



Systematic Mechanisms of Patriarchal Oppression in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of domestic violence in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*. It argues that the novel presents violence against women not as a set of isolated acts but as a system that patriarchal culture builds, justifies, and passes down. Through close reading of key scenes, the paper traces how physical, psychological, verbal, and sexual abuse appear across different settings and social classes, from the orphanage where Bint Allah grows up to the homes of the Great Writer and the Chief of Security. The analysis shows that beating, veiling, enforced silence, and the constant threat of divorce all serve one purpose: to strip women of their identity and turn them into obedient bodies. The paper also draws on El Saadawi's non-fiction to show how her novel reflects her wider critique of Arab patriarchal society. It concludes that, for El Saadawi, the abuse of women is ultimately a sign of a broader loss of humanity.

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1. Introduction

Violence against women is often discussed in terms of statistics and legal reform (Mansour *et al.*)^[72], but literature can show something numbers cannot: how abuse feels from the inside, and how a culture comes to accept it as normal. Few writers have exposed this as directly as Nawal El Saadawi. An Egyptian physician, novelist, and activist, El Saadawi spent much of her career writing about the ways patriarchal power shapes women's lives in the Arab world, and her work has often been censored for its frankness.

The Fall of the Imam is one of her most unsettling novels. It follows Bint Allah, an illegitimate girl raised in an orphanage, through a world in which men of every rank, from a guard to a celebrated writer to the head of state security, treat women as property. Violence in the novel is everywhere. It happens in public and private, in poor households and rich ones, and it is rarely questioned by those who commit it or by those who suffer it.

This paper looks at how El Saadawi represents domestic violence in the novel and what that representation suggests about the society she is criticizing. It argues that the novel treats domestic violence as a deliberate tool of patriarchal control rather than a private family matter. Physical abuse is used to break women's will, while psychological and verbal abuse, along with practices such as forced veiling, seclusion, and the threat of divorce, work to erase their sense of self. The paper first defines domestic violence and its forms, then examines how these forms appear in the novel, and finally considers how El Saadawi's non-fiction supports her fictional portrait of a society that has lost its humanity.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach based on close textual reading of *The Fall of the Imam*. Passages that depict or justify violence against women were selected and analyzed for what they reveal about the attitudes and social structures behind that violence. The analysis is guided by feminist literary criticism, which reads literary texts in light of the power relations between

men and women and asks how those relations are produced and maintained. To frame the discussion, the paper relies on definitions of domestic violence that recognize its many forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal abuse, rather than limiting it to physical harm. These categories are used to organize the reading of the novel. The paper also draws on El Saadawi's non-fiction, particularly *The Hidden Face of Eve* and *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi*, to place the novel within her broader thought on the condition of women in Arab societies.

3. Domestic Violence Women in Nawal El Saadawi's the Fall of the Imam

Domestic violence is one of the most widespread types of violence against women. It is also called family violence or intimate partner violence. It can be defined as the violence practiced by an intimate partner in a domestic setting (Mitchell 320) or in an intimate context (Grodin 441). Most people think of domestic violence as being physical; however, there are several types of domestic violence such as, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, threat and blame (Arizona Coalition 1). Faqir has also illustrated that domestic violence "can take the shape of rape both within and outside marriage, besides beating, childhood sexual assault and incest" ^[66]. It is believed that the main reason behind domestic violence in Arab societies is cultural instigation (Sharawi 3).

In *The Fall of the Imam*, El Saadawi presents several types of domestic violence such as wife beating, child beating and sexual, psychological and verbal abuse. El Saadawi explains that humans are more savage than predators, she illustrates that: "[t]igers devoured antelopes and deer but they refrained from human flesh. Men were the only living beings that fed on the flesh of their own kind. The meat of deer was rare, but human beings everywhere and their flesh was easy to find" ^[17]. By presenting the savage and cruel patriarchal treatment against women, El Saadawi suggests that humanity is lost. Although people are there, they seem to be invisible due to the absence of their humanity: "where have the people gone?" I asked. I could see no one. The body of the girl had disappeared, and her assassins had left. 'Where have the human beings gone?' I asked again" ^[18].

In the orphanage, Bint Allah is raised in consistent terror. Bint Allah, along with the other children are beaten and savagely punished by their teacher, Baba. She says: "His right hand always held a stick, while his left hand was closed most of the time around the arm of some girl he was dragging off to the punishment cell" ^[33]. Moreover, Bint Allah explains that she expects being beaten everyday: "My turn had come to be punished. I had been expecting it every day, like a dark fate that hung over my head. I felt his thick fingers close tightly over my arm" ^[37].

Bint Allah also explains that girls, since their childhood, have lived in a prison where it is not allowed for them to look from the windows towards the gathering of men. This practice, actually, shows the psychology of the eastern society that prevents the gathering of the two sexes in one place:

We were not permitted to look out the windows. The balconies of the military hospital overlooked the windows of the nursing school and so the military men could look down on the girls from above. I stood near the window a long slender ray of sunlight would reach me over one of the corners. I could feel the harsh grip of fingers over my back

pulling me away from it. They were the fingers of the Head Nurse. ^[72]

In this vein, it is obvious that the culture depicted in the novel does not respect women and considers them as ignorant. In fact, women are preferred to be ignorant to be easily controlled. Therefore, men try to obliterate women's identity and leave them only with a body for pleasure:

I hide my wife behind a veil and make her walk behind me in the streets. She does not know how to write her name, and she cannot read the word of God. Her mind has little substance but her body is full of flesh, her buttocks are heavy and her brain is lightweight. God created her out of a gnarled and twisted rib. She was destined to be poor, or without lineage or family, a woman of low descent. ^[54]

The humiliating patriarchal practices depicted in the novel are meant to enforce male oppression against women through implementing various forms of persecution. Imposing the veil on women within the culture of the novel is considered an oppressive practice against women, for that it does not reflect men's religious commitment, rather than their cultural awareness which aims to prevent women's social activities and communication with the outside world, and thus, to assassinate their identity. In addition to this, forcing women to walk behind men indicates men's degrading of women's social value. Treating women unequally as well as obliterating their identity is classified as a psychological abuse. Besides, describing women by having a little mind and a large body mass is meant to insult women and destroy their self-esteem.

Throughout the novel, men of different classes beat their wives and normalize this practice and present it as a normal practice in the society. In the orphanage, the guard beats his wife and abuses her verbally and psychologically for receiving Bint Allah in her room: "The woman answers, 'She is Bint Allah.' / He lifts his hand high up in the air and brings it down on her face with all his might. 'You adulterous whore! You daughter of an adulterous bitch!' he screams" ^[28]. Therefore, Arab women are not treated as respected partners but as sexual tools, "gratifying the physical needs of their men" (Amin 16). Consequently, weak women are products of their society that seeks to weaken them so that they accept their degraded position, and thus "makes them more amenable to submission and enslavement" (El Saadawi) ^[69] and "compelled to accept their husbands' domination" ^[26-27]. This practice of devaluation of women is not just prevalent among the low-class community but also among the upper class. The Great Writer explains that he uses to beat his wife and she uses to accept this without complaining. "If I beat her according to the rules of chastisement she never complained, and if I slipped out of bed to go to my mistress, she pretended to be asleep, and if asleep went into a deeper sleep" ^[172]. The chief of Security has also beaten his wife on the first night of marriage because he believes that she will become a loyal slave and consequently worship him:

I beat her until she confessed, then I forgave her just as God does with His creatures when they sin. I became her God. She worshipped me, chose to be at my feet like a dog, and now I possessed her completely but she had no hold over me at all. The more I turned away from her, the greater her passion for me grew, but I only desired those women who refused me. Each time I was refused I remembered how my mother used to say to my father: 'thou art my shadow on earth, when I runneth away from thee thou turneth around at once followth me.' ^[43-44]

From the chief of Security's speech, it is understood that the goal behind beating women is to subjugate them to the patriarchal authority by force. The domestic violence against women has different forms; the physical one that is meant to undermine their fighting well and the psychological one that is meant to distort their identity and turn them into obedient slaves.

In *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi, A Reader*, El Saadawi illustrates that it is a consistent tradition of a husband to beat his wife on the first night of marriage; the wife "had to try the taste of his stick before she could sample the taste of his food so that she would know that Allah [God] was above, and her husband below, and she should be ready for a beating if she did not do as she was told" [93].

In chapter 'Illicit Love,' El Saadawi explains that the oath of divorce is used as a psychological abuse against women, so they are under a consistent threat of being thrown out the house at any moment. In other words, women are deprived of the sense of security and stability in their marital life while being completely convinced that they are destined to experience such humiliation:

The lips of his legal wives remained tightly closed and not one of them dared to open her mouth, for if she did she risked hearing him swear an oath of divorce, pronouncing it three times as he lay on his back with his mouth half-open and his eyes half-closed, and after that she would be seen carrying her bundle as she left the house, and the next wife would arrive carrying the fear of divorce in her heart like a fear of death. [218-220]

Besides, women are not allowed to express their feelings or opinions on any occasion; even regarding their kids' issues. Thus, women are brought up watching their mothers experiencing humiliation on a daily basis and tolerating all the abuses they receive from their fathers. Consequently, they become completely convinced that this is the way they must live and the only way to survive is to keep silent and accept their (fake) destiny.

Therefore, marital life is neither the solution for women to escape slavery, nor the way to establish their independent identity. That is to say, any relationship that does not stand fixedly on a mutual respect is an oppressive relationship where women are used and destroyed. In this context, El Saadawi explains that:

All such developments are natural to a society where women have lost the essential constituents of their personality, have been emptied of their human qualities, and have been metamorphosed into an object, a part of the body, or instrument. Sometimes they are instruments of pleasure, passion and sexual satisfaction, or receptacles for bearing children, or commodities to be bought and sold in the marriage market. (*The Hidden* 77)

4. Conclusion

The Fall of the Imam gives a disturbing picture of a society in which violence against women is so ordinary that it barely needs explaining. El Saadawi shows that this violence takes many forms. Girls in the orphanage are beaten and kept away from windows; wives are struck on their wedding night, insulted, and threatened with divorce; women are veiled, silenced, and reduced to their bodies. What links these acts is their purpose. Each one is meant to teach women that they are worth less than men and that submission is their natural fate. The novel also makes clear that this is not a problem of one class. The guard and the Great Writer beat their wives in the

same way, and the Chief of Security openly describes violence as the path to total possession. Women, in turn, learn silence from watching their mothers, and the cycle continues. Marriage, which might seem a way out, turns out to be another form of captivity when it is not built on mutual respect.

In the end, El Saadawi suggests that a society which treats half its people this way has lost something essential. Her image of humans as crueler than predators is not just an attack on individual men but a judgment on a whole culture. By making this violence visible, the novel asks readers to stop seeing it as normal, which is the first step toward ending it.

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