feel that they are superior to women. For this reason, force is used on the lower class people like Kafrawi and Masoud, Fatheya's father who are reminded that their patriarchal authority and manhood are at stake if they do not resort to the use of force to get their daughters to comply with their orders. Women who find themselves in situations like these remain silent in order not to be named deviants.

In explaining this silence, Mary Field Belenky in Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, (1986) states: 'it indicates a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to authority around them.'¹² Silent women tend to lack self-confidence and are at the mercy of dominant figures who, in many cases, are their husbands. Fatheya's silence makes her live in her husband's shadow. Silent women lack voice and as a result are made prisoners in their marriages. The silence imposed on her by a man of God is satirized. It is noted that it is difficult, rather impossible, for men in patriarchal societies to be rational with the truth. Their obstinacy in rejecting the most rational, cogent and soundest of arguments raised in the Qu'ran concerning the welfare of women cannot be understood. As a Muslim, Hamzawi must submit in totality to the will and order of

Allah. One does not weigh the commands and dictates of the religion on the scales of one's limited and scanty logic. Since he has failed or chosen to fail in that respect, it seems as if such people want free reign and an unlimited license to fulfill all their lust and desires. Allah mentions in the Holy Quran "Have you not seen that person who has taken his desires as his God?" (25:43) or do you suppose that most of them listen or understand? They are merely like cattle; nay, rather they are even farther astray from the (right) path."(The Holy Qur'an : Text, Translation and Commentary ,1979)¹³ Any rationale or creed that impedes the freedom and liberty of women is considered oppressive, illogical, sexist and retrogressive.

The silence in marriage fortified by religion is similarly treated in the other novel, Woman at Point Zero, and the subsequent paragraphs will be devoted to that novel.

In Woman at Point Zero, El Saadawi strives hard to deconstruct the patriarchal attitude towards marriage. In Saadawi's portrayal of marriage in this novel, certain issues clearly emerge: women are seen as commodities to be traded off when need be: fathers remain the only authority to determine who their daughter should marry and the effects of such marriages on women. Firdaus, the main character is portrayed as a silent woman who, by this very fact, becomes a victim to her uncle, her husband and her society.

When Firdaus's parents pass away and she goes to live with her uncle, she finally has the chance to get education having been earlier denied education by her father.

However, after her secondary school certificate, her uncle and his wife refuse to send her to the university because as her uncle puts it “A respectable sheik and man of religion like myself sending my niece off to mix in the company of men?!¹⁴ The novel takes the form of a biting dialogue between her uncle and his wife about Firdaus in which Firdaus is silenced, referred to only in the third person:

‘Firdaus has grown your holiness and must be married. It is risky for her to continue without a husband. She is a good girl but the world is full of bastards. Girls of her age have already married years ago and borne children.’

‘Supposing she refuses’?

‘Why should she refuse him?... besides she has inherited nothing, and has no income of her own. We will never find a better husband for her than Sheikh Mahmud’

‘...Do you think Sheikh Mahmud will welcome the idea?’

‘If I speak to him I am sure he will agree. I intend to ask him for a big dowry.’

‘How much?’

‘A hundred pound or perhaps even two hundred if he has the money.’

‘If he pays a hundred pound then Allah will indeed have been generous to us and

I would not be greedy to ask for more.’

‘I will start with two hundred. You know he is a man who can argue for hours over five millimes and kill himself over a piaster.’

‘If he pays one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debt and buy some underwear as well as a dress or two

for her.’(WAPZp.120)

This dialogue is an irony that makes a mockery of the uncle and his wife as corrupt muslims. Again, it is evident that in patriachal societies women “were materials, just like objects, or items on the shelve of a shop they were sold and bought as shepherds sold their goats at market places or shop owners sold the goods to customers.” (Farah, 1974) They remain passive since according to Michael Mann in “A Crisis in Stratification Theory” in Gender and Stratification: (1986)

the patriarchal society is one in which power is held by male heads of households. There is also clear separation between the public and private spheres of life. In the private sphere of the household, the patriarch enjoys arbitrary power over all junior males, all females, and all children. In the public sphere, power is shared between male patriarchs according to whatever principles of stratification that operate.¹⁶

As the marginalized third person, Firdaus becomes the passive agent in a study about her in which she is rendered irrelevant and therefore her voice is silenced. Voiceless and passive, she is rendered an object, hence allowing her uncle and his wife to make decisions for her. By deciding what Firdaus needs, even in a most personal way, her uncle, a respected sheik and his wife do not only humiliate her but also are opposed to the natural rights of individuals to be free of any form of subjugation.

By the arbitrary power vested in Firdaus’ uncle as the male head, he marries her off to her aunt's uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, an old, deformed, tyrannical husband for a hundred pound dowry without anyone ever asking Firdaus’ opinion. As her society has created the ideal self-sacrificing, passive and nurturing woman, the female who disobeys a

member of her family has not only broken the law but has also violated gender expectations. To do otherwise is a violation which puts the violator in a cultural and religious space of otherness. So Firdaus has no other alternative than to marry the old Sheik against her will.

Firdaus' uncle's behaviour is comparable to Hamzawi's in God Dies by the Nile: women are commodities that can be traded off any time there is the need for it. It is obvious then that women are victims of both class and patriarchy and their duties toward the family and society precede their rights as individuals. In this regard, one is drawn towards Zuhur Sherifa's observation in "Women and Empowerment in the Arab World," Arab Studies Quarterly, (2003) that: "The Arab states embody various patriarchal structures and Arab society clings to a patriarchal system in which women's position within and duties toward the family precede their rights as individuals."¹⁷

It is also worth noting that the perception of marriage in Firdaus's society is contrary to the teachings in the Qur'an as already stated in chapter two. Therefore, it is evident that the uncle is acting not on Islamic principles but on his own selfish desires.

Both her uncle, an enlightened man and Sheikh Mahmoud are religious leaders and should know better. It is also clear that the uncle is materialistic and not the real man of God that he claims he is. He is simply repeating what existed in Arabia before Islam when women were not even a party to their marriage. It is also a fact that not even religion and education can alter the attitude of men in patriarchal societies towards

women. It is realized that one fact still remains: modernity and the gradations of social class do not seem to lessen the bad treatment given to women. It is obvious that Firdaus' uncle and his wife represent a parody of greedy and selfish people who hide under the cloak of religion to exploit innocent people. More importantly, he is against western education which would afford Firdaus the opportunity to be enlightened. In a larger context, it is clear that by neglecting women's education, men in African societies are mortgaging the future in terms of women's effective participation in all spheres of society. This way the suffering and cheating can continue.

The effects of such marriages are evident: the women are considered personal property. For this reason, physical abuse is licensed in such marriages. Quranic verses such as: "The best among you are those who are kindest to their wives,"(Qur'an 4: 20). ...He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts (Quran 30: 21) ..." are thrown overboard by men who claim to champion the cause of the religion. Firdaus explains "The Sheikh is extremely cheap and cannot stand to waste food. On one occasion, he finds scraps of food in the trashcan. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not." (WA PZp.46) At one point in her marriage he beats her with a shoe, leaving her face and body swollen and bruised. What Sheikh Mahmoud has succeeded in doing is to turn Firdaus into an abused wife who deserves no better treatment from him because he bought her and such a trade is sealed. The behavior of Sheik Mahmoud is a pointer to the fact that any society which tries to ban or deny women their rights ends up achieving nothing but a host of evils and

problems that have sunk their societies to the lowest of the low, in the form of pain and abandonment on the part of women. Therefore it could be said that pain and abandonment associated with rejection is often the result of such relationships and not the joy that it is supposed to create for both parties involved in the marriage.

That the trade is sealed is exemplified in the behavior of her uncle and the wife. After giving Firdaus into a marriage of servitude, their duty is over. Neither he nor his wife does anything to encourage Sheikh Mahmoud to make Firdaus happy. Therefore when Firdaus decides to find refuge outside her husband's house she finds none. She returns to her uncle's house hoping to find solace but when Firdaus complains, her uncle simply tells her that "all husbands beat their wives" (p.69) and her uncle's wife admits to being beaten often. Her aunt tells her: "A virtuous woman is not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty is perfect obedience."(WAPZp.70) Firdaus cannot believe this and argues with her: "I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife."(WAPZp.71) However, her aunt replies ironically that it was "precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment." (WA PZp.72)

From this quotation, it is undeniable that her uncle's wife is a victim of her own self-defeating conception of marriage by persuading herself that men naturally beat women. She refuses to contest the tradition which sanctions wife beating by accepting the notion that a woman derives her social prestige and legitimacy only from marriage. Her aunt's

behaviour also points to the fact that the search for happiness in marriage for women is in vain since fellow women selfishly infringe upon other women's liberty and happiness out of ignorance. It also shows that the 'prison-house' of marriage will survive anywhere women put societal laws and dictates above their personal happiness and well-being. Her uncle takes her back to her husband without any caution whatsoever to the man. This heightens the fact that the trade contract is sealed and cannot be abrogated and thus giving Sheikh Mahmoud an upper hand over Firdaus. He remarks: "why did you come back from your uncle's house? Couldn't he bear to feed you for a few days? Now you will realize that I am the only person who can put with you and who is prepared to feed you." (WA P Zp.77) By helping send Firdaus back to her husband, her uncle is contributing to accentuate centuries-old discrimination and brutalities against women. By depriving her of her rights, he is holding fast to the atrocious husband wife continuum which is essential in patriarchal societies. It is rather paradoxical that a man of his caliber would cling to ideas perceived by ancient Egyptians and it is for this reason that Sadaawi in God Dies by the Nile believes that: "People have become corrupt everywhere you can search in vain for Islam, or for a devout Moslem. They no longer exist." (GDBN.p.40) But one thing still remains: they could not pay for her indispensability. She is a woman and she is indispensable to man. It seems therefore that the tortured married woman is torn between a rock and a hard plate and is forever depressed. Firdaus returns reluctantly to an empty home with no happiness and love. She cannot protest the life of servitude she is living under Sheikh Mahmoud and has nowhere else to go but continue serving him. It could then be said that a tortured married woman's loneliness is compounded by the fact that staying single as a way of

avoiding the ignominy is no solution since in the final analysis, an unmarried woman is not accepted in the African set up. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that the behavior of the supposed men of God is not justified in the Quran.

Marriage as discussed in chapter two is based on mutual love, peace and compassion. In consideration of the physiological and psychological make-up of man and woman, both have equal rights and claims on one another, except for one responsibility, that of leadership. This is a matter which is natural in any collective life and which is consistent with the nature of man. The Qur'an states that women have rights similar to those of men but men are a degree above them. Such degree is *Quiwama* (maintenance and protection) which refers to that natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker sex to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before the law. Again, the Quran does not sanction wife beating. Verse 4:34 states:

Men are maintainers of [qawwamuna ala] women, on the basis of what Allah has preferred [faddala] some of them over others, and on the basis of what they spend of their property. So the righteous women are obedient to Allah [qanitat], guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As to those women on whose part you fear [nushuz], admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds, and (last) idribuhunna. Then, if they obey you, seek not against them means. (of annoyance)

This verse is used by some muslims as seen in this novel to convince themselves that Allah stated in the Qu'ran that women should obey their husbands who are in charge, and that husbands can beat their wives. Marriage is based on mutual respect; it is a partnership rather than appointment of the male as the boss in this relation. This misunderstanding stems from several words in this verse: *qawwamuna ala*, *faddala*,

qanitat, nushuz, and idribhunna. Amina Wadud in Qur'an and Women, (1999) states that:

the words "*qawwamuna ala*" are usually misinterpreted to mean men are in charge of women. First of all, *qiwamah* here is dependent on satisfying two conditions: what Allah has preferred some over others, and what they (men) spend of their property to support women. The first condition is usually misinterpreted as: Allah preferred men over women; however, Allah states in this verse: "some over others" meaning, some women over other men, some men over other women and some men, over other men. This verse does not read 'they (masculine plural) are preferred over them. (feminine plural)¹⁸

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan in Women in Islamic Shari'ah, (1998) explains this part as "excelled some over other", which he states occurs several times in the Qu'ran: for crops and fruits where no superiority is indicated.¹⁹ To apply this to women and men, he states: "just as women have uniquely feminine qualities, so also do men have uniquely masculine qualities." (p.30) For *qiwamah*, Sayyed Qutb in Fi Thilal Al-Quran, (1972) says both men and women are from Allah's creatures, and Allah never intends to oppress anyone from His creation. Since childbearing is among the functions of the woman, it is only fair that the husband's responsibility is to provide for the woman and take care of her. *Qiwamah* is therefore, concludes Qutb a responsibility on men, not a preference given to them by Allah over women.²⁰

Moreover, wife beating is often justified by the word *nushuz*. *Nushuz* is not used only with females but also with males. According to Wadud most scholars have their bias when interpreting *nushuz*. When applied to the husband it means cruelty or desertion, but when applied to the wife, it means disobedience to the husband. Logically, since

the Quran uses *nushuz* for both males and females, it cannot mean different things. *Nushuz* means a state of disorder between the married couple. Allah gives in the Quran the steps a husband could follow to correct this *nushuz* of his wife. One of those steps, which is usually misunderstood, is to *idribuhunna*, often translated as beat, scourge, or strike the wives. The Arabic word used here is *daraba* and it does not necessarily indicate force or violence. It is used in the Quran in the phrase "*daraba Allah mathalan...*" meaning Allah gives or sets as an example. This word, on the other hand, is strongly contrasted to the second form, the intensive: *dar-raba*: to strike intensely or repeatedly. Violence against women existed in Arabia thus, this verse was revealed by Allah not to permit, but to eliminate an existing practice through giving alternatives.

Though the novel does not go into the specifics of which part of the Qur'an or Hadith actually sanctions violence, it is exactly this type of overarching belief about Islam that the characters cite when attempting to justify abuse. This is exemplified by the behavior of most of the men in the novel. Bayoumi, the man who promises to help Firdaus when she runs from her husband's house locks her in his apartment and let his friends have sex with her, and beats her up at the least provocation. Therefore, one may say that Firdaus's rights have been violated upon not by religion but by patriarchal attitudes of her society.

Taking the perception of women in these books into consideration, it is evident that ignorance, misinformation and incorrect assumptions that are made with regard to Islam's treatment of women are probably the most severe. Numerous verses of the

Qur'an as already stated in the previous chapter make it clear that men and women are equal in the sight of God. According to the teachings of Islam, the only thing that distinguishes people in the site of God is their level of God-consciousness. Due to this, many people are surprised to find out that Islamic Law guaranteed rights to women over 1400 years ago which women in Europe and America only obtained recently. For example, as already stated in chapter two, Islam clearly teaches that a woman is a full-person under the law, and is spiritually equal to a male. Additionally, they have the right to inherit property and to have their marriage dissolved in the case of neglect or mistreatment. Also, it should be mentioned that the Prophet Muhammad's mission stopped many of the horrible practices with regard to women that were present in the society of his time. For example, the Qur'an put an end to the pagan Arab practice of killing their baby daughters when they were born. Additionally, Islam put restrictions on the unrestricted polygamy of the Arabs of the time, and put many laws in place to protect the well-being of women. If women in Egypt and the Muslim World today do not have their rights, it is not because Islam did not give them the rights. The problem is that in many places, for example in Egypt, alien traditions have come to overshadow the teachings of Islam, either intentionally, through ignorance, or through the impact of colonization

To conclude, it is significant to note that the mere fact that the women in these novels never object to their husband's decisions as detrimental as they may be to them, underscores their life of subordination. Whether emotionally abused, culturally relegated to second class citizenship status, marginalized by religion, or voiceless, the

women in Saadawi's novels under discussion share one common tragic bond: their marriages have condemned them invariably to prison just because religion has been intentionally twisted in favour of some group in society. It is however, not only marriage that condemns women to 'prison' in the novels but power structure and other practices play a significant role in reducing women to second class citizens in the Egyptian society and these will be discussed in the next chapter

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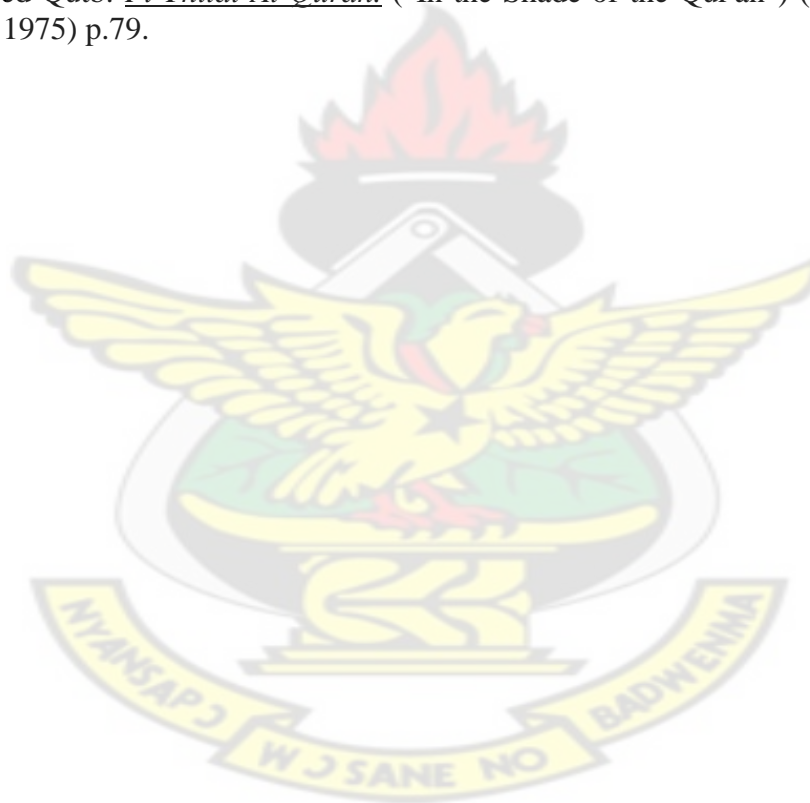
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CHAPTER FOUR

A WOMAN'S BURDEN: POWER STRUCTURES AND CLITORIDECTOMY

Throughout history, traditional African societies have had cultural and traditional practices that hold them together and serve as their codes of conduct. However, some of these traditions are manipulated by some privileged members of the society, especially men. This is achieved because often the line between power and its application becomes the site where cultural biases and gender inequalities are manifested. Nowhere is this co-mingling more present and with more devastating results than in God Dies by the Nile (1985) and Woman at Point Zero (1975). This chapter describes female genital mutilation, outlines the rules and regulations governing the lives of women and the difficulties and shame associated with being a woman in a repressive patriarchal society. The power structures that nurture the cultural biases and gender inequalities will be discussed starting with God Dies by the Nile.

The Mayor in God Dies by the Nile is the representative of the political establishment in *Kafr El Teen* and he symbolizes the ruling class in general who have power and resources under their basic control. For this reason, he abuses this power by using his political position to exploit the peasants who are mostly women, and spends the money he squeezes out of them on “his extravagant tastes in food, tobacco, wine and women.”¹ The Mayor, a symbol of patriarchy, is fortified by power, religion and sex, the three interrelated forces. Saadawi takes readers through the consciousness of the Mayor where we are introduced to the trilogy, his tools of oppression and domination:

There were three men in Kafr El Teen who knew almost everything about him. The Chief of the Village Guard, the Sheikh of the mosque, and the village barber. Without them he could not rule *Kafr El Teen*. They were his instruments, his aides and his means for administering the affairs of the village.(G D.B. T. N.P.98)

From this, it is evident that the coercive power of the political establishment is personified by three people: the Head of the Village Guard, Sheikh Zahran, the Imam of the Mosque, Sheikh Hamzawi who represents religious ideology and the local and cultural traditions symbolized by the local healer, Haj Ismail. Zakeya, Kafrawi and her two children represent the lower class and they work on the land day and night in order to survive. Therefore when a summon comes: “if Nefissa will work in his house as a maid, he will pay the family an almost unimaginable sum per month,” (G.D.B.T.N.p.23) they feel this idea comes as a panacea to their problem. The fact that the women are powerless is exemplified in Nefissa’s behavior: “I work here in my father’s house, Sheikh Zahran, and I work in the fields all day..... I do not want to go to the Mayor’s house.... she kept wailing and shrieking from her hiding place, refusing to go.” (G. D.B. T. N.p.21) Unfortunately, such women are forced against their will under the guise of persuasion. She is persuaded by Sheik Zahran to accept the offer:

Our Mayor is a generous man... You will be paid twenty piastres a day. You’re a stupid girl with no brains. How can you throw away all the good that is coming to you? Do you prefer hunger and poverty rather than doing a bit of work?” (G D.B. T. N.P.20-21)

This statement coming from the man of God is ironically presented to show the sharp difference between what the Mayor stands for and what we will soon know him to be. Finally, she is forced to work in the Mayor’s house against her will by her father,

Kafrawi. This is because by their culture, the Mayor should not be disobeyed. Since the beliefs and values of a culture discourage people from going outside what is "appropriate" for that society, Kafrawi is constrained by that society's expectations. If he does something unacceptable, something counter to these ideals, then he must suffer the consequences. The beliefs of the people set up standards that Greenblatt, Stephen in Culture: Critical Terms for Literary Study, (1998) says "function as a pervasive technology of control to structure and delimit the behavior of members of that society."² It is for this reason that Kafrawi thinks the Mayor cannot be disobeyed and for that matter Nefissa cannot refuse to go. Nefissa's tragic departure for the Mayor's house and the fact that she has been forced into child labour are metaphorically conveyed to us through the eyes of the donkey that carried her. "The donkey suddenly lifted its head and brayed in a long, drawn-out gasping lament....She looked into the eyes of the donkey and saw tears." (G D.B. T. N.P.6)

Apart from forced labour, another damning effect of abuse of power is that such innocent girls are molested by their masters. For example, Nefissa is raped by the Mayor in his house. She becomes pregnant, gives birth, throws the baby away, and disappears. The significance of Nefissa's final acts of desperation needs to be emphasized. Throwing her child away is an act of condemnation of rape and the power structure that shields it. Her escape means the emancipation of the body and soul of the woman. In a patriarchal society, by abandoning her child, she has in a way killed all those who are in favour of such powers that neglect women's problems. Feminine criminality is the first thing that comes to the mind of the reader. As society has created

the passive and nurturing woman the female who kills has not only broken the law but has also violated gender expectations. One message can be heard loud and clear: Nefissa has crossed a traditional line that does not usurp the role that corresponds to the patriarch. Even though brutal, one might say that the radical decision to throw the child away is equal and proportional to the pain inflicted on her. It is only through a break with the *status quo* that the generational vision that Saadawi proposes can be fully appreciated. This break with tradition is indeed indicative of the generational divide. Taking into consideration this rape incident, one cannot help but agree with Nabila Jaber in Bargaining with Patriarchy: Gender Voice and Spatial Development in the Middle East, (2001) when she observes:

Gender oppression is class oppression and women's subordination is seen as a form of class oppression which is maintained because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class. The government, according to Nabila Jaber, sees two modes of patriarchy: private patriarchy that is enacted in the authority of men over women in family and public patriarchy as manifested through the state and increasingly the religious establishment, particularly Islam.”³

Hamzawi explains further that the Mayor has absolute control over his people and he:

holds their daily bread in his hands and if he wants, he can deprive them of it. If he gets angry their debts double, and the government keeps sending them one summon after the other. “Either pay your tax or your land will be confiscated.(G· D.B. T. N.P.106)

According to Zahran, “People like him, who live on top of the world, don’t know the word “impossible.” They walk over the earth like Gods...” (GDBN.p.54) It is against the background of this statement that the Mayor’s behaviour goes to the heart of a looming social political problem in Africa. Inequalities in all aspects of life still relegate

women to second-class citizenship status. Nefissa is one such second-class citizen whose lack of voice turns her into an object in her society.

After this incident, the corrupt nature of the Mayor and his cohorts is made more evident when Haj Ismail, one of the Mayor's oppressive tools ensures that the patriarchal union is safely guarded. The Mayor gets him to misinterpret traditions and religion to persuade Zeinab, Nefissa's sister, to work in his house so that the cycle will begin again:

On the following day, before dawn, Zeinab is to take another bath with clean water from the Nile, meanwhile repeating the testimony three times. Then do her prayers at the crack of dawn. Once this is over, she is to open the door of your house before sunrise, stand on the threshold facing its direction and recite the first verse of the Koran ten times. In front of her she will see a big iron gate. She is to walk towards it, open it and walk in. She must never walk out of it again until the owner of the house orders her to do so. He is a noble and great man, born of a noble and great father, and he belongs to a good and devout family blessed by Allah, and His prophet. . (GDBN.p.91)

The instruction given is so descriptive and compelling that one is likely to believe them. Zeinab is made to believe that if she goes to the Mayor's house and complies with whatever he says or does, her sick aunt Zakeya will be cured. Therefore, at the gate when the Mayor asks her why she has come so early, she replies innocently "it is Allah who has sent me" (GDBN.p.95.) and the Mayor remarks "son of the devil. What a cunning rogue you are, Haj Ismail."(GDBN.p.95) Thereafter, Zeinab is sexually exploited and raped. The fate of the poor girl at the hands of the Mayor is described pathetically:

But her leg slipped on the smooth tiles and in a moment she was lying full length on the floor. Before she had time to rest her hands on it for support and get up, his arm was already around her waist helping her to rise. The tip of his fingers brushed against her breast and he felt his hand tremble as it moved stealthily around its smooth contour until it was cupped in his palm. She gave a half throttled shriek, part pain at the hard press of his hand around her breast, sensitive with youth and inexperience, part fright running through her body with an icy shivering, part pleasure, a strange new pleasure almost akin to an ecstasy of salvation, of being free of the heavy load which has been weighing down on her heart. Now she could leave herself in the hands of God, deliver her body and soul to him, fulfill his vow, and savour the relief of having done so...

...his hand moved up her legs, lifted the wet garment over her thighs....
'Take off your garment Zeinab otherwise you will catch cold' "He pulled on it so hard that it split with a rending sound. She gasped, 'My *galabeya!* (Long dress) It's my only *galabeya!*' He tore the remaining folds around her body, held her tight, whispering in her ear, 'I will buy you a thousand *galabeye.*'.... his hands were now sliding up her thighs to her belly trying to lift the garment higher but it was wet and stuck to her flesh He stretched out his hand, opened the tap and a shower of warm water poured down over her naked body. With his own hands, he washed off the dust and dirt of the day's work, his hands diligent over her hair, shoulders, her belly and thighs and breast. (GDBNp.99-100)

In all the instances, one could really imagine oneself being immersed in the sights, sounds, and smells of what is being said. Wayne C. Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction, (1883) reiterates this when he remarks: "one of the most obvious artificial devices of the story teller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character mind and heart."⁴ Saadawi is so excellent at drawing these characters and showing us their feelings and motivations making their feelings powerfully appealing to the senses. The reader gets a feel for the body language of the characters, and what it means, even if it is unfamiliar to him or her. For example, as we are caught up by the hunted life of the two sisters, we travel with them and we come as close to identifying with them as it is possible to come without losing our sense of pain.

For example, vulnerability of young girls in patriarchal societies is expressed in the feelings of Zeinab. This way, we are able to have an informed and unbiased perception of any character. We are almost as helpless as the victim herself and we are thus ready to fall into the emotional trap that Saadawi lays for us.

After this incident, Zeinab runs away while the Mayor goes scot free because: “he was above suspicion, above the law, even above the moral rules which governed ordinary people’s behavior. Nobody in KafrEl Teen would dare suspect him. They could have doubts about Allah, but about him....It was impossible.” (G:DBN,p. 98)

The abuse of Nefissa and Zeinab is the culmination of abuse that has been internalized over the years and meted out to innocent women and children by the upper class who are fortified by power. The mayor is therefore perpetuating the same *status quo* from which Islam endeavors to break free. It is worthy to mention that the victims, whether illegitimate children or raped women like Nefissa and Zeinab, are sacrificed at the altar of the patriarchal class system, which Saadawi describes in The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World, (1980) as “a civilization where man is god and decides how best to satisfy his interests, his desires and his whims.”⁵ It also alludes to the fact that many illegitimate children were born as a result of the sexual freedom enjoyed by men in the patriarchal class system. More importantly, however, such sexual encounters underline the novelist's observation that heterosexuality in Islamic cultures is founded on rape. Nefisa and Zeinab’s innocence and the fact that the pregnancy is the result of rape are not issues the men, especially the Imam of the Mosque, Sheikh Hamzawi think

are worth contemplating. For the male dominated society, their condition is the result of the inferior morality of women. In view of this, Susan Brownmiller in Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape, (1975) sees the secret of patriarchy lying in rape which is an act of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse against her will.⁶ Here, one may contend that the meaning of rape is connected to the concept of women as property which Heidi in The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,(1981) compares to the power of capital: “men’s desire to control women is at least as strong as capital’s desire to control workers. Capitalism and patriarchy are two different beasts, each of which must be fought with different weapons.”⁷

The Qur’an views the taking of family matters to public courts unfavorably; consequently, arbitration is encouraged in all instances. The government thus, sees the family as private rather than public. For this reason some Muslim men capitalize on the Qur’an’s view of the family as private and enact laws which consolidate the authority of men. It is because of cultural indoctrination such as this that Nefissa and her sister are raped by the mayor and no eyebrows are raised. Within this context, El Saadawi in The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World, (1980) argues that “moral codes and standards in our societies very rarely apply to all people equally. This is the most damning proof of how immoral such codes and standards really are.”(p.27) Furthermore, these rape cases of both Nefissa and Zeinab shed light on the plight of women who work as servants in upper- class houses.

Further demonstrations of how power works against women is in the way female domestic servants working in upper-class homes are treated. El Saadawi observes in The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World, (1980) that they are particularly prone to sexual assault as a result of class differences: “The small maidservant . . . is the only remaining "sex avenue" for the hungry males that are panting with thirst of sexual frustration, and lying in wait for any chance or hope of satisfying it . . .” (p. 23) Consequently, even the mayor’s son, Tariq, uses his class status to molest and violate female servants in the mayor’s household. This is conveyed to us by Tariq’s mother who is conscious of the plight of poor servant women.

Matters have gone so far that I have now decided to employ only menservants. Pray, tell me what happens to your virtue when you are so occupied pursuing the girls on the telephone, or across windows, or standing on the balconies, or don’t you know that our neighbors in Maadi have complained to me several times?...Now you are putting on a Sheikh’s turban and talking of virtue. Where was your virtue hiding last week when you stole a ten pound note from my handbag, and went to visit that woman with whose house I have now become familiar? Where was your virtue last year when you assaulted Saadia, the servant, and obliged me to throw her out in order to avoid a scandal?
(GDBTN,pp.39-40)

Hence, one may say that Tariq's aggressive sexual conduct can be considered as a violation of the powerless women by the powerful upper class people because the women are considered as property. Ironically, Tariq complains that sexual immorality has become rampant because women have supposedly thrown virtue overboard: “Girls have no morals these days father.”(GDBNp.39) The mayor also justifies the double moral standards: “Men have always been immoral. But now the women are throwing virtue overboard, and that will lead to a real catastrophe.”(GDBNp p.39) The mayor’s

wife is able to see the hypocrisy of the patriarchal ideology and she challenges her son and husband: “Why catastrophe? Why not equality, or justice?” (GDBNp p.39) In view of this, Saadawi in The Hidden Face of Eve, (1980) remarks: “At the root of this anomalous situation lies the fact that sexual experience in the life of a man is a source of pride and a symbol of virility, whereas sexual experience in the life of women is a source of shame and a symbol of degradation.”(p.31) This discussion illustrates indentured servitude on the part of the domestic servants. As women, they are a step removed from slavery. They have no rights, not even to personal happiness and live and serve at the pleasure of their bosses. As portrayed in the mayor’s wife’s assertion, it is the domestic servants, not their services that have been paid for. They will be free to leave only after they have served the time agreed upon, or have been sexually harassed. From the point of view of the mayor and his son, one can say that chastity and virginity have been manipulated and are considered essential for women while freedom and sexual licentiousness are looked upon as natural where men are concerned. For this reason, Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, (1976) argues:

Patriarchy is the power of ideological, political system in which men--by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.⁸

Therefore, moral values, it would seem, are *men made* and imposed by the men with the aim of serving certain economic and political interests to ensure that the situation from which that class draws power is maintained. From this discussion, we see that the

mayor is not only a symbol of class but that he is also symbolically foregrounded as the ultimate god of patriarchy.

Apart from the above, the excesses of male obsession are manifested in how Fatheya is killed. The violence structuring the patriarchal society finds a temporary outlet in the sacrifice of Fatheya and her baby. When she decides to save and adopt one of the mayor's "illegitimate" children abandoned on the doorsteps of the Imam's house, her husband tells her to let go of the child because the mayor will expel him from the mosque for harbouring an illegitimate child, but she refuses. For refusing to let go of the "son of sin," she and the baby are stoned to death by the villagers supported by the mayor:

Hands moved in on her from every side.... They sank into her breast tearing flesh out of flesh. Male eyes gleamed with an unsatisfied lust, feeding on her breast with a hunger run wild like a group of starved men gathered around a lamb roasting on a fire. Each one trying to devour as much as he can lest his neighbour be quicker than him.... In a few moments Fatheya's body had become a mass of torn flesh and the ground was stained red with her blood. (GDBN p.115)

The sexualized violence and graphic spectacle, portrayed by expressions such as such as "tearing flesh out of flesh", "Male eyes gleamed with an unsatisfied lust, feeding on her Breast" unlike that of a pride of hungry lions at a kill, but of men, reflects the ways in which sexuality in this novel seems anchored in fierce male rivalries that turn sex into rape and murder.

Added to the power structure which works to the disadvantage of women, religious beliefs and traditions, sometimes based on ignorance and poverty, are used by the male

dominated society to continue oppressing the poor in general and women in particular in the name of religion.

One of these traditions is female circumcision. Female circumcision is generally understood as the removal of some or all of the female genitals. The WHO outlines three basic types: circumcision (the removal of the clitoris), excision (removal of the clitoris and labia minora), and infibulation (removal of clitoris, inner and outer vaginal lips, and the sewing together of the vaginal orifice, leaving a space the size of a rice grain for urine and menstruation).⁹ According to Saadawi, genital mutilation was one of the prescriptions made to young muslim girls upon their reaching puberty. El Saadawi notes in The Hidden Face of Eve, (1980) that women are groomed all their lives in order to become marriageable and thus fulfill their religious obligations. (p. 183) Part of the social obligation in this preparation is circumcision (all types). Moreover, maintenance of one's virginity ensured a good marriage, which created the possibility of moving the family out of economic hardship, or into another class. So fascinating was this belief that it was common for young girls who were suspected of not being virgins on their wedding night to be killed by their male relatives. For example, Saadawi recounts horrific stories of young girls in Egypt in Daughter of Isis, (1999) whose bodies were found by the police, killed by their families because it was suspected that their swollen bodies indicated an illegitimate pregnancy. However, autopsies confirmed the presence of accumulated menstrual blood that was unable to be released because of tight infibulations.¹⁰ For this reason, Fatheya in God Dies by the Nile, is conditioned culturally since her childhood that she has something “impure” about her, that

something in her body was unclean and bad which needs to be cut and it was indeed cut. “Then one day Om Saber came to their house, and she was told that the old woman was going to cut the bad, unclean part off. She was overcome by a feeling of overwhelming happiness. She was only six years old at the time.”(GDBN p.32) Saadawi describes the gruesome process in The Hidden Face of Eve, (1980):

On the scene appears the *daya* or local midwife. Two women members of the family grasp the child’s thighs on either side and pull them apart to expose the external genital organs and to prevent her from struggling -like trussing a chicken before it is slain. A sharp razor in the hand of the *daya* cuts off the clitoris.(p.33)

Nuruddin Farah in From a Crooked Rib, (1973) adds that:

they had sliced her clitoris and stitched the lips together thus blocking the passageway, but leaving a small inlet for urinating through. They had tied her legs together and she had been laid flat on the ground without any mattress or anything underneath her, for she would bleed on it. They had beaten the drums when the girls cried so that the beating of the drums drown the crying if the child cried too much they tucked a piece of cloth into her mouth.¹¹

The ritual is performed again on brides before they leave for their husband’s house by the *daya* (local midwife) who tears open the vagina of young brides. Saadawi adds that immediately after the ceremony, “The father of the bride then holds up a white towel stained with blood, and waves it proudly above his head for the relatives assembled at the door to bear witness to the fact that the honour of his daughter and of the family is intact.” (p. 29)

This ritual in honour of virginity is meant to render women powerless so that they can become sex objects. The female body is thus carved into the cultural realm, where she

becomes an active participant in the community. Her body joins other women in a language which is muted because there is the instant separation of her sexuality from her biological function. This language is the unspoken implicit dependency a woman has on man. This language has incredible power, though silent, to reinforce gender inequality. This is because the primary job of the clitoris is for sexual stimulation. When some or all of the genitals are removed, the ability for full sexual development is hindered in the process and sex then becomes a one sided affair. The wife then becomes nothing more than an infant factory. The woman's body becomes the commodity of both midwife and husband throughout her lifetime.

Taking into account the political factors behind such a practice, Fawzia Khan in Introducing New Course: Moslem Women in Twentieth Century Literature (1997) emphasizes that “we must place the issue of clitoridectomy in a global context of capitalist oppression and injustice of which women are victims.”¹² This practice cannot be considered religious or Islamic for that matter because for El Saadawi in The Hidden Face of Eve, (1980) religion:

aims at truth, equality, justice, love and a healthy wholesome life for all people, whether men or women. There can be no true religion that aims at disease, mutilation of the bodies of female children, and amputation of an essential part of their reproductive organs.(p.41-42)

Ironically, the genital mutilation is carried out by a woman. Genital mutilation is clearly represented in the novel God Dies by the Nile by Om Saber, the *daya* (local midwife) whose deceitful and fraudulent functions include female genital mutilation, abortions, and exorcism:

At weddings she would lead the *yoyo yoos*, paint the feet of girls and women with red henna, and on the wedding night she would tear the virgin's hymen with her finger, or conceal the fact that it was already torn by spraying the white towel on which the virgin's blood was supposed to pour with the blood of a rabbit or a hen. But when it was a time for mourning her suffering knew no bounds. She would slap her face with both hands repeatedly, scream out in agony, chant a hymn of sadness to the deceased, and wash the body if she was a female. She was always busy solving the problems of girls and women, carrying out abortions with a stalk of *mouloukheya*, throttling the new-born baby if necessary, or leaving it to die by not tying the umbilical cord with a silk thread so that it bled to death. (G.D.B.N.p72)

From the quotation, it is realized that cultural differences rather than gender have set the stage for a confrontation among women for the heart and soul of a man, when they should have presented a united front in order to fight effectively against men's injustices toward women. The phenomenon of women deliberately sabotaging the happiness of other women in a male dominated society is one that should be condemned outright. These women deliberately disrupt the happiness of their fellow women to take personal advantage of whatever the situation may be. For Om Saber, women are seen as less than wives to be steered and encouraged to fulfill themselves in all areas of life than assets which will deliver her from poverty. It is in this light that one thread binds men in the novel and Om Saber, as enemies of women. It is difficult to believe that a woman would want to see another woman in pain let alone be the one to carry out the operation. It is as if to join Daba, a character in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter in asking: "how can one woman destroy the happiness of another woman?"(p.67.)¹³ What is the state of the society? She seems to ask.

The Qu'ran does not mandate circumcision but it is obvious that women find it difficult to challenge the cultural practices. They could not challenge the advice of men as they interpreted the Qu'ran the way they saw it. In traditional Egyptian homes for example, women were trained to serve and never question. Their identification as good wives and mothers taught them not to go against the holy words of Allah which they did not read themselves but which were transmitted by their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Hamzawi for example, makes Fatheya his wife pray every night and when she says she does not understand what she recites, he exposes his deceitful nature when he replies "the word of Allah and the rituals of prayer were supposed to be learnt by heart and not understood."(p,33) The women believed whatever they were told whether it was true or not. In her book, Daughter of Isis, (1999) Saadawi recounts that it was only her father and uncle who were allowed to read from the Qu'ran, not the women of the house. (p. 9) In all these cases, the teachings of the Qu'ran have been violated for it is written: "You shall not accept any information, unless you verify it for yourself. I have given you the hearing, the eyesight, and the brain, and you are responsible for using them." (17:36)

Considering the discussion so far, it is obvious that the weight of circumcision lies more within its socio-cultural bearings than its religious mandates. However, it is maintained within an age-old community of women (*dayas*) who make their money from this practice, justifying it as an obligation in Islam. It is not only wealth which is an immediate incentive, but the prestige, status, and communal authority that these women

demand, and are given, are heavy investments and justifications for why midwives support the practice.

Having discussed clitoridectomy and the multi-faceted power structures which fuel the negative perception of women by men and sometimes other women in God Dies by the Nile, I shall proceed with the discussion of the other novel, Woman at Point Zero in the subsequent paragraphs.

In Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus is not spared the surgery aimed at reducing women to asexual objects. Her mother forces her to undergo a strange surgery clitoridectomy during her childhood. During her childhood she experiments sex with a local boy named Mohammadain. They play “bride and bridegroom:” (they take off their clothes and rub against one another). Firdaus describes the sensation of pleasure she gets from her encounters with Mohammadain as very exciting. But this ends when her mother forces her to undergo a strange surgery. After this procedure, she never again experiences sexual pleasure the way she once did. When Firdaus overhears her uncle and his wife having sex, she painfully perceives the sensation and the idea of it warms her, but she is unable to take pleasure in it herself as she did with Mohammadain. Therefore, by removing the clitoris, sex has become an act in which only men take pleasure as women then become prey to the lust of men. The damning effects of such practice are that it makes women think that men own women's bodies. Therefore when her uncle sexualizes her as a young child, though Firdaus is uncomfortable with the way in which he touches her, she does not object to it because she thinks men own women’s bodies.

This perception is further exemplified when she marries. As a wife, Firdaus' duties include doing the household chores and taking care of Sheikh Mahmoud's sexual needs:

The day came that I departed from my uncle's house and went to live with Sheikh Mahmoud. Now I slept on a comfortable bed instead of a wooden couch. But no sooner did I stretch out my body on it to rest from the fatigue of cooking, and washing and cleansing the large house with its rooms full of furniture, than Sheikh Mahmoud would appear by my side.
(WA PZpp44-45)¹⁴

Firdaus describes the lack of joy she feels during sex and remarks bitterly: "but I want to feel Sherifa".... "you would get nothing out of feeling except pain." remarks Shaeifa. (WAPZ p.60) Later when she becomes a prostitute, men who come to her as clients will demand sarcastically, during sex, to know whether or not she is taking pleasure in the act. It is interesting to note that for these men, the act is not about two people enjoying each other, but instead about proving their physical prowess. They are determined to wring pleasure from Firdaus, whether she wants it or not because she is seen as a sex object. In order to comply with rules, Firdaus tells the men that she enjoys sex (though she does not), which stops them from asking. There is only one painful way to resistance for such women:

I learnt to resist by being passive, to keep myself whole by offering nothing, to live by withdrawing to a world of my own. In other words I was telling the man he could have my whole body, he could have a dead body, but he would never be able to make me react, or tremble or feel either pleasure or pain. I made no effort, expended no energy, gave no affection, provided no thought.
(WAPZp.93)

In addition to clitoridectomy, Saadawi's critical lens focuses on a less known figure in African Literature: the prostitute. It is in the relationship between the male and the prostitute that cultural biases and gender inequalities are manifested in this novel.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Firdaus marries an abusive husband and after some series of abuse, she flees from her husband's house. Like a rejected stone, she searches fruitlessly all over for happiness without anybody taking notice of her because she is an insignificant person, a woman:

I walked through the streets with swollen eyes, and a bruised face, but no one paid attention to me. People were rushing round the buses and cars or on foot. It was as though they were blind, unable to see anything. The street was an endless expanse stretched out before my eyes like a sea. I was just a pebble thrown into it, battered by the waves, tossed here and there, rolling over and over to be abandoned somewhere in the shore. (WAPZpp47-48)

However, society's desires will eventually push Firdaus into the arms of a newly found job, now recast as a commercial sex object. Firdaus realizes that there is choice after all when she meets Bayoumi. She is soon to realize that the choice is just one of the disguises adopted by men in her hypocritical society to continue abusing women like her because they are seen as sex objects. Bayoumi promises to help Firdaus when she runs away from her husband's house. For once, Firdaus thinks she has found a different man when he tells her: "you take the bed and I will sleep on the floor." But Firdaus refused: "I lay down on the floor and started to fall asleep. But he came to me, took hold of my arm and took me to the bed.... Never in my life had anyone put me first before himself." (WAPZ p.51) The reality of the perception of her society about women will dawn on her when she soon realizes:

There was no room for illusion. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, blind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insult or blows.(WAPZ p.94)

Bayoumi's astuteness is just one of the ploys of men to continue exploiting her. After persuading her to live with him, Bayoumi locks her up in his apartment and he and his friends have sex with her, and beat her up at the least provocation referring to her as a street walker and a low woman. It is realized that there is always an outlet, a subordinating one, by society for the woman everywhere she finds herself. One observes that unable to impose its will on Firdaus to become a prisoner of marriage, society resorts to subjugation through another form of marriage, prostitution. It is the society, as will soon be realized which teaches women how to command 'power' by using their body for sex and turns round and accuses them of being immoral.

The realization of this hypocrisy is portrayed when she runs away from Bayoumi. She meets Sharifa, a wealthy prostitute who uses the power of the desires that men have for her to her advantage and she teaches her to do the same. Sharifa intends to sell Firdaus to clients so that she can make money. Sharifa's imagination is juxtaposed against that of Firdaus. It is a fact that Sharifa's imagination is constrained by a patriarchal society in a way in which Firdaus' is not. Sharifa only wants money and a comfortable life, and is willing to play the game that powerful men have set up in order to attain these things. Powerful men have succeeded in putting such women in a fantasy world making women like Sherifa think being a prostitute is better than allowing men free use of her body. Firdaus on the other hand wants to be comfortable and free mentally.

Although also a woman, it is evident that Sharifa's relationship with Firdaus is an economic one, just like that of her uncle and his wife. By setting Firdaus as a foil to Sharifa, it is noted that women are their own enemies because by playing the game set up by men, Sharifa is unwittingly perpetuating the same *status quo* from which she endeavors to break free. It is also a fact that women are vulnerable in society because men decide which music to play at any given time and the woman like a stooge, must dance to it. Also, Sharifa and Firdaus' choice is contrasted with the role society expects of them -- becoming a respectable wife. However, it is true that in Firdaus's society, all wives are prostitutes who trade their sexual favours for regular subsistence, housing and support of their offspring. However, the prostitute who lives outside the accepted social and religious order like Sharifa and Firdaus may be less oppressed than women who accepted the prevailing social conventions.

Another instance of inequality which makes Firdaus think that there is no real choice for her is seen when she is into full time prostitution. The first of cultural biases she experiences is that even in the trade invented by men she is not respected. As a prostitute, Firdaus has the money and the power to make choices for herself. By exercising choice, she commands more and more money and gets increasingly prestigious clients and chooses her own apartment and clothing and also begins to choose which men she will and will not sleep with. Because of this, she begins to believe in her own independence. Ironically though, to men, her body is a commodity, just as food and clothing are commodities. The more difficult it is for them to obtain the

commodity, the more money they will pay. The truth of the animosity will be clear when she realizes:

That my profession had been invented by men and that men were in control of our worlds, the one on earth and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their body at a price and that the lower paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. (WAPZ p.99)

In the patriarchal world therefore, there is no way for women to make real choices. The low status of women in the job created by men is further exemplified when she meets Di'aa. Just as all seems well for Firdaus, conniving Di'aa will be on guard to help her reach the goal men want for women: second-rate human beings. Di'aa, who has engaged her services as a prostitute, points out to her that in spite of her financial security, she is not respectable. She is deeply hurt by this statement, gives up her nice apartment and prostitution, and finds work in an office. The fact that she finds herself in that job by no fault of hers but by society's exploitative nature is emphasized here. Di'aa's free advice to Firdaus comes as no surprise. While this advice is intended to benefit Firdaus, it is Di'aa who stands to gain. This is because Di'aa's moral authority as her adviser and as a man is hindered should she gain financial freedom. His advice is therefore a sacrifice for Firdaus to make on the altar of financial gain. In other words, Firdaus's society places so much weight on financial independence for the woman since it is considered a drawback to patriarchal status. One can say then that in Firdaus's world, men don't want women to have financial independence and power like them. By condemning her work as a prostitute as shameful, men symbolized by Di'aa, try to minimize her power, though they are also involved in the exchange of sex and money. It is interesting to note

that until Firdaus has money of her own, the world never paid her much attention because she was just a woman, an invisible person occupying the role of daughter or wife. When she finally accumulates some wealth, she gets power (though not real power), and the world ruled by men takes notice of her. The behaviour of a waiter in a restaurant Firdaus goes to eat points this belief out clearly:

The ten pound note lay in my bag for I had not yet paid for my meal. I opened my bag to take it. The waiter approached, bowed over the table with a movement of respectful humility and started to collect the plates... I held the ten pound note in my hand and he watched it through the corner of one eye while the other eye looked away as though shunning the forbidden parts of a woman's body. I was seized with a feeling of wonder. Could it be that the ten pound I held in my hand was as illicit and forbidden as the thrill of sacrilegious pleasure? I almost opened my mouth to ask the waiter 'who has decided that the ten pound note is to be considered forbidden'? But I kept my lips pressed tightly together for I had in fact known the answer all along. I found it out many years ago right from the moment when my father hit me over the hand when I first held it out for a coin. As time went on, my mother had once beaten me for losing a coin... and so as the years went by, I began to look in the other direction every time I saw someone count his money or even take money out of his pocket. It was as though money was a shameful thing made to be hidden, an object of sin which was forbidden to me and yet permissible for others as though it had been made legitimate for them. (WAPZ p.72)

It is a fact as shown by the waiter that society venerates money and it does not deem it fit for women to command that respect. Firdaus was at the mercy of her stingy father, uncle, husband, and Sharifa because they had money and she did not. All of them recognized this fact, and they were careful not to give her any money of her own, lest she escaped their grasp.

In order to become respectable, Firdaus quits prostitution but becomes unconscious that she has stepped into another world of discrimination. Respectability means placing

yourself under the power of men who cling to the patriarchal ideology. Indeed, Firdaus becomes a “respectable” woman by placing herself under the power of men again. Her brief stint as an office worker only serves to reinforce this idea. It is manifested in the behavior of Ibrahim, her colleague at the office, and her other co-workers. For the first time, she feels as though she has met a man she can trust at the office where she works. The respectability seems to be working until Firdaus discovers that Ibrahim, her colleague at the office, is using her for sex. It is undeniable then that a woman is always on a slippery slope as subordination rears its ugly head, starring her in the face. One thing remains clear: patriarchal attitudes have no respect for women even if they have money or power. It is realized that no matter how powerful she might seem, she is still a woman, and men will still attempt to exercise control over her. Saadawi makes a ridicule of the behavior of men while at the same time pointing out how vulnerable women are. It is once again realized that “respectability” does not lie on one being a prostitute or not. It simply has to do with gender and therefore does not matter where one finds oneself. It is simply a trap that is designed to put women at the mercy of men. Respectability in the world of the patriarch then means “playing by someone else's rules.” For men, therefore, respectable women are women who are submissive and live under the protection of a powerful man. Firdaus has come to the realization that:

I was not destined to achieve what I had hoped for, for no matter how hard I tried or what sacrifices I made, like a dreamer sold to a cause, I still remained a poor insignificant employer. My virtue like the virtue of all those who are poor could never be considered a quality, or an asset but rather was looked upon as a kind of stupidity or simple mindedness to be despised even more than depravity or vice. (WAPZ p.94)

To show her disapproval of such hypocritical behavior, she quits her job and returns to prostitution where she makes a lot of money. From the ensuing discussion, it would not be far from the truth to say Sadaawi is sending a message to women to reject the pursuit of a “respectable” life in favor of a life of power and self-determination.

The last manifestation of discrimination is indicated when she meets Marzouk, a pimp who demands protection over her, proving that indeed patriarchal attitudes have no respect for women even if they have money. The conversation between Marzouk and Firdaus proves this:

‘You can’t do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out.

‘I refuse your threat.’

‘But I’m not threatening you. I’m just giving you a little advice.’

‘And if I don’t accept your advice?’

‘Then I may be obliged to threaten you.’

‘How do you propose to threaten me?’

‘I have my own ways of doing things.

Every craft has its tools.’ (WAPZ p.100)

After this encounter, Firdaus decides to lodge a complaint with the police but to her surprise she discovers that: “he had better contacts than I. Then I had recourse to legal proceedings. I found out that the law punishes women like me, but turns a blind eye to what men do. (WAPZ p.101) At this moment, we sympathize with Firdaus and other women who share her plight. She, like other women in her society is in a “prison

house.” She can go round the rooms in the house but will never be allowed to go out. Marzouk threatens to defame her or kill her, proving that no matter how much money she has, Firdaus is still vulnerable to men because she has something to lose. Money has come to mean something very different. It becomes just another symbol of the hypocrisy of her society, the load she must carry as a woman. It gives power to the unworthy and makes the despicable seem respectable. It allows men to rule over women, and makes the pimp think that he can buy Firdaus.

Since Firdaus can not buy love, freedom nor happiness, she has to destroy the very symbol that reminds her of her misery, men. The ultimate way to free oneself from this hypocritical society is to kill. She kills Marzouk, the man who claims his “capital is women’s bodies.” She insists: “When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife; it is my truth which frightens them.” (WAPZ p.112)

By being tough, to the point of being abusive, Firdaus is not seen by society as the woman in the male role, but rather as a woman\wife who does not know how to be one. For that reason alone society is prepared to forgive her and ask her to go for a lawyer who will defend her. To show her dissatisfaction with society, she chooses not to appeal her sentence; she would prefer to die in order to escape the control that other people have over her. She refuses to work with the system, sign an appeal, or accept a visit from the doctor because she does not want to feel like a captive. When she finally

agrees to meet with Nawal El Saadawi, the doctor, it is only in order to spread a message of truth and to do further damage to the world that abused her before she dies.

A broader reading of Firdaus' action shows that her first and only obligation is to keep herself and her society free of any cultural ambivalence represented by Marzouk. As the cultural "other," one message can be heard loud and clear over this silence: oppressed women are capable of crossing the traditional line, one does not usurp the role that corresponds to the patriarch no matter how misguided such a decision is or how strongly one rejects the issue at hand.

The significance of Firdaus' final acts of desperation needs to be emphasized. Murdering is an act of condemnation of patriarchy. In a patriarchal society, by murdering the pimp, she has in a way killed patriarchy which would have lived on through the ages to come. The story of Euripides' Medea has laid the foundations for society's response to women who kill and the name still evokes images of unchecked female rage. Medea, Euripides tells us, is a sorceress daughter of Aëtes and wife of Jason the Argonaut, whom she assisted in obtaining the Golden Fleece. When Jason deserted her, she killed her children. Firdaus has become a Medea-like character as she decides to take revenge on patriarchy. Like Medea, Firdaus has asserted herself in a way that is foreign and outside the boundaries of accepted female behavior. She has by her actions gone against what society has prescribed as normal female behavior – that is, sacrifice themselves for the good of males (father, husband and son) in their lives. A normal woman is therefore one who, impotent with rage, must still be submissive and

suffer in silence. Falling back on the Medea paradigm, a mother or woman who kills may have done so because she has been pushed to the wall. To arrive at this decision, Firdaus has to accept the fact that neither the men nor the Egyptian society will accept her.

An analysis of the novels leads to the conclusion that each of the major characters is silenced in different ways, with society and interpretations of Islam playing a significant role in their oppression. Comparing the two novels, it is apparent that the major characters are poor and they find themselves having to submit to the power of authority, without ever entirely accepting it. In letting women eloquently tell the anguish of their heartbreak, El Saadawi suggests that all women have important stories to tell and that their plight should be given a voice. However, the fight for women's emancipation in these novels is not as direct as in other novels such as So Long a Letter by Mariama Ba and Changes by Ama Ataa Aidoo. The level of education of the major characters in these novels makes them aware of their right as women whereas traditionally minded Zakeya, Zeinab, Fatheya and Firdaus in Saadawi's novels still cling to religion and customs. These characters would be discussed in the next chapter.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Nawal El Saadawi, God Dies by the Nile Trans. Sherif Hetata.(London: Zed, 1985) p.34. All other references to the text, unless otherwise indicated are to this this edition, henceforth referred to as GNBN.
- ² Greenblatt, Stephen. "Culture:" Critical Terms for Literature Study. Ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) pp 225-32.
- ³Jaber Nabila, "Bargaining with Patriarchy: Gender, Voice and Spatial Development in the Middle East". *Arab Studies Quarterly*. 23:3, 2001: p.101.
- ⁴ Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction. (london: The University of Chigargo Press,1983) p.3
- ⁵ Nawal El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab. (London: Zed Books, 1980.p.29.
- ⁶ Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape. (New York: Simon andSchuster, 1975) p.209.
- ⁷ Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a MoreProgressive Union," in Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriageof Marxism and Feminism. Ed. Sergeant, Lydia ed. (Boston: south end press, 1981) p.23.
- ⁸ Rich, Adrienne, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976) p.57-58.
- ⁹Gordon-Chipembere, Natasha. Carving the Body: Female Circumcision in African Women's Memoirs. 2006. p.1
- ¹⁰ Nawal El Saadawi,. Daughter of Isis. (London: Zed Books, 1999) p.26.
- ¹¹ Farah, Nuruddin. From a crooked Rib. London; Heinemann,1970.
- ¹² Fawzia Khan, "Introducing a New Course: Muslim Women in Twentieth-Century Literature." *NWSA*. 9:1 (1997): p.88.
- ¹³ Mariama Bâ, So Long a Letter. (Dakar: Africaines, 1979) p.67.
- ¹⁴ El Sadaawi, Nawal. A Woman at Point Zero. (London: Zed, 1975) p.37. All further references to the text, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition hereafter abbreviated as WAPZ.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHARACTERIZATION

This chapter studies the characters in the novels under discussion. The major characters would be traced by their special notable features and then their significance in the novels explained.

The men in God Dies by the Nile are directly responsible for the suffering and victimization of the women in *Kafr El Teen* because it is through their eyes that we see the ills of patriarchy. They are intensely clamouring for social power at every chance, so much so that a man's substance, his identity, his personality, and his masculinity derive from his place in society.

One of the men is the mayor, the representative of the political establishment in *Kafr El Teen*. He symbolizes the ruling class in general who has power and resources under their control. Such men believe that manhood is based on a particular relationship to property and on social power. Thus, the mayor's authority and importance rest obviously on his power to exploit the women at will. For example, the mayor abuses this power by using his political position to exploit the peasants, especially women, economically and sexually because "he's got strange tastes where women are concerned, and if he likes a woman he can't forget her... Once he sets his eyes on a woman he must have her, come what may."(GDBNp.54) Such powers enable him to command his aides to lure Naffisa to work in his house where he subsequently rapes her. When Naffisa runs away he kills an innocent man, Elwau and frames Kafrawi up as

the murderer and Kafrawi is incarcerated. Galal his brother is also framed up for stealing and imprisoned.

Our belief in his ruthlessness is supported both by what people think of him "we are God's slaves when it's time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time" (GDBNp.53) and more significantly by the quality of what is revealed whenever we enter his psyche:

True, Nefissa's story had remained a secret, but who knew? May be this time things would not be concealed so easily. He tried to chase away his fears. Who could find out the things that had happened? He was above suspicion, above the law, even above the moral rules which governed ordinary people's behavior. Nobody in Kafr El Teen would dare suspect him. They could have doubts about Allah, but about him....It was impossible. (GDBNp.98)

The Mayor moved his head closer to Haj Ishmael and said: "The girl resembles Nefissa." Haj Ishmeal responded quickly "she is Nefissa's sister". The Mayor winked at him and chuckled: "but the younger is always the most tasty."....The mayor became silent. His eyes followed the tall little figure of Zeinab as she walked along the river bank. He could see her firm, rounded buttocks pressing up against the long *galabeye* from behind. Her pointed breast moved up and down with each step.(GDBN p.16)

By his character, he has revealed the place of women in patriarchal societies making the story of women subordination more credible. More importantly, rape may be interpreted as metaphors of abuse of power. The mayor's affairs with the daughters of Kafrawi, Nefissa and Zeinab reflect the material power of the ruling class serving as a source of the sexual exploitation of women in general. One tends to say that such government represented by the mayor is tyrannically based on sheer caprices of those

who control it and on a crude display of brute force. Thus, women are raped and destroyed for being women and men are killed or imprisoned to fortify and support fully the patriarchal class domination. Other characters worth mentioning are the three cohorts of the mayor. They are Sheik Hamzawi, the leader of the village mosque, Haj Ismail, the village healer, and Sheik Zahran the barber. They are the embodiment of corrupt officials who ensure that the path to liberation for women remains thick with thorns so that their selfish desires will be met.

Through these characters, Saadawi criticizes people who support the ruling class to suppress women. By their character, they show that in an attempt to be on the social ladder, men in patriarchal societies are prepared to sacrifice anything including children, men and women. It is as if to say when it has to do with virility Allah can be sidelined. Together, they aid the mayor to perpetrate the crimes he commits and they do this out of self interest. Quranic echoes are used to lay bare their character. For example, to get favour from the mayor, Haj Ismail tells Naffisa:

Our mayor is a generous man and his wife belongs to a good family. You will be paid twenty piastres a day. You're a stupid girl with no brains. How can you throw away all the good that is coming to you? Do you prefer hunger and poverty than doing a bit of work? ... You people are free to do what you like. It looks as though you are fated not to enjoy all the good that Allah wants to bestow to you. (GDBNp.21)

Shortly after this he will see to it that Zeinab is tricked into going to "work" for the mayor, ensuring the sacrifice of yet another twelve-year-old girl to the mayor's sexual appetite. He tells Zeinab that Zakeya, her aunt, is possessed by the devil and this

compels Nafissa to say “am prepared to do anything that will let my aunty Zakeya get well again” after which he outlines what the “Qu’ran” asks her to do:

Zakyeya is possessed by the devil and it will not leave her unless she listens to my advice and does what I tell her to do... he opened his oldbag and extracted a long piece of paper covered with verses of the Quran.He chanted a few obscure incantations, folded the piece of paper and put it in a small dirty pouch of rough white cotton then he hanged it around Zakyeya’s neckchanting other verses and incantations. After that, he muttered a few words and started to evoke the name of God and exalt his unlimited power. After he finished,he wiped his hands and said to Zeinab, this amulet has great powers. It costs only five piastres....

Your aunt zakyeya is sick. She is sick because you continue to disobey Allah and she has encouraged you to do that but Allah is all merciful and kind and will forgive both of you on condition that you obey and do what he asks of you. He will cure her sickness if he so will, blessed be his name on high. (GDBN p78-79)

Another character trait of these men is that in an attempt to be on the social ladder, they outdo other men especially those in the lower class. For example, the three men conspired to frame Kafrawi up in order to shield the mayor:

Kafrawi is not capable of killing a chicken, you know that very well, said the village barber.

But when it is a man’s honour that is at stake, anyone can kill said Hamzawi.

Everyone says Kafrawi killed Elwau because of Naffisa. As a matter of fact, quite a number of people saw him kneeling next to his body with blood on his hands.

He is steeped in this crime from the the top of his head to the the bottom of his heels.

The village barber chuckled again, you are really the son of the devil. (GDBN p.53)

Again, these men sacrifice their traditions to maintain their patriarchal status. This is evident when Haj Ishmail consoles Hamzawi on his sexual weakness and convinces Fatheya to marry Hamzawi, the spiritual leader of the village disregarding custom and traditions:

I know you are a generous man and that you are from a descendant of a generous family. But most important of all, you are a man who preserves the faith in this village and watches over our morals. Therefore you must leave the matter in the hands of Allah and not worry about it any further. I will see to it. You can depend on that. Just follow what I asked you to do before. Make constant use of warm water and salt and lemon. Burn your incense every night leaving none of it to the following morning, then take the rosary between your fingers and recite a thanks giving to Allah ninety-nine times. After that curse your first wife thirty three times, for were you not potent when you married her, sheik Hamzawi? ... (GDBNp.29)

God is going to save you from withering sun of the fields, from the dirt and the dung, from your diet of dry bread and salted pickles. Instead, you will spend your days resting in the shade eating white bread and meat. You will become the wife of Sheik Hanzawi, the man who devotes himself to the worship of god, to serving his mosque, the man who leads the people of the village in prayer, and lives a life of piety. (GDBNp.31)

From these passages, though one laughs at the excesses of Haj Ismail, Sheik Hamzawi, and Sheik Zahran's obsession and their willingness to pursue even to the last breathe their virility, our laughter is sympathetic towards the women involved. If the Quran is a legally accepted book, then any statement from it should be accepted to all who believe it. If indeed Hanzawi "is the man who devotes himself to the worship of God, to serving his mosque, the man who leads the people of the `village in prayer, and lives a life of piety", then he should be seen going by what the Quran says about marriage and should not have forced Fatheya to marry him. Also, he knows that he is going to turn Fatheya into a perpetual virgin because he is impotent yet he goes ahead and marries her.

It is obvious then that social power and physical force, the novel seems to suggest, are merely different sides of the same coin. In a sense, the mayor, Hamzawi, Haj Ismail and Zahran belong to the category of men who feel the need to prove their manhood through their virility, fortifying the scope of masculinity by reducing femininity to that one attribute: voiceless. These actions of these characters compel us to live the experience of the poor girls, experiencing at first hand as it were the hardships of living under patriarchal society. We see the hardships that a woman faces in patriarchal society dramatized and made active in these characters. By their deeds they expose the true nature of their character, situations and events. This helps to provide understanding and good judgments for the reasons and actions of characters in the novel.

Another memorable character is Fatheya, the strong-willed wife of the leader of the village mosque. She is presented as a strong and hardened woman well fashioned to face the vicissitudes of life. She is revealed as a sacrificial lamb for the cause of injustice against women. She also demonstrates the frailty of the woman in patriarchal societies. She is a victim of forced marriage and sexual abuse. She is forced to undergo clitoridectomy at a tender age of six and the pain she goes through is exquisitely shown:

Underneath her, on the back of the donkey, its rough coat was becoming wetter and wetter. The spine of the donkey pressed up between her thighs. She could feel it hard against the wound, which was still bleeding inside. With every step, with every beat of the *table* (a long conical drum), the neck of the donkey rose and fell, and its thin spine moved up and down to rub on her wounds, causing her a sharp pain every time, and making her lips open in a noiseless cry. (GDBN p.32)

Moreover, she is forced to marry the leader of the village mosque and she is molested sexually. When she decides to save and adopt one of the mayor's 'illegitimate' children abandoned on the doorsteps of the Imam's house, her husband tells her to let go of the child because the mayor will expel him from the mosque for harbouring an illegitimate child. She vehemently says: "then I will leave the house with the child." (GDBNp.112) She refuses to be a hypocrite like her husband who fears that he would lose his position as the village religious leader because he is harbouring a "son of sin." Fatheya insists: "Allah will care for us if the mayor expels you out of the mosque." (GDBNp.112) She rejects the double moral standards of patriarchy that condemns the 'son of sin' rather than the sinner himself:

Every time something goes wrong in the village, they will blame this innocent child. What has the child got to do with the cotton worm, Hamzawi? Was it he who told the worm to eat the cotton? The brain of a buffalo has more sense in it than the mind of these people here in Kafr El Teen. (GDBN p.112-113)

For refusing to let go off the "son of sin", she and the baby are stoned to death. Before her death, as though driven by a strange, almost insane determination, we see Fatheya fighting tooth and nail against those who seek to destroy her adopted "son of sin."

She was a wild animal, ferociously fighting those who surrounded her in the night. She hit out at the men with legs, and her feet, with her shoulders, turning her sexualized body into a weapon against the men and all the while holding the child tightly in her arms. (GDBN p.115)

...She curled her arms around it tightly and closed her eyes. And now when they lifted her they found that her body was light and easy to carry. They carried her as far as the house, and on the following morning buried her with the child held tightly in her arms. Hamzawi bought her a shroud of green silk and they wrapped her in it carefully. They dug a long ditch for her and lay her softly down in it, then covered her with the earth which lay around. (GDBN p.116)

During the course of her courageous resistance, Fatheya ultimately comes to her ultimate end. By her action, she demonstrates that the resistance against the religious, political and traditional forces that consolidate and legitimize patriarchy is fatal.

Another character worth mentioning is Zakeya. She is the embodiment of peasant victimization and a symbol of female intransigence. She has lost two of her daughters to the mayor's sexual escapades. We share in her feelings and her mental suffering. She sees counter-violence as her only sensible choice to resist the oppression perpetrated against her family in particular and women in general. Consequently, she walks out of the door and pauses for a moment before crossing the lane to the iron gate of the mayor's house. The mayor sees her come towards him and ponders:

One of the peasant women who work on my farm,' he thought. When he came close he saw her arm rise high up in the air holding the hoe. He did not feel the hoe land on his head and crush it at one blow. For a moment before, he had looked into her eyes, just once. And from that moment he was destined never to see, or feel, or know anything more. (GDBN.p.137)

She decides to strike at the head of patriarchy and fells the mayor dead with her hoe, using her instrument for sowing seeds to end the mayor's excessive seed sowing. She is arrested and imprisoned but she is not perturbed by her act. Inside the prison, she tells a fellow prisoner: "I know who it is and the woman asked her curiously, who it is my dear? She answered; I know it is Allah, my child. Where is he sighed her companion? If he were here we could pray him to have mercy on women like us. He's over there my child. I buried him there on the bank of the Nile." (GDBNp.138) She has come to the realization that the "god" they worship is not the true God and the mayor, "god of

patriarchy” becomes demystified in her mind. Thus, in patriarchal societies, men lord over women, wanting to be god on earth. The final act of Zakeya and her reaction afterwards in prison is a pointer to the fact that women accept their inferior situation grudgingly: “It was a different world from the world she had known...Around her wrist they had put handcuffs but her large black eyes were wide open, her lips were tightly closed... but every now and then the men around her could see her mutter, like someone talking to herself.” (GDBN p.138) Women may not display their anger but rather give the impression that all is well because of cultural indoctrination. They are naturally upset, but take it positively turning to Allah to ask His assistance. This store of anger then drives them to act maliciously. To overcome the hurt, Zakeya will have to place herself in the ward where this takes place: the ward of the patient- prisoner.

Zakeya's action, like Firdaus's killing of her pimp in Woman at Point Zero, indicates the severely limited nature of the power women can wrest from the oppressive systems operating in their lives. It also alludes to the fact that the path to liberation is thick with thorns in a society accustomed to class hierarchy and gender inequality. Therefore, the oppressive nature of the patriarchal class order can be explicitly seen through the incarceration of Kafrawi and Galal, the rape and disappearance of both Nefissa and Zeinab and the murder of Elwau, Fatheya, and her adopted child.

Having talked about the characters in God Dies by the Nile, I shall do the same analysis for the other novel. In Woman at Point Zero, men are equally directly responsible for the suffering and victimization of women.

The main character, Firdaus, a victim of male subordination is a symbol of a harassed and defenceless woman in a society in which women have limited options. Throughout the book, Firdaus fights not just to be in control of her own destiny but also to figure out who she is. The scene in Bayoumi's coffee shop is an example of this. Bayoumi asks Firdaus whether she wants oranges or tangerines, and Firdaus is unable to answer him, having never considered whether she might like one thing more than another. Apart from this, growing up, Firdaus is treated as inferior to her brother and is not allowed to attend school simply because she is a girl. She is forced into marriage and when she thinks she has found an outlet by leaving her abusive husband, she is surprised that there is really no outlet. Firdaus discovers this initially through historical works, and later in her own experiences:

I read about a ruler whose female servants and concubines were as numerous as his army and another whose only interests in life were wine, women, and whipping his slaves. A third cared little for women, but enjoyed wars, killing, and torturing men. Another of these rulers loved food, money and hoarding riches without end. Still another was possessed with such an admiration for himself and his greatness that for him no one else in the land existed. There was also a ruler so obsessed with plots and conspiracies that he spent all his time distorting the facts of history and trying to fool his people. I discovered that all these rulers were men. What they had in common was an avaricious and distorted personality, a never-ending appetite for money, sex and unlimited power. They were men who sowed corruption on the earth, and plundered their peoples, men endowed with loud voices, a capacity for persuasion, for choosing sweet words and shooting poisoned arrows. Thus, the truth about them was revealed only after their death, and as a result I discovered that history tended to repeat itself with a foolish obstinacy. (W.A.P.Z.p26)

Firdaus discovers that the rulers (men) of her own era are no better, nor are the ordinary men she encounters in her life. In other words, ancient men and modern men share the same ideology: women must be suppressed anywhere they find themselves. She then

finds solace in prostitution. The choice of prostitution seems inevitably sad in the absence of better options for women in such societies. The feeling of sorrow exquisitely shown by Firdaus when Diaa tells her she is not respected is clearly a pointer to the fact that there are no better options for women like her:

You are not respectable he replied but before the word not respectable could reach my ears, my hand rose to cover them quickly but they penetrated into my head like the sharp tip of a plunging dagger ... the words continued to echo in my ears, took refuge in their innermost depths, buried themselves in my head like some palpable material object, like a body as sharp as the edge of a knife which had cut its way through my ears and the bones of my head to the brain inside. (W.A.P.Zp76)

In an attempt to get respected, she quits prostitution and finds work in an office only to find out that disrespect like an albatross hangs on her neck. . She is disappointed by society and all attempts to get a better life seem to lead to a dead end. She then finds love in Ibrahim only to find that she cannot be loved:

I walked round and round in the streets, my eyes could see nothing, for the tears kept flowing from them drying up now and then for a short while only to start flowing once more when night fell I was completely exhausted. All of a sudden my tears ceased to flow as though something had closed inside. Soon my face and neck became dry but the front of my bodice was soaking wet. The cold air penetrated to my body I shivered and wound my arms around my chest to keep me warm I remembered his arms around me and shivered even more I wept but the tears had dried once and for all I heard a sound like that of a woman sobbing and realized that the voice I could hear was mine. (WAPZp.91)

Firdaus becomes upset and is beside herself with rage and returns to prostitution. It is evident here that choice does not exist for women in patriarchal societies because the power to choose lies within the domain of the male. Society fails to provide dignity and

respect wherever a woman finds herself: as a wife, a prostitute or as an office worker. Even though she fights against patriarchy, she loses her battle. The killing of her pimp and her subsequent arrest and imprisonment is a pointer to the fact that there is really no way for women in patriarchal societies.

Another character is Firdaus's father. He signifies the severity of the unlimited powers men have in patriarchal societies. He is presented as an insensitive and an abused man who would do anything to wield power in the home. The portrayal of the woman clearly emerges in his character:

In summer I would see her sitting at his feet with a thin mug in her hand as she washed his legs with cold water. When I grew a little older, my father put the mug in my hand and taught me how to wash his legs with water. (WAPZp.16)

Sometimes when there is no food at home we would all go to bed with empty stomach. But my father would never fail to have a meal. My mother would hide his food from us at the bottom of one of the holes in the oven. He would sit eating alone while we watch him. One evening I dared to stretch out my hand to his plate but he struck at me a sharp blow over the back of my finger. I was so hungry that I could not cry. I sat in front of him watching as he ate. My eyes following his hand from the moment his fingers plunged into the bowl until it rose into the air and carried the food into his mouth... at the end of the meal; my mother would bring him a glass of water. He drank it and belched loudly expelling the air from the mouth or belly with a prolonged noise. (WAPZp.17-18)

When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs and then he would go to sleep just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep. (WAPZp.23)

From these passages, it is clear that to Firdaus's father, women are worthless toys in the hands of men and they can be treated worse than slave-girls. Such powers compel his

wife to go all out to satisfy him at the expense of their children. This passage is juxtaposed against another passage describing the behavior of her father at the mosque. Firdaus describes him as he discusses the day's sermon with the other men of the village:

I could see them walking through the narrow winding lanes, nodding their heads in admiration, and in approval of everything his Holiness the Imam said. I would watch them as they continued to nod their heads, rub their hands one against the other, wipe their brows while all the time invoking Allah's name, calling upon his blessings, repeating His holy words in a guttural, subdued tone, muttering and whispering without a moment's respite. (W.A.P.Zp11)

The use of words and phrases with negative connotations, such as "guttural" and "without a moment's respite," in this passage works to make the view of her father an insensitive man, as well as the other men, appear pessimistic. The hypocritical nature of men is luminously lit in this passage. Because it is religion that the men are discussing, that topic is presented in a negative light as well because they hide under the cloak of religion to suppress women. This passage is again contrasted with the following lines:

On my head I carried a heavy earthenware jar, full of water. Under its weight my neck would sometimes jerk backwards, or to the left or to the right. I had to exert myself to maintain it balanced on my head, and keep it from falling. I kept my legs moving in the way my mother had taught me, so that my neck remained upright. (WAPZp.11)

The tremendous weight that men such as Firdaus's father want women to carry, both literally and figuratively, are obvious: the weight of discrimination.

Another character is Ibrahim, a colleague of Firdaus at the office described in the novel as a revolutionary fighting for the cause of women. Saadawi tells us to beware of such characters since they are equally hypocrites and even worse than men such as Firdaus's father because:

Revolutionary men with principles were not really different from the rest, they used their cleverness to get in return for principles what other men buy with their money. Revolution for them is like sex for us. Something to be abused. Something to be sold. (WAPZp.87)

A revolutionary committee is set up in the company where Firdaus works, with Ibrahim as the Chairman. Firdaus joins the committee and starts to work for it day and night including holidays. Ibrahim fakes love for Firdaus making her think she has got a man she can trust, a man who is different from the rest, a man she can marry. But soon, it is realized that Ibrahim comes to Firdaus every night because he does not have to pay anything and not because he loves her.

Another important character in the novel is Firdaus' uncle. He symbolises selfishness and hypocrisy that exist in patriarchal societies. As a young girl living with her mother and father, her uncle represents a kind of freedom because he is a scholar, and he lives in Cairo, far away from the rural world of her immediate family. He teaches her how to read, giving her the first taste of the power of books. Books represent her uncle's kindness and the potential for a better life for women in patriarchal societies. However one fact still remains: modernity and the gradations of social class do not seem to lessen the bad treatment given to women by men. This is made noticeable when Firdaus's uncle gives her out in exchange for wealth and status. Again he abandons the life of a

scholar to become a civil servant. These instances point out that men are obsessed with power and money and that women are insignificant when compared to the thirst for power. When he marries Firdaus off to his wife's old and disfigured uncle for a large sum of money, he confirms the belief that women are alone in the world and that men can be horrible hypocrites who will do anything for money and power.

Apart from Firdaus's uncle, it is in Sharifa, the high-class prostitute through whom Firdaus sees that she has beauty and strength. She is a parody of female frailty and a symbol of women who have resigned to their fate and decide to exploit the system to their advantage. In patriarchal societies, the novel seem to suggest, the facade to liberation is to exploit the desire that many men have for women by getting money for it because people with money can also command some respect. She supports and undermines Firdaus. Under Sharifa, Firdaus is reborn as an attractive woman aware of the power that she has over men. Prior to her association with Sharifa, she realizes she does not even know what she wants because she has never had to think about what she wanted. Other people who represent patriarchal ideology always told her what would happen or what she should do. She realizes that there is choice after all and this is as a result of her association with Sharifa. Unfortunately, Sharifa shows her the "way" in order to make her more appealing to the men to whom she hopes to sell Firdaus's body. Sharifa's imagination is constrained by a patriarchal society in a way in which Firdaus's is not. Sharifa, like some women, only wants money and a comfortable life, and is willing to play the game that powerful men have set up in order to attain these things.

Unfortunately, she is sabotaging the cause of liberation for women by her action and with such women, liberation will surely boomerang.

Finally, the ridiculous stance taken and the double moral standards of society are exemplified in the character of top government officials who patronize prostitutes. The paradox such dignitaries personify, giving nothing to people like Firdaus in terms of dignity and respect and yet expecting something from her (her body) is criticized.

Firdaus explains how a president sends his body guard to lure her for him:

once he offered me money, on another occasion, he threatened me with prison, on still a third, he explained to me that refusing a head of state could be looked as an insult to a great man and lead to strained relations between the two countries. He added that if I really loved my country, if I were a patriot I would go to him at once. (W.A.P.Z.p.98)

Important personalities want prostitutes in their bed like any common pimp would do and yet a talk in dignified tone of patriotism and moral principle is used. It is made to seem as if “where national duty was concerned, a prostitute is awarded the highest honour and murder could become an act of heroism.” (WAPZp.99)

It could be concluded then that, women in patriarchal societies find themselves in prostitution through no fault of theirs but because of the demands from society. Prostitutes have at least the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women: charging for service rendered and being patronized by high profile officials. By this, Saadawi is saying that revolting against patriarchy exacts a severe penalty which may include paying with one’s life or body. Even though prostitution is not a better

choice, Firdaus has succeeded in exposing the ills of society through her choice of profession.

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ENDNOTES

¹A Woman at Point Zero Trans. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed, 1975.p.43-44.

²Nawal El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab world. Trans. Sherif Hetata. (London: Zed Books, 1980) p.23.

³Nawal El Saadawi, God Dies by the Nile. (London: Zed, 1985) pp.39-40.

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CONCLUSION

The critical review of the two texts by Nawal El Saadawi has clearly shown that nowhere in the Qu'ran is the question of the low status of women posed or even addressed. This dissertation has addressed the notion that even though women occupy an inferior position in traditional society, Islamic societies manipulate the precepts of Islam in order to oppress and restrict them. The study concerns itself with the role of women in Islamic countries, particularly Egypt, and calls for the full equality of all Moslems, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Again, it seeks to highlight the deeply rooted teachings of equality in the Quran and encourages a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Quran, *hadith* (sayings of Mohammed), *Sunnah* (actions of Prophet Mohammed) and *Sharia* (law) towards the creation of a more equal and just society.

Further, the study found that the ignorant, misinformed and incorrect assumptions that are made with regard to Islam's treatment of women are very severe. Numerous verses in the Qur'an as already stated make it clear that men and women are equal in the sight of God. According to the teachings of Islam, the only thing that distinguishes people in the sight of God is their level of God-consciousness. Due to this, many people are surprised to find out that Islamic Law guaranteed rights to women over 1400 years ago which women in Europe and America only obtained recently. For example, Islam clearly teaches that a woman is a full-person under the law, and is spiritually equal to a male. Also, according to Islamic Law, women have the right to own property, operate a business and receive equal pay for equal work. Women are allowed total control of their

wealth, they cannot be married against their will and they are allowed to keep their own name when married. Additionally, they have the right to inherit property and to have their marriage dissolved in the case of neglect or mistreatment.

Additionally, it should be mentioned that Prophet Muhammed's mission stopped many of the horrible practices with regard to women that were present in the society of his time. For example, the Qur'an put an end to the pagan Arab practice of killing their baby daughters when they were born. Also, Islam put restrictions on the unrestricted polygamy of the Arabs of the time, and put many laws in place to protect the well-being of women. If women in the Muslim World today do not have any rights, it is not because Islam did not give them those rights. The problem is that, in many places, alien traditions have come to overshadow the teachings of Islam either through ignorance or the impact of colonization. It is usually the case that people honour any set of laws which they perceive as being beneficial to them, especially when these laws prevent evil or harm from befalling them when applied. Moreover, people do not mind if these laws include certain restrictions on their freedom and impose penalties on those who disobey or transgress the defined limits. For this reason, when ideology has not fully been implemented, force has been used to implement the laws. Since men rule over and dominate women, they, in turn, permit for themselves what they forbid to women.

Besides, the study concluded that patriarchy, a cultural constraint in God Dies by the Nile and Woman at Point Zero emerges as a system with political, economic, social, cultural, and psychological manifestations bound together by underlying class dynamics. Sadaawi advocates indifference to those cultural practices that may be

outmoded such as are found in some communities in northern Ghana. Some of the outmoded customs in northern Ghana include women being forced into marriage with some marrying men as old as their fathers, women being bundled up like a load and sent back north for marriage, genital mutilation perpetrated on girls as young as eight years, young girls being denied formal education because it is perceived that the woman need not be educated since her ultimate aim is to procreate, and women being camped on mere suspicion that they are witches when their situation could have been menopausal disturbances. In some Islamic communities in Ghana, women are not allowed to work. Even though some would argue that it is the women who are cast as willing participants in such practices, these practices as this study has shown are inimical socially, economically and emotionally to women and the nation at large. Such oppressive systems, represented by the abusive and exploitative figures of male authority, are the real cause of the suffering of Zakeya, Nefissa, Zeinab, Fatheya and Firdaus in the novels as well as some women in Ghana. The conflicting relationship between males and females and the extent to which chauvinism destroys otherwise loving family relationships is emphasized. For example, Firdaus is left in an identity limbo; an ambivalent state of belonging to an outsider because she revolted against patriarchy. Fatheya is also stoned to death for revolting against patriarchy.

It will take education to erase some of these brutal practices. It is a fact that western education will afford women and even men the opportunity to be enlightened. Therefore, if women's education is neglected, the Ghanaian society will be mortgaging the future in terms of women's effective participation in all spheres of society. By

depriving women of their rights, Ghanains will be holding fast to the atrocious man - woman continuum which is detrimental to the development of our nation. Empowering women can contribute to weaken the centuries-old discrimination and brutalities against women. This is because most of the women who are molested are economically poor. For this reason, one cannot ignore the economic and political dimensions that shape and influence the moral values imposed on women. In this regard, says Mitchell Juliet in Psychoanalysis and Feminism, 1974, any change in the status of women should be accompanied by the defeat of capitalism as well as patriarchy through social and ideological means respectively. She argues that we should use Marxist strategies to topple capitalism and psychoanalytic strategies to overthrow patriarchy.¹ The more enlightened women are the better contribution they can make to the development of the nation. Sadaawi has therefore shed light on an important issue in Ghana in particular and Africa in general.

It is apparent that the novels send a message that the collective efforts by women all over the world are urgently needed to eradicate their oppression. It can be concluded further that, it is only through organization and a patient, long-enduring struggle that women can become an effective political power which will force society to change and abolish the patriarchal class structures that victimise women. In her interview with Stephanie McMillan, Sadaawi says that “my conception of God is that God is inside us, and if God is outside us, it is the collective power of people, when they act, when they revolt against injustice. So God to me is justice.”² “The prison-house of women” will

therefore survive wherever women put societal laws and dictates above their personal happiness and well-being.

However, it is one thing organizing conferences each passing day and another for the individual woman being really desirous to improve her lot. The picture some women create for themselves is not good enough to merit respect from men. For example, even though polygamy is said to be injurious to women, some women prefer married men to single men. Unless women today learn to combine resolutions with socially and morally accepted lifestyles, their fight for emancipation will always fall on the rocks. El Saadawi has shown the way in her novels God Dies by the Nile and Woman at Point Zero.



ENDNOTES

¹ Mitchell Juliet, Psychoanalysis and Feminism. (New York: Vintage, 1974) p.154.

² home.earthlink.net/twoeyesmagazine/issue1/nes.htm>

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¹⁶Rosemary Crompton, Michael Mann, "A Crisis in Stratification Theory." Gender and Stratification. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986.

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